

*The Representation of History in the Feature Film
“The Chronicle of Yerevan Days”*

Shmavon Azatyan, La Trobe University, Australia

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Abstract

The film “The Chronicle of Yerevan Days” is unique in the way it uses city ambience as a narrative technique. Set in the capital of Soviet Armenia, Yerevan, in 1972, it features a peculiar spatial narrative through location shooting and portrayal of historical buildings. As a result, history materializes and overbears humans. In this paper, I draw on the ideas and theories of Mallet-Stevens, Pratt and San Juan, Ockman, Schwarzer and Vaz da Costa about architecture and film and suggest there is an interactive dynamics between history and narrative in the film – each shaping the other. I argue that the narrative constructs story using a particular historically charged iconography. History is manifested in form of urban space and architecture and mutely tells about the past and narrates the present and the actual moment. Figuring as a narrative, history is a fact, and the protagonist’s attempts to obliterate historical facts are futile, because the solid stone buildings and the non-embraceable urban environment are beyond him. Yerevan maintains history and “writes” history – buildings “guard” facts that shape people’s destinies, while streets and squares control the characters’ movement and determine accidents and happenstances. The building of the National Archive of Armenia, built in 1901, is the inanimate antagonist. A mixture of styles - ancient Armenian and European / Russian classicism – it reinforces the presence of history as an invincible force, as well as it safeguards citizens’ “identities and biographies,” which traumatize them and ruin their lives, though the archives reveal the truth.

Keywords: history, cinema, narrative, architecture, urban space, Yerevan city

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The Story

Set in Yerevan, in 1972, the feature film The Chronicle of Yerevan Days (1972) surveys an episode from the busy routine of Yerevan, the capital of Soviet Armenia. The events in the film tell the last days of Armen's life. Armen is a forty year old clerk working at the National Archives of Armenia (NAA). On the thematic level, the film explores the idea of recorded history in relation to human memory and shows how human destiny depends on both. Armen seeks justice in both senses, local and global, but the powers he fights are beyond him. He is tormented by the way the factual data he deals with on regular basis inflicts miseries and hardships on the citizens of Yerevan. He wants to destroy the documents that contain information that may break up families, assign false identities and confirm non-existence of facts that could help people lead fulfilled lives. Armen reaches out to the citizens and guides them, through self-sacrifice, to solving their personal issues.

Through Armen as the protagonist, the film concerns itself with the lives of Yerevanites and how their present situations are insurmountably linked with the 50 years' history of Soviet Armenia. NAA plays a significant role in the film. This is where documents and records concerning social, political, cultural walks of life in Armenia and the biographic data of the citizens are kept. The political upheavals in Transcaucasia¹ wreaked a devastation on the lives of Armenians, the cruelest of which were the Armenian Genocide and the WWII. In the film, Yerevanites suffer from lost or unknown identities and seek restoration and completion of their biological and biographical data. Half a century later, NAA should be the institution where an individual can piece their identity together and legitimately claim their civic rights. Ironically, the truth safeguarded by the government within the walls of NAA building is cruel.

In a broader sense, the film is about the capital of Armenia - Yerevan. The narrative discourse employs the actual city space in real time. City spaces open the narrative and then they reappear consistently, in the end city spaces close the film. This consistency invites a claim that this ongoing narrative device has a specific intention. Parallel to unfolding the story, the narrative systematically points the viewer's attention to the setting. There are scenes and sequences, where the action could have been set in the interior, but the specific choices call for a reading of the story about Armen with specific references to the physical Yerevan city in 1972.

The Narrative Strategy

The film deploys a narrative system that constructs the diegetic world via images that consist of two layers – realist and aesthetic, based on two modes of perception – pragmatic and aesthetic. The realist layer is the raw material that is unmediated, whereas the other one is the aestheticizing implication conveyed by particular techniques of cinematography and mise-en-scene. The first one familiarizes the viewer with the city and locates the viewer in historically real time and space, while the other provides

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

aesthetic commentary by means of an interplay between character and environment. Several cinematic narrative techniques are repeatedly employed and suggest the double-track narrative system.

