

## ***Detroit: Ruin of a City - a reception diary***

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### **Abstract**

*Detroit: Ruin of a City is a feature documentary about a richly mythologised city that engages with questions of history, myth and memory in contemporary perceptions. This article provides an account of the reception of the film when screened to the city's own inhabitants and an exploration of issues raised by conditions of production and exhibition. It was produced through academic funding (around \$25,000) as a collaboration between film-maker Michael Chanan and sociologist George Steinmetz, and given its first screening at a conference on 'The Ruin of Modernity' at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, in March 2005.*

### **Keywords**

Detroit  
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city films  
George Steinmetz

This film, which is slipping away from us, now appears before critics and viewers. It presents us once again with problems, indeed with new problems. These are not aesthetic problems but questions more directly related to life.

(Edgar Morin, *Chronicle of a Film*, 1962)

### **Part 1**

Late in February 2005, the University of Michigan issues a press release about the forthcoming premiere of *Detroit: Ruin of a City*, at a conference on 'The Ruin of Modernity' at the University of Michigan (18 March 2005). Immediately an announcement of the screening is posted on Lowell Boileau's website 'Detroit Yes'.<sup>1</sup> Lowell is one of the film's participants, who takes us on a tour of what he calls 'the fabulous ruins of Detroit'. Within 48 hours there are two dozen responses, which mostly range from the sarcastic ('Well that's a fresh, exciting topic that's never been documented before...') to the vitriolic ('I'm glad to see our tax dollars are being put to good use by the leftwing, America-hating professors at University of Michigan who cannot help but participate in what I predict will be a one-sided smear of the city they are all supposedly are so concerned about.'). Although we are not by any means expecting Detroiters to give us a smooth ride, we did not anticipate the dismissive hostility of some of those postings. Lowell e-mails us to explain the reaction of those he calls Detroit 'nationalists' - we have touched a raw nerve by referring in the press release to Devil's Night - when people set fire to buildings and automobiles on the eve of Halloween - as if it were still ongoing. For subsequent press releases, we correct the wording to indicate - as we say in the film's opening sequence - that the arson has been reduced over the last few years.

The premiere of the film will bring further surprises, including more discussion on Lowell's website, and in now coming to write about the film, it seems to me it might be useful to consider the various responses and

1 <http://www.detroityes.com>. Web links referenced in this essay can be found at the film's website, <http://humanities.uwe.ac.uk/bristoldocs/detroit>.

inquire into what they say about audience reception. Reception and audience studies are not usually like this - they are not generally undertaken by the author of the work in question, who hardly possesses the necessary distance from it to provide a disinterested account. But perhaps I can compensate for this by drawing attention to issues and nuances that more formal methods might well miss. (The rationale for this is that the filmmaker knows what they've put into the film, and by being attentive to the audience you can learn whether, and to what extent, it comes across - and what other meanings emerge, because they always do.)

Mainly what interest me are two things: the diversity of responses within the audience as signs of different social positioning, and the conditions of reception at a particularly intriguing moment in the trajectory of documentary cinema. The former is a complex interaction between the film on the screen (the 'text'), the situation of viewing (the institutional context), and the viewer's disposition (their own emotional subtext). The latter refers to the unexpected return of documentary to the cinema screen over the last decade or so, in the shape of what might be called the new wave documentary. This is also to speak of the development of digital video and desktop editing which contribute to the phenomenon by hugely reducing the costs of production, and the introduction of the DVD as a low-cost high-quality format for reaching an audience beyond the cinema. It is this combination of factors that has allowed us to conceive this film in the first place, and to carry it out on academic funding for a budget of about \$20,000. Nonetheless, the film's dialogue with the audience still begins in the direct encounter with the audience gathered in front of the big screen, which for us means the premiere at the University of Michigan. The location for this event, Ann Arbor, is not quite Detroit, but being only an hour's drive away, close enough that making the trip again from England, it feels like entering the lion's den - after all, it is peculiarly unnerving to make a film about a city and then show it to the city's own inhabitants; all the more so when it's a mythical city like Detroit and your film tries to confront the myth.

