

GEORGE STEINMETZ

DRIVE-BY SHOOTING: MAKING A DOCUMENTARY ABOUT DETROIT

There have . . . been cases in the history of the documentary when photographers became so fascinated by dirt that the result was the dirt looked interesting and strange, not something repellant to the cinema audience. . . . The error of exotic dirt.

Joris Ivens, *The Camera and I*¹

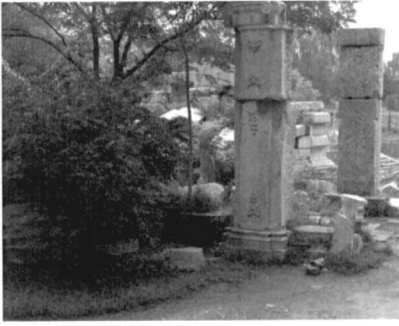
Modern Ruins

The crumbling office buildings, factories, and dwellings of a modern American industrial city like Detroit cannot constitute an American acropolis. These ruins are widely perceived as embarrassing and ugly, as a reminder of a painful history that would best be forgotten, and as targets for the wrecking ball.² The proposal a decade ago by the brilliant documentary photographer Camilo Vergara to make Detroit's abandoned skyscrapers into a museum of urban modernity on the scale of the Roman Forum was met with derision and accusations of insensitivity.³ Unlike other sites of disgrace and catastrophe such as Oradour-sur-Glane in France or the Anhalt railway station in Berlin, these American ruins have not been recognized by the state or by important sectors of the public as worthy of preservation. Nor has UNESCO offered to rescue these abandoned and demolished structures, even though many of them have historical and architectural importance that is easily equal to sites such as the old Völklingen ironworks in Germany, which was turned into a World Cultural

Heritage Monument and explicitly described by leading German politicians as an “acropolis” for use in “contemplation and perception.”⁴ Detroit’s ruins are not accorded the dignity of official “realms of memory” or *lieux de memoire*.⁵

Indeed, Detroit’s ruins are almost invisible to society at large. One reason they have not become part of a collective memorialization process is because there is no consensus on what caused them. Unlike some of the recognized modern ruins these are not the outcome of some readily identifiable emergency or a punctual historical disaster, but of more gradual and hidden processes of disinvestment, emigration, and racialized discrimination. By contrast, the bombed cathedral in Coventry recalls for everyone the attacks of the Luftwaffe; the ruins of the erstwhile Hiroshima Prefecture Industrial Promotion Hall near Ground Zero remind every visitor of the decision to use the atom bomb; and the tumbled remains of the Imperial Garden (Yuanming Yuan) in Beijing are interpreted for the visitor as the result of imperialist looting and burning by Anglo-French troops in 1861.⁶ Industrial ruins like the Völklingen ironworks are more likely to be preserved where nostalgia for the industrial era is widespread rather than marginal, as in the U.S. These American urban structures are therefore regarded as rubble, that is, as socially un-signified remnants, rather than as ruins.⁷ Their invisibility is compounded by the fact that they tend to be located in poor and minority neighborhoods, on the dominated side of the racialized patterns of American spatial apartheid. As for the inhabitants of these devastated cities and neighborhoods, even if they agree on the sources of the urban crisis they tend to be divorced from the means of aesthetic and political representation.⁸ The politicians, local developers, city planners, and many community activists are virtually compelled to strike an optimistic, even Pollyanna-ish pose, and to raze the ruins in the hope of luring residents and investors back to the crumbling city. Thus the national media “discovered” Detroit’s ruination during the buildup to the 2006 Super Bowl game, echoing their genuine or feigned puzzlement about the level of poverty in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.⁹

For Georg Simmel, a leading theorist of the ruin, the ruined building was an object of melancholy nostalgia whose aesthetic attraction lay in its ability to hold the vital opposing



Top left: Ruins of the old Imperial Garden (Yuanming Yuan) in Beijing
 Top right: Brush Park, Detroit
 Bottom: Oradour-sur-Glane, France

tendencies of nature and the “human spirit” in a sort of temporary equilibrium. The ruin presented a “new whole,” a “quietly abiding image,” even as “it lets one side preponderate as the other sinks into annihilation.” To qualify as a ruin a building had to be only partially decayed, allowing it to suggest an almost Hegelian *Aufhebung* of the contradiction between nature and culture: “the stumps of the pillars of the Forum Romanum are simply ugly and nothing else, while a pillar crumbled—say halfway down—can generate a maximum of charm.” Moreover, an object could qualify as a ruin *strictu sensu* for Simmel only if its destruction was the work of nature, not of human agency. In this respect, he said, the sorts of ruins we are talking about in Detroit are of a different and “unsettling, often unbearable” sort, since what strikes us here

is that “man makes himself the accomplice of nature,” hastening the destruction.¹⁰

Detroit: Ruin of a City

The film *Detroit: Ruin of a City*¹¹ began as an attempt to make these manmade ruins visible while avoiding the seductions of *Ruinenlust* (pleasure in ruins) or Ivens’ “error of exotic dirt.” Rose Macaulay wrote that the ruins of the industrial era “have not yet acquired the weathered patina of age” and are “still stark and bare,” smelling “of fire and mortality.”¹² Despite Macaulay’s assurances, however, the aesthetic attraction of “irresistible decay” (Walter Benjamin) that was recognized by the Baroque continues to structure artistic perceptions of urban ruination.¹³ Our premise was that the film format could partly avoid the extreme semiotic openness of the still photograph, which allows viewers to indulge in decontextualized *Ruinenlust* and to furnish the images with radically differing narratives. By dealing explicitly with the historical genesis of the ruins in question we hoped to narrow the range of interpretive possibilities, even while avoiding a single, seamless explanatory account.¹⁴ The film explores the social processes and the evolving field of representations that have produced Detroit’s shattered landscape. At the same



Above: Michigan Central train station, Detroit (right: detail)



Above: Brush Park, Detroit. Ransom Gyllis home (left) and ruined house with GM tower in background (right).

time, using a visual format forces the American viewer to confront the extent of the ruination in their midst.

