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Entangled histories of architecture and dispossession in The Pruitt-Igoe Myth (2011)

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Architectural historiography, Disposession, Documentary, Pruitt-Igoe

Abstract

This paper addresses how documentary film may attend to, mediate, and negotiate the histories of the entanglement between housing and dispossession. For this purpose, it focuses on Chad Freidrichs' 2011 documentary film *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth* that centers the accounts of Pruitt-Igoe's African American residents. As it is well-known, the media images as well as the initial scholarly accounts of the demolishment of the housing complex have largely served as an icon of reactions against modernist architecture. The majority of later accounts, while steering the conversation away from a sole focus on architecture, singled out one or two aspects of this intricate tangle and approached the residents of the complex as passive victims rather than active agents. Here, *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth* constitutes a unique case not only within the popularized and highly mediatized conceptions of but also the extensive scholarship on the building complex. The paper argues that, in its centering of the first-hand accounts as well as documents of lives that unfolded in the building complex, this documentary offers us a more open mode of architectural historiography that centers the complex intersections of structural racism, dispossession, and built environment.

Highlights

- This paper focuses on on Chad Freidrichs' 2011 documentary film *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth* that centers the accounts of Pruitt-Igoe's African American residents.
- The paper explores how documentary film may attend to the histories of public housing and dispossession.
- The paper discusses how this documentary offers us a more open mode of architectural historiography.

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Pruitt-Igoe Efsanesi filminde (2011) dolaşık mimarlık ve mülksüzleştirilme tarihleri

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Anahtar Sözcükler

Belgesel, Mimarlık tarihi, Mülksüzleştirilme, Pruitt-Igoe

Öz

Bu makale, belgesel filmin konut ve mülksüzleştirme arasındaki karmaşık ilişkilerin tarihçesine nasıl katkıda bulunup aracılık edebileceğini ele alır. Bu amaçla Chad Freidrichs'in 2011 yapımı Pruitt-Igoe bina kompleksinin Afro-Amerikalı sakinlerinin hikayelerini merkeze alan belgesel filmi *Pruitt-Igoe Efsanesi*'ne odaklanır. Bilindiği gibi, bu konut kompleksinin yıkılmasına ilişkin medya görüntüleri ve ilk bilimsel açıklamalar, büyük ölçüde modernist mimariye karşı tepkilerin simgesi haline gelmiştir. Konu hakkındaki sonraki literatürün çoğunluğu ise, konuyu yalnızca mimariye odaklanmaktan uzaklaştırırken, bu karmaşık düğümün sadece bir veya iki yönünü öne çıkardı ve kompleksin sakinlerine aktif özneler yerine pasif kurbanlar olarak yaklaştı. Bu bakımdan, *Pruitt-Igoe Efsanesi*, yalnızca popüler ve medyatik temsiller arasında değil, aynı zamanda bina kompleksine ilişkin kapsamlı bilimsel çalışmalar içinde de benzersiz bir örnek oluşturmaktadır. Makale, bina kompleksinde ortaya çıkan yaşamlara ilişkin belgelerin yanı sıra ilk elden anlatımları merkeze alan bu belgeselin, yapısal ırkçılık, mülksüzleştirme ve yapılı çevre arasındaki karmaşık kesişimleri merkeze alan daha açık bir mimari tarih yazımı tarzı sunduğunu ileri sürer.

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Araştırma Makalesi

Öne Çıkanlar

- Bu makale Chad Freidrichs'in 2011 yapımı Pruitt-Igoe bina kompleksinin Afro-Amerikalı sakinlerinin hikayelerini merkeze alan belgesel filmi *Pruitt-Igoe Efsanesi*'ne odaklanır.
- Makale, belgesel filmin toplu konut ve mülksüzleştirme tarihçelerine nasıl katkıda bulunabileceğini ele alır.
- Makale, bu belgeselin daha açık bir mimari tarih yazımı tarzı sunduğunu ileri sürer.

