Detroit in Crisis: Baudrillard, Benjamin, and the Limits of Misrepresenting a City

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Abstract

Detroit in Crisis: Baudrillard, Benjamin, and the Limits of Misrepresenting a City

In 2013, Detroit became the largest municipality in the United States to ever file for Chapter 9 bankruptcy. To date, news coverage of the bankruptcy has relied on older tropes of poverty and failure that have been synonymous with the city for decades. My thesis takes the bankruptcy as a starting point to explore what has happened to everyday life amidst the proliferation of sensational media claiming to depict Detroit. In Chapter 1, I address how the official justification for the bankruptcy, far from a sober look at the city's finances, invites emotional responses to the state of the city in the absence of more disruptive political actions. In Chapter 2, I use Walter Benjamin's theorization of allegory to explore how mass-circulated images of Detroit's buildings depict the city as dead, effectively sanctioning the continued mistreatment of city residents while opening Detroit to more lucrative enterprises. In Chapter 3, after having established that so many representations of Detroit do not in fact perform the task of re-presenting an underlying reality, I follow the work of Jean Baudrillard to understand the stakes of a shifting relationship between reality and representation in the city's media and economy.

Résumé

Détroit en crise: Baudrillard, Benjamin et les limites de la fausse représentation d'une ville

En 2013, Détroit devint la plus grande municipalité des États-Unis à déclarer faillite en vertu du 9e chapitre. Jusqu'à date, la couverture médiatique de cette faillite a été basée sur les anciennes tropes de pauvreté et de défaite si souvent utilisées lors des dernières décennies pour faire référence à Détroit. Ma thèse prend cette faillite en tant que point de départ pour explorer les changements à la vie quotidienne lors de la prolifération des reportages sensationnels dans les média prétendant dépeindre Détroit. Dans le premier chapitre, je traite des manières dont la justification officielle pour la faillite, loin d'utiliser sