

Film Essay 1: Neighboring Sounds

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An essay on urban tension and paranoia by Cameron Miller

Geography 277 AA

Director Kleber Mendonca Filho's film *Neighboring Sounds* paints a picture of paranoid gentrification in Brazil's Sao Paulo. Throughout the piece, tension is repeatedly built up considerably, largely through sound, only to lead nowhere. Only in the final scene does anything extreme happen, and the camera quickly cuts away before things get violent. This film was actually enhanced by the way in which I watched it – at the beginning of the quarter we were told one of the required films is extraordinarily violent, but I forgot which one of the two we were warned about. During these points of tension in *Neighboring Sounds*, I grew even tenser while thinking that this could be the point where the film's truly violent nature revealed itself, but that never happened. I almost lived the same paranoia alongside the characters in the story.

Just as I worried about violence that (almost) never came, the film suggests that the residents of the featured street also worry for nothing. Despite the fear prevalent in their lives (personified by walled properties, barricaded doors opened by maids rather than the residents, security cameras, and outright admissions of fear of the outside), the only two problematic things actually featured are a car having the radio stolen, and a small child sneaking around (who is disproportionately dealt with via a punch to the head). Despite all the protections the residents have and the seeming lack of need for them, they still agree to hire even further security personnel. This is also despite the fact that some residents, perhaps partially in jest, suggest that the security is some sort of protection racket. Even their own security cannot be fully trusted.

The security personnel are some of the few shown to hang around on the streets. *Neighboring Sounds* seems to have reached a similar conclusion as Caldeira. "To walk on the public street is becoming a sign of class in many cities, an activity that the elite is abandoning." (Caldeira 1996, 314). Besides the security company, one of the few repeat street-level characters are the main character's two acquaintances, who are initially questioned as if they have some insider knowledge of local street crime, and one is later seen keying a car. The film doesn't provide a strong case for their character. The main character's grandfather, who is extremely wealthy, is seen on the street once, on his way to and from a dangerous late-night swim. He is depicted as not being fully sound of mind during this scene, so it's interesting that this is one of the few times we see him outside his own enclaves. This suggests the rich, when sane, have no interest in engaging the city via the public street. The main character is depicted in that area more often, and he is shown to be at least a little aware and partially unhappy with his privileged lifestyle.

This urban tension of the film is perhaps most personified by one of the side characters, the mother of the two children. She's shown to be incredibly on edge and stressed, although is given little reason to be that way. The family is shown to be very well off – able to afford both English and Mandarin tutors for the children, and large TV's – the mother has no job, seemingly few responsibilities (they also have a maid to assist with domestic duties), and is free to spend the day smoking weed and pleasuring herself with the washing machine. The only hiccup is that damned neighborhood dog, but otherwise this doesn't seem such a bad way to live. Yet still this character doesn't seem at ease. While a relatively relaxed life doesn't necessarily equate to a fulfilling one, it's still not made clear why exactly she feels the way she does. And while many people might take this as an opportunity to leave the house, particularly to escape annoying dogs or sisters, this character seems more content to stay within her enclave to avoid the fears outside.

Perhaps it's partially due to a lack of anywhere to go. *Sounds* seems to depict a similar situation as that in LA. "For Davis, the increasingly segregated and privatized Los Angeles is the result of a clear master plan of post-liberal (i.e., Reagan-Bush Republican) elites" (Caldeira 1996, 323). I've already described how the residents view the streets, but the one other public space shown is a beach, which features a large sign stating *BEWARE OF SHARKS*. This matches up with what I've experienced through another class focused on urbanism here at UW, about increasingly privatized space. However, in a lot of cases in the US, this is done less through physical barriers and more with monetary ones. Starbucks aims to be a sort of the modern agora, but that comes with the expectation that you spend money there, effectively renting a table.

A quote of interest in is this: "everyday interactions with people from other social groups diminish substantially, and public encounters primarily occur inside of protected and relatively homogeneous groups..."(Caldeira 1996, 316) and I find it interesting not just because we're required to respond to it. In class we discussed the US's long history of spatial segregation. As groups of people separate physically, it becomes easier and easier to think of them as an "other". As we continue to think of groups as "others" it becomes easy to dehumanize them. We see this in the film with the violent handling of the sneaky young boy, who I believe had darker skin than most of the residents of the neighborhood. Caldeira refers to and combats the idea that different groups retreating into their own special areas is the easiest way to go about things, that it will be the most devoid of conflict if we simply agree to ignore one another. However, *any time* there are at least two groups of humans, one of them will realize they want something the other has. The further this dehumanization continues, the worse it's going to be for group B when group A has this realization. In extreme cases, this results in violence. In less drastic but still problematic, we have cases like gentrified neighborhoods, where people from one area want land in the other, and them and the government that is meant to represent the original inhabitants fail to consider the needs of the neighborhood – since they are an "other" their values are less important. It doesn't have to be this way, however – there isn't an inherent problem when one person wants what another has.

Neighboring Sounds is an eerie look into the growing urban paranoia of Sao Palo, and many of these fears seem to ring true in the US as well. The building up of fortresses at the expense of public space increases our community's physical segregation, which can have dangerous results further down the line. Perhaps someday soon we can all collectively lower our drawbridges, but until then we'll be stuck inside listening to the incessant barking of the neighboring dogs.

Citations

Teresa P. R. Caldeira. 1996. "Fortified Enclaves: The New Urban Segregation." *Public Culture* 8: 303-328.