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INTRODUCTION

In the 2021 special issue of Mediapolis: A Journal of Cities and Culture that focuses on the vexed intersections between housing, dispossession, and media, Anna Viola Sborgi (2021, n.p.) asked how "the complex spatialities of precarious homes and the city [are] being made, inhabited, and negotiated through screen media". This question is especially significant in our current context of a planetary housing crisis that, in turn, finds its expression in several media representations, especially cinematic ones. From narrative features - *Wendy & Lucy* (dir. Kelly Reichardt, 2008), *Rosie* (dir. Paddy Breathnach, 2018), *Parasite* (Bong Joon-ho, 2019), *Nomadland* (dir. Chloé Zhao, 2020), and *Minari* (dir. Lee Isaac Chung, 2020) - to documentaries – *Public Housing* (dir. Frederick Wiseman, 1999) and *Dear Babylon* (dir. Ayo Akingbade, 2019) - and experimental essays - *Estate, A Reverie* (dir. Andrea Luka Zimmerman, 2015) -, a wide range of recent films have addressed issues of housing and dispossession. In this paper, I address and expand Sborgi's question to explore how documentary film may attend to and mediate the histories of the entanglement between housing and dispossession. For this purpose, I will focus on Chad Freidrichs' 2011 documentary film *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth* that centers the accounts of Pruitt-Igoe's African American residents and the structural, institutional, and everyday racisms that have shaped and was supported by the built environments.

A broad-ranging scholarship at the intersection of cinema studies and architecture have to-date tackled how cinema defines, reconsiders, and transforms the notion of space through a wide array of themes, concepts, and theories (see, for instance, Vidler, 1992; Bruno, 1993; Wojcik, 2010; Lu and Penz, 2011; Rhodes and Garfinkel, 2011; Koeck, 2013; Rhodes, 2017; Froechlich, 2018; Schleier, 2021). That the intersection between architecture and cinema studies is not limited to the representation of space in films and should also attend to screening practices and spaces is a more recent development. Considering what happens to the viewer's sense of space in different media environments, such studies examine the different screening venues and various audience experiences, rituals and social relationships shaped by these spaces (see, for instance, McGuire, 2007; Welling, 2007; Ameri, 2011; Balsom, 2013; Bruno, 2014; Uroskie, 2014; Elcott, 2016; Paul, 2016; Wasson, 2016; Szczepaniak-Gillece, 2018; Biltereyst, Maltby, and Meers, 2019; Butler, 2019; Klenotic, 2020; Smoodin, 2020; Ma, 2021; Melnick, 2022). Another research topic that has recently emerged at the intersection of the two disciplines traces the spaces where cinema is produced, especially focusing on the architecture of these spaces and their relationship with the spaces depicted in the film (Jacobson, 2015; Jacobson, 2020). Yet, the question of how cinema among other visual media may address, assist, and even reconceptualize architectural historiography has garnered only erratic and often rather brief scholarly attention (Stieber, 2005; Beckman, 2009; Handa, 2010). At the same time, theories concerning media networks have to some extent steered

architectural historiography discussions toward conceptualizing architecture itself as an intermedial assemblage:

> The historian who deploys [media] approaches to architectural history is compelled to turn away from the primacy of architecture as cultural construct, from the architectural object as the effect of discursive processes, from a bias toward form or type, and from preconceived theoretical or interpretive frameworks. This mode of inquiry pursues the medial processes inherent to architecture, which inextricably bind technique to culture. As a medium — that is, a channel of transmission — architecture can make visible an intermedial dynamic of material, technical, and social consequence (Lobsinger, 2016, p. 136).

Such an approach to architectural history writing argues that not only history writing but also architecture should be considered as a technique and media that accumulates and communicates between material, social, and technological registers (ibid; von Fischer and Toulomi, 2018; Nieland, 2020).

The Pruitt-Igoe housing complex is such an intermedial assemblage that makes clearly visible the inextricable entanglement of material, technological, social, economic, political, and institutional domains. As it is well-known, the media images as well as the initial scholarly accounts of the demolishment of the housing complex have largely served as an icon of reactions against modernist architecture (Newman, 1972; Jencks, 1977). The majority of later accounts, while steering the conversation away from a sole focus on architecture, singled out one or two aspects of this intricate tangle (Meehan, 1979; Fuerst and Petty, 1991; von Hoffmann, 2000). Even scholars who proposed more encompassing perspectives approached the residents of the complex as passive victims rather than actors (Comerio, 1981; Bristol, 1991) who "deploy the full incommensurability of their own world-making activities" (Latour, 2005, p. 25). Here, *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth* constitutes a unique case not only within the popularized and highly mediatized conceptions of but also the extensive scholarship on the building complex. By focusing on the representational politics of both the media images as well as the documentary film that problematizes the media spectacle from a racial perspective into modern architecture, I will argue that the documentary provides us with a more open mode of architectural historiography. This becomes possible to the extent that the film priorities the first-hand accounts as well as documents of lives that unfolded in the building complex, centering the complex intersections of structural racism, dispossession, and built environment. At the same time, *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth* rectifies the dispossessing tendencies of previous accounts by foregrounding the residents as active agents that endured, struggled with, and resisted these relationships.

