

MIT Student

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Film Notes, *Midnight Cowboy*

The director of the film *Midnight Cowboy* is John Schlesinger and it was released in 1969. It is set in the same time period. The film maps the journey of the character Joe Buck and his move from Texas to New York City to Florida and were shot on location.

Five adjectives or phrases to describe the sense of the Texan town:

- Desolate, uncivilized, cruel, lonely, hot, inexplicably violent. Oppressively yellow.

Five adjectives or phrases to describe the sense of NYC:

- Quintessential depiction of the city where all the outcasts and deviants gather and form unique subcultures. Still lonely, but only more compressed and with more concrete than the dirt and sand of Joe's Texan town. Joe and Ratso's relationship stands out because they are so loyal to each other; otherwise, all the relationships and interactions are transitory and emotionally distant and insincere. Gray from the concrete is the predominant color when Joe and Ratso walk through the city. Everyone is disinterested in each other. Everyone is simply trying to carve out a space for him or herself (Warhol superstars). Joe's naiveté and optimism make him a novelty amongst the jaded NYC inhabitants.

Five adjectives or phrases to describe the sense of Miami:

- A more pleasant, paler yellow than Texas. The waitress at the diner is kind and personal in her questioning that is vastly different from the chic, patronizing, probing woman with the camera at the psychedelic party Joe and Ratso attend in NYC. Portrayed very much as a paradise for Ratso and Joe. However, the people on the bus are equally as uncompassionate and voyeuristic as the ones in NYC when they stare at Ratso's dead body. Joe has also adopted a more conservative form of dress to assimilate with the culture of the locals; he is no longer capitalizing on his "hick" schtick and has become more sensible, though at the cost of his own naivete.

One remarkable scene that is related to the subject of the course: After Ratso steals the contact information from another male prostitute at a high-end escort service. Earlier, Joe fantasizes about all the different ways he can enter the woman's apartment before having sex with her. In this particular scene, we watch Joe enter the apartment building from Ratso's point of view across the street, and the scene is intercut with a fantasy sequence of Ratso (with his leg fully healed) and Joe frolicking on the beach in Miami. This scene is remarkable because it addresses the notion of romance between the two men head-on. This scene was the most poignant

statement about two lonely drifters who happened to find each other despite living in a vast and unforgiving city.

Two questions I would like to discuss in class: Do you think the psychedelic party scene fit in with the rest of the film or was extraneous in regards to the plot or the themes? Do all the Joes and Ratsos of New York City eventually leave? I got the sense when watching the film that while New York City can attract lost souls, the city itself doesn't cater to those people specifically to keep them there for long.

One parallel film is *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. Also includes the eccentric NYC characters who only catch glimpses of each other and each other's lives, and don't bother to explain themselves or their motives. Holly Golightly is also an escort, but an escort with both innocence and melancholia at the same time – there is ambiguity to her character and she remains sympathetic to the audience despite the supposed disrepute of her profession, much like the case for Joe or Ratso.

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