1. The establishing shots articulate buildings – that of NAA, the Genocide Memorial, 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 on the background of a building detail, in which case the details are “narrated” closely.
3. The tracking and following shots imbue the narrative with naturalism. In some instances, the camera's view of Anahit is obstructed by traffic and passersby; in two cases the cuts to another street are determined by the casual traffic's blocking the spectator's view; in the sequence where Armen spots Anahit, random pedestrians crowd the street, the camera, doesn't focus on Armen, and as a result he gets lost in the crowd (as if the camera spies on him). The shifting of locations distracts the viewer, and the attention isn't fully drawn to Armen, rather it is drawn to passersby, lookers-on, the real time sounds and speech, specific stretches of the given streets (with their buildings).
4. The intense naturalistic bend in the outdoor location shooting prompts the spectator (especially the local) to think of off-screen space. Because of a deep sense of familiarity, the viewer tends to pay more than usual attention to the locale, out of curiosity and, perhaps, has fun in virtually being with the characters at the given locations across Yerevan.
5. In two instances, the lingering static shots close the scenes with no characters present. In these shots, the city represented by buildings and streets is brought to the foreground.

Robert Alter puts forth the ideas of “mythographer” and “realist witness” in “Imagined Cities” (2005) 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, through which the link between protagonist's consciousness and the nature of the city is shown. The narrative strategy in the film allows Armen to be the central consciousness through which the viewer interprets the images. The subtlety in the film narrative lies in the fact that the viewer can also see the city spaces independent of Armen's point of view. In another instant, Alter discusses “the voice of Paris awakening” as a representation of the city in Flaubert's *Sentimental Education*, a feature that is rampant in the film's narrative, e.g. the viewer can hear the real-time traffic noise, honks, pedestrian's chatter and in the backyard scene the tenant woman's crying “Arturik” in a Russianized accent.

The interaction between city space and character is key to understanding the film. Exacerbating buildings amounts to a unique spatial narrative voice. With the successive shots of the buildings in Yerevan, varying in length and angle, the discourse establishes an historical truthfulness and associates the actual buildings with human characters in the

narrative. The framing guides reading of the characters' situations in a close interplay with the buildings. The buildings demonstrate their role in recording history, locking in memory, and operate as artifacts, in which the past and the present coexist. The building details – decors, pillars, arcs and facades - become markers of a particular history and present the diegetic world of the film as Armenia. As a social and spatial reality Yerevan assumes the shape of a grand awe-inspiring artifact of ancient civilization (Yerevan is 2799 years old, (“Yerevan,” n.d.) that imposes itself on the humans by virtue of articulating the unique historical-cultural heritage. As James Chapman in his book “Film and History” says, according to the model of New History film, a film is “a two-sided mirror through which we can see how American identity is shaped in the movies, at the same time, how the movies are shaped by it” (2013, p. 94). Likewise, The Chronicle of Yerevan Days implies the notion of the mechanism of man building a city and the city shaping man's destiny, which is at the heart of the process of creating culture.

History as Narrative: Culture and Society

It's noteworthy to mention that the architecture of modern Yerevan is a mixture of various styles – ancient, medieval and classical. The plan of the present day city was designed by Alexander Tamayan who revived the ancient Armenian architecture by composing the plan of Yerevan based on the city plans of medieval era (streets and squares) and designed the first buildings in the spirit of medieval Armenian architecture with elements of Russian classicism (Azatyan, 2013). The architecture of Yerevan combines these styles in a modernist way that validates Armen's function (he fills the missing gaps) as a nexus between the past and the present. Throughout The Chronicle of Yerevan Days, the city fragments, buildings, facades, entrance doors, windows, streets and squares constantly build up the character of Yerevan parallel to the developing action. Maria Da Costa thinks that using the locations, city spaces and city's topography is a way of creating the urban environment as mise-en-scene. This strategy articulates movement, which allows the viewer to visualize the cityscape (2015). By staging the action in the streets, squares and courts, using shots that emphasize the city spaces, the film maker conveys the idea that the story about Armen is indispensably linked with the history of Yerevan.

The action is set in and near historically accurate buildings of the time - the National Archives of Armenia (1901) and the Republican Clinical Hospital (1965-70), which are represented as such. Other buildings that appear in the narrative ranging from public to residential are the memorial of the Armenian Genocide (1965-67), the Government Residence of Republic of Armenia (1940s), the Nalbandyan Street apartment block (1930s), the Baghramyan Avenue apartment block (1960s), the Academy of Sciences of Armenia (1940-50s), the Hovhannes Tumanyan Museum (1950s). They all have been important landmarks in Yerevan. The themes of being trapped by the past, the recorded history, and memory emerge from the interaction between edifice and man. Humans seek salvation from the shackles imposed on them by the authorities, whose physical representation is the NAA building. The buildings and streets appear to be indispensable parts of humans' lives, however they don't figure as shelters or places of social functions in the traditional sense. Instead, they are presented as places where the characters realize

their self-assertions (the café, Nalbandyan Street, the stranger's apartment), seek their identities (the NAA building, the Genocide Memorial), make sense of their world (Spring Street), look for a place to get hooked and stop being adrift (montage of streets during the drive to Spring Street). Da Costa claims that representation in its essence is an interpretation, and the images of edifice in the film speak a lot about the reality of a given city (2015).

Chapman (2013) discusses the idea of feature film as a source of history. He quotes Marc Ferro saying that film could also be an 'agent of history.' Ferro distinguishes between films "inscribed in the flow of dominant currents and those that propose an independent or innovative view of societies" (85). Chapman also presents Robert Rosenstone's 'New History film' – a film that questions the traditionally accepted narrative techniques, which shape knowledge of history, as well as "smaller historical truths, received wisdoms, conventional images" (p. 86). Addressing the view of Nouvelle Vague criticism about the formal properties and representational conventions of films, Chapman stresses the importance of the style of filmic narration in representing reality. In his words, Jacques Segond asserts that 'explicit content of film is only part of the form that expresses the implicit meaning' (93). "The Chronicle of Yerevan Days" narrationally does contest the larger discourse of telling history, especially given the Soviet strict censorship, under which it was made, but at the same time the film provides, indirectly, evidence of a historical moment articulated by documenting the social reality of Yerevan in 1972.

Buildings

The National Archives of Armenia

The building of NAA is situated on Sakharov Square. It was built in 1901 as a Provincial Treasury, when Armenia was part of the Russian Empire (Gasparyan, 2008). In the film, the building of NAA figures as a complex representation of history - an agglomerate of the past and present political regimes and situations, the social structures, as well as the historical roots of ethnic architecture and the evolution of national culture. The building is a significant locus for the action. It is where Armen works, commits an offence, meets Anahit and falls in love with her, organizes the confrontation with the wrongful attorney. In addition, the windowless, dungeon-like archive storage disturbs his mental state. In Rome, Open City, the Palace of Italian civilization is the building that is a distinctive feature for recognizing the location. The Universal Exposition of Rome (EUR), built in 1942, is designed to imitate the structure of Coliseum. It is a sign of fascism, but also a marker of post-war internal assessment of responsibility and cooperation with fascism. The site where EUR is located gains significance through "the most charged ruins of the war in the film" (Pratt and San Juan, 2014).

Somewhat as an antagonist, the state organization - National Archives of Armenia (embodied in the building) - interferes with the lives of the residents. NAA stores a document written 16 years ago, which entitles the teenager boy's biological father to take over the custody of his son from the old couple who adopted the boy and raised him. As a cultural artifact, the NAA building tells about the cultural heritage of Armenia. The decor

on the building “narrate” the story of Yerevan by describing the characteristics of the city – modernity through medieval forms. The classical style and the black tufa (a stone endemic to Armenia) emanate the inconvenient irreversible truth safeguarded inside.

As an introduction, the building of NAA appears in a long shot. The shot describes the general appearance of the building - a pattern of arc windows on the first level and rectangular ones on the ground level. As the camera zooms in on Armen’s car coming to a stop, the façade details emerge: the second level balcony and linear ornaments on the Yerevan black tufa. In another scene, the establishing and closing shots don’t focus on the characters, but on the NAA building. Armen and two co-workers who watch and supervise the hanging of a poster, are mute, small and insignificant. The camera moves upward across the façade and pauses on the poster - a still shot showing the windows – those on the upper level have arcs, those on the lower level are rectangular. The still shot also shows the portal – all these details are in the spirit of Russian classicism (Gasparyan, 2008). In the sequence where Armen helps the old woman, the semi-basement level windows and sectional ornamentation of the façade are revealed. Within an hour and half of the film (which spans over most of the narrative time), the narrative describes Yerevan through episodic views of the typical routine in the National Archives and the building from various angles. Humans come and go – in a historical sense, they’re passersby, but Yerevan is firm and unshakable. It outlives Armen and Anahit’s relationship. In da Costa’s words, Walter Benjamin shows the cinema’s ability to “narrate” in a way other mediums cannot. “Different dimensions and angles of the same object” allow the audience a peculiar way to make sense of the object, otherwise impossible (104).