LAYERS OF DISPOSSESSION

My binary conceptualization of dispossession dwells on the theoretical framework recently proposed by Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou (2013) in relation to the differential distribution of precarity by power networks as well as dispossessed populations' potential for solidarity and

resistance to such unjust conduct. Butler and Athanasiou's (2013, p. 7) account of dispossession expands the meaning of the term from a focus on matters of possession and ownership to a more inclusive understanding of differential treatment and injustice so that "ethical and political ways of objecting to forcible and coercive dispossession (…) do not depend upon a valorization of possessive individualism." For Butler and Athanasiou (2013, p. 3), our relation, as social beings, to dispossession is twofold: On the first level, as "relational and interdependent beings" we are all dispossessed and precarious. The second level depends on the first to the extent that we are dependent on forms of governmentality that can deprive us of livelihood, shelter and housing, food, and security and expose us to various modes of violence. In Butler and Athanasiou's (2013) framework, differential citizenship practices that distribute precarity unequally and discriminate certain populations based on their class, ethnicity, race, gender, and sexuality are all acts of governmental dispossession. Such an expansive conceptualization of dispossession also attends to matters of agency in discursive practices that attempt to define these populations and their predicament. Opposing the evident lack of agency in Giorgio Agamben's (1998) concept of "bare life," Butler elsewhere suggests that:

> if we seek to take account of exclusion itself as a political problem, as part of politics itself, then it will not do to say that once excluded, those beings lack appearance or "reality" in political terms, that they have no social or political standing or are cast out and reduced to mere being (forms of givenness precluded from the sphere of action). Nothing so metaphysically extravagant has to happen if we agree that one reason the sphere of the political cannot be defined by the classic conception of the polis is that we are then deprived of having and using a language for those forms of agency and resistance undertaken by the dispossessed. Those who find themselves in positions of radical exposure to violence, without basic political protections by forms of law, are not for that reason outside the political or deprived of all forms of agency. Of course, we need a language to describe the status of unacceptable exposure, but we have to be careful that the language we use does not further deprive such populations of all forms of agency and resistance, all ways of caring for one another or establishing networks of support (Butler, 2015, p. 79-80).

The material and discursive histories of Pruitt-Igoe building complex provides us with a fecund ground to discuss the various layers of dispossession proposed by Butler. First, as an instance of social housing, the case steers the conversation from individual ownership to more public modes of shelter and our fundamental rights to it. Second, both the media accounts and initial architectural histories of the building glossed over the racial dynamics that underwrote the history of the building complex. Indeed, in their recent attempt to "write race back into architectural history," Irene Cheng, Charles L. Davis II, and Mabel O. Wilson (2020, p. 4) underlined the traditional neglect of the issue of race in architectural history where the subject has been cast outside the 'proper' boundaries of the discipline. There exists a differential and unjust treatment of the African American population of the building who were first dispossessed of their rights to shelter followed

by their erasure from initial accounts of the building complex. Third, in their neglect of the social networks of resistance these people established, the later more detailed analyses of the history of the building, perhaps inadvertently, even further dispossessed the residents this time off of their agency.

