

# Special issue: Urban sights: visual culture and urban history

## Filmic witness to the 1964 Kitty Genovese murder

CARRIE RENTSCHLER

Associate Professor & William Dawson Scholar of Feminist Media Studies,  
McGill University  
Carrie.Rentschler@mcgill.ca

**ABSTRACT:** This essay examines a body of films that represent and re-enact the infamous 1964 Catherine Genovese rape and murder, helping to define the crime as a problem of bystander non-intervention exacerbated by urban living conditions and the 'high rise anxieties' of apartment dwellers. The moving image culture around the Genovese case tells a story about male violence against women in the city through the perspective of urban apartment dwellers, who are portrayed as bystander witnesses to both the city and to the social relations of stranger sociability in the city. Films depict the killing of Kitty Genovese, sometimes through fictional analogues to her and the crime, as an outcome of failed witnessing, explicating those failures around changing ideas about urban social relations between strangers, and ways of surveilling the city street from apartment windows. By portraying urban bystanders as primarily non-interventionist spectators of the Genovese rape and murder, films locate the conditions of femicide and responsibility for it in detached modes of seeing and encountering strangers. By analysing film as forms of historic documentation and imagination, as artifacts of historically and contextually different ways of telling and revising the story of the Genovese murder as one of bystander non-intervention in gender violence in the city, the essay conceptualizes film and filmic re-enactments as a mode of paying witness to the past.

This Scalar site can be viewed at: <http://scalar.usc.edu/anvc/urban-sights-visual-culture-and-urban-history/index>