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Review

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REVIEW

The Apartment Complex: Urban Living and Global Screen Cultures, edited by Pamela Robertson Wojcik, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2018, xi +200 pp., (paperback. \$24.95) ISBN: 978-1-4780-0108-9

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This is a book review of Pamela Robertson Wojcik's *The Apartment Complex: Urban Living and Global Screen Cultures* (2018), which is comprised of essays by scholars responding to and utilising her concept of the apartment plot film which she established in her previous book *The Apartment Plot: Urban Living in American Film and Popular Culture, 1945 to 1975* (2010).

Keywords: Apartment Plot; Apartment Film; Apartment Space; Global Screen Culture; Ideology; Space

Inspired by a colleague's use of her previous book *The Apartment Plot: Urban Living in American Film and Popular Culture, 1945 to 1975* (2010) in a lecture on Latin American Cinema, in *The Apartment Complex: Urban Living and Global Screen Cultures* (2018) Pamela Robertson Wojcik has assembled a diversity of essays by scholars employing and responding to her concept of the apartment plot film in their own research. Wojcik's central aim for *The Apartment Complex* then is to demonstrate how the apartment space in film functions as a subject that can traverse time, location, and genre, and which can be ideologically adapted to its historical, national, and genre context. By gathering this assortment of essays together, Wojcik has produced a book unrestricted by the limits of genre, history, nation, or industry figure, and illuminates important visual and thematic connections between films in global screen culture.

The first two essays of *The Apartment Complex* assay the representation of the apartment space in two different periods of Hollywood cinema history, and its relatedness with the making of the modern American identity. 'Palaces of Pleasure and Deceit Among the Clouds: The Depression-Era Cinematic Penthouse Plot' by Merrill Schleier examines the ideological meaning of the penthouse plot in American cinema during the economic climate of the Great Depression. Schleier begins by providing an architectural history of the penthouse. She finds that although initially the penthouse had been considered the ultimate emblem of luxury and modernity, due to the pressures of the Depression, cinema would depict it as a site of subversion, corruption, perversion, and debauchery for moral purposes. Steven Cohan's 'From Walter Neff to C.C. Baxter: Billy Wilder's Apartment Plots' traces the relationship between the urban habitat and the single man (or "summer bachelor") in Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944), *The Seven Year Itch* (1955), and *The Apartment* (1960). Cohan finds that the representation of apartments in Wilder's films is split between two contexts, noir and the sex comedy, and each impose a different meaning onto the space. In Wilder's noir, the apartment appears as an incomplete and porous space susceptible and unprotected to the dangers of the external world. In the director's sex comedies, it is presented as a space of anxiety as its male occupants are unable to keep control of it. In either case, Wilder's use of the apartment in these films subverts the feeling of sanctuary the space is meant to promise.

The third and fourth essay look at the socio-political significance of movement within the confines of the apartment space. In 'Alain Resnais, Tsai Ming-liang, and the Apartment Plot Musical', Joe McElhaney considers the apartment-turned-musical-stage in the radically dissimilar *On connaît la chanson* (Alain Resnais, 1997) and *The Hole* (Tsai Ming-liang, 1998). McElhaney identifies that although the films utilise the cinematic form differently, they both disrupt the logic of positive resolution that defines the traditional musical to allegorically express national anxiety and historical trauma via their specific employment of the apartment space. 'Movement and Stasis in Fassbinder's Apartment Plot' by Michael Deangelis examines five of Rainer Werner Fassbinder's domestic dramas: *Warum läuft Herr R.*

amok?/Why does Herr R. Run Amok? (1970); *Die Händler der vier Jahreszeiten/The Merchant of Four Seasons* (1971); *Angst essen Seele auf/Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (1974); *Mutter Küsters Fährt zum Himmel/Mother Küsters Goes to Heaven* (1975); and *Angst vor der Angst/Fear of Fear* (1975), to analyse how the apartment space in these films are inflicted by socio-political issues. Following theorist Henri Lefebvre's concept of 'socially activated space' (Lefebvre, 1991), Deangelis politically theorises the ideological meaning of movement and stopping in these films, and considers them in relation to notions of the gaze and spatial porosity.

Essays Five to Seven explore the conscious and subconscious connotations of the apartment space in respect to the sexual and gender identities of its occupants. In 'Housework, Sex Work: Feminist Ambivalence at 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles', Annamarie Jagose confronts the positive and negative feminist critiques of Chantal Akerman's film *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975). Specifically, those which concern the titular protagonist, Jeanne Dielman. Offering a close analysis of two scenes, Jagose advances that the film's ability to arouse empathy in its spectator through an internalisation of Dielman's quotidian female domestic routine is strongly feminist. 'Home's Invasion: Repulsion and the Horror of Apartments' by Veronica Fitzpatrick explores the concept of boundary logic in relation to the collapse of the internal and external, to argue how the apartment space in Roman Polanski's *Repulsion* (1965) is both haunted by Carol's (Catherine Deneuve) traumatised subconscious, but also haunting of it. In 'Reattachment Theory: Gay Marriage and the Apartment Plot' Lee Wallace inspects the apartment spaces in Stacie Passon's *Concussion* (2013) and Andrew Haigh's *Weekend* (2011), to assess how they are representational of the sexual and erotic dynamics of their residents. Advancing how films can de-idealise and re-idealise marriage in response to social, legal, and cultural changes, Wallace focuses on how the presentation of the apartment plot can speak to notions of fidelity and conjugality in gay and lesbian narratives in the wake of marriage equality.

The final case study in the *The Apartment Complex*, "'We Don't Need to Dream No More. We Got Real Estate": *The Wire*, Urban Development, and the Racial Boundaries of the American Dream' by Paula J. Massood considers the social and political

significance of the apartment space in the television show *The Wire* (2002–2008). Focusing on the location of Stringer Bell's (Idris Elba) death, Massood argues how it symbolically speaks to the current of criminality underlain the American dream, and functions as the locus of the conventions of both the apartment plot and the gangster film in the show.

Pamela Robertson Wojcik's *The Apartment Complex* is an anthology of essays which, inspired by her concept of the apartment plot, explore the ideological connotations of the apartment space in distinctly different national and historical contexts. Wojcik's selection and organisation of these varying pieces of scholarship has produced a text unconcerned by hierarchy and which delights in the interconnectedness and universality of film and cinema.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Reference

Lefebvre, H. 1991. *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. Oxford: Blackwell. p. 94.

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