



## The Sound Space of the City as a Reflection of “the Spirit of the Times” and the Inner World of the Film Hero

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**ABSTRACT:** The theme of the artistic image of the city in film has been repeatedly considered in film studies from both historical and cultural perspectives. However, two aspects of the study of the theme remain virtually unexplored because they are associated with a professional analysis of such a specific area of filmmaking as sound directing. The first aspect is the role of the city in films as both visual and audio space; the second aspect is the significance of urban sounds in the creation of the inner world of a film character.

This essay explores the director’s vision of urban space and the possibilities of sound directing in the formation of the inner world of a character and his/her various mental conditions - through the use of sound textures of the urban environment. The author analyses several films about Georgia’s capital Tbilisi, produced in different time periods. The vivid “sound face” of Tbilisi allows one to follow changes in the aesthetic approaches to the use of the city’s sounds for the formation of the image of film characters in the cultural and historical context of particular films. The essay concludes that the urban space, with its huge range of sound phenomena, contributes to the formation of a polyphonic phonogram which could bring a film’s semantics to higher aesthetic and intellectual levels.

**KEY WORDS:** urban space in cinema, sound directing in cinema, film sound design, inner world of film character, films about Tbilisi, contemporary Georgian cinema

Since the beginning of the silent film era, city landscapes have been common shooting locations. The city has been integral to the atmosphere of many film masterpieces; for example, movies such as “Paris qui dort” (Paris Asleep) (1923) by R. Clair, “L’Atalante” (1934) by Jean Vigo, and “Les Quatre cents coups” (1959) by F. Truffaut are inconceivable without the sights of Paris. Similarly, “The Third Meshchanskaya” (1927) by A. Room, “Walking the Streets of Moscow” (1963) by G. Danelia, and “I Am Twenty” (1965) by M. Khutsiev are nothing without the streets of Moscow. The theme of the city as an artistic image in movies has been widely discussed in film studies and the history and science of culture. Examples include academic works

<sup>1</sup> Goroda v kino [Cities in the cinema]. – Moscow: Kanon+ ROOI «Reabilitaciya», 2013. – 272 p. (in Russian).

<sup>2</sup> Balandina N.P. (2008) Obrazy goroda i doma v kinoiskusstve: na materiale otechestvennogo i francuzskogo kino konca 50-h – 60-h godov [Images of the city and home in the cinema: on the material of domestic and French cinema of the late 50s – 60s.]. – Diss. kand. iskusstvovedeniya. – Moscow, 2008. – 191 p. (in Russian)

such as “Cities in the movies,”<sup>1</sup> a Ph. D. thesis by N.P. Balandina, “Images of the city and home in the art of motion pictures: based on the domestic and French movies of the late 50s–60s,”<sup>2</sup> and other works. However, several sound engineering aspects have not yet been studied as part of city theme research in movies. The first aspect is the city as a visual and *audible space*, and the second is associated with the values of city sounds in creating film characters’ *inner worlds*.

Every city shown in films is a unique world, filled with a wide range of sounds. The specific city atmosphere is created by the background noise, the murmur of the multilingual crowd, the sound of trams ringing, the clatter of a horse-drawn carriage, the roar of engines, the rustle of bicycle tires, the cacophony of factory buzzers, the crash of construction sounds, or the chaos of the marketplace. A city’s “phonosphere” is largely created by people living there; their way of speaking, the speech rhythm and intonation, the peculiar sounds of national musical instruments, the distinctive speech patterns associated with local holidays, and other acoustic peculiarities. The sounds of some cities seem to be “implanted” in our memories, partly due to moviemaking; for example, Paris is associated with the sound of accordions or the nostalgic melody of a French song. The representation and memorability of the sound affects both the director’s view of the city space and the sound engineer’s ability to create the character’s inner world and demonstrate the character’s various states of mind by manipulating the acoustic patterns in the city environment. Therefore, analyzing colorful and identifiable sound reality in movies is of special interest.

Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, and Moscow, the capital of Russia, have long had strong “cinematographic” links and spiritual relationships. From the 1950s to the 1960s, a stellar cast of talented Georgian workers visited Moscow, which, consequently, significantly affected the development of the domestic Georgian movie industry. The group included Lev Kulidzhanov, Marlen Khutsiev, Otar Iosseliani, Sergey Paradzhanov, camera man Dmitry Meskhiev, script writer Anatoly Grebnev, music maker Mikael Tariverdiev, and other talented artists. Tbilisi’s distinctive character and multiculturalism heavily influenced these remarkable moviemakers’ aesthetic principles. Grebnev commented on the city of his youth:

“It was our Tbilisi, warm-hearted, generous, and poor, adapted to its own worn-out poverty; however, still keeping its ambitions of the prince; Tbilisi of the galleries looking inside the yards; long lines for kerosene, separate for men and women; huge, almost empty rooms, where a grandma with knitting is sitting in an old rocking chair; the voices of your friends in the street calling you... families

of old Georgian intelligentsia spoke both Georgian and Russian, and sometimes even French... What I'm talking about still can be seen in the movies of Otar Iosseliani—going away and gone away old days of Tbilisi”<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Grebnev A. (2000) Zapiski poslednego scenarista [Notes of the last screenwriter]. – Moscow: Algoritm, 2000. – 368 p. // URL: <https://kinodramaturg.ru/grebnev-zapiski-poslednego-scenarista/60/> (Accessed: 05.01.2019). (in Russian).

### The City as a space for ironic games and tragic paradoxes

Two movies by Iosseliani, “Falling Leaves” (1966) and “There Once was a Singing Blackbird” (1971), presented the Georgian national identity and the trends of the “thaw period,” which then became significant to domestic movie production. The main feature of these movies was their new intonation, a cultured irony that reduced smug discussions of the movie “hero,” “problem,” and “idea.” Therefore, Iosseliani’s first movies were similar to the aesthetics of the French “new wave,” with its “de-dramatization” of the plot, the simplification of conflicts, and the “non-hero,” a character without prominent personal “heroic” features, brought to the fore. Both story and plot in Iosseliani’s movies were portrayed in the main character’s ironic attitude, through gentle humor and “playing with reality” by creating a unique meaning through a space filled with exotic objects, inhabited by extravagant characters, and absurd situations that frequently generated an unbearable sense of unfulfillment, loss, or grief.

This world required special attention to the delicate sounds that were smoothly included in the movie’s ironic-game space and created the “caught reality.” In an interview, Iosseliani noted that he constructed his work “based on the rules that he created himself and that relate to the musical form. For example, I try to escape the sonata form; i.e., the collision of two opposite forms that in music theory is also called a struggle, development, a collision or a workout. On the contrary, I take a sample polyphonic composition, such as a fugue, with counterpoint that has repeated themes and with latent themes coming to the forefront”<sup>4</sup>.

Therefore, in the first ten minutes of “There Once was a Singing Blackbird,” the audience hears: a harpsichord (at the screen credits), street traffic, a waterfall, the beginning of an orchestra’s practice, the first notes of the alto aria from “Matthäus Passion” by I. S. Bach, birdsong, street noise, a wind band, an opera closing, Georgian chanting, the fox-trot “Rio Rita,” Georgian polyphonic singing, “salon” guitar, and numerous conversation fragments. Some of these sound fragments overlap, as if they were simultaneously “caught” with the ear during an endless wander around the city. The main character, Giya, a musician-drummer, is always running somewhere, always in a hurry, and always late. As the camera follows the main character, the sound mirrors Giya’s “run across,” “run in,” and “run out” actions

<sup>4</sup> Malyshev V.S. (2018) Vliyanie shedevrov mirovogo kino na tvorcheskoe mirovozzrenie rezhissera [The influence of the masterpieces of world cinema on the creative worldview of the director] // Vestnik VGIK. 2018. № 4 (38). P. 8–23. (in Russian).



Shot from the film  
"Lived the song thrush",  
Director O. Ioseliani,  
1970

as he moves from one sound space to another, and sometimes echo the sounds in his subconscious. The city's sound is a kaleidoscope of many "subspaces," such as cafés, restaurants, windows, science laboratories, a doctor's office, a sauna, and a repair workshop.

When looking for the manager of the opera theatre in the conservatory, with whom Giya has made an

appointment to have a "serious conversation," he walks up and down the stairs and corridors and looks inside the different class rooms. As he opens each door, through which various sounds emit. For example, behind one door, a little violin player is learning a piece of music, and Giya greets him with "Hello, Vakhtang! Do your best!" Behind other doors, a clarinet is playing, a vocal band is practicing, a solo singer is warming up, and a harpsichord is playing. Giya, who knows almost everybody in the city, says hello to everybody, asks about their parents' health, apologizes, sings with someone, and teaches singing. By listening to this sound "turnaround," the audience evaluates the meaning of the "sound stops" and the sound symbols, as the director transitions from a "game space" to existential senses such as a clock ticking out a life time, or the alto aria "Erbarme dich" from Bach's "Matthäus Passion." At this moment, the main character stops running and stands alone, with Bach's melody playing in his subconscious, its beginning sounds making him feel regret for a different life. The overloud sound of the clock ticking (time's implacability) is heard at the end of the movie when an unrecoverable event occurs (Giya is crushed by an automobile when crossing the road). The notion of the "existential stop" is included in a restaurant scene, when several of Giya's friends sing a beautiful Georgian song. The philosopher Merab Mamardashvili said of Georgian drinking songs that, "when <Georgians> drink and sing, this expresses a particular Georgian tragedy that is joy through despair."<sup>5</sup>