The specifically visual difficulties associated with the topic of the modern ruin are compounded by the problem of filming “the city.” On the one hand, cities were a preferred subject matter for some of the first avant-garde experiments in documentary filmmaking in the 1920s and early 1930s. These include Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand’s *Manhatta* (1920); Dziga Vertov’s *Man with the Movie Camera* (1929); Walter Ruttmann’s *Berlin, Symphony of a City* (1927); and Jean Vigo’s *À propos de Nice* (1930). (We chose the title *Detroit: Ruin of a City* partly because of its resonance with Ruttmann’s title, and indeed often found ourselves referring accidentally to “Berlin” rather than “Detroit” during the filming.) But the city is in some respects impossible to visualize in its totality. As Jane Jacobs noted, “streets provide the principal visual scenes in cities.”¹⁵ She meant streets in their vibrancy, with their sidewalks full of people and their vistas of buildings and houses. Benjamin quoted Hofmannsthal as saying that Paris was “a landscape made of living people.”¹⁶ This sense of the city cannot be conveyed by the aerial shots favored by Hollywood (and by Vigo, in the opening moments of *À propos de Nice*) to establish setting or by the bird’s-eye view favored by Hitchcock. The city can never be presented in a single image or shot. Vertov, Ruttmann, and others addressed this problem by constructing their films around movement—

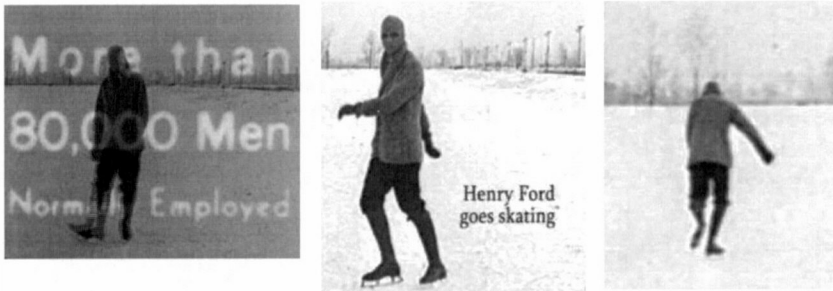
above all, the movement of trains, cars, and other vehicles. Our film follows their lead, shooting in a "drive-by" mode much of the time.

Indeed, the automobile is both subject and object in the film. The city's history is completely organized around the auto industry, beginning with Ford's creation in southeast Michigan of a socioeconomic system that theorists now call "Fordism."¹⁷ This industry accounts for many of the city's spatial peculiarities, for its rapid growth to about two million people in the 1950s, and for its subsequent decline during the past half century (although racism played a compounding role in these processes). Our focus on the automobile has other layers of irony, since rates of car ownership in the Motor City are far below the national average, and since "it costs more to drive a car in Motown than in any other city in the country" due to the high insurance rates.¹⁸ Public buses provide the sole means of public transportation outside of the downtown district. Where the earlier city films emphasized the street's vitality, we find mainly empty sidewalks and sparse car traffic. The film ends with a sequence showing suburbanites climbing into Hummers and other display cars at the annual North American International Auto Show in Detroit.

Documentary filmmaking is often described as being closer to social scientific research than fiction filmmaking. It is oriented toward "the world"—a "historical world we all share"—and not toward "a world" (an imaginary world), even if it can speak about the shared world in various modes of address. Documentary speaks a "discourse of sobriety" related to *epistophilia* or a desire to know ("documentary desire")—even if it is "equally a discourse of *jouissance*—of pleasure, desire, and of appeals to the Imaginary."¹⁹ Insofar as people appear on the screen, the documentary inevitably encourages identifications, but as Paula Rabinowitz suggests, "the psychosexual processes of identification and disavowal central to [fictional] narrative address are routed away from interiority and located in evidence."²⁰ *Detroit* is a mix of film-essay and analytic historic documentary. It presents itself as evidence-based research.²¹ We include several sequences in which the filmmakers are shown puzzling over found footage in front of the Steenbeck 16-mm film editing machine. At the same time this uncertainty about the provenance and meaning of the histori-

cal footage underscores one of the inevitably “subjective” aspects of even the most expository forms of documentary filmmaking (and of the human sciences more generally).

Subjectivity is also omnipresent in every camera angle, every decision to use a close-up or wide-angle framing, every editing cut.²² One example of an editing decision making a theoretical and political point is the sequence showing Henry Ford ice skating. This is introduced at a moment when we begin to discuss the city’s decline. The shot of Ford skating away from the camera underscores the argument that he pioneered the art of abandoning Detroit by building factories outside city limits, beginning with his Highland Park factory in 1910, depriving the city of tax revenue.



Stills from *Detroit*: Henry Ford skating

The decision to include music in a film also breaks with a strict empiricist realism. In a deliberate effort to disrupt entrenched expectations and Pavlovian associations (and because of our severely limited budget) we decided not to use “Detroit music” except where it is part of the archive footage or, in a single case, as background to a discussion of Motown music. This decision was no more or less arbitrary than the ritualistic use of a stereotypical “Detroit” soundtrack in Hollywood movies set in Detroit (e.g. *Four Brothers*, 2005). Michael Nyman’s score, written and performed specifically for our film, alludes to Detroit music through sonority. The Hammond organ sound recalls Motown and the African-American church, while certain electronic sounds evoke techno, whose provenance is traced to Detroit. Nyman’s score also alludes to

the Fordist assembly line and standardized production through rhythm, repetition, and slight variations on a somewhat ominous mechanical theme.²³ The cut from the Ford promotional film on the Rouge production plant ("More than 80,000 Men Normally Employed") to the image of Ford skating is accompanied by a shift from rousing orchestral film music to a strange synthesized sound that resembles a skate blade cutting ice (the film from which the skating scene is taken is silent, so we were not compelled by our self-imposed rule to use the original soundtrack with any archival footage).

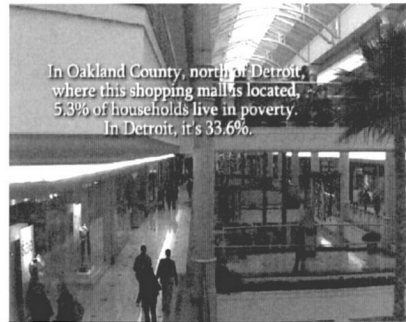
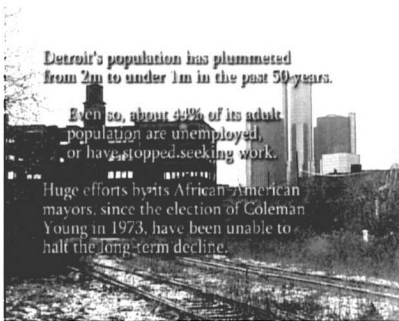
The film mixes together a variety of documentary genres in addition to the expository-analytic modes already mentioned.²⁴ The formal device of the scenes in front of the Steenbeck allows us to emphasize the conditional character of truth claims and the constructedness of the omniscient standpoint in conventional documentaries.²⁵ An example of the poetic mode includes the film's opening montage of ruins and the repeated, accumulating cluster of images from the filmic archive of Detroit (and *Detroit*). Indeed, the historical archive material comes already equipped with "poetic" connotations, due to our historical viewing habits and our distance from black and white film. Leo Seltzer, one of the founders of the Workers Film and Photo League and a cameraman filming the Ford Hunger March of 1932, was committed to an "expository" mode of filmmaking.²⁶ But for contemporaries accustomed to the smudged black and white photo paintings of a Gerhard Richter and to the jerky movements of the hand-held camera favored by filmmakers seeking a gritty realism effect, the Ford Hunger March footage is saturated with visual associations. Indeed, the dreamlike image of the marchers' coffins being placed in the hearse, with the camera panning across a huge crowd of black and white faces and raised fists, resembles Gerhard Richter's painting *Burial* in his cycle *October 18, 1977*.

Subjective elements permeate even the more expository aspects of our film. For example, the commentary is not presented in the disinterested, authoritative, omniscient manner of news anchors. Some of the experts we interview are impassioned; others are avowedly uncertain or providing first impressions rather than authoritative summaries. The interview with Detroit City Planner Marcus Loper is remarkable for the way it slides from a tone of expert commentary to one of suppressed

emotion, culminating in the verb *extinguished*, when he discusses the urban renewal projects of the 1950s and 1960s:

As a planner, from a professional standpoint, I do see what the goals of urban renewal were, and I see some of the positive results of urban renewal, but from a personal background, I can also see the devastation that it had on families that had to be relocated, and whole communities that were uprooted and *extinguished* . . .

Official and academic experts are presented alongside artists, journalists, and people on the street, with no clear priority given to anyone. The voices of the “experts” are also partly vernacular in the sense that their lines are not rehearsed but spontaneous, with all of the associated grain of the voice that results. They have a variety of different accents and speaking styles. Their comments are not presented in a strict voice-over form; instead, we see the speakers in various natural settings: much of the time inside automobiles, but also in their homes or offices, or on a city street. At several points in the film we felt the need to provide a more definitive comment, in order to counter misconceptions or provide information. These are presented as “text-overs” rather than voice-overs.



Stills from *Detroit: Renaissance Center* (GM headquarters) and industrial ruin (left); suburban shopping mall (right)

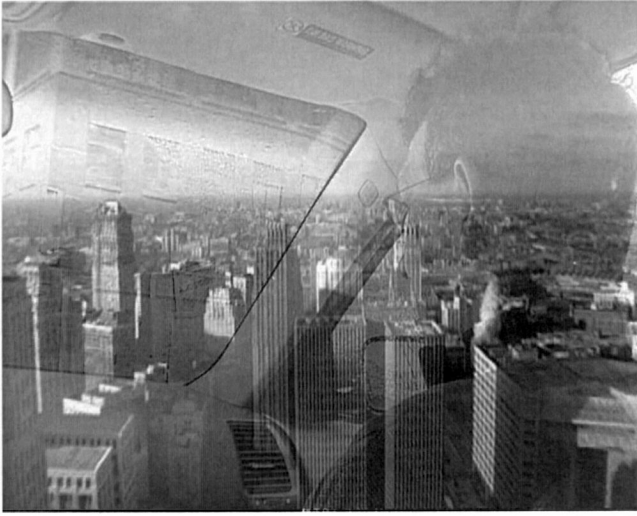
Narrative form is another inherently subjective or “ideological” element disrupting the documentary “discourse of sobriety.” At least three narratives are combined and interwoven in this film. The first of these is a history of the city that moves from the early twentieth century to the present. This story

ends with the 1967 riots and then jumps forward to the present. This chronological gap underscores the argument that the destructive forces of disinvestment and white racism have been operating more or less continuously all along and that in some respects little has changed since the 1950s.²⁷ The second narrative concerns the accumulation of *images* of the city and its residents—a cultural history of representations. Here the overall trend is from a symphony of contending voices in the period from the 1930s through the 1960s, when there was a true “battle of representation”²⁸ over the city’s image, to a radically constricted field dominated by Hollywood and the evening television news in the past three decades. A third narrative consists of two parallel road trips in which artist Lowell Boileau and sociologist Loïc Wacquant drive around the city in an irregular spiral, gradually approaching the center. But the arrival at the center is a narrative disappointment: the trip with Boileau culminates with the shot along the riverfront of the downtown Renaissance Center (GM’s world headquarters) framed by hulking factory ruins in the foreground; the visit with Wacquant ends with him at the heart of the downtown business district remarking:

There are some significant buildings, but you have the sense that you’re in a mid-sized Midwestern city. . . . Wow, you have boarded up buildings right downtown. . . . Unbelievable, I mean come on, clean it up! . . . Every other major city has abandoned buildings, but not right in the downtown district.

The film has narrative structure, but it is a truncated narrative lacking a happy end in the sense of policy recommendations or a call to revolution. The absence of a solid resolution to a social drama presented on film has always been troubling to audiences and state officials, and this is one reason the modernist documentaries of the 1920s USSR were suppressed. As Bill Nichols writes,

Instead of the resolution-oriented structure of classical narrative, or the comparable problem-solution pattern of much documentary, modernist experimentation favored an open-ended, ambiguous play with time and space that did less to resolve real issues than to challenge the definition and priority of an issue per se.²⁹



Still from *Detroit*: Loïc Wacquant, sociologist, superimposed on aerial view of the city

As it turned out, not just Soviet elites but also Western government sponsors were unhappy with the “rhetorical exuberance” of the 1920s modernists. In 1935 John Grierson, founder of the British documentary film and the person who had introduced the word “documentary” into English (an adaptation of the French term *documentaire*) in the mid-1920s, wrote that Russian directors

have, indeed, suffered greatly from the freedom given to artists in a first uncritical moment of revolutionary enthusiasm. . . . They have given themselves the airs and ribbons of art. . . . One’s impression is that when some of the art and all of the bohemian self-indulgence have been knocked out of them, the Russian cinema will fulfill its high promise.”³⁰

Several years later Stalin’s purges began and more and more intellectuals began to have the “self-indulgence” knocked out of them.³¹ This is not to say that happy endings are necessarily Stalinist, although the most adamant criticism of our film for lacking a “positive message” came from two elderly Detroiters, one close to the Communist Party and the other a former Trotskyite. I would argue that our own “negative dialectics”—our unwillingness to make predictions or tarry with the positive—is

actually a less subjective approach than the versions of positivism that combine futurological forecasting with relentless optimism. This refusal to forecast or to resolve an issue is more in line with contemporary understandings of appropriate epistemology, ontology, and method for the human sciences.³² The happy end is, in this respect, the narrative equivalent of the scientific belief in general laws of human behavior.³³ Such critiques of our “negativism” also miss the film’s message about the oppositional public sphere.³⁴ One review of our film acknowledges this cultural scene as an alternative to the city’s desolation:

Detroit . . . illuminates by exposing, articulating and advocating alternatives. There is a future for the city, perhaps very different from its past glory. There is an alternative Detroit: one where an artist puts humanity back into decayed buildings by nailing pictures of faces to walls. . . .³⁵

This countersphere appears throughout the film: in the reconstruction of the various left and labor filmmaking traditions, in the footage of Diego Rivera painting his Detroit Industry murals, in the interview with civil rights and labor activist Lasker Smith recounting the struggle against housing discrimination, in the sequence on the Heidelberg Street project by artist Tyree Guyton (see below), and in the discourse of music journalist and Detroit radio host W. Kim Heron about the vibrant local music scene.

A further subjective issue concerns the question of insider/outsider perspective. We were intensely conscious from the start that we were two privileged white men making a film about a predominantly black city with the highest rate of urban poverty in the country. Certain subjective aspects of experience are simply unavailable to outsiders. The film cannot take a position, for instance, on the question of whether the 1967 riots were “worth it” in order to send a signal to the white American power structure and even to consolidate the city as a black-controlled public sphere.³⁶ But our film is not an ethnographic film per se, and it does not really deal with the period after 1967.³⁷ Nor is its focus strictly on the city proper but also on metropolitan Detroit and the polarized relations between city and suburbs. Rather than disavowing our outsider perspective we confront the “tourism” problem di-

rectly, staging the film as a documentary road movie in which we are continually entering and reentering the city from the suburbs, haplessly losing our way, asking naïve questions, and learning as we go. In a sense the film recapitulates the experience of the suburbanite venturing back into the city and also reverses the direction of flow of postwar suburbanization and white flight, while making that very process a topic of inquiry.