Apartment Blocks and Public Buildings

The theme of history as narrative surfaces in many scenes, where the architecture of Yerevan is especially marked as a significant part of the action. In one scene it comes through quite forcefully, when the narrative visits the Nalbandyan Street apartment block and the adjacent building of the Department of Architecture of Yerevan City Council (built in 1940-50s). In the beginning sequence, from Armen’s point of view the viewer is introduced to the Nalbandyan Street and the buildings that line the street up to the Republic Square. The images of the buildings that are made of local tufa and built in the style of Armenian national romanticism charge the shot heavily with historical significance. A sense of upward movement of the elevation of the office buildings, with 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 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 rays. Similar to how buildings carry history, Armen is in grips with the historical 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. At this crucial moment of his life, the old man 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 drawn from the impregnable “chronicles”

housed by and articulated in the buildings' structures contextualize the old man's tragedy, reinforcing the theme that a human being is powerless against recorded history.

History resurfaces in a much hushed way in the sequence set at the Republican Clinical Hospital. The hospital building is a huge construction stretching from right to left and beyond the shot. The massive building of the hospital, on the background of which we see Armen's tiny car is a listless and frigid rock. The hospital should be the hope, the place where the life of a man who's been in an accident can be saved, Alas! Though the doctor struggles to force the man's heart back to beating, he dies. The scene implies how fragile and vulnerable Yerevanites are in contrast to the city, represented in architecture.

In another episode, the film shows how the camera narrates the historically accurate current moment. The viewer has a detailed view of the apartment block on Nalbandyan Street, while Anahit and her boyfriend quarrel. The windows and the entrance door of the apartment block are open. The shot reveals that the ground level windows are barred and the panes replaced by carton, which tells about burglary as a possibility and informs that the semi-basement levels in the apartment blocks in Yerevan weren't used for residential purposes. An interesting characteristic image of Yerevan is also described - the façade of the apartment block is made up of basalt in the lower section and of Ani tufa in the section above the ground level windows.

The theme of the past determining human destiny is reinforced by the configuration of Anahit's apartment in the tenement located on Sayat-Nova and Nalbandyan crossroads as a historical-cultural artifact rather than home. When Armen calls on Anahit to make a proposal, the five-level building fills most of the frame, the rest being occupied by Ani Hotel next to it. The presence of the tenement is articulated, while Anahit's apartment's interior audience is never shown. In terms of comfort and safety, Anahit's apartment is non-existent, which suggests that Anahit's home is not a haven for her and Armen. Instead, the tenement, where her apartment is, appears in its full size, as an accumulation of history - culture, politics, and social activity. The lingering of the camera after Armen's car stops and the composition of the photography where Armen's car is small and Armen and Anahit are absent, insinuate the controlling force of the residential building, which is not different from the public building (NAA). The massive structure belittles humans' issues and deeds.

Another configuration of such a metaphysical interaction, which reveals how the past imposes itself on the vulnerable human characters is implied in the scenes set in the Republic Square and at the Genocide Memorial. When Armen drives the widow home, the Republic Square appears with a monumental arcade and tall pillars, typical of ancient architecture, as an awe-inspiring grandeur, which under the bells of the tower clock imposes discipline, order and divinity. The buildings reflect historical, political, national and cultural values. A fragment of the Government Residence is framed by the car windshield when Armen drives into the square - the viewer can see the pillars and arcs on the upper sections of the façade. As the widow drinks water, the buildings surround the empty square and create an illusion of a royal court with the arcade and the bulky domed

structure of the Museum of National History of Armenia (built in 1970) standing grandly above the bereft woman.

The scene at the Genocide Memorial is a special moment, when Anahit tells Armen how she has survived WW II. The first two shots tell the viewer about the memorial before the viewer sees Armen and Anahit. The memory of the Armenians massacred at the end of 19 and beginning of 20 centuries still wounds Armenians in the same way as Anahit's memories of her parents who perished in the WWII don't leave her alone. In the dark night, the usual lighting at the monument validates the sinister and mischievous force lurking behind an individual's destiny, as Armen stands tiny against the huge massive stone blocks, his hands stretched in the manner of crucified Christ.

