

## ***The Chronicle of Yerevan Days: Spatial Representation and Authentic Realism***

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### **Abstract:**

This article offers an insight into how space is represented in the feature film *The Chronicle of Yerevan Days* (Dovlatyan, 1972). I examine the film's unmediated and minimally mediated spatial presentation of the actual city of Yerevan – its buildings and streets etc. I claim that, in narrating the fictional story, the mise-en-scène and cinematography emphasize the city's spaces. The manner in which the buildings, streets, and squares are highlighted suggests that the city acts as an agent. I use Koppelhoff's (2012) theory of "diegetic space," Alter's (2005) idea of "mythographer," and da Costa's (2015) notion of the urban environment as mise-en-scène to argue that authentic realism arises from the deployment in real time of the city as an agent in *The Chronicle of Yerevan Days*.

At the core of my argument lies the claim that the film's narrative integrates objective documentary narration with fictional storytelling. The mise-en-scène and cinematography selectively represent details and fragments of city spaces and buildings, which equip the represented city with a certain agency. In this function, the city interacts with the human characters. My claim about authentic realism stems from the fact that the buildings, streets, and squares in the film are historically accurate in function. This creates for the viewer an intense familiarity. Also, by virtue of their historical and cultural values, the represented buildings and streets contextualize the story as Armenian, infusing a sense of authenticity into the characters and their actions.

**Keywords:** film narrative, spatial narrative, realism, film and architecture, location filming

## Introduction

This article examines the use of spatial narrative in the film *The Chronicle of Yerevan Days* (Dovlatyan, 1972) – specifically, the employment of exterior cinematography and location filming – and argues that authentic realism arises from a particular use of this narrative technique. In the film, the narrative discourse systematically draws the viewer's attention to the built heritage and streets of Yerevan – the capital of Armenia. City spaces open the narrative and reappear consistently, and a panoramic view of the city closes the film. There are scenes and sequences where the action could have been set in the interior, but the particular choices call for a reading of the story with reference to the physical Yerevan city of 1972. This consistency suggests that the spatial narrative device is used intentionally.

Based on the assumption of a specific intent regarding the use of architecture in the film, I claim that the actual city functions as a narrative agent in the film. The film's narrative strategy integrates buildings, streets and squares into the dramatic action and represents them in their historically accurate functions. The effect is that Yerevan emerges as a character that advances the narrative through interacting with the human characters. In the role of a character, Yerevan represents history – more specifically, recorded history. Further, I propose that the cultural-social value of the represented buildings and streets authenticates the fictional story as genuinely Armenian. The character of Yerevan embodies Armenian history and Armenian built heritage and develops the thematic thread of recorded history.

According to Hermann Kappelhoff (2012), the current neo-formalist critique employs the concept of diegetic space or plot space to explain the process of the spectator's interpretation of the realistic quality of the cinematic image. The parameters of filmic spatial construction coincide with vectors that control spatial orientation in real life conditions. And this coincidence allows the cinematic image to be perceived as “a continual series of plot events,” in other words “the image space” translated “into a realistic plot space” (Kappelhoff, 2012, p. 1). Kappelhoff's theory corroborates my claim that Dovlatyan emphasizes the image of the city's spaces with actual pedestrians, traffic, and sound in the narrative discourse to convey the idea that Yerevan is a character. Maria H. B da Costa's (2015) theory is also about city acting as an agent in film, differentiating between “true city movie” and “urban local color movie.” In the former, “the city actively participates in shaping character and plot,” (p. 107) while in the latter, a change in the setting has no effect on the constituents of the narrative.

The distinction between the story world and the real world becomes insignificant in *The Chronicle of Yerevan Days*. The location filming and the documentary narration of the city's life make the cinematic city and the real city identical. What springs from this recognition is that the fictional story is authentically Armenian because it is drawn on a politically, socially, historically and architecturally genuine environment. Da Costa (2015) says that to understand what city is, it is necessary to study the full scope of its constitution – physical, sociological, political and economic. “A cinematic city is constituted by references to real cities and is a space represented by film through the construction of different notions of motion” (p. 106). She argues that urban environment can function as a narrative itself, and in that role it serves as a space within the film that expresses meaning. However, she continues saying that the fabricated city in the film narrative is not “freed from the influence of its real counterpart” because reality affects our perception of forms in culture (pp. 106–11).

My argument and the theory I have used cohere with criticism in film studies regarding the concept of cinematic city and, in particular, the representation of architecture in film. Carsten

Strathausen (2003) discusses how two “city films” *The Symphony of a Great City* (Ruttman, 1927) and *Man with a Movie Camera* (Vertov, 1929) deploy everyday images and montage to characterize the modern city as an empty and alienating living space (pp. 15–41). Tyrus Miller (2003) explains how post World War II (WWII) Central and Eastern European films create spaces of “resistance to totalitarianism” imposed by Nazism and Stalinism and its implications (pp. 80–100). Jessie Labov (2003) investigates how selective use of city fragments in *Dekalog* (Kieslowski, 1988) aims at undermining the Soviet state by “withdrawing from the realm of politics into the resistant practice of everyday life” (pp. 113–37). Mark Shiel’s (2003) examination of Italian Neorealism in terms of the concept of cinematic city reveals that the Italian filmmakers of this period used location filming, real-life events, specific streets and buildings (used by the film’s real-life subjects) in their pursuit after authenticity. “Documentary-life objectivity” and “manipulation of time and space” were characteristic conventions of achieving authenticity via location filming. Thematically, neorealism focused on city in terms of the process of modernization, representing it as a metaphor for progress and achievement, but also ruin (pp. 11–16). Mitchell Schwarzer (2000) surveys Antonioni’s films in terms of the latter’s extensive use of architecture. Schwarzer claims that architecture in his films has a narrative agency manifested in its contribution to the plot, interaction with characters and objects, and figuring as protagonist and antagonist. Particularly in *The Night* (1960), but also in his other films, Antonioni deploys streets, facades, terraces, towers and other fragments of city’s built heritage to convey various thematic oppositions – ancient vs modern, turmoil vs order, crowds and silence, historicism and the modern (Schwarzer, 2000, p. 198).

### **The Story**

*The Chronicle of Yerevan Days* surveys an episode from the routine of Yerevan in 1972, the then capital of Soviet Armenia. The events in the film tell the last days of Armen’s (Khoren Abrahamyan) life. Armen is a forty-year-old clerk working at the National Archives of Armenia – henceforth referred to as the NAA – who has access to the chronicled history of the city and its residents. Armen helps the NAA clients – petitioners – to retrieve historical facts and biographical data, sometimes taking recourse to illegal measures. Armen’s best friends, Karen (Leonard Sarkisov) and Ruben (Armen Ayvazyan), understand him, but also blame him for being overly compassionate towards strangers. Working in the NAA has made Armen mentally distraught. The public archives often reveal information that complicates the citizens’ lives instead of improving their social wellbeing and condition. A teenage boy’s (unidentified) stepfather (Robert Martirosyan), a man in his 50s, wants to see the letter his adopted son’s biological father wrote upon giving the baby away to a foster home. Seeing the stepfather’s despaired anticipation of losing his only child, Armen burns the letter. The teenage boy’s biological father sues Armen, and Armen gets fired from the NAA.

Anahit (Julietta Avagyan), who is engaged to a middle-aged man (unidentified) seeks restoration of her true family name, which is unknown because her parents were killed in WWII. Armen cannot help her, because no document in the NAA archives is preserved, and the last witness, an Armenian soldier named Vahram Rshtuni (unidentified), who may have known her parents was sentenced to death for espionage. An old woman petitioner (Elena Khudabashyan) requests a certificate from Armen that she has worked as a national parkland security. An old man petitioner (unidentified) wants Armen to provide him with a work certificate to the effect that he worked as a Chief of Kolhoz in Morut Village in 1930. Armen finds a legally dubious way to help the old woman. He refuses to help the old man, but the latter’s comment “You’re a good man, you will give me the document” suggests that Armen will most probably use a loophole in the law to help the old man, too.

In the relationship line, Armen courts Anahit and they fall in love. Anahit breaks up with her fiancé. Armen investigates Anahit's story privately. Ruben who is a war veteran pulls strings in the War Veterans' Committee and finds the State Attorney, Hayk Smbatyan (Gurgen Janibekyan), who sentenced Rshtuni to death during the war. Armen forces Smbatyan to reveal the truth, and the retired attorney confesses he and his colleagues made a mistake of sentencing Rshtuni to death, because they didn't believe Rshtuni's story according to which he had become a war prisoner and then escaped. Later Rshtuni's story was proved to be true. Armen accuses Smbatyan of keeping the story about Rshtuni and his connection with Anahit a secret. What ensues is Armen's marriage to Anahit, his discharge from the NAA and his sudden death that concludes the story.

In the context of the crucial political and social changes the Armenian people underwent in the first half of the 20th century, the role of the NAA, which contains documents and records concerning the social, political, cultural history of Armenia, is significant. The personal histories of Armenians living in this period were affected by political turmoil that befell Transcaucasia<sup>1</sup> at the turn of the 20th century. The following had had an excruciating impact on the lives of Armenians: the absence of a national state; the division of Armenia among the Ottoman Empire, the Russian Empire and Persia; the Armenian Genocide; the establishing of the first Armenian Republic, which after two years succumbed to Bolshevik pressure and was annexed to the USSR; and last but not least, the severe population loss during WWII. In *The Chronicle of Yerevan Days*, Yerevanites suffer from lost or unknown identities and seek restoration and completion of their biological and biographical data. The NAA should be the institution where an individual can piece their identity together and legitimately claim his or her civic rights. Ironically, the truth told by the archives is cruel.

On the thematic level, the film juxtaposes recorded history and memory to explore the past, and shows how human destiny may depend on the dynamics between the two. Armen's function is to fill the missing gaps in residents' biographies; thus, his character serves as a nexus between the past and the present. Yerevan is embodied in the architecture, in particular the NAA building, and acts as an antagonist to Armen. This narrative conflict translates into the subthemes of individual agency versus the monumentality of history, and memory versus recorded history. The agency Yerevan exerts as a character imbues the fictional story with the history of Armenia and makes the story of Armen and Anahit genuinely Armenian. The film alludes to the history of Armenia through the representation of the Armenian Genocide Monument, the History Museum of Armenia, and the Hovhannes Tumanyan Museum, evoking the tumultuous history of Armenia via associations with atrocity and loss. Like any Armenian, Armen's mind is burdened with the past of his nation, but his attempts to delete his and Anahit's memories about their past are doomed. Nevertheless, Armen partially restores Anahit's identity; their marriage redefines her persona. He leaves the NAA and they start a new life together. One morning, Armen goes shopping and accidentally dies from a heart attack in the street. His death incident suggests that the past, especially the history of Armenia, is monolithic, heavy, and indelible. Its pressure on Armen's psyche gives him a heart attack, and he falls down and dies in Mashtots Avenue.

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<sup>1</sup> A geopolitical region in the vicinity of the southern Caucasus Mountains on the border of Eastern Europe and Western Asia.

## The Narrative Strategy

### The Cinematic Narrative Technique

*The Chronicle of Yerevan Days* deploys a narrative system that constructs the diegetic world via images of space consisting of two layers: real and fictive. The former is the raw material that is unmediated, whereas the latter is the aestheticizing implication conveyed by particular techniques of cinematography and mise-en-scène. I base my claim on two modes of perception – pragmatic and aesthetic, which relate to “real” and “fictive” respectively. The images of the built heritage have a dual effect on the viewer. First, we see that the narrative documents the city as if in an actual moment in 1972. This real layer familiarizes the viewer with the city, locates the viewer in a historical real time and space, and describes the life in Yerevan in 1972. Second, the fictive layer, which provides aesthetic commentary on the images, is constructed through the cinematic synthesis of the fictional narrative (plot and characters) with the built heritage of Yerevan. Throughout the film, the fictional story and the documentary representation of Yerevan complement each other.

Presented below are several cinematic narrative techniques employed in the film that support the argument that there is a distinction between documenting life in Yerevan and telling a fictional story in the film narrative, which subsequently conveys the idea that city acts as an agent.

1. The establishing shots articulate buildings (the NAA, the Armenian Genocide Monument, and the Republican Clinical Hospital). The closing shots, too, show buildings with no characters.
2. The long shots and framing are deployed to focus the narrative on the buildings. The characters are either small against the buildings’ vast backdrop, or they are in the background of a building detail.
3. The tracking and following shots create a sense of naturalism. The camera’s view of Anahit is blocked by traffic and passersby. The cut to another street is determined by the traffic blocking the audience’s view. Random pedestrians and traffic enter shots, and, as the camera does not keep focused on the characters, the viewer’s attention is drawn to passersby and on lookers, the real-time city sounds and the speech of passersby, specific stretches of the given streets, and fragments of buildings.
4. The exterior location shooting prompts the viewer (especially the local viewer) to reconstruct action and plot events in the diegetic world within the off-screen space.
5. The opening and closing shots feature Yerevan. The film begins by narrating dawn in Yerevan through a montage of city spaces. The finale is composed of a montage of still shots of windows that ends with a panoramic view of Yerevan at dawn.

The interplay between the real and the fictive in the film narrative suggests that we associate the real (the unmediated representation of the city) with the capital of Soviet Armenia in 1972 and consider the actual functions of the buildings and streets. The fictive layer (Armen’s story) may be linked with the artistic value of the built heritage of historical Yerevan. The film plays out this opposition through photographic compositions where Armen and the city enter an uncanny relationship. Koppelhoff (2012) argues that spatial constructions inherently carry semantic potential and that aesthetically reflexive spatialization ignores this potential. Cinema cannot capture reality in its entirety; instead a cinematographic image “frames the passing moment of a material reality” (p. 1). In the film *The Chronicle of Yerevan Days*, the particular cinematography and mise-en-scène do stylize the representation of spaces. However, the appearances of buildings and streets of historical and cultural significance give the images a

special semantic charge. Thus, both the cinematic narrative mode and the particular architecture are combined in the continuous framing of images of city spaces.

In a few instances, the film narrative switches to Armen's subjective point of view. The viewer interprets the images of the city through his perspective. This strategy enables the viewer to understand Armen's mental state through interpretations of the way the city architecture is presented. However, the viewer can also see the city spaces independent of Armen's point of view. Thus the viewer also figures as a "realist witness" (Alter, 2005, p. 10). Both Armen and the viewer "see" the city as it was in 1972; at the same time Armen and the viewer apperceive the city because Dovlatyan deploys a remarkable spatial narrative technique specifically for aesthetic commentary.

Robert Alter (2005) puts forth the ideas of "mythographer" and "realist witness" in *Imagined Cities* discussing the representation of city in fiction. He claims Flaubert's representation of city is executed via the consciousness of a particular character, not just a disinterested spectator (p. 10). Flaubert shows the link between protagonist's consciousness and the nature of the city (p. 13). In another instance, Alter (2005) discusses "the voice of Paris awakening" as a representation of the city in Flaubert's novel *Sentimental Education* (p. 14). This feature is rampant in the film's narrative when the viewer can hear the traffic noise, honks, and pedestrians' chatter. It is most vividly expressed in the backyard scene. In this scene, while Armen and Karen get in Armen's car, we hear a woman (an actual tenant in the apartment block) call her son, off screen, repeating his name "Arturik" (Russianized pronunciation of the name Arthur).

In the following I discuss the use of particular streets and buildings to illustrate how space is used as a meaning-making device in *The Chronicles of Yerevan Days*. I have subsumed the examples of city fragments under three categories of city space, buildings, and windows, because this organization of discussion foregrounds the use of city as a narrative agent, which, it may be suggested, was the filmmaker's intention.

### **City Ambience: Streets and Squares**

The city participates in structuring the scenes that are set in streets and squares. Firstly, the exterior city scenes display the daily routines of Yerevanites in 1972, showing the pedestrians, cars, trolley-buses, and taxis that happen to be going by while Armen goes about his business. The streets have the same names as today – a Yerevanite watching this film 40 years on can easily recognize where the action is taking place. Secondly, the exterior shots, where much of the dramatic action is staged, carry the plot. By virtue of their dominance over the interior spaces, the city's spaces contain and direct the dramatic action and guide the viewer to locate themselves in and navigate across the city "in real time".

It is noteworthy to mention that the architecture of modern Yerevan is a unique mixture of various styles – ancient, medieval and classical. The plan of the present day city was designed by Alexander Tamanyan at the beginning of the 1920s (Azatyan, 2013, p. 25) who revived the ancient Armenian architecture by composing the city plan based on those in the medieval era (streets and squares) and designed the first buildings in the spirit of medieval Armenian architecture with elements of Russian classicism (Azatyan, 2013, p. 26). The following buildings which appear in the film – the National History Museum, the Baghramyan Avenue residential apartment block, the Academy of Sciences, the Tumanyan Museum – combine the traditional Armenian architecture and Russian classicism in a modernist way.

The streets and squares that appear in the narrative have been well-known for their historical significance. The Khanjyan, Nalbandyan (15th century A.D.), Baghramyan, and Sayat Nova (1860s) streets, as well as Sakharov Square and Republic Square (1930s) exist today and have always been the major commuting and commercial venues, and cultural landmarks of Yerevan. Tamanyan's vision and his successors' views and practices have shaped a unique image of Yerevan. This historical knowledge defines the spatial narrative in the film, which in turn enhances understanding of the fictional story with respect to the themes of the past, recorded history and memory. Barnes and Duncan (1992) believe that meaning is produced via intertextuality, a theory in which reality can be an image, a concept and so on, that defines physical elements. They conclude that creating a film is constitutive, namely the old world is the basis of a new world (cited in da Costa, 2015, p. 106).

Da Costa (2015) suggests that using the city's topography is a way of creating the urban environment as *mise-en-scène*. This strategy articulates movement, which allows the viewer to visualize the cityscape (pp. 108–9). Likewise, Siegfried Kracauer (1997) explains why cinema pays so much attention to the street: "A street serving as background to some quarrel or love affair may rush to the fore and produce an intoxicating effect" (cited in Pratt & San Juan, 2014, p. 23). He believes that street has two functions in a film – to advance the narrative and reveal a moment of "a visible reality" that has a certain indeterminate meaning. He further develops his argument by saying that there is a constant enfolding of the real and the fictive in a film – a process, through which the real emerges in unexpected ways. A film presents the real in fragmented ways, and fragments within film depend on chance and carry something that is not sewn perfectly into the narrative coherence of the film (cited in Pratt & San Juan, 2014, pp. 23–4).

Many scenes in the narrative document the city's life. The film opens on Khanjyan Street, with probably the first tram out on its route. It is a long shot composed of city spaces and Mount Ararat rising over Yerevan in the far. The shot provides a picture for the city's broader geography with the high-rise apartment blocks, the tall wide lamp posts, the tram tracks in the middle and occasional traffic on the right. The shots of Sakharov Square, a place revisited a few times, characterize Yerevan by capturing the kvass tanker and the phone booth in front of the parking space outside the NAA building (locals may recall how they bought kvass and used the phone in the past). In the sequence where Armen approaches Anahit and asks her to go on a date, he walks in Tumanyan Street with the traffic obstructing the audience's view. When he spots Anahit and tries to cross the street to chat her up, his point of view of her is blocked by trolley-buses and passersby. Another street scene where the viewer can see a typical afternoon on Nalbandyan Street is the one where Anahit slaps her fiancé – the shots have captured two women talking, a man chatting up a woman, another man probably observing the filming process.

The characters' movement through streets in the film is realistic and because of this "real" Yerevan puts certain "confines" upon the characters by directing their activity. The real time representation of Yerevan also involves the viewer participating in the action. Since the viewer knows exactly where they are, the viewer engages in the action, as if live. The following scenes illuminate this: Armen and Karen driving to the Republican Clinical Hospital; Armen following Anahit in Abovyan Street; Armen and Anahit's taxi ride to Spring Street; Armen helping the old woman petitioner; Armen walking across the city at the end. The effects of Yerevan directing the characters' actions and the viewer's direct engagement in the action are especially remarkable in two sequences, one showing Armen and Karen driving to the hospital and the other – Armen and Anahit riding to Spring Street in a taxi. In the former, as Armen

drives down Baghramyan Street, the camera shows an apartment blocks on the right side. A Yerevanite knows they're going towards the juncture with Orbeli Street and that from there they're going to turn right to go to the hospital. In this way, 'real' Yerevan shapes the dramatic action, and the viewer realistically locates Armen and the events of his life. In the other sequence, the taxi driver is having problems with finding Spring Street. As we navigate through the city with Armen and Anahit in the taxi, first we are on Azatoutyun Avenue, then Baghramyan Street, then at the ropeway on Koryun Street, finally at an unrecognizable construction site. The taxi driver enumerates the existing street names and then stops by a police station to inquire after a street named Spring. Armen does not know of such a street. He has asked the taxi driver to take them to Spring Street with the intention to make Anahit happy and mark their relationship with some meaning. They end up in a street that is under construction.

In the wedding feast sequence, the procession of the party, consisting of Armen, Anahit, Karen, Ruben and a group of musicians playing on pipes and a drum, passes through by-streets and courtyards. The setting, difficult to recognize due to night shots, is in one of the neighborhoods in the city center. It is composed of medieval-style buildings with high arcs and narrow winding streets, again typical of medieval cities. Following the reveling party, the viewer experiences a brief mysterious tour of an ancient-like city.

Yerevan not only directs the characters' actions and activity, but also shows its various characteristic features, which contributes to its narrative agency. The street shooting describes the urban spaces by showing the typical habits of Yerevanites, who use streets and squares for discussions, conversations, arguments, business, dealing with personal issues, and making love. In the sequence where Armen drives Karen to hospital, the latter advises Armen to get married, saying "A married man will not do follies," referring to Armen's burning of the document certifying the biological father's relationship to the teenage boy. The camera shows the flitting facades of the residential buildings through the car's windshield. The actual rush hour street hurry-scurry and the traffic racket are seamlessly sewn with the character's private lives, reconfiguring the public areas of Yerevan city as a space where personal matters are usually discussed.

At one point, the narrative also shows the business side of Yerevan. In that scene, where Armen resolves the old woman's petitioner issue, they go up and down Nalbandyan Street, walk in a bistro, where Armen makes a call to a friend in the government. Then they walk out and stroll down the street. Characteristically, Armen and the old woman petitioner are presented in long shots and the viewer cannot see their faces. Thus it is the street, busy with trolley buses blocking the camera view, pedestrians walking by, and the fragments of the NAA building that is in the focus. At another moment, when Armen and Anahit end up at a construction site, the narrative discloses the ugly side of the city. The site implies the 'ruins' of Anahit's identity, equipping Yerevan (metaphorically the history of Armenia) with another dimension.

In a few scenes, the city's agency escalates the conflict between individual and history. This is remarkable in scenes that are set in squares. In two scenes, one set in Republic Square, the other in Sakharov Square, the squares contain the dramatic action. In the scene, where Armen is driving the widow (whose husband died in hospital) home, he stops the car in Republic Square at her request. Seen from an aerial perspective in the dawn, the square is empty, and her steps echo in the huge square designed in the spirit of medieval architecture. The empty square underscores the bereft woman's despair. She is small in the empty square, and the huge pillars of the National Museum of History tower over her. When the woman takes a drink from



the floral-shaped water fountain, the fountain – a piece of sculpture wrought in stone, a characteristic feature of the architecture of Yerevan – occupies the center of the shot. The camera remains static on the water fountain, while in the background Armen helps the woman get in the car. In the same shot, the arcs of the government building form the background. The scene shows the vulnerability of humans in the face of built heritage. This scene is also a good example of how Yerevan incarnates the history of Armenia that speaks through the representation of national cultural heritage.

In the scene in Sakharov Square, the *mise-en-scène* is highly casual, and the shots are packed with images of city space. This brings forward the city's agency by highlighting its historical-cultural heritage. The camera follows Armen as he sneaks into his car. Only Armen's head is seen behind the parked cars as he stealthily approaches his vehicle, while the viewer can see more details of the other parked cars. Armen spots a family (an old couple and their adopted teenage son) arguing, three small figures standing against the façade of unique stonework of a Nalbandyan Street apartment block, whose pinkish color and the décor evoke a palace. At this moment, Yerevan acts as an antagonist, which is articulated in two ways. First, via a medium shot, the dramatic action is interfered by the following details: the apartment block building with the ground floor shop with high arc-windows; the kvass tanker; the employees' and/or visitors' parked cars; a random car pulling into the parking area and blocking the viewer's and the family's point of view of Armen. There is a sense that the city complicates the characters' lives. Second, we hear only the sounds of Yerevan, whereas the voices of the despairing family are muted. Before this scene the action has already raised the curiosity of the viewer, and the latter is eager to hear the heated conversation. The traffic racket does not allow the viewer to hear what the stepfather says to his wife and adopted son. Thus the reality obscures the fiction.

The agency of the city is brought to a climax in a 4-minute sequence, as the film draws to an end. Armen goes shopping beneath the actual sounds of Yerevan. As the sequence starts, the camera tracks Armen's movement across the city. At the Sayat-Nova and Nalbandyan intersection he is about to get hit by a car, lost in thought. Incidentally, the camera frames the widow, showing her from Armen's point of view. As she crosses Sayat Nova, she and Armen exchange glances. Keeping up Armen's point of view, the camera tracks the woman in shots gradually moving from medium to close-ups. Suddenly, again incidentally, the camera cuts to Rshtuni's picture in a newspaper posted on a bulletin board (that used to be installed at certain points in Yerevan). By virtue of its urban plan Yerevan helps expand the narrative from Armen's action to include actual details. Both the woman and the bulletin board are part of Yerevan and happen to cross paths with Armen. Fiction, actual historical moment, and past history all intersect, working through the protagonist's confused strolling across the city.

Then in an aerial shot Armen approaches the Mashtots Avenue and Isahakyan Street intersection: here, he decides to walk down Mashtots Avenue on the left side, past the grocery shop and the phone box (familiar to the local viewer). This is where he suddenly has a heart attack and dies in the midst of a crowd. The scene is presented in a very naturalistic style through following close-up shots and then crane shots shifting to close-ups of on-lookers' faces and Armen lying on the ground. The crowd surrounds Armen, one man rubs his chest, a glass of water passes hands. A paramedic arrives and checks Armen's pulse and eyes, and a voice from the crowd asks "Dead?" followed by a grunting "Yeah."