The subjective aspect that I particularly want to focus on is located not just on the side of the filmmakers but also with their object. *Detroit: Ruin of a City* differs from most other city films in focusing on the interplay between cultural, especially filmic, discourse about a city and the history of the city itself.³⁸ The implicit claim is that the collective imaginary is structured in important ways by film, both documentary and fiction, and by other media images, and that these vehicles of cultural hegemony are sometimes confronted by counterimages. We spend a great deal of time demonstrating how the first six decades of the twentieth century differed with respect to the field of film and counterfilm, and talking to film historian and critic Dan Georgakas about this issue. The films made in Hollywood and by Ford's own motion picture company were challenged by alternatives from the labor unions, the Film and Photo League, and the Newsreel group of the 1960s, all of which were active in Detroit.³⁹ The enormous variety of visual signatures that characterized the early and middle decades of the twentieth century in the city has narrowed dramatically in the more recent period. In filmic and ideological terms, Detroit has largely lost control of the way it is depicted. In the voyeuristic pathologization of the city found in Hollywood's urban dystopias and the nightly crime reports, the city's ruination bleeds metonymically into a discourse about "human ruins" who are blamed for the damaged condition of their environment.

Of course Detroit has other cultural venues: two daily newspapers and numerous weeklies, world-famous museums, television and radio stations, filmmaking classes at local colleges, and a small but excellent film school in the Detroit Film Center. The point is a comparative one—compared with other cities of similar size and especially compared with its own past, there seems to be a depressed level of self-representation—



Still from *Detroit*: James Clark, resident: “They drop these tires, people drop them on us, and we gotta clear ‘em up, OK? We didn’t put ‘em here. They drop them here and we got to clean ‘em up. Soon as I can get ‘em all cleaned up, I’m getting the hell out of Detroit. . . . They told me if worked hard, I’d get a piece of the pie.”

except in sports and music. Alongside the much-discussed “hunger for the real” which appears as a kind of backlash against the hyperreality of contemporary life and which may be propelling the current popularity of documentary (even if much of that documentary is now explicitly autobiographical or subjective), there is a parallel desire for voice in a city that has been cast adrift from the rest of U.S. society.⁴⁰

Alongside interviews with poor and homeless residents, social activists, and urban planners, we included participants in the city’s cultural scene. The most memorable presence, for many viewers, is artist Tyree Guyton. His Heidelberg Street installation, which has sometimes been presented as a joyous celebration of life and the human spirit, is shown here in a somewhat different light. Guyton’s comments in this film are also more political and hard-edged than has been the case in some earlier presentations. He clearly has no illusions about an imminent “happy end.” Images of abandoned vehicle parts at his Heidelberg Street installation underscore Guyton’s

words: "We have abandoned vehicles all over the city, but we also have abandoned people all over the city." Dozens of shoes hanging from a tall tree in front of the "OJ House" on Heidelberg Street seem at first glance to resemble the plastic bags stuck in trees all across urban America, but Guyton explains them as an illustration of a story from his grandfather about lynchings in the Jim Crow South, where only the soles of the victims' feet could be seen. A cluster of anti-war slogans on one of the houses introduces a sequence with an African-American Vietnam veteran campaigning for John Kerry and demonstrating how he "fought the Vietcong." Cut to Tyree Guyton:

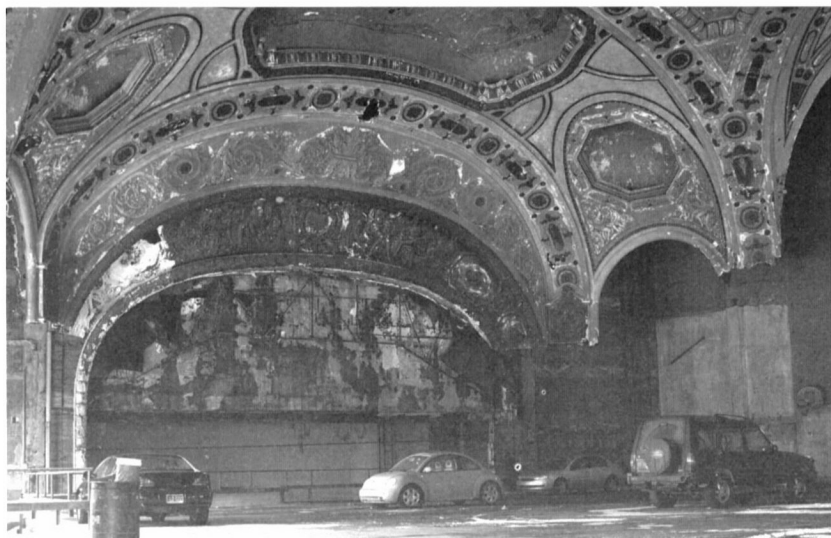


Still from *Detroit*: Tyree Guyton, artist: "I went to the military, and I went to fight for this country, and I came back home disappointed. I came back home and I found myself fighting here. Fighting just to be free. Fighting to be accepted. Fighting to be my own person. And that's why you see flags over on Heidelberg Street. Some of those flags are turned upside down, because I think that we live in a crazy place. And I think the system is kind of confusing and mixed up. You go and spend time fighting for this country and you come back here and you're fighting homelessness, poverty, racism, and the list just goes on and on and on. Something's wrong."