### **Cacophony of the new city reality and the silence of emotions**

Several decades after Ioseliani's first movies, critical changes took place in the Georgian community, which were reflected in the state of the culture and people's self-awareness. In one of his articles, Professor Georgy Kadzhrishvili noted that:

<sup>5</sup> Mamardashvili M.K. (2011) Soznanie i civilizaciya [Consciousness and civilization]. – Azbuka, Azbuka-Attikus, 2011. – 288 p. (in Russian).

<sup>6</sup> Kadzhrishvili G. Bitter taste of freedom and Georgian movie (new traditions in the contemporary Georgian moviemaking) // *Istoriya nacional'nykh kinematografii v SSSR i perspektivy razvitiya kino gosudarstv – uchastnikov SNG, stran Baltii i Gruzii: Kollektivnaya monografiya* [The history of national cinematography in the USSR and the prospects for the development of cinema of the states participating in the CIS, the Baltic States and Georgia: A collective monograph]. – Moscow: Akademicheskij projekt, 2018. – 773 p. + 64 p/ vкл. – (Tekhnologii kul'tury). (in Russian).

<sup>7</sup> The movie “Tbilisi-Tbilisi” was awarded “Nika” prize as the best movie of the CIS countries and Baltic States in 2005. – *Author's note*

“It is safe to say that Georgian movies were an exact reflection of Georgian history and still are. It developed, changed, stopped, and then kept going and went up together with the political, economic, and cultural events in the country. These circumstances were shown in the movies not only as problems but also as artistic solutions, with the forms of these tasks directly affecting the destiny of the entire moviemaking industry”<sup>6</sup>.

However, the constants remained, reflecting a cultural national code that is still present in contemporary movies, which are connected to the different acoustic phenomena underlying the transformations of the city environment and the state of the human beings within it.

In 2005, Georgian director Levan Zakareishvili shot the movie “**Tbilisi-Tbilisi**,”<sup>7</sup> in which the Georgian capital is shown as it was at the end of 1990s, when Georgia transformed to its new economy, and in which the sound of the electric train symbolizes endless movement throughout the entire movie. The movie opens in the room of the main character, the young director Dato (David Takaishvili). The bleat of the neighbor's goat is heard among the rare car noise. The morning sleep of Dato and Salomeya, his wife, is interrupted with a phone ringing and a woman asking, “What's the time?” to which Dato answers: “Time to take some wine.” However, the audience does not see this cultural constant, honorable Georgian wine-taking accompanied by traditional male chanting; at the end of 1990s, the citizens of Tbilisi drink only beer and vodka. When awakened, Dato starts smoking, turns on a tape recorder (a stylish Georgian folk-rock-band singing in French) and drinks beer from the bottle.

Probably, nothing can be different in a city that has transformed into a continuous cheap market where even former scientific workers are involved in commerce. The screenwriting professor, Otar Eristavi, is an old man with a trolley. He sells margarine and gives pages of his thesis, “Georgian filmmaking relative to world movies,” to a familiar street trader, who uses them to make paper bags for sunflower seeds. Eristavi's ex-student, Dato, barely recognizes him. Dato's wife, who is a teacher in a conservatory and plays piano in the restaurant in the evening, prepares coffee on a makeshift stove and gets ready for her lectures. The movie has many details exposing the difficulties of city life, such as a disabled person without a left leg who has a dog on a leash with a tied up left paw, or a boy playing basketball in a yard using a basket made of a broken bentwood chair. Traditional Georgian music is played by a duet; Gavrosh, a young drummer (playing a double-sided Georgian drum called a dhola), and an accordion player; when Dato says, “he plays well!” his companion answers, “and makes good profit!”