## **Buildings**

### **The National Archives of Armenia**

The narrative discourse uses the NAA building, a historically accurate government organization, as an axis around which the plot action revolves. Today, it is situated on Sakharov Square, but it was built in 1901 as a Provincial Treasury, when Armenia was part of the Russian Empire. It is built of black tufa (stone that exists only in Yerevan), in the style of Russian classicism (Azatyan, 2011, p. 26). After Armenia became part of the USSR in 1923 the building housed the national archives of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Armenia.

Throughout the film, the narration interweaves various fragments of the NAA building with the dramatic action. The film narrative cues the viewer to identify the NAA building as an embodiment of recorded history and thus a representation of power through association of the building with the state organization and the colonial past of Armenia. On a metaphysical level, the building impacts the characters' lives negatively. The plot unfolds around two main cases petitioned at the NAA. First, it is the stepfather's request to read the letter written by his adopted son's biological father, which Armen burns. Second, it is Anahit's petition for a search for her real family name. As both cases aren't solved, and the stepfather is left in misery, and Anahit remains without her real family name, the NAA building metamorphoses into a dark force that brings evil. As the narrative constantly develops the NAA building's character and displays it as overbearing when interacting with Armen and the other characters, two other implications arise. First, the history chronicled in the archives is evil and second, the built heritage exerts a certain influence on humans.

In addition, the interaction between the NAA building and Armen (and other characters) authenticates the fictional story as part of the history of Armenia. As the NAA is represented in the film in its historically accurate function, we tend to read the fictional story as true, or a story that can be true. The seamless interweaving of the NAA building with the fictional story suggests that Armen and Anahit's stories are an "incarnation" of the history of Armenia.

In the first exterior sequence, the NAA building appears in a long shot. The narrative shows the general appearance of the building. As the camera zooms in on Armen's car coming to a stop, the closer shots of the building develop the character of Yerevan. The façade details emerge, and we see the second level balcony and linear ornaments on the Yerevan black tufa.

The second scene starts with the camera panning on a passing bus. Then the camera establishes Nalbandyan Street and the NAA building. Armen and his colleagues are mute, small and insignificant. The camera moves upward across the façade and pauses on a poster – a still shot, in which the viewer has an unobstructed view of the face of the NAA building. This shot shows more details of the building – the windows on the upper level with arcs, the rectangular windows on the lower level, and the portal. After Armen exits the scene, the camera again moves upward on the poster and the façade.

In the sequence where Armen resolves the old woman's petitioner issue, the portal of the NAA building and the decor on the façade that appear in the shots broaden the range of the characteristic features of the building by showing the semi-basement level windows and sectional ornamentation of the façade. The building appears in still a longer shot. Armen and the old woman walk down the stairs into a semi-basement bistro. When they return to the outside of the NAA entrance the building is shown again surrounded by busy traffic and passing

pedestrians. The decor on the building ‘narrate’ the story of Yerevan by describing the characteristics of the city – modernity through medieval forms.

The last exterior shot of the NAA building, too, starts with the camera tilting downward that is in sync with the lowering of the poster across the façade of the NAA building. The NAA building is framed in a close-up shot. When the camera frame becomes still, Armen enters it and walks into the building. The shot provides another angle of view of the NAA building – from bottom up and from a slanted angle on the entrance.

### **Apartment Blocks and Public Buildings**

The narrative also highlights the supremacy of other buildings over human characters, thus reinforcing the thematic conflicts between recorded history versus memory and between individual versus history. In the scene where Armen arrives at work, the *mise-en-scène* and cinematography articulate a remarkable interaction between the buildings on Nalbandyan Street, situated across from the NAA building, and the stepfather. The camera documents the city’s life at dawn – we see the apartment block (1950s), a mixture of national and classic styles (Azatyan, 2011, p. 22) and the adjacent building of the Department of Architecture of Yerevan City Council (1940-50s), built in the spirit of Armenian national romanticism (Azatyan, 2011, p. 22), in the empty Nalbandyan Street. The camera captures the city cleaning service’s activity and a passing trolley-bus that interferes with the shot of Armen getting out of his car. Seeing the stepfather, Armen stops walking. From Armen’s perspective we see the stepfather’s black hollow silhouette against the background of the buildings (the apartment block and the Department of Architecture of Yerevan City Council) diminishing diagonally into the depth of the shot. The buildings line the street up to Republic Square. The still frame and the particular angle provide the aesthetic effect. The images of the buildings made of local tufa and built in the Armenian national romantic style charge the shot with historical significance. A sense of upward movement of the elevated office buildings, with their pillars and palace-like appearance, resonates with an implication that Yerevan possesses a kind of durability that is hard to obliterate, because over millennia the city has maintained its status and in 1972 is continuing its mission of layering history. The choice of the building is significant too. The early morning sunlight shining on the façade of the building imparts a sense of glory, while the palatial architecture gives an impression of grandeur.

The photographic composition implies that against the massiveness of the stone-wrought city the stepfather is helpless. The man, in misery because he has to give up his adopted son, is a fragile black silhouette standing humpbacked in the background of grandly rising spectacular buildings lit by the morning sun. This shot is Armen’s point of view. He knows and commiserates with the man, as we find out minutes later. Later in the film, Armen is in the grip of the truth contained in the certifying letter, which proves tragic and painful because, even if the artifact can be destroyed, its truth will remain in memory. Humans’ inability to erase their memories plays out along with how buildings carry history. The deep perspective, lined by sublime buildings exulting in their victorious stance over an individual’s destiny, takes the viewer from the moment into the depth of history. At this crucial moment of his life, the stepfather has no choice but to face a childless future. Through a particular framing, the Armenian national romantic architecture is given a monumental character. This image, together with the implication that the “chronicles” are impregnable because they are protected by the NAA buildings’ firm structures, contextualizes the stepfather’s tragedy that is part of the thematic thread – a human being is powerless against the weight of recorded history.