Heidelberg Street, Detroit

With a few exceptions, films allegedly set in Detroit have no recognizable local landmarks and are sometimes absurdly inaccurate. The recent remake of *Assault on Precinct 13* moved the action from Los Angeles to Detroit, where the city's "most lethal criminals" are being held in an inner city police station



The Michigan Theater, Detroit, now a parking garage, with cars parking beneath the old projection booth and the tatters of the stage curtains

located next to an immense urban pine forest. This suggests that Hollywood is not just using “Detroit” as a metaphor for all that is debased and evil but that it assumes that actual filmgoers will not recognize the difference between Detroit and some other city. And indeed, this may not be unreasonable since the city is terra incognita even for most residents of the surrounding suburbs.

As for the residents of Detroit, many are unable to see these films until they are shown on television, since this city of a million people has just one commercial movie house downtown and a second one located at the very edge of the city at Eight Mile Road. In earlier decades Detroiters could walk or take an electric trolley to numerous movie theaters, and a cluster of exquisitely ornate theaters graced the center of downtown—although African Americans were forced to sit in the balconies in those theaters.⁴¹ The fate of the old movie theaters is discussed in the film in some detail. There is one restored 1920s movie house, however, the Redford Theater, which was the venue for our first screening of the film in Detroit.



Redford Theater screening, April 5, 2005

Reception

Michael Chanan remarked while we were shooting that the residents of a city are the most difficult audience in the world for a city film. So we anticipated that Detroiters would dislike it. Detroit city planners had objected to the use of the word “ruin” in the film’s title. The day before the screening we were interviewed on Detroit radio and television shows, and some of the interviews began by asking whether we were bashing Detroit.⁴² Much of the coverage was positive, however, and as a result, about a thousand people showed up for the premiere, many from Detroit and some from even farther afield. Both of Michigan’s U.S. Senators were in the audience.

The actual response to the film was quite complex, and different from what we had expected. Most of the Detroiters who saw the film at the premiere or at the various screenings in and around the city in the following months praised it. One of the most interesting screenings was at the Swords into Plowshares Peace Center and Gallery in Detroit in June 2005. There the audience was a mix of political activists and fifteen candidates for Detroit’s upcoming city council and mayoral elections. After the screening there was a discussion of the film followed by a presentation of candidates’ platforms. None of the municipal candidates criticized the film for its lack of optimism, and some referred to the film directly in framing their electoral message about the city’s problems (“As we saw in the film . . .”). One mayoral candidate, Tania K. Walton, agreed with the film, arguing “We should be utilizing these buildings, like the old Motown building . . . and not have them to decay . . . there are too many buildings that we are leaving, that are not being utilized,” and adding that “we need to put businesses in these buildings, Detroit-based businesses.”⁴³ Another mayoral candidate, Sarella Johnson, praised the film for dealing with the Detroit race riot of 1943. The Detroit response was similar among African-American and white residents of the city. Those I spoke to personally after screenings who praised the film came from all walks of life, ranging from a school principal to a retired school teacher, from a local businessman to a truck driver. Admittedly this cannot be a representative sample—but what would a representative sample actually look like, in this case? Surely one cannot ask peo-

ple who don't want to see a film to evaluate it, and documentary films do not use the market as an indicator of their value.

Most of the most negative responses came from suburbanites and local experts angry about not being interviewed in the film. Some were upset that we did not blame Detroit's decline on Mayor Coleman Young. A local monthly, the *Ann Arbor Observer*, panned the film. But *Time Out London* gave it four stars.⁴⁴ In addition to bringing some sense of proportion to the critical reception, this reaction seemed to underscore the sensitivity of the suburbs to being blamed for the city's plight. As I noted above, some viewers wanted more of a focus on political options. On the other hand, a very practical group of social activists, the Motor City Blight Busters, adopted our film for fund-raising events at the Redford Theater.⁴⁵ This is a group that demolishes and rebuilds abandoned houses in Detroit. The first Redford Theater screening was framed as a problem and response—*Detroit: Ruin of a City* outlined the problem while the Blight Busters' informational video proposed one possible solution.

Thus the film's local reception was shaped by geography, political stance, and race or "racial" interpretations of urban history. Where local sensitivities and resentments were not at stake, the reception focused more on aesthetic and filmic questions.

Conclusion

The documentary lends itself to readings as both a modern and a postmodern form. On the one hand, a documentary like *Detroit* is open-ended and dialogic, and cannot even attempt to control all the information it contains. A historical documentary, if it avoids the traditional expository style of presenting the facts from a single authoritative position, is even more unstable. We tried to inject into the film a sense of the ambiguity of many of the sources. We were anxious from the beginning to cast our film in a way that marked our concern with questions of perspective and framing in the discursive as well as the visual sense. At the same time, we do not believe that the ruination of Detroit is inexplicable, and the structure of the film is therefore suggestive of an explanation. In that

sense our film does not correspond to ideas of postmodern incredulity and skepticism, and is closer again to the analytic film-essay. At a more general level, the documentary form claims at least one basic ontological difference from the Hollywood film, namely, its indexical relation to the real and the authenticity of its dramatis personae—that is, the absence of actors. If a hunger for the real is a marker of modernism, and if the recent uptick of interest in documentary is related to this, that is one more indicator that modernism and postmodernism are not two neatly demarcated historical epochs, any more than Fordism and post-Fordism belong to a separate past and present. The film's form thus integrates modernist and postmodernist elements in a sort of structural homage to the city that is struggling to move beyond the ruins of Fordism.