Dato looks for a film plot focused on his city but finds only a fable for a tragic story. Bitter-eyed, he looks through the material he has shot in



Shot from the film  
"Tbilisi-Tbilisi", Director  
L. Zakareishvili, 2005

absolute silence (associated with dead emotions), in which there is a continuous market, criminal faces, homeless vagrants, and the unemployed. In a poor decrepit snack bar with a pennant that says "Team of Communist Labor" on the wall, he hears a drunken man singing the aria of King Philipp from Verdi's opera "Don Karlos" in a professional bass voice for the local hooker, Elsa. Dato exclaims, "This is the Bolshoi

Theater! Shalyapin! Moscow!" His friend, Nodar, responds: "This is not Moscow. This is Tbilisi. Tbilisi. People have stones instead of hearts here."

The city's soundscape is expressed through the market cacophony: quarreling traders and buyers; the imputing of thieving woman; a Russian song ("An attic full of junk, there's mass on the floor, very strong fist"); the more distant sounds of an electric train; a rhythmic drum; an accordion melody; and Professor Eristavi's reply to his neighbor, in the trade stand, about the newspaper crossword, "Founding-father of French filmmaking, six letters?" – "Méliès." Full of the city realities, Dato is lost in drunken drowsiness, feeling that he has lost his professional and human dignity, as society does not demand the art that he seeks to master. Finally, when he obtains a "commercial proposal" from Roland to make an advertising clip sponsored by people from Columbia, Dato says, "I first wished to make a movie about friendship, then, about dogs and now about handcuffs? You sold customs; you sold the Motherland; am I next?" Everything that was valuable to Dato escapes, accompanied by the sound of the night electric train. At the very end of the movie, the feeling of loss is enhanced by a detached freight car, which had been standing idle for a long time and in which two homeless orphans, a sister and a brother, live, suddenly starts moving, going to an unknown place.

### **The city as a space of historic memory and a dialogue of generations**

Understanding the current condition of Georgian society focuses on the history of the people, restoring unknown or taboo practices. In





A scene from the movie  
"Hostages", directed  
R. Gigineishvili, 2017

this respect, the 2017 movie "Hostages" (directed by R. Gigineishvili) is significant, as it is based on actual events in 1984 when several young people (including a young lady), representing the so called Georgian "elite youth," attempted to hijack an aircraft from Georgia to Turkey. The audience sees a group of friends: Sandro, an artist, Daniil, a priest, and several more people, among whom Niko, the main character, is distinguished as a young movie actor who had already become popular. The hijacking is scheduled for the day after Niko's wedding to Anna; however, things go awry. The hijack attempt ends with the murder of several passengers and crew members. Special Forces on board seize the hijackers, all of whom are sentenced to death except for Anna, who is sentenced to 15 years imprisonment.

The movie has several interesting acoustic accompaniments, such as the sounds of the city spaces that are connected to the characters' inner feelings and emotions and underlines some features of their natures. From the first shot, the audience hears marching music typical of the late-Soviet era coming from a tape recorder and sees "Rostov" standing in the square, which was used for celebratory demonstrations ("The capital of Georgia celebrates, the whole country celebrates!"). The detail in this scene is a microphone in the speaker's hands that does not work and that he, unsuccessfully, knocks with his fingers in preparation for a speech; however, the demonstrators in the background pay no attention to him. These sounds mark the movie space-time.

The striking of a wall clock is heard in the next scene, a character's home. The symbol of the striking (counting the lifetime) slowly transforms into a loud bell ringing and religious chanting in the next shot. The artist, Sandro, who is dressed in canonical attire, serves in the church. Sandro from "Hostages" visually resembles a character with the same name and occupation in the Georgian movie "Repentance" by T. Abuladze<sup>8</sup>; an icon-like face with light red hair and a beard. However, the Sandro in Abuladze's movie protested against

<sup>8</sup> Besides the similarity of appearance of the characters there are a number of coincidences in the movies. "Repentance" was made at the same time as the events in the movie "Hostages" in 1984. One of the actors in "Repentance" participated in the aircraft hijack. Two actors in "Repentance", Avtandil Makhizaradze and Merab Ninidze, played in "Hostages" –  
*Author's note*

the totalitarian system using his art and sacrificing his life, whereas the Sandro of Gigineishvili strives for personal freedom, thinks nothing of murder, and violates the main Christian commandment, “thou shalt not kill.” In “Repentance,” during Sandro’s torture, an audio-visual counterpoint occurs under the church dome; the “Ode to Joy” from the finale of Beethoven’s 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony is heard at the background. In “Hostages,” a wonderful male choir is heard singing in the church to which Sandro comes, and which is disturbed by the shout of Sandro’s mother: “I do not want my son to come here!”

