

# The Apartment

By Kyle Westphal

Although the years immediately following World War II delivered unprecedented and broad-based prosperity across American society, several sociologists and political theorists observed something curious. The high rises and suburban office parks had bred a qualitatively different kind of worker from the craftsmen and factory hands of old. They were unthinkingly loyal to corporate prerogative and often none the happier for it. This new archetype was examined in best-selling pop-sociology volumes like David Riesman, Nathan Glazer, and Reuel Denney's "The Lonely Crowd" (1950), C. Wright Mills's "White Collar: The American Middle Classes" (1951), and William H. Whyte's "The Organization Man" (1956). For a class cohort allegedly allergic to self-examination and prone to collectivist group-think, these men in grey flannel suits demonstrated a considerable appetite for reading about themselves.

These threads of moral opprobrium, management theory, and American social portraiture also animate Billy Wilder's "The Apartment." A caustic critique spiced with enough ingratiating notes to become a box office hit and Academy Award juggernaut, "The Apartment" chronicles C.C. "Bud" Baxter's tragicomic journey up and down the corporate ladder. As realized by Jack Lemmon, Baxter emerges as the supreme conformist. Preposterously "other-directed" in Riesman's parlance, Baxter is all too willing to offer up his bachelor flat as a site for his managers' trysts, even if it means he sleeps on a park bench for the night. Exhibiting no discernible talent for business, Baxter rises from a cog at Ordinary Policy Department, Premium Accounting Division, Section W, Desk 861 to the nebulously prestigious rank of 2nd Administrative Assistant, making him the second-youngest executive at the Consolidated Life insurance firm.

With a burgeoning liquor bill and an endless string of mistresses whose screams can be heard from the hallway, Baxter is wrongly presumed by his landlady and neighbors to be an indefatigable playboy. (When Baxter finally manages to bring a conquest of his own to the apartment, she squeals, "Some lover you are! Some sexpot!") The siren song of executive washroom access keeps Baxter oblivious to the human damage of his scheme—until he realizes that



*Aspiring executive C.C. Baxter (Jack Lemmon) chats up elevator operator Fran Kubelik (Shirley MacLaine). Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.*

he's been facilitating an affair between his Personnel Manager Jeff Sheldrake (Fred MacMurray) and Miss Kubelik (Shirley MacLaine), the elevator operator and effortless gamine whom Baxter secretly loves. The exploitative pursuit of a subordinate is the corporate scenario writ large; compounding the farce, the obsequious Organization Man acts as an unwitting accomplice in his own romantic sabotage.

This was a curious *cri de coeur* from a man who had come to America as a refugee and rose to the pinnacle of Hollywood. By the time of "The Apartment," Wilder had already won three Oscars and been nominated for fourteen more. His last picture, "Some Like It Hot," had been enormously profitable. If corporate climbing was to be regarded with suspicion, Wilder had soundly mastered it. Whyte had worried in "The Organization Man" that the compartmentalized labor of the assembly line had brought about "the sacrifice of individual accomplishment," but Wilder extolled the system's virtues in a 1960 interview with "Playboy":

*I am an artist but I am a man who makes motion pictures for a mass audience, I am making pictures on all levels. To be a mechanic working in a back-alley garage, tinkering away for years and coming out with one little automobile, that is one thing, but to work on an assembly line and come out with a Cadillac—that is something else. That is what I am trying to do here.*

Give Wilder credit where it's due: "The Apartment" is one elegantly appointed Cadillac. Cinematographer Joseph LaShelle used the new, distortion-free Panavision camera lens to capture the titular apartment in all its dingy expanse. The central locale is itself wonderfully realized by veteran art director Alexander Trauner. Silent props like a key or a broken compact mirror are assiduously deployed in place of pages of dialogue. Wilder and co-writer I.A.L. Diamond's script is structured as a series of vernacular volleys, with the slang-slathered speeches and buzzwords forever passing from one character to the other—and gaining unchallenged power with each repetition. "Premium-wise and billing-wise, we are 18% ahead of last year, October-wise," middle manager Kirkeby dictates to himself, as if illustrate Whyte's observation of the corporate creature's "tremendous affinity for vogue words by which the status quo can be described as dynamic advance." (The productivity gibberish bled over to "The Apartment's" marketing campaign. The poster's tagline: "Movie-wise, there has never been anything like 'The Apartment,' love-wise, laugh-wise, or otherwise-wise.")

Had Wilder sold out, or was something else going on here? Freed from the patrician, New England roots of his first writing partner, Charles Brackett, Wilder managed to craft a distinctly, if clandestinely, Jewish film in collaboration with Diamond, another wiseacre émigré. "The Apartment" is a story of assimilation in reverse, pitting an entrenched all-American success ethic against half-forgotten Old World values. It's "The Jazz Singer," updated for the TV dinner era. The central characters played by Lemmon, MacLaine, and MacMurray are Gentiles, but the supporting characters are almost exclusively Jewish, often resembling the affectionate caricatures of the Borscht Belt. Much of the dialogue is simply exceptional *kvelling*. Yiddishisms abound: the Consolidated Life executive who compliments Baxter for winning an office with a "name on the door, rug on the floor, the whole *schmeat*"; the mistress who laments her

assignment at the unfashionable apartment of "some *schnook* that works in the office"; the landlady who blames adverse weather on "that *mishegas* at Cape Canaveral"; Baxter's next-door neighbor who marvels that "a *nebbish* like you" can be such a ladies' man. (Actually, Baxter is more like the philanderers' *Shabbos goy*, attending to the menial tasks that his Jewish colleagues cannot perform.)

In "The Apartment's" central scene, the good Dr. Dreyfus (Jack Kruschen) delivers a hilariously curt summation of modern American values: "Live now, pay later! Diner's Club!" He also exhorts his disaffected neighbor Baxter to resist this siren song and become a *mensch*—a Yiddish term that leaves the junior executive goy duly puzzled. This mysterious prescription is actually the submerged emotional arc of the movie. By the end of "The Apartment," it's Baxter who's justifying his actions to Sheldrake by invoking the necessity of being a *mensch*. Baxter still may not know what the term means—but he'll strive to be one anyway.

*The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

*Kyle Westphal is a programmer at the Northwest Chicago Film Society, a non-profit organization dedicated to the exhibition, dissemination, and preservation of celluloid history. Westphal began his film career at Doc Films, the University of Chicago's year-round, student-run cinema-theque, serving variously as treasurer, projectionist, historian, and ultimately programming chair. He subsequently served as the Chief Projectionist of the Dryden Theatre at George Eastman House, and also projected at the Little Theatre, the Film Studies Center, and the Wisconsin Film Festival. On behalf of the Northwest Chicago Film Society, he supervised the photochemical preservation of the independent musical feature Corn's-A-Poppin' (1955). He is a 2009 graduate of the L. Jeffrey Selznick School of Film Preservation.*