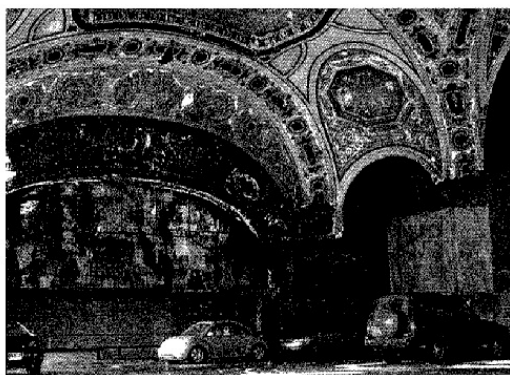


DON'T FORGET THE MOTOR CITY

By Pepe Petos



Detroit: *Ruin of a City* is a journey through time and space. Called a documentary road movie by the filmmakers, it takes you in and out of the city and its history, chronicling how the metropolis grew with the car and the automobile industry.

The prologue sets a sinister mood for what is to come, using images of burning houses, cars and businesses from 'Devil's Night'. These occurrences, at the end of October virtually every year, are suspected to be in part due to businesses seeking to avoid bankruptcy through insurance claims. However, this kind of destruction is far from having a singular cause. The film shows houses crumbling into fragments, abandoned neighbourhoods and incompetence from the authorities. Sprayed with white paint on a forsaken window is the statement Chanan and Steinmetz subtly use throughout the film: 'Question the Media.'

Deconstructing the city's history through Fordism and Post-Fordism, and using images from the Ford Motor Company's own archive, we see how Detroit became the U.S.' fourth largest city and the home of the first freeway; a blue collar work haven that paid the highest wages to factory workers. It was also the first big city to elect a black mayor. However, the freeway led to a defunct bus service that no longer served its residents; the high wages to a presumption that workers were owned and easily disposable; and the work haven became an insecure and treacherous job market. This Chaplinesque

real life version of *Modern Times* soon reveals itself as the highly alienated environment of René Clair's *À Nous la Liberté*, which prompted the city revolts precluded in Lang's *Metropolis*.

Unlike neighbouring Flint, where there had been a try-and-fail-and-try-again attitude to generating interest for white money and investors, Detroit's majority black population has no 'Michael Moore' campaigning heroes to speak on its behalf. That said, the fictional Detroit doesn't fare any better. Its depiction in Hollywood films is of a place where a person who can afford a new pair of trainers will walk away to escape a violent and doomed city with no prospects.

This convenient demonisation of Detroit's poverty-ridden population is also exposed and explored in Chanan and Steinmetz's film. For example, pedestrian road bridges were initially caged off because the local government thought its citizenry were throwing stones at cars. Subsequently, it was discovered that the stones came from the bridges' own slowly crumbling structures.

Perhaps a film that portrays a million inhabitants in a consumptive city where all but one of the cinema palaces are 'progressed' into car parks might be grim. Far from it, *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; where trainers are tied to firmly rooted trees; where incompetent council planners can be ousted and people can transform run-down hotels into museums. Where the departmentalised holes on the battlefields of capitalism can be used to grow seeds of collectivism. ▀

Detroit: Ruin of a City by Michael Chanan and George Steinmetz, with music by Michael Nyman (<http://humanities.uwe.ac.uk/bristoldocs/detroit/>).

Pepe Petos is about to start a PhD on Documentary at Brunel University. He is also making a film on the history of The Other Cinema.