## Part 2

It is not difficult to recognize the habitus from which the hostility turning up on the website arises. Its ideological roots are similar to the call made a few weeks earlier in Britain for the BBC to cancel the transmission of *Jerry Springer: The Opera* on grounds of blasphemy, or the demand from certain Tory circles for the suspension until after the general election of another BBC programme, a television play about the 1984 miners strike, which the protestors suppose will be politically prejudicial. These responses arise from a fear of representation, of the exposure to ridicule of an object of attachment, or the rehearsal of a 'bad object' in the case of the miners strike. What is it about the strike that the Tories do not wish to remember? Or in our case, what does the putative image of the city show that these responses wish to deny?

A contributor to the website forum charges us, without yet having seen the film, of 'breezing into town as a tourist with a camera around their neck' - this looks like xenophobia, pure and simple. Lowell himself

uses the word when we meet up at the premiere. We are struck by the difference between these responses and those of the Detroiters we met while making the film, who showed no such knee-jerk reactions. On the contrary, several of the participants in the film are people who approached us while we were filming on the streets, and on learning what we were about, were eager to have their say - on several occasions they launched into their rap before I even had a chance to focus the camera.

The question of tourism that popped up on the website forum in the shape of an emotional outburst, unwittingly goes to the heart of the problematic of documentary representation. To put it crudely, the content may be real - that is, a veridical representation of external reality - but whose point of view is it? The question has particular force in the case of a city film, because of course it makes a difference whether the film-maker knows the city from the inside, or arrives as an outsider, a stranger. What the xenophobe fails to allow is the validity of the stranger's perspective, and the representation of what the other sees. Behind this rejection is the fear that what others say *may turn out to be true*.

The documentary audience has a tendency to divide into believers and doubters. For believers, the image is transparent, what you see is what you get, and a documentary is only classed as subjective when they disagree with it. For doubters, the claim of objectivity is no longer fully to be credited, as if objectivity is no longer what it used to be, but rather another form of subjectivity. If both these positions are problematic, the mistake is in the conventional wisdom that objectivity and subjectivity are necessarily opposed, since in fact both are bound to be present in the mode of documentary at the same time: the world portrayed is real enough but the portrayal is the result of filmic decisions and thus subjective. This is one of the things that, one way or another, much new wave documentary wants to insist on.

Living in the city you are filming, or visiting: each has its advantages and disadvantages. But either way, the film-maker has to create a cognitive map of the city on the screen, a way of moving around it, which makes sense of it whether the viewer knows the city or not. We ourselves were anxious from the beginning to cast the film in a form that marked our own concern with the questions of perspective and framing in a discursive as well as visual sense. On the visual level, we were concerned with how to film the ruins without aestheticising them. On the discursive level, our solution to the tourism problem, which we anticipated from very early on, was to acknowledge and foreground our activity as visitors - to stage our act of visiting the city (which is why we called the film in our publicity 'a documentary road movie'). Indeed the film interweaves different journeys we take back and forth around and across Detroit with different people, filming in and from the cars we're driving. Now it's true that in many cities in the United States you can practically only get around by car, because public transport is extremely poor or virtually non-existent. But in Detroit, because this is Motor City, this necessity and this absence becomes symbolic, all the more so when you begin to understand the ways in which the city and the automobile interact, some of which are traced in the film.

### Part 3

Our film belongs to a documentary tradition which goes back to the 1920s and what are known as the 'city films', evocations of cities (such as Ruttmann's Berlin, Vertov's composite Soviet metropolis, Cavalcanti's Paris, Ivens' Amsterdam, Vigo's Nice) that provide one of the original genres of documentary cinema. In researching our own city film, we discovered that you can add to the classic titles a series of films about American cities, including *Dynamic Detroit*, dating from 1921, with Henry Ford as their intellectual (or ideological) author - films made by the Ford Motor Company and issued as part of the Ford Educational Library.