NOTES

¹ Joris Ivens, *The Camera and I* (New York: International, 1969), 88.

² James Bennett, "A Tribute to Ruin Irks Detroit," *New York Times*, Dec. 10, 1995, 22.

³ Peter Gavrilovich and Bill McGraw, *The Detroit Almanac* (Detroit: Detroit Free Press, 2001), 295; Camilo Vergara, *American Ruins* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1999).

⁴ See Johann Peter Lüth, "Thoughts on Handling a Difficult Monument," in Lucius Burckhardt, Georg Skalecki, Hans Meyer-Veden, and Johann Peter Lüth, *Alte Völklinger Hütte* (Stuttgart: Edition Axel Menges, 1997), 71.

⁵ See *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, under the direction of Pierre Nora (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

⁶ Young-tsu Wong, *Paradise Lost: The Imperial Garden Yuanming Yuan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), chapter 7.

⁷ For the rubble/ruin distinction see Julia Hell, "Orphic Journeys through Germany's Ruins," in *Writing Travel*, edited by John Zilcosky (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, forthcoming).

⁸ Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

⁹ See, for example, "Two Steelers made in Detroit: Bettis Left a Broken Neighborhood Behind," *New York Times*, Feb. 2, 2006, C19.

¹⁰ Georg Simmel, "The Ruin," in *Essays on Sociology, Philosophy and Aesthetics*, ed. Kurt H. Wolff (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 259–266.

¹¹ *Detroit: Ruin of a City*, codirected and coproduced by Michael Chanan and George Steinmetz, music by Michael Nyman; published as a DVD by Intellect Books (www.intellect.com) in 2006 and included as a DVD in the volume *The Ruins of Modernity*, edited by Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, forthcoming).

¹² Dame Rose Macaulay, *Pleasure of Ruins* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1953), 453.

¹³ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (London: Verso, 1985), 178. To some extent this polarization between artistic and popular perceptions of modern ruins may reflect the dynamics of class-stratified aesthetic taste as discussed by Pierre Bourdieu. The ability to see the beauty in images of painful necessity can be deployed as a marker of rarified taste. What Bourdieu ignores is the actual content of the image in question, however: not all “ugly” images are alike in terms of their connotations and indexical relations to the world. For example, an image of a mountain destroyed by volcanic forces may be sublime in the Kantian sense, but it is not necessarily an image of a ruin, since the vital force of human agency is not represented in a struggle with nature. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

¹⁴ Film itself has been associated with the ruin insofar as it preserves an image and freezes a process of decay. In our case, in working with uncatalogued and decaying archival footage, the associations with ruins were multiplied.

¹⁵ Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 2002), 378.

¹⁶ Walter Benjamin, “The Return of the *Flâneur*,” in *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings, Vol. 2, Part 1, 1927–1930*, edited by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 263.

¹⁷ Michel Aglietta, *A Theory of Capitalist Regulation. The U.S. Experience* (London: Verso, 1987); George Steinmetz, “Fordism,” in *Encyclopedia of Europe: 1914–2004*, eds. John Merriman and Jay Winter (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2006).

¹⁸ Dustin P. Walsh, “Auto collective. Can car sharing work in Detroit?,” *Metro Times* (Detroit), Dec. 17, 2005; and “Detroit is most expensive place to own a car,” http://www.consumeraffairs.com/news04/2005/car_costs.html.

¹⁹ Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 39–40; Michael Renov, “Introduction: The Truth about Fiction,” in *Theorizing Documentary*, ed. Michael Renov (New York: Routledge, 1993), 5.

²⁰ Paula Rabinowitz, “Wreckage upon Wreckage: History, Documentary and the Ruins of Memory,” *History and Theory* 32:2 (1993), 132; reprinted as chapter one in *They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary* (London: Verso, 1994).

²¹ On the idea of “analytic documentary” see Ann M. Lopez, “The Battle of Chile: Documentary, Political Process, and Representation,” in *The Social Documentary in Latin America*, ed. Julianne Burton (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1990), 274.

²² See Trinh T. Minh-Ha, “Documentary Is/Not a Name,” *October*, 52 (1990), 80.

²³ On the role of the electric Hammond organ in Motown and black culture see Gerald Lyn Early, *One Nation under a Groove: Motown and American Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004). On techno see Dan Sisko, *Techno Rebels: The Renegades of Electronic Funk* (New York: Billboard Books, 1999).

²⁴ On genre in documentary see Nichols, *Introduction*, and *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

²⁵ Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 69–72.

²⁶ Leo Seltzer, born in Montreal in 1910, told us in 2004 that he was one of the cameramen who filmed the 1932 Detroit Hunger March. See Charles Wolfe, “The Poetics and Politics of Nonfiction: Documentary Film,” in *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930–1939*, ed. Tino Balio (New York: Scribner, 1993), 351–386.

