East European Film Bulletin

REVIEW

Liminal Spaces in Post-Pandemic Tbilisi

Felix Kalmenson's *Gamodi* (2023)

VOL. 148 (OCTOBER 2024) BY ANTONIS LAGARIAS

Come on out, come out! / Life means to live / it's time to build the future!

– Mgzavrebi, "Gamodi," 2018.[1]

In Georgian, the word "*gamodi*" ("come out") is used in daily speech to invite someone to step outside, leave a place, or overcome a difficult situation. It is also well-known in Georgian culture as the title of a popular song from the mid-twentieth century, with lyrics by Petre Gruzinsky. Director Felix Kalmenson named his film "Gamodi," though this choice appears intentionally ironic, as the film questions the very notions of 'inside' and 'outside.' The film's characters inhabit a deserted metropolis, living in makeshift bedrooms set in unconventional spaces – ruined buildings, half-constructed apartments with holes for windows, and basements filled with debris. Thus, the filmic action takes place both 'inside' (since the bedrooms have the appearance of interior spaces) and 'outside' (since they remain exposed to the outside world). In a sense, people are already 'outside,' yet this is not a liberating experience for them, as the title may suggest.

The film opens with a drag show that is being filmed for TV in a packed room. When the lights go out, the colorful costumes and cheerful – if competitive – ambiance give way to still, distant shots of the same TV personas, now isolated in solitude. Instead of typical homes, the characters return to an unfinished tower block, where old sofas, camp beds, and torn fabrics are pieced together to give the appearance of bedrooms. Interaction is minimal as they spend their lives alone in the half-built apartment tower filled with garbage and debris, devoid of walls, windows, or proper flooring. Yet one should not look for realism in this setting: the film's scenography seeks to visually express a state of being

that conveys – among other things – feelings of social exclusion and loneliness.

Construction sites within the built environment disrupt the continuity of urban life. They replace what previously existed in the same place, be it a vacant lot or an older building, with fences, scaffolding, and other temporary barriers limiting access to workers alone. This is, of course, a temporary measure, an inconvenience justified by practical needs. Photorealistic prints plastered around construction sites stress their temporary dimension, showing what the future will (soon) look like. However, during construction – which can last for years – this specific part of the city remains in an in-between state in terms of land use and identity, its past erased and its future not yet materialized.

But what happens when the temporary turns permanent? In *Gamodi*, no worker arrives to disturb the lives of the building's inhabitants. On the contrary, the unfinished apartments appear deteriorated, as if a long time had passed since the last construction efforts were abandoned. And yet, life inside the tower continues. The film draws a parallel between this strange state of prolonged suspension and the way some people lived through the COVID pandemic. The scarce information available to viewers – via TV news and recorded audio messages – speaks of quarantine and social distancing. In retrospect, this explains the peculiar arrangement of the makeshift bedrooms, which have elaborate dressing sets and plasma-screen TVs amid the surrounding debris. It is a visual metaphor for what self-isolation might have felt like: people striving to maintain a semblance of normality and struggling with daily tasks while feeling increasingly purposeless and lonely as the world starts to crumble. In the few scenes set outside the tower block, the rest of the city appears to be caught up in a similarly strange temporality. Nature has reclaimed certain areas, plants intertwine with buildings, and humans seem to have lost the ability or will to speak (the characters remain silent throughout the film).

Shot right after the pandemic, the film depicts its deep impact on our collective mental health. Yet, the film's focus on Tbilisi's queer community, as suggested by the opening scene, also reminds viewers that the pandemic's toll was particularly heavy for people already belonging to a minority or disadvantaged group. Studies published after the pandemic have extensively documented this inequality, not only in terms of mortality rates or access to hospitals and vaccines, but also in terms of the mental well-being of those who lacked a broad social circle outside work or school, or the luxury of fleeing to vacation homes in the countryside. At present, studies showcase a "shadow pandemic" of domestic violence, depression, and abuse disproportionately affecting social groups already considered vulnerable, such as immigrants, students, women, or trans people.[2] *Gamodi* is also about expressing these mental and affective states that are typically internal and inaccessible to the outside eye.

Sadly, the film is overly reliant on this idea, which, while interesting, soon feels exhausted. Several scenes are similar in their tone and in terms of what they

show, not really advancing the storytelling or adding to its affective dimension. Similarly, the dreamlike sequences created through the use of smoke, or the superimposition of shots – impressive at first –, become tried over time. Repetitiveness is certainly consistent with the experience of the pandemic, when time felt suspended, and days blurred into one another. Yet, even in the most stagnant moments, diverse elements emerged, as people resisted monotony and sought new ways of (re)defining their daily lives. Even when they failed, these efforts made the months of isolation become something more than just a waiting period for the return to normality. A few moments in the film explore this creative potential. For instance, we see a character trying to maintain their balance on a wooden construction panel, suspended in place, evoking a sense of transition or exploration without a clearly defined goal. Towards the end, several characters participate in a theatrical, ritual-like gathering that could be seen as an attempt to re-establish human connection. However, these moments add little to the film's overall distant tone.

This represents a missed opportunity, particularly with regard to queer identity, central though it is to the film. People who question norms of gender and sexuality enter a long process of becoming that often knows no end. The nature of this experience is, of course, fundamentally different from the temporal aspects of the pandemic or the spatial constraints of a construction site, yet it similarly involves inhabiting an in-between continuum of space and time created out of the rejection of that which society takes for granted. It is an experience often accompanied by solitude and disconnection – feelings they share with those populating the bedrooms depicted in the film. However, the act of deconstructing and reconstructing one's self-image and identity is also an open and dynamic process that promises valuable and creative insights. If anything, it is an experience that victim narratives fail to capture. Kalmenson notes that many scenes in the film emerged from improvisations with both actors and non-actors who are members of Tbilisi's queer community. This may explain the film's narrative structure, which resembles a collage of self-contained scenes rather than a continuous whole. It may also explain why the film's strange, crumbling world feels confident and precise in capturing the lingering effects of the pandemic on a community cut off from the social connections that nightlife enables. Its visual premise is powerful enough to draw viewers into this filmic universe. Yet what *Gamodi* lacks is a clear direction in moving beyond solitude, monotony, and repetitiveness to explore the creative potential that emerges when people reclaim and redefine that which they were not supposed to – be it liminal spaces in the urban fabric, or their own identities.

1. A translation of the lyrics of the Georgian song "*Gamodi*" can be found on the "Lyrics Translate" website: http://lyricstranslate.com/en/gamodi-come-out.html [accessed on 10

March 2025]. ↩
2. See for instance Piquero, A. R., Jennings, W. G., Jemison, E., Kaukinen, C., & Knaul, F. M. (2021). Domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic – Evidence from a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, *74*; Špániková, H., Moulac, M., Pavlou, P., Vona, L., & Siöland, L. (2023). Intersectional evaluation of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on different groups. *Policy Department for Economic, Scientific and Quality of Life Policies, European Parliament*. ↩