The city films of the 1920s are very different from each other, not only because they each have their own style or aesthetic strategy, but also because the cities are different, and the scenario of a city film must arise from the chosen city itself. The biggest difference, however, between making a city film in the 1920s and making one now is not just the benefits of digital video as against silent 35mm film cameras, but also that 80 years later there are extensive audio-visual archives, especially, as it happens, in the case of Detroit. Historical images of Detroit are rolled up in thousands of feet of film to be found, first of all, in the national film archives in Washington, where they were deposited by the Ford Motor Company. Also in a number of films held in collections like those of MOMA in New York and the Walter Reuther Library in Detroit itself; including a 1932 newsreel about the hunger march on Ford's River Rouge plant made by the Workers Film and Photo League, and then seven years later, a film by the Union of Auto Workers on the great strike of 1939 against General Motors. Important bits of the city's post-war history are filed away in television newsreel libraries like ITN in London. We've used all these sources. (There are also other films for which we could not find room, or in some cases we could not get the rights.)

Bringing these together, as we have done here, one of the stories they tell is that of a battle of representation which began when Ford instructed his advertising department to start making films back in 1914, encouraged by his friend Thomas Edison. The battle extends far beyond the material we have included, to the Hollywood movies discussed in the film by Dan Georgakas, a writer returning to visit the city where he grew up, who observes that in movies like *Blue Collar*, *Robocop*, *Eight Mile* and so forth, Detroit has been persistently trashed. We did not include clips from these films because our budget was much too small. The great thing about the Ford films is that being in the public domain, there are no huge rights to pay.

What struck us in this range of material is what Dan expresses very simply, that film-making in Detroit was partly a response to the Ford Company films and the kind of image they projected, just as nationally, union and political film making on the left was a response to Hollywood's refusal to make films on subjects like labour and politics. One of the things we wanted to do was to recover the memory of this activity, which Dan calls 'the best of the American radical tradition'. In the historical documentaries about Detroit made for American public television and widely used in college education, and which we viewed as part of our archive

research, this tradition is suppressed - they borrow the images without saying where they came from. For us, this was a critical part of the story we had to tell, and it involves a critique of conventional usage.

#### Part 4

After a press show (15 March 2005, in the beautiful big auditorium at the Detroit Institute of Arts), the local media takes up the film as a news story, following the lead of the Detroit Free Press, which runs it on the front page of the local news section under the headline 'A CRITICAL LOOK AT DETROIT: 2 filmmakers team up to scrutinize the city block by block'.<sup>2</sup> Over the next three days, we do several interviews for local radio and television (including the local network affiliates of Fox, NBC and ABC - the last of them live in the studio for the seven o'clock news). The reporters are polite (even the fellow from Fox) although one or two of them cannot help asking straight up if we aren't just indulging in Detroit-bashing (but it was us who were getting bashed on Lowell's website).

The result is that come the day and around a thousand people turn up for one free screening in an auditorium seating about 300, and arrangements are hastily made for additional screenings. This is impressive, and suggests that despite the massive dominance of the escapist and fantasy-laden commercial values of contemporary Hollywood cinema, nonetheless, American culture, even in the broad interior of the country, sustains a regard for the screen which goes beyond mere entertainment, to connect with everyday reality. The overall impression I take away is that these must be the kinds of people who comprise the new-found audience for documentary in the cinema: a motley of folk from all walks of life. Except that African Americans are sparse, at least partly for reasons contained in the film: too far to go just to see a movie if you have to rely on bad public transport.

Is this audience a new phenomenon discovered with the return of documentary to the cinema? At all events, this kind of interest in the film affirms one of the reasons for making it: to demonstrate the viability of digital documentary, with its reduced production costs, and supported by the infrastructure of the university itself as a base of operations, for purposes of public education, aimed at both the campus circuit and the community beyond it. The point is to make the kind of documentary that is virtually impossible to make for television, certainly nowadays, and thereby to occupy a space between the esoteric discourse of academia and the populist discourse of the media. This kind of film will have a different relationship to the audience precisely to the extent that it discards the ruling model of the television documentary, for example by eschewing a conventional commentary, with its neatly packaged and authoritarian interpretations of the image. Indeed 'Detroit' also dispenses with a linear narrative, and switches between different speakers without imposing a hierarchy of authority on them. The viewer is invited to watch montages of historical images without someone telling them how they should be read (guided only by Michael Nyman's masterful music) or worse, they are confronted with ruptures and breaks in the aesthetic surface where the viewer is required to do their own thinking in order to make connections.