An example of how the interaction between building and character explores the conflict between individual and history is the scene where Armen visits Anahit. The apartment block on the Sayat-Nova and Nalbandyan crossroads where Anahit lives fills most of the frame, along with the Ani Hotel (a well-known landmark of Yerevan) next to it. The apartment block appears in its full bulk. The horizontal lines of the windows and balconies diminish in perspective. The building is more an accumulation of history – culture, politics, and social activity – than a home. The lingering of the camera after Armen stops the car and the composition of Armen's tiny car against the apartment block building together insinuate the controlling force of the building. Anahit's apartment is represented as a non-place, because its interior is not shown. It is not different from any other public building, for instance the NAA. The building belittles the lovers' issues and deeds. There is no comfort and safety for the couple. The past (the built heritage) determines Armen and Anahit's destiny.

The scene at the hospital reflects how fragile and vulnerable Yerevanites are when they clash with the history of the city, represented by its architecture. In the sequence where Armen takes Karen to hospital, we see the building of the Republican Clinical Hospital of Yerevan that stretches from right to left and beyond the frame. The massive building of the hospital, compared to Armen's tiny car, is a lifeless and frigid rock. The hospital seems to be the hope, the place where the life of a man who has been in an accident can be saved. Although Karen struggles to resuscitate the man, he dies.

A scene at the Genocide Memorial is a special moment, where the rock-like monument validates the sinister and mischievous forces lurking behind an individual's destiny. The first two shots describe the memorial before the viewer sees Armen and Anahit. Anahit tells Armen how she has survived WWII. The memory of one and half million Armenians massacred at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries still wounds many Armenians in the same way that Anahit's memories of her parents who perished in WWII still haunt her. The scene is concluded by an extreme long shot, where, in the dark night, with the usual lighting at the memorial, Armen's tiny figure stands against the massive stone blocks, his hands stretched out in the manner of the crucified Christ.

In another scene, the apartment block on Nalbandyan Street "speaks" by describing social issues typical of Soviet Yerevan. While Anahit and her fiancé quarrel, the extreme long shot followed by a long shot from Armen's point of view reveal that the ground level windows are barred and the panes have been replaced by cardboard. While Armen watches Anahit quarreling with her fiancé, the viewer sees the barred windows, which hints at burglary as a possibility and also informs the viewer that the semi-basement levels in the apartment blocks in Yerevan weren't used for residential purposes. Another characteristic image of Yerevan is also captured in this shot – the façade of the apartment block is made of basalt in the lower section and of Ani tufa in the section above the ground-level windows. In other scenes, Yerevan comes across as an ancient mythical city. In the wedding scene, the building fragments with a colonnade are reminiscent of a medieval city quarter. In the Republic Square scene, the National Museum of History, with the monumental arcade and tall pillars typical of ancient architecture, has an awe-inspiring grandeur which imposes discipline, order, and divinity under the bells of the clock tower.

In the finale, the narrative discourse shows Armen's last daydream in a silent long shot – his wedding party posing for a photograph against buildings in the Armenian national romantic style in perspective. Beginning with images of windows, the narrative unfolds in gradually lengthening shots of facades with windows, the number of which increases from shot to shot.

At the end, Yerevan encroaches upon the human characters with a plot-controlling gravity and settledness. Coming in rather aggressively to finish Armen's story, Yerevan shows its might in stone. The buildings are a silent testimony to human history and perhaps a victorious silent declaration that cities are superior structures which outlive the humans who build them.

### **Windows**

Windows are constantly visited throughout the film. They are seen as parts of buildings, however, they gain a certain agency, too. The symbolic nature of windows in the film does not lie in their function as transitional spaces, or as a separation, insecurity, entry and exit and/or intrusion. Rather, the film narrative tends to implicate windows with a more functional role integral to the action. In two scenes, the windows domineer over the characters; in some scenes, windows are in the background by virtue of being part of the buildings and provide spatial narrative coherence; and in the last sequence windows "speak" significantly. In addition, the images of windows authenticate the fictional story as Armenian the same way as the buildings and streets.

In the film, windows establish an unusually marked presence. When Armen and Anahit appear in a window frame, they are small, occupying the window frame like indistinguishable figures, while the window is depicted in its entirety. Because windows are presented as part of buildings, their participation in action is active, though they are lifeless and eerie. The significant shots in this vein are the one where Armen watches how Anahit and her fiancé argue (discussed in the section on buildings), another one where Anahit looks through the apartment block window down at Armen (when they part ways after a date), still another one that is right before the climax, which shows Anahit's view of Armen again through the same apartment block window.