The film ends in a sequence of shots of buildings with no human character. The montage of window shots starts with a close-up shot of a window, moving to increasingly lengthening shots that contain rows of windows. The final shot displays the whole façade of Tumanyan Museum where the windows are difficult to see because three arcs obstruct the view. As an allusion to escape, the windows with their serene and unshakable majesty finalize the undercurrent motif of the incapability of humans to obliterate the past. In connection with denial of escape, the images of windows mean that buildings contain history humans have to deal with, also that history can reveal inconvenient truths for humans.

At the end, Yerevan comes in rather aggressively to finish Armen's story and to show its might perpetrated in stone. At the same time, the buildings are a silent testimony to the human history. Also, perhaps a victorious silent declaration that cities as structures built by humans outlive them because they are superior.

City Spaces

The streets and squares that appear in the narrative have been well-known for their historically functional significance. The Khanjyan, Nalbandyan (15 century A.D.), Baghramyan, 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 (Gasparyan, 2008). These streets and squares are invested in a lot of history, and once built, these structures have been shaping, on their part, the lives of Yerevanites over decades up until our days. The physical environment in the diegesis of the film is largely organized by streets and squares of at least half a century old. This historical knowledge, visually emphasized, defines the spatial narrative in the film thanks to the particular use of the city spaces. The extraordinary image of Yerevan contributes to this, as architect Tamanyan's vision and his successors' views and practices have already shaped a unique text of Yerevan. T.J. Barnes and J.S. Duncan 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. And within this context, they conclude that creating a film is constitutive, namely the old world is the basis of a new world (Costa).

In the film, the streets navigate the viewer in real time movement and reveal the many sides of Yerevan, in terms of culture and social life in 1972. The opening scene on the Khanjyan Street, with probably the first tram out on its route, is a long shot composed of the city spaces and Mount Ararat rising over Yerevan in the far. The shot describes the spaces of the city, with the high-rise apartment blocks, the tall wide lamp posts, the tram tracks in the middle, occasional traffic on the right side. The shots of Sakharov Square, a place revisited a few times for the dramatic action, describe the public life, simultaneously capturing the kvass tanker and the phone booth in front of the parking space outside the NAA building (locals can 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 casual traffic interfering with the view of the camera. When he spots Anahit and tries to cross the street – his point of view of her is blocked by trolley-buses and passers-by. Another street scene where the viewer can see a typical afternoon on Nalbandyan Street in 1972 is the one where Anahit slaps her fiancée – the shots have captured two women talking, a man chatting up a woman, another man probably looking on the action going on between Anahit and her fiancée.

A strong sense of truthfulness arises, when 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 Avenue, then at the ropeway on Koryun Street, finally at an unrecognizable construction site. The taxi driver enumerates all the existing street names and then he stops by a police station to inquire after a street named Spring. They end up in a street that's under construction. Here, the narrative discloses the ugly side of Yerevan, equipping it with yet another dimension, implying the “ruins” of Anahit's identity.

The film ends in a 4-minute sequence, where Armen walks to the shop beneath the real time sounds of Yerevan. By virtue of its urban plan and communal life Yerevan helps expand the narrative to include along with Armen's action details of the authentic setting of the story. The camera tracks Armen's movement, then in a reverse shot shows the widow, following her now. As the woman crosses Sayat Nova, she and Armen exchange glances. The camera starts tracking the woman in shots gradually moving from medium to close-ups and then from her moves on to Rshtuni's (soldier who saved Anahit's life) picture in a newspaper posted on the bulletin board. 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 viewer), being still confused and indecisive. This is where he suddenly has a heart attack and drops dead in the midst of a crowd. The scene, even if staged, is presented in a very naturalistic style through following close-up shots of on-lookers' faces, crane shots shifting to close-ups narrating the incident – we see the crowd that has surrounded Armen, one man rubbing his chest, a glass of water passing hands, a doctor arriving and checking Armen's pulse and eyes and a voice from the crowd asking “Dead?” followed by a grunting “Yeah.”

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Contact email: shazzai@yahoo.com