2 Youssef, Nancy (2005), 'A Critical Look at Detroit: 2 filmmakers team up to scrutinize the city block by block', *Detroit Free Press*, 16 March, [www.freep.com/news/locway/ruins16e\\_20050316.htm](http://www.freep.com/news/locway/ruins16e_20050316.htm). Accessed 28 September 2005.

- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Lawson, Terry (2005), "Detroit: Ruin of a City": Academic pretensions without a coherent point', *Detroit Free Press*, 18 March.

From the postings on Lowell's website after the premiere, it seems that a number of viewers - doubtless those less schooled in the inventiveness of new wave documentary - find it all a tad disorienting, but you cannot be sure, reading the postings, that it is not really the content which dismays them.

Sad to say, this also sometimes applies to film reviewers. The report in the *Detroit Free Press*, written by a staff writer who had just come back from a tour of duty in Baghdad, provided a very fair account of the film as 'a critical examination of how Detroit has gone from one of the world's greatest industrial centres to a city increasingly known around the world - especially in academia - as perhaps the best case study of urban decline.'<sup>3</sup> However, the review by the *Detroit Free Press* film critic that appears on the day of the screening is a different kettle of fish. Headlined 'Academic pretensions without a coherent point', this is more like what you would expect from the populist, timorous and politically subservient local press.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the account of the film is wildly inaccurate, casting doubt on the reviewer's competence as a film critic. When he writes that 'The filmmakers dispense with chronology in favor of an impressionistic road movie, which means they drive around Detroit with various experts looking at decay and commenting on it', he fails to notice that the history of the city, told through archive footage which is interspersed with the road sequences, is indeed presented chronologically - whereas this is something no audience misses, and they sometimes ask why we stopped after the 1967 riots. Lastly, he also distorts and misrepresents what people say in the film, betraying tendentious deafness not only to the film but also what Detroiters on the streets in the film are actually saying. (Advice to the editor of the *Detroit Free Press*: send your film critic out onto the streets as a reporter, and give your reporter the job of film critic.)

Lowell himself, who admits that in places he finds it disjointed, nevertheless sees it as a metaphor: 'it was as if the film makers, when they assembled all their footage, found themselves staring at that immense Gordian knot we all know and love as Detroit, the knot that we have all struggled to understand and to untie' (detroityes.com). The film is about how the knot got tied, how it became more and more tangled, and especially in the art and figure of Tyree Guyton, the feeling of those who are trapped inside the knot. Lowell's reading of the film is all the more remarkable because it is extremely rare to have such a considered response from one of the subjects of a documentary. And it is due to the potential for the Internet to create a new circuit of public discussion not just globally, in the form of virtual communities, but also at the level of real geographical localities.

The misrepresentation of the mass media does not faze me - it is only to be expected, and is ideologically transparent anyway. Much more testing is the encounter with the audience, which at the premiere is overwhelmingly white, young, socially mixed, and only partly composed of university students. Many of those I overhear as they come out at the end, and several who come up and talk to us, are Detroiters who have driven out to Ann Arbor to see the film, including a young white man who drives a local delivery truck who did not like it, a middle-aged black artist who did, an

elderly Jewish doctor who treated the riot victims of 1967, who has brought his wife and son, but monopolised the conversation with his own rather random reflections. The young truck driver found the film very uncomfortable; he was disturbed by its negative image of the city, and could not identify with the African American viewpoint. By contrast, the artist thought the film hit the nail on the head. The Jewish doctor was curiously, and perhaps characteristically, ambivalent. I recognize the type; he is the same generation as my eldest brother, and occupies a similar habitus; he did not doubt that the version told in the film was true, and his cultural heritage led him to sympathize with the oppressed, but his white professional social identity took its distance. In short, these are individual responses but also representative positions in the complex interaction between race and class in a place where this interaction has been particularly intense.