The young movie actor Niko is also associated with a character from “There Once was a Singing Blackbird” by Iosseliani. Niko is quick, social, and careless in appearance but is internally tragic in a very particular way. In the scene in which Niko exchanges a Beatles record, purchased from a priest for 30 rubles, for a combat grenade, the false sounds of a poorly tuned piano are heard as the *property*. In the background during Niko’s wedding party amidst the toasts, congratulations, exclamations, and sounds of horns, the sad, atonal music of Gia Kancheli from the concert for alto, chorus, and orchestra, with the symbolic name “Styx,”<sup>9</sup> can be heard (the same music sounds as a contrapuntal background on board the aircraft during the bloody tragedy).

The leading motive in the movie is an aircraft buzz; it is frequently used in the background but cannot be recognized easily without visual support. The low-frequency aircraft sound provides an instinctive feeling of anxiety and danger. However, this sound has different meanings and multiple connotations in different parts of the movie, depending on the context and the dramaturgic accents. Every scene of the movie includes multi-layered background textures, combined with the aircraft sound, during both pauses and dialogue. It is also important to know particular sounds’ functions and know whether they are semantic or coloristic. This was how movie director Gigineishvili evaluated the work of the sound engineer K. Vasilenko in one of the interviews: “It is important for him for example to have a very soft aircraft sound as the tragic messenger, when the two characters are shooting in the forest like children.”<sup>10</sup>

Following is an example of the polyphonic acoustic textures in only one episode of the movie. We see a house yard and an automobile coming, and hear the polyphony of playing children, a sparrow’s tweet, and the far off noise of the city. Automobiles and pile driving with delayed effect<sup>11</sup> (rhythmic shocks, similar to the tick of a clock, creating a feeling of anxiety) alternate with background noises, such as several far off train horns, a child’s shout, and automobile sounds, all of which were designed and acoustically processed from individual textures by the sound engineer.

<sup>9</sup> «Styx» was composed by Kancheli as a requiem in memory of his friends, music makers, A. Terteryan and A. Shnitke. – *Author’s note*

<sup>10</sup> Dolin A. (2017) «Bortprovodnitsa skazala: „Konechno, ya uzhe prostila etih rebyat”» Interv’yu Rezo Gigineishvili, rezhissera «Zalozhnikov» — fil’m o zahvate samoleta v sovetskoy Gruzii [Interview of Rezo Gigineishvili, director of “Hostages” a film about the hijacking of an airplane in Soviet Georgia]. // URL: <https://meduza.io/feature/2017/09/20/bortprovodnitsa-skazala-konechno-ya-uzhe-prostila-etih-rebyat> (Accessed: 09.01.2019). (in Russian).

<sup>11</sup> Delay is an acoustic effect imitating fading repetitions of the original signal. Effect is implemented by adding of one or several copies delayed in time to the original signal. –



In a conversation scene between the main character and his father, typical sound solutions reinforce the stress of the situation. The sounds of the TV in the background (TV news underlining the movie's time of action), outside sounds of automobiles, the "deaf" atmospheric pause of the house accompanied by various utility textures such as water dripping, dogs baying, a clock ticking, and individual low-frequency cars going by. All these acoustic elements merge to convey the main character's stressed inner state.

Another acoustically saturated scene elucidating inner emotions is when Anna runs into the street after the wedding party because she is afraid of her planned running away. Disturbing background noise is heard; far off reverberated shots strengthened by the sound of mercury lamps, a resonant aircraft roar, train noises and train braking sounds with less than a second's interval between them, the baying of a dog, the sound of water dripping, a train horn, and an electric train horn one octave lower as a response. These acoustic layers interact and add to each other to make a uniform sound image that enlarges the presented environment.

In summary, modern sound engineering allows construction of comprehensive semantic structures, which enriches the general sound-visual image of the audio-visual work, and lifts it to a level of symbolism exceeding the specific-semantic meanings of the plot. The city space, with its huge range of acoustic events, contributes to the creation of polyphonic aesthetic and intellectual soundtrack. With various multichannel soundtracks available through modern technologies, the different semantic levels in the sound-visual image allow attention to be focused on the sound textures that have priority when the director tries to explain the character's inner world or to compose the movie's integral artistic feel by ensuring there is an aesthetic transition in the semantic meanings. Further research on the different aspects of these "city subjects" could help systematize the modern filmmaking experience and lead to further development in the practical use of sound-visual moviemaking solutions.

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