THE PRUITT-IGOE AND BEYOND

The design and construction process of the Wendell O. Pruitt and William L. Igoe Homes took place under the auspices of the 1949 United States Housing Act which aimed to institute inner city slum clearance, urban redevelopment, and expansion of public housing projects (Major, 2021, p. 57; Birmingham 1999, p. 296). Spurred by the initiative, St Louis officials began a process of razing inner city slums for redevelopment schemes that they hoped would revitalize the city center. In order to accommodate the high numbers of tenement occupants displaced by the massive demolishment, they simultaneously inaugurated a public housing project that culminated in the construction of Pruitt-Igoe upon a 57-acre land within the run-down DeSoto-Carr inner city neighborhood. Minoru Yamasaki of Hellmuth, Yamasaki, and Leinweber firm designed the public housing project and also oversaw the massive changes to the initial proposal. Yamasaki's earlier proposal for the complex was a mixture of high-rise buildings and low-rise garden apartments surrounded by greenery and with ample amenities for recreation and community building (Bristol, 1991, p. 164). Yet, due to federal budget cuts as well as the pressure from the city officials, what got completed in 1954 was a building complex of 33 11-storey modernist-style thin slabs with a significant lack of landscaping and public services such as stores, libraries, gyms, pharmacies, schools, day-care facilities, and even public bathrooms (Bailey, 1965, p. 23; Comeiro, 1981, p. 27). The only public space that the complex featured was a so-called community center where the housing authority officials eventually set up shop to not only collect rent but also to implicitly survey the inhabitants. As James Bailey (ibid, p. 22) states; "such 'luxuries' as paint on the concrete block walls of the galleries and stairwells, insulation on exposed steam pipes, screening over gallery windows, and public toilets on ground floors were eliminated". Furthermore, the inner-city slum razing that set in motion the construction of the blocks left the surroundings almost completely deserted making it especially difficult for the residents (the majority of whom did not own cars) to access any kind of public amenities (Montgomery, 1985; Birmingham, 1999, p. 301). The project was initially racially segregated in accordance with Jim Crow laws with Pruitt blocks reserved for African Americans and Igoe apartments for whites. However, the Brown vs. Board of Education Supreme Court decision of 1954 that made racial segregation illegal in the country obliged the public officials and designers to integrate the complex (Bristol, 1991, p.165). Despite this development, white citizens either refused to move to Pruitt-Igoe altogether or left soon after moving to the complex culminating in a 98 percent low-income African American building population (Comeiro, 1981, p. 27; Birmingham, 1999, p. 291).

Figure 1. Demolition photos of the Pruitt-Igoe complex (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development).

Only eighteen years after its first resident moved in, Housing Authority of St. Louis decided to destroy the project citing disrepair, crime, and vandalism that plagued the building complex as the reasons (St. Louis Housing Authority, 1974, p. 2). In 1972, three of the slabs were demolished by dynamite. The following year the complex was declared entirely unsalvageable and the rest of the buildings were destroyed using conventional methods. Then a relatively new method for

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demolishing buildings, the spectacular dynamiting of the buildings was highly publicized in the media in the form of a series of photographs and film footage (Figure 1). Underlining how the vast coverage of the demolishment in both national media as well as architectural press solely focused on the design-related problems and the failure of modern architecture at large, Katharine G. Bristol stated:

> Architectural Forum, AIA Journal, Architecture Plus, and The Architect's Journal all published articles on the failure of the supposedly innovative design features. Life, Time, The Washington Post, and The National Observer, among others, reported on the demolition experiment and pointed to the architecture as one of the contributing causes. These articles represent the first appearance of the Pruitt-Igoe myth. No longer confining their criticism to particular architectural features, such as the open galleries, the critics now began to relate the project's failure to flaws in the overall approach or design philosophy. The general theme that emerged was that the architects were insensitive to the needs of the lower class population and were trying to use the design to force a middle-class, white, lifestyle on Pruitt-Igoe residents (Bristol, 1991, p. 167).

While Bristol's account correctly identifies the tendency of general and professional media to solely blame the architectural design for the failure of the project while neglecting the larger socio-political, economic, and institutional issues, in the end such tendency had much larger ramifications that extended beyond the world of architecture and urban design. Erasing the complex entanglement of racial, economic, and political factors that played into the demise of the project, this sensational imagery of utmost annihilation eventually helped the erosion of social welfare policies and public housing initiatives while at the same time further stigmatizing African Americans as criminals and vandals. Architectural and urban design criticism and scholarship followed suit in the diminution of the underlying socio-political context in order to emphasize the failures of modernist architecture (Newman, 1972; Jencks, 1977). The imagery found its way not only into such seminal books as Charles Jencks' The Language of Postmodern Architecture (1977), Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter's Collage City (1978), and David Harvey's The Condition of Postmodernity (1989) but also to architectural history classrooms. In mainstream architectural discourse, the demolishment thus began to mark the discontents with modernist architecture and the rupture into the postmodernist condition especially thanks to Jencks' (1977, p. 7) now well-known declaration that "Modern Architecture died in St. Louis, Missouri on July 15, 1972 at 3.32 pm (or thereabouts) when the infamous Pruitt-Igoe scheme, or rather several of its slab blocks, were given the final coup de grace by dynamite". Yet, what got also glossed over in the popular scholarly discourse on the shift from modern to postmodern architecture was the second part of Jencks' (ibid) argument which read: "Previously it had been vandalized, mutilated and defaced by its black inhabitants, and although millions of dollars were pumped back, trying to keep it alive (fixing broken elevators, repairing smashed windows, repainting), it was finally put out of its misery. Boom, boom, boom". The not-so-implicit blaming of the African American residents of the complex here paints a picture of black pathology whereby the modernist design of the project was not able to take into account the supposedly violent and uncivilized behavior of the building's