Brief encounters like these tell the film-maker that the film is doing its work, provoking responses that of course are also subjective, because they depend on the viewer's social positioning and emotional disposition, which are both shaped by external and contextual influences. (The problem with the institutional form of documentary, which constantly tells you what to think, is that it has the effect of denying the viewer's subjectivity.) The only disturbing thing in this is the appearance of certain misreadings that are hardly innocent. Of these, perhaps the most striking is the criticism, in the words of one correspondent, of 'the racist undertones of the French professor, who even went so far as to comment that the city wouldn't be the way it was if [it] were a "city of 1 million whites"'. This rapidly elicits several replies that counter that this is to miss the point - the comment referred to institutional racism at work. It is worth quoting one of these replies, to get the flavour of the debate:

If you don't see that, take off the goddamn rose coloured goggles ya got on! You seriously think Detroit would have seen the abandonment had whites not left? ... Had the city stayed majority white, there wouldn't be this huge pissing match between the city and suburbs. This comment isn't insinuating that blacks ruined the city, it is suggesting that whites are responsible for its ruins for leaving. Detroit gets shit on at the state and federal level because it's a black city. Detroit is constantly targeted for negative news in the nation's spotlight because of this. I find it amazing that you can't see the continued racism this region deals with to this day because of white flight.

Another of these replies is by Lowell himself, who modestly calls the said sociologist, Loïc Wacquant, the film's 'true star', describing him as 'alternately charming, embarrassingly naïve, totally correct and insensitive'. For others, however, Loïc's role in the film is simply that of fall guy, and xenophobia rears its head again in comments to the effect that 'we don't need to take any notice of a foreign intellectual' or 'that may be true in Europe but this is the USA'.

This is to miss the point of the dialogue that runs through the film on the soundtrack between the two of us who are making it, an American sociologist and an English videographer. In this perspective, in which

5 It is also reported that downloading movies, television programmes and music, mostly for free, using a program called BitTorrent, accounts for one-third of all Internet traffic.

Loïc's point of view as a European frequently coincided with my own, there are moments when he becomes my surrogate, especially when he expresses my own responses the first time I visited Detroit, but which I did not articulate verbally at the time because I was filming. To scapegoat Loïc is a displacement of the negative onto the otherness of the foreigner, and in this way symptomatic of a certain denial.

To approach this another way, we are often questioned about things that according to the questioner's perspective are missing from the film. This is always a liability in making a city film. At the same time certain aspects of the film are ignored, and when this is repeated from one screening to another, it calls for a symptomatic reading. What is being denied is perhaps most clearly signalled by the difference in the film's reception at home and abroad. Obviously the audience at the screenings we've held in England is coming to see the film for different reasons, not to see an image of their own habitat but to feed their interest in contemporary urban mythology. Right from the start, and with only a few exceptions, what they see of the way Detroit appears is something they are unprepared for. The way they read the film by the end is as a study in American capitalism, and the way that American capitalism rules through racism. Above all, perhaps, they see a view of the United States that, though hardly flattering, is not 'anti-American', but simply punctures its hegemonic image as richest-and-most-advanced-country-in-the-world.

## Part 5

The biggest irony in making a film about Detroit and then going to show it there is the question of where. In Detroit proper, there are practically no cinemas because, as we show in the film, they have closed down - some stand empty; one, the Michigan Theater, has been turned into a makeshift multi-storey car park. There are almost no commercial venues, and none at all downtown. Academic and community venues are nowadays often equipped with DVD projection, though not always of very high quality. To ensure the best possible projection, we have to hire a professional videotape deck and take it along to plug in.