²⁷ Of course a separate film would be necessary to deal with the period since 1967 and the election of the first African-American mayor, Coleman Young, in 1973. We decided to skip over this period both because we felt that the main determinants of Detroit’s decline (racism and disinvestment) were already in place by this time and because the political struggles that have been central since this period have been located mainly within the African-American community. The current mayor, Kwame Kilpatrick, argues convincingly that the sources of the city’s problems were in place before he was born. As James Baldwin wrote in 1984, “it is not pleasant to be forced to recognize, more than thirty years” after the original publication of *Notes of a Native Son*, that the “horror” of the “conundrum of color” has “so welded past and present that it is virtually impossible to speak of it occurring, as it were, in time. . . . There have been superficial changes, with results at best ambiguous and, at worst, disastrous.” Preface to the 1984 edition, *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), xii–xiii.

²⁸ Michael Chanan, “Detroit: *Ruin of a City*—A Reception Diary,” *Journal of Media Practice*, 6:2 (2005), 135–144.

²⁹ Bill Nichols, “Documentary Film and the Modernist Avant-Garde,” *Critical Inquiry* 27:4 (2001), 594.

³⁰ John Grierson, *Grierson on Documentary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 183. Grierson was later film commissioner of the National Film Board of Canada and UNESCO coordinator of mass media.

³¹ Vertov lost his state sponsorship in the mid-1930s; see Dziga Vertov, *Tagebücher, Arbeitshefte*, eds. Thomas Tode and Ale Moñoz-Kohrs (Konstanz, Germany: UVK Medien, 2000).

³² Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 1990).

³³ See my “Positivism and Its Others in the Social Sciences,” in *The Politics of Method in the Human Sciences: Positivism and Its Epistemological Others*, ed. George Steinmetz (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 1–56.

³⁴ See Alexander Kluge, “On Film and the Public Sphere,” *New German Critique* 24/25 (1981–1982), 206–220.

³⁵ Pepe Petos, “Don’t Forget the Motor City,” *Vertigo*, 2:9 (Autumn/Winter 2005), 21.

³⁶ This position was presented to me in an interview with Detroit social activist and erstwhile mayoral candidate Sarella Johnson on July 30, 2005. I am not convinced by the epistemological argument that only “insiders” can generate social knowledge. More to the point, while the condition of being dominated or victimized yields unique opportunities for knowledge, there is no guarantee that the opportunities will be seized. Oppression and deprivation can also yield systematic forms of blindness or adaptation, as Pierre Bourdieu, among others, has argued. See Caroline New, “Realism, Deconstruction and the Feminist Standpoint,” *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 28:4 (1998), 349–372.

³⁷ On ethnographic documentary film see the interesting article by

Gérard Althabe, "Lecture ethnologique du film documentaire," *L'Homme et la Société*, 142 (oct.–dec. 2001), 9–25.

³⁸ Another recent example is "Los Angeles Plays Itself" (2003), directed by Thom Anderson.

³⁹ Bill Nichols, *Newsreel: Documentary Filmmaking on the American Left (1971–1975)* (New York: Arno Press, 1980); Michael Renov, *The Subject of Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), chapter one. The most famous Detroit Newsreel product, "Finally Got the News," was released by Black Star Productions. For that film's history see Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin, *Detroit, I do mind dying* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1998).

⁴⁰ On the "hunger for documentary images of the real" see Linda Williams, "Mirrors without Memories: Truth, History, and the New Documentary," *Film Quarterly* 46:3 (1993), 10.

⁴¹ According to Tania K. Walton, mayoral candidate and local businessperson, interviewed by the author in Detroit on July 30, 2005.

⁴² The *Detroit Free Press* ran two reviews, one very favorable and another quite negative: Nancy K. Youssef, "A Critical Look at Detroit: Two Filmmakers Team up to Scrutinize the City Block," *Detroit Free Press*, March 16, 2005; Terry Lawson, "'Detroit: Ruin of a City': Academic Pretensions without a Coherent Point," *Detroit Free Press*, March 18, 2005. The second reviewer apparently did not see the film, however or at least not all of it, since he claims that "a total of one municipal employee"—Marcus Loper—is interviewed, whereas one of first interviews in the film is with another city planner, Marcia Bruhn. The reviewer's implication that city officials are more important interlocutors than residents suggests that he was looking for a more expository form of documentary with a policymaking orientation.

⁴³ Interview with Tania K. Walton, Detroit, July 30, 2005.

⁴⁴ *Time Out London*, film review, issue 1812, May 11–18 2005. Indeed, the national and international reception has also been surprising. One result of the fact that Detroit has lost over a million inhabitants during the past half century is that there are former Detroiters everywhere, and they have shown up at screenings from Portland, Oregon, to Bristol, England.

⁴⁵ See <http://www.blightbusters.org/>.

way: *Hemingway: A Biography* (1985), *Hemingway: The Critical Heritage* (1982), and *Hemingway: Life into Art* (1982). His essay "Hemingway's Humor" appeared in the Spring 2004 issue of *MQR*. He has just completed a life of Picasso's friend Modigliani.

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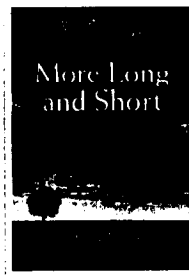
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