potential residents therefore justifying the differential treatment of African Americans that makes them vulnerable to dispossession. As Roderick A Ferguson (2015, p. 141) suggests; "[t]he failures of Pruitt- Igoe were increasingly understood as a mismatch between modern design and black cultural inferiority". Such an oversimplifying discourse is especially ironic given postmodernism's prevalent emphasis on diversity, difference, and locality as a challenge to the universalizing and all-encompassing tendencies of modernism.

Focusing on a variety of economic, social, and political circumstances surrounding the demise of the building complex, several scholars have since then endeavored to update this reductive discourse around Pruitt-Igoe, which has fed into anti-social program agendas as well as racism even furthering governmental dispossession acts. Eugene Meehan (1979), for instance, emphasized the economic downfall that the city was facing as a major reason in what he called the "programmed failure" of public housing inasmuch as it caused the Housing Authority to significantly cut the budget while increasing the population density that the complex could accommodate. Analyzing why they opted for a high-density, high-rise project on a relatively small amount of land, Alexander von Hoffmann (2000, p. 180-205) highlighted the vision of the mayor and city officials to turn St Louis into a major metropolis that could emulate New York City with its public and private high-rise residential complexes. J. S. Fuerst and Roy Petty (1991, p. 118), on the other hand, suggested that "poor locations; poor tenancy controls; enormous concentrations of very poor, socially troubled families; design flaws; poor maintenance; few supporting social services; and inept management", rather than the favoring of high-rise buildings were responsible. Among these studies, especially Mary C. Comerio's (1981) "Pruitt Igoe and Other Stories" and Katharine G. Bristol's (1991) "The Pruitt-Igoe Myth" stand out in their approach to the problem as a multi-faceted one that cannot be comprehensively analyzed by focusing on a single circumstance or superficial factor. While rather valuable in their attention to the intricate entanglement of economic, social, and political constituents of the historical context surrounding the Pruitt-Igoe affair, these accounts have two problems. First, they touch upon the issue of race, racial segregation, and structural racism and the relationship of these with the built environment yet never offer an in-depth analysis. Second, rather than active subjects, the African American residents of the complex emerge in these studies as passive victims of historical circumstances surrounding them, which perhaps inadvertently dispossesses them off of their agency and potential.

THE PRUITT-IGOE MYTH

Exactly at this point the significance of the documentary film *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth* becomes unmistakably clear (Figure 2). On a most basic level, the film provides us with a fuller picture of why the first level of dispossession (destruction of the complex and the relocation of the residents) that afflicted the building happened. Yet, and more importantly, the film, through the use of specific documentary techniques such as talking heads, found footage, etc, rectifies the status of the building's residents as historical, political, and aesthetic agents. Accordingly, *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth* allows us to reconsider the question of what documentary film can do for architectural historiography while also substantiating new ways of thinking about the role of documentary film in relation to the representation of the outside world.

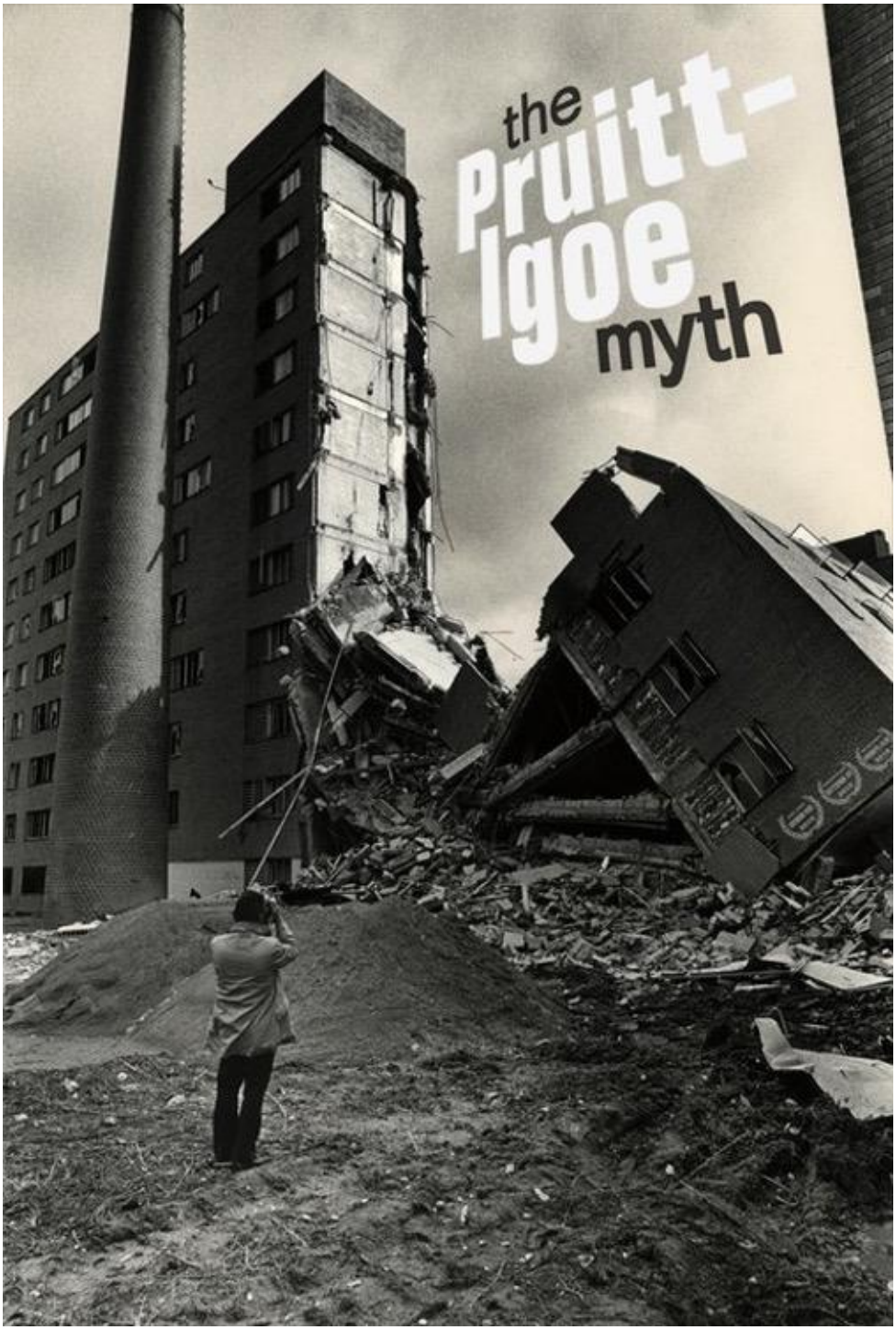

Figure 2. ***The Pruitt-Igoe Myth*** **promotional poster (http://www.pruitt-igoe.com/press-materials/, original photo by Daniel T. Magidson).**

One of the many "turns" that have defined contemporary art and moving image culture in the last twenty-five years or so has been a documentary one (Nash, 2004, p. 15-21; Nash, 2008, p. 118-125; Enwezor, 2008, p. 10-51; Lind and Steyerl, 2008; Stallabrass, 2013; Balsom and Peleg, 2016, p. 10-19). Defined by a sustained and intense attention to the actual and fabricated archival, historical, and/or ethnographic documents, traces, and fragments of real and fictional events, beings, and objects, this tendency have also foregrounded questions about the authoritative, factual tone of

conventional forms of documentary. The documentary turn is unmistakably an outcome of the historical context that witnessed the rise of digital media and the attendant proclamations of the theories concerning the "death of the indexical" (Doane, 2007; Gunning, 2007) as well as a general dissatisfaction with the ultimate nihilism about the documentation of the real world that tends to emerge when postmodern criticisms of representation and factuality are taken to their extremes. Such interest in documentary modes of relating to the lifeworlds has materialized in two distinct yet related methods: reconstructive and descriptive modes. Common strategies of representation in the former vein have included re-enactments and re-stagings, essayistic modes, blurring of the factual and fictional, use of non-indexical media (especially animation), as well as aesthetic manipulation of indexical documentation (Takahashi, 2013, p. 68-78; Magagnoli, 2015, p. 55). While still self-reflexively questioning the possibility of mediating facts and actual events, these experimentations also see a merit in continuing the attempts to do so. As Hal Foster (2017) has aptly noted, this turn evinces a shift "from a posture of deconstruction to one of reconstruction — that is, to the use of artifice to rehabilitate the documentary mode as an effective critical system, if not an adequate descriptive one". Rather than aiming a direct mediation of the outside world discursively presented as universal facts, then, this documentary mode displays an interest in an approximation of affective, corporeal, and situated/partial truths "to make the real real again, which is to say, effective again, felt again, as such" (ibid). The latter mode, on the other hand, adopts observational and descriptive strategies that nonetheless keeps authoritative claims to factuality at arm's length and recognizes that all knowledge and its representation is situated (Balsom, 2020, p. 180-196). As Marcus, Love, and Best argue:

> Description might become a noninstrumental accumulation of particulars with no immediately clear purpose. Or, like the shifts in scale that "decenter the human perspective" (…) description conceived of as honoring the object described might occasion a kind of ecstatic dispossession or pleasure in identifying with an object, being, or world. Such acts of mimetic description are unlikely to generate institutionally familiar genres of scholarship, but they can be creative, illuminating practices that produce forms, data, and insights keyed to the liveliness of worlds and works.
>
> Why describe? Because describing and descriptions can produce pleasure — granular, slow, compressed, attentive, appreciative (…) Because description can allow us both to see more and to look more attentively, more fully, and more selectively. Because description can take us out of ourselves, as when we try to see a mite or to see like a mite. Because description connects us to others — to those described, to the makers of what we describe, to other describers (Marcus, Best, and Love, 2016, 14).

Here, description emerges as a way of establishing close proximity to an alterity whose 'truth' (situated or approximate) most probably will forever elude us.

Bringing together both reconstructive (talking heads, essayistic commentary) and descriptive (found footage of observational documentaries and home videos) modes of representation, *The*

Pruitt-Igoe Myth provides us with a fuller picture of the multiple networks and actors that constituted the state of affairs that influenced the building and the ultimate demolishment of Pruitt-Igoe without any claims to all-encompassing factual authority. This more comprehensive account with a weighty emphasis on the issues of racial discrimination and dispossession becomes especially possible by the film's extensive archival research that dwells upon but significantly expands the previous scholarship on the building complex. Several official documents, newspaper clippings, news footage reporting on the historical context at large and the building complex in particular, as well as photographs and home videos of the life in the complex significantly add to the existing studies. The emerging fuller picture of the film highlights how the Housing Act of 1949 that initiated the public housing projects simultaneously and ironically encouraged through loans the suburbanization process whereby the white city residents largely migrated to the urban peripheries. As a result, St Louis inner city population and along with it, job prospects faced a major decline that amplified the poverty of African American citizens. As the film argues, this increased the vacancy rates of Pruitt-Igoe to the extent that dwellings left behind by whites became available for African American citizens. Because the city and federal funds only sponsored the building of Pruitt-Igoe and consigned the upkeep of the building to the funds obtained by rent collection, the immense vacancy rates meant that Pruitt-Igoe received next to zero maintenance initiating the deterioration of the complex. In addition to these factors, and more importantly, *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth* throws light on the systematic racism that had an impact on various facets of the affair, from the site selection to the daily life of the residents. The film suggests that there existed a major anxiety in the United States at large, and St. Louis in particular, about the de-clustering around the city of the rising African American population. Part of the reason behind the public housing initiatives' favoring of high-density projects on condensed lands was to control this process and segregate African Americans in small pockets of the inner cities. Moreover, compared to the mortgages and the price of groceries and services in the white neighborhoods, rent, food, and basic amenities were significantly higher in these urban enclaves further exploiting the isolated lives and inadequate means of the African Americans. These differential treatments that the film underscores attest to the governmental acts of dispossession that deliberately and systematically fail to provide livable and affordable conditions of "shelter in such a way that it is accessible to each and every person," as Butler would put it. The film footage of the demonstrations of white people opposing the desegregation of their suburban neighborhoods around St. Louis explicitly attests to this argument that the film proposes.

Figure 3. Talking Head Interviews with Former Residents of Pruitt-Igoe (Screen captures from the *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth* DVD, First Run Features, 2012).

While portraying this structural racism that segregated the Pruitt-Igoe complex, through the use of documents and talking head interviews with former residents, the film simultaneously pays particular attention to the multi-faceted aspects of life that unfurled in the building (Figure 3). This focus ensures that the audience perceives the residents of Pruitt-Igoe as active agents that negotiated in multiple and complex ways the dynamics of the built environment thereby restoring their voices that were largely overlooked in former accounts (Figure 4). Through interviews as well as photographs and films documenting early years of the building, it becomes unmistakably clear that the residents at first enjoyed and appreciated the building which provided them with a much better living environment than their former tiny tenements with no plumbing. While racism built into the system that, for instance, banned not only telephones and televisions in the apartments but also any able-bodied man from living in Pruitt-Igoe, therefore forcing families to separate, put significant strain on their lives, the statements of former residents narrate how they found solutions to cope that demonstrate their resilience and resourcefulness. Also attesting to the residents' resistance to the circumstances caused by racial segregation and institutional racism is the film's highlight on the nine-month long general rent strike of the public housing residents in St. Louis in 1969 and their victory that won them capped rent rates based on income, funds for addressing the maintenance issues, and a tenants' affairs board that allowed them a say in the running of the building complexes (Figure 5). While this triumph could not prevent the ultimate demise of Pruitt-Igoe, the strike shows how the residents attempted to become actively involved in the shaping of their built environment rather than allowing the socio-historical forces to simply take their course.

Figure 4. Life in Pruitt-Igoe
(Screen captures from the *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth* DVD, First Run Features, 2012).

This reconstruction of the building residents as socio-political actors is augmented by the use of found footage that substantiates them as aesthetic subjects. Part of this footage is based on Steve Carver's *More than One Thing*, a 30-minute-long documentary shot on 16mm film that provides glimpses of the life of one of the young residents of Pruitt-Igoe in a mainly observational yet rather poetic mode. The black and white visuals incorporated into *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth* shows the residents playing jazz records and dancing at night while also inscribing the minutiae of the daily life of the residents and their living quarters. Similarly, the home videos shot by the residents themselves provide us with not only glimpses into the lives that unfolded in the building but also establish them as active agents who each have their own perspective into their own material and social environment. Accordingly, while rectifying the second level of dispossession that Butler and Athanasiou (2013) underlines, the series of observational and descriptive footage that the film recycles, at the same time, instigates a temporary "ecstatic dispossession" (Marcus, Love, and Best, 2016, p. 14) in the audience that invites them to situate themselves in close proximity to (and perhaps even identify with) the residents of Pruitt-Igoe. In its invitation to leave behind the individual self with all its private baggage, bearings, and possessions in favor of embracing, albeit for a few seconds, a collective alterity, such an act of dispossession is a favorable one.

Figure 5. Rent strike of the public housing residents in St. Louis in 1969 (Screen capture from the *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth* DVD, First Run Features, 2012).

CONCLUSION

In 2014, ruminating on the public unrest in Ferguson, Missouri galvanized by the murder of an African American teenager by a white police officer, Sylvester Brown Jr. (2014) reminded his readers of the long history of structural racism that have plagued the area; "the long fuse that led to Ferguson burns hot" in Pruitt-Igoe, he suggested (also see Ferguson, 2015, p. 140). Yet, an in-depth account of this long history's embroilments with the built environment rarely found its way into the popular perceptions, collective memory, or the architectural histories of Pruitt-Igoe. From media spectacle imagery to the architectural history classroom slide, the demolishment of the housing complex figured as the quintessential image of the failure of modernist architecture and its utopic aims concerning the urban fabric. Even the corrective academic histories committed acts of dispossession in glossing over the complex ways in which the residents of the housing project negotiated, challenged, and resisted the structural, institutional, and everyday forms of racism plaguing and shaping their built environment. Rather than the two decades long history of the building especially with reference to the lives of its African American population, what has

predominantly occupied the popular and academic attention was the demolishment of the complex. *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth* challenges and updates this popular image by focusing on an extensive history of the building in relation to the larger context of the urban renewal projects in the city and the racial politics of such renewal that actually culminated in the ultimate demise of this residential project. The film instead provides us with a thorough account with an emphasis on the issues of racial discrimination and dispossession. This emphasis depends upon extensive archival research that significantly expands the previous scholarship on the building complex. At the same time, the film draws attention to the multi-faceted aspects of life that unfolded in the building through the use of found footage and talking head interviews. Centering the issue of race and the perspectives of its African American residents in the historiography of the building, the film points towards the potentials of an architectural history that leaves behind all-encompassing discourses in favor of the multi-faceted entanglements of racial discrimination, dispossession, and the built environment.

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AUTHOR 1: (a) Idea, Study Design, (b) Methodology, (c) Literature Review, (f) Data Collection, Processing, (g) Analyses, Interpretation (h) Writing Text., (i) Critical Review

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