This is part of the dilemma of producing digital documentaries. Theatrical distribution is almost impossible unless the video is transferred to 35mm film. This can now be done very effectively, but it's also expensive: in our case, it would be something like double the cost of producing the film in the first place. The independent producer, academic or otherwise, can rarely afford to do this, and therefore needs a distributor. But finding a distributor means entering a marketplace where established practices are breaking down precisely because digital video introduces new channels of distribution. According to recent reports, DVD sales in countries like the United States and United Kingdom are beginning to outstrip cinema admissions, and it turns out that the benefits are not limited to the likes of Blockbuster. The growing circulation of DVDs that can be easily purchased over the Internet has also benefited independent production, including documentary.<sup>5</sup> A few big successes have raised the stakes, and there are now more feature documentaries entering the cinema than ever before - and even more turning up at film festivals without achieving



the goal of cinema distribution. In some places, exhibition practices are slowly beginning to change, as smaller art houses install video projection, which although this only reaches a small circuit, hugely reduces the costs of distribution. But the main attraction remains the DVD's potential for reaching large numbers with low cost distribution. What constitutes 'large numbers' is relative, however, and the profile of independent documentary is that of the 'niche market'. But this opens the door to a radical departure in the circulation of films and videos of many different types, a break in the *modus operandi* of the old film industry dominated by the corporate studio-distributor axis; in short, the emergence of small-scale operators using the Internet for direct sales.

6 *Cineaste*, Vol. 30: 3, Summer 2005: Thom Andersen on p. 32, Pat Aufderheide on p. 27.

This might seem insignificant compared to the commercial mass market, but it clearly plays a vital social role in a public sphere denuded and distorted by the anti-democratic drive of the mass media, what theorist Jürgen Habermas calls the pseudo-public sphere. In this perspective it is striking that a number of the biggest recent documentary successes are explicitly political, while others carry strong political subtexts. Indeed a powerful stream of independent documentaries has appeared - Moore is only the most prominent of these film-makers; other important titles include *Outfoxed*, *Unconstitutional*, *Supersize Me*, *The Yes Men*, etc. - that critique the neoliberal hegemony and thereby act as the contestation of authority and catalysts of debate. It is particularly notable that this is happening in the United States, where the mass media are the most thoroughly dominated by corporate interests and disciplined into promoting the Republican cause. A good part of the new documentary audience represents a growing constituency of resisters. In a discussion of the documentary phenomenon in a recent issue of the independent film magazine *Cineaste*, one contributor suggested 'three negative reasons for the current popularity of political documentary - Bush, Hollywood and television', and another reports that when Morgan Spurlock, the director of *Supersize Me*, told a festival audience, 'We live in a world where independent documentary film has truly become the last bastion of free speech', he won a round of applause from a packed house.<sup>6</sup>

In this volatile context, the experience of bringing Detroit to the screen is an experiment (that has not yet run its course because at the moment of writing the DVD has not yet been published) that says something about the relation between subject and locality. There is a dialectic long observed by theorists of globalisation, in which globalisation produces the assertion of local identities in response. A parallel dialectic in the dynamics of new wave documentary is obscured by the domination of international theatrical distribution by the United States, which gives their own producers, even political dissidents, a strong international advantage, and conversely, means that very few films from other sources achieve the same foreign distribution. But the discourse of documentary is always rooted in the particular and the local, in actual geographical vicinities (or nearly always, but especially so in the case of a city film). The act of representation brings this portrayal to the distant observer, and this has always been true. In the new distribution practices that belong to the virtual world of the Internet, this promises direct access to a potentially global audience, but this is not

necessarily the driving force of the movement. If the return of documentary to the big screen is a worldwide phenomenon, the primary social motivation is just as likely to be found in the domestic public sphere. *Fahrenheit 9/11* had a worldwide audience, but the effect that Moore was looking for was on the elections at home. Meanwhile, *Detroit: Ruin of a City* has only just begun to spread abroad, mainly through screenings at academic conferences, but around Detroit itself, it has already begun to stimulate audiences to fresh reflection on the global dynamic which lies behind the local situation.

#### **Further Information**

Further information and contacts for sales and exhibition enquiries is available at the film's website: <http://humanities.uwe.ac.uk/bristoldocs/detroit>.

#### **Suggested citation**

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