

MIT Student

Paper 3

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Heaven and “El”: The Depiction of the City Apartment

There seems to be one ubiquitous scene in a film featuring a city: the depiction of the apartment. The city is a predominantly public space, but the apartment becomes a place where the urbanite can have a measure of privacy and control. In a city designed, constructed, managed, and populated by strangers, the apartment becomes a place where the character can create on his own and he can make a space his. Three films where the apartment plays the role of establishing a character’s place in the city are King Vidor’s *The Crowd*, What-his face’s *The Naked City* and John Schlesinger’s *Midnight Cowboy*, though they have three different variations in the theme of creating and belonging in a place in the city. John Sims in *The Crowd* seeks a domestic refuge from the bustling and stifling crowd of New York. Garza in *The Naked City* also seeks privacy, but from the police and his arrest. Finally Ratso Rizzo in *Midnight Cowboy* seeks a place where he can be different and not persecuted for it. The need of privacy from an apartment appears ultimately integral to understanding the experiences of these characters and their lives in New York.

The Sims’ apartment is characterized in two contradictory ways from the first few sequences. First, John Sim’s song “It’s heavenly inside our flat/but outside it is El!” creates the image of the apartment as refuge from the city. However, the flat turns out to be cramped and dysfunctional, and really not at all “heavenly.” The bed has to be folded into the wall to even get the front door open, and the apartment is so small almost every shot includes the toilet or bathroom door. That King Vidor decided to include the toilet when it was not custom shows that he wanted these few sequences to explain John’s life in New York as crowded and counter to

expectations. Just as the apartment itself was promised a dream home he only needed to “furnish a girl” to receive, New York City was promised as a place he only needed to go to in order to be successful and important.

John’s character develops primarily around this unfilled promise of success. His father predicted that he would stand out from the crowd one day, but neither his attitude nor his pre-fab apartment reflects this. John defers responsibility in the maintenance of the apartment just as defers responsibility of his career advancement to other people and forces. He charges Mary with fixing or getting the various appliances and structures of the apartment fixed, just as he expects his promotions and opportunities to appear without taking any initiative himself. The end result of this passivity is twofold: Mary leaves the middle of the city where they were living to make a home for herself, and John becomes just another face in the crowd working for a meager wage in a dehumanizing job.

The Naked City shows the ability of the apartment to hide and display someone’s location in the city. We can contrast the nondescript apartment in no special place where Halloran finds Garza to Jean Dexter’s penthouse, where she wants to be seen and found by the city. When Jean dies, crowds form outside her door because the apartment is her symbol in the city. But this criminal who must live in the city but below the view of the cops tells no one where exactly he has made a home for himself. Halloran must rely solely on recognition by Garza’s neighbors to narrow his search and actually find his target. Even though Garza does not tell even his own brother or his fellow wrestlers where he lives, his neighbors can still identify him and point out where he lives. This is because the “privacy” of the city apartment is not the same as privacy where no one can see. Neighbors may not know his name but they know his face, and this creates

a non-verbal network of recognition centered on the neighborhood's external identification between the apartment and its resident.

Interaction with the apartment is also necessary for it to be a signal of the urbanite's presence. The process of coming and going is of course necessary to establish his place in the non-vocal neighborhood network for simple recognition but a measure of homemaking is symbolically important. The resident must create a putting energy into its maintenance and decoration so the apartment has a sense of permanence. John Sims does not do this; there is nothing in his flats that would explain anything about him it as belonging to anyone. Even his apartment emphasizes his anonymity. But Garza has taped photos to the boudoir and piled books on the table and has made the space his own private gym; allowing him to hide out for a long time from the cops. He has taken an apartment even smaller than the Sims' and made it work efficiently for him as a unique part of the city. However he is still found because he is unique, and his presence in the neighborhood gives him away.

Ratso Rizzo achieves the privacy that Garza needed to avoid the cops despite being a very noticeable character because his apartment has no neighbor network. The only way to find Rizzo is by knowing where he lives, and the necessity of isolation is what makes the condemned apartment building perfect for his character. The city has taken away his ability to be autonomous, exemplified in the loss of his own name. He can longer be "Rico" but "Ratso," except for "in [his] own place." Here the apartment is again refuge from the anonymizing city where his identity is only what other people make it. In the apartment, he alone has control and autonomy.

Ratso has also made the apartment very much his and created a space where he has control. He covered it in posters of Florida and has filled it with appliances he has stolen to make

it his real home. Importantly, he also has the ability to open it up to Joe Buck when he needs a place to stay. This ability to allow certain people and things into the apartment creates a controlled border between the resident and the city. We see in *The Crowd* after the little girl is hit by the truck the neighborhood fills the apartment because John does not manage the border as well as Garza or Rizzo. Even Garza falls short in maintaining the boundary when Detective Halloran can find his way to him. But the only person who comes to Rizzo's apartment Joe, and as an invited party he emerges as the only person in the city who actually cares about Rizzo, and indeed the only one who actually calls him Rico in the entire film.

Most stories set in the city feature a character trying to gain control and autonomy, primarily over his own identity, which the city has a tendency to obscure. The importance of the apartment in the city lies in function as a space where the resident is free to make himself as whatever he needs; famous or anonymous or conformist or deviant. The apartment, under the control of its resident gives him freedom that the social structure of the city may not. Whether or not the resident exercises this power comes down to him, but the successful manipulation of apartment can result in a long and prosperous life in the city while an unsuccessful manipulation ends in the resident often leaving the city altogether.

Epilogue:

When Ratso Rizzo bring Joe to the condemned building for the first time he says “It’s nice because the land lord can’t collect rent.” These films do not deal much with rent collection, but the risk of being evicted from your apartment because you cannot pay for it is a real barrier to using the benefits of the apartment completely outside of the resident’s control. One of the recent debates in New York now is the issue of rent controlled apartments, a measure put in place by the city government to prevent retirees who have lived in their apartments for a long time from being evicted if the cost of their apartment rises. Those apartments are the place where they have made their life in the city, and those apartments will be the home base for them. It seems unfair for them to be evicted because their pensions cannot pay the rent because a sudden influx of richer people begin driving up the rents in the neighborhood. People in the films lose their apartments because their own human faults; they are passive, murderers, or sick but their apartments are theirs. The process of rent control ensures that the resident is safe from losing the apartment from external, non-human, market forces beyond his or her control.

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