In the parting scene, Anahit enters the building, walks upstairs and through the second floor window looks down at Armen. The window frame is the boundary, from behind which she can see Armen, but not be intimate with him. When Armen watches Anahit and her fiancé quarreling, he is framed by the window in the NAA building. The window frame's massive rocks make Armen's figure look fragile. The black color is ominous, as if the window holds Armen back from desiring Anahit. The camera views Armen in the window from the ground, and the angle expresses a certain privilege to Armen's position as a clerk at the NAA. But this privilege is sinister, because knowing about people's lives Armen understands how unsafe and powerless humans are. Armen and Anahit's being contained by window frame suggests that transition for them is impossible. The window frames trap Armen and Anahit, forbidding Armen from escaping his job and preventing Armen and Anahit from merging into a happy matrimonial union. The broader implication is that buildings contain humans, and closely linked with it is the idea that the human characters can't escape from the grasp of the city, namely, the recorded history.

In some scenes, the viewer can see endless rows of windows, like eyes watching the action. These images appear continually and build up the setting of the story, making the viewer anticipate similar settings in succeeding scenes. The windows' narrative function reinforces the argument that architectural features function as a mechanism of narrative continuity. As a metaphor for eyes, the windows imply that Yerevan is engaged in the film as the omniscient narrator, or that Yerevan is in control of the action.

At the resolution of the film, we see a montage of shots of windows, following a particular pattern. The succession of window images starts with a close-up shot of a window, then moves

to increasingly lengthening shots to show rows of windows. The viewer can see a window partially, then a full shot of it, then a row of four windows on a façade, then a part of a façade with two full and one half rows of windows, then a window grid of three rows and six columns, and finally a complex structure of fifteen narrow and small windows in the upper section and sixteen big windows in the lower section of an elevation of a building. In the last shot, the lower section windows form pairs inside eight niches marked by arcs and protruding pillars. The final shot displays the whole façade of Tumanyan Museum where the windows are difficult to see because three arcs obstruct the view. As artifacts combining ancient, medieval and modern styles and as an allusion to escape, these window-characters with their serene and unshakable majesty reinforce the undercurrent motif of the incapability of humans to obliterate the past. In connection with denial of escape, the images of windows convey that buildings contain history, physically and metaphysically, which can reveal inconvenient truths for humans. In a broader sense, Yerevan controls Yerevanites because it “knows” much more about them, their biographies, identities, and forefathers than Yerevanites themselves.

## Conclusion

The article offers an insight into the technical and symbolic aspects of filmmaking by claiming that two kinds of cinematic narrative – fictional and documentary – underlie the feature film *The Chronicle of Yerevan Days*. Working from this premise, the article argues that Yerevan exerts a special agency in relation to the other characters. The agency of the city in the film is articulated in the representation of city spaces, buildings and windows. The city’s spaces – streets and squares – direct the character’s movement through “real” Yerevan, guide the viewer through the narrative as a “realist witness” (Alter, 2005, p. 10), as well as build up Yerevan’s character. The buildings interact with the characters on a metaphoric level by acting as an antagonist and oppressing the characters by their supremacy. As part of the buildings, the windows restrain the characters’ desires and provide a spatial narrative continuity in the film. Subsequently, the location filming enables the film to authenticate the fictional story as Armenian by exploring how the geography and built heritage of Yerevan construct meaning within the film. A sense of authenticity emerges from the visual and auditory representation of “real” Yerevan. Extending the argument, the article further suggests that the exterior cinematography in the film contributes to the major theme, which is the depiction of the past as an opposition between recorded history and memory.

To theorize the argument that the representation of an actual city as an agent authenticates the fictional story, it can be proposed that the references to the architecture of Yerevan in the film are related to the role of place in meaning-making. The idea that spatial representation is used in *The Chronicle of Yerevan Days* as a meaning-making device underlies the connection between the audience as “realist witness” (Alter, 2005, p. 10) and the function of cinematography and sound that is observed in the article. Use of place as a meaning-making device is a subject of critical debate within the academic studies of cinematic city and representation of architecture in film. In some studies in this field, the underpinning argument is concerned with the idea that the deployment of city spaces as *mise-en-scène* articulates motifs and theme, and creates authenticity. In other studies, discussions revolve around the idea that the representation of routine life in the city is used to define modernity and characterize modern city life. Perhaps the pinnacle of the cinematic practice of using spatial narration is Antonioni, who uses built heritage as a device to communicate ideas and themes. By connecting these interpretations with Kappelhoff’s idea that cinematic representations of space are read as realistic settings, it can be concluded that in the film *The Chronicle of Yerevan Days* the city is employed as a device to contextualize a fictional story in terms of ethnicity,

national culture, and urban geography. To further this conclusion, da Costa's claim that the urban environment can function as a narrative and express meaning in film supports the theory that place can be employed in film as a meaning-making device. In this capacity it can be considered as a narrative constituent that is equipped with agency.

In the film *The Chronicle of Yerevan Days*, Dovlatyan interweaves the images of the actual routine of Yerevan in 1972 with the fictional story in a dialectical opposition between human agency and historical determinism. A hypothetical explication of this dialectic may be that humans create art, which afterwards determines their activity. The idea that built heritage (city) acts as an agent calls into question the idea of agency. It may be connected with the duality of human perception in terms of the opposition between pragmatic and aesthetic, manifested in the narrative style of *The Chronicle of Yerevan Days* that is both documentary and fiction. Recording history is the practical side of our life. Yerevan and its built heritage provide valuable information about the past of Armenia. However, our imagination calls for reflecting on material culture and its influence on us and questioning bare facts, because we seek subtlety in understanding life and our relationships with each other. Hence Armen's demise, which suggests human's inability to make sense and probably come to terms with history because of its all-encompassing feature.

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