

APARTMENT HUNTING

JORDAN STRAFER *views* Barbet Schroeder



SINGLE WHITE FEMALE, 1992

I want to talk about the apartment in *Single White Female*, a 1992 thriller directed by Barbet Schroeder.

For anyone who hasn't seen it: after Allie, a young creative freelancer, breaks up with her boyfriend, she needs a roommate for her palatial, "rent-controlled" two-bedroom in New York City. She puts an ad in the paper, hence the title of the movie, based on the 1990 novel *SWF Seeks Same* by John Lutz. Though she interviews a series of roommates, none seems suitable, until Hedy comes along. Soon, however, their relationship devolves into Hedy trying to *become* Allie—and then trying to kill her. The movie has become a pop artifact. Even my therapist uses the term "single white female syndrome" to describe this type of friendship dynamic.

The first scene after the opening credits shows the façade of a beautiful prewar apartment building, then cuts to Allie and her soon-to-be ex-boyfriend in bed. In the fake moonlight, the ironwork outside the window casts decorative shadows. When I see that, what comes to mind is that I want to work with sets like that—or maybe I just want to live in an apartment like that.

It looks like the idea of an NYC apartment, but at the same time like absolutely no place I've known anyone to live in. It's practically a theater stage. Camp, indulgent. The set doesn't get weighed down by realistic details, so I never forget that I'm watching a movie. This allows me to think about its symbols and structure, rather than getting swept up by its anxiety and suspense. It's like decoding a dream while you're dreaming.

One of the few relatable details in *Single White Female* is that Allie is so dedicated to keeping her apartment that she puts up with a psychotic roommate instead of getting away from her. Arguably, what this movie is really about is the scarcity mindset of NYC real estate.

The façade at least *is* real: a historic Upper West Side building called the Ansonia Hotel at 2109 Broadway, completed in 1903. As I write this, StreetEasy lists a two-bedroom like Allie's for \$7,950 per month.

When Hedy moves in, some moments are supposed to feel like "classic" NYC. The sink in the kitchen sprays water everywhere, for instance, so the

roommates have to fix it themselves. As we see more of the apartment, however, it looks endless: new rooms and many-paned windows keep appearing. The ceilings must be 14-foot tall. There is a clawfoot tub and a grand foyer. The building even has an elevator and a bellhop.

In the popular imagination, living in New York City is the ultimate aspiration. Anywhere else in the world, people imagine the home of an NYC artist to look just like Allie's apartment. And who can blame them, as nearly every depiction suggests a huge, gorgeous apartment is attainable for regular people like the characters on screen.

Everyone I know who has a "good deal" in Manhattan has a cramped apartment with pest infestations, bad light, and many floors to walk up. They have stress-induced auto-immune diseases, and either no time to work on their own projects or considerable trust funds, and they are terrified of letting go of their apartments. Now, for a new lease on a studio apartment maybe half the size of one of Allie's many rooms, expect to pay at least \$3,000. It's time for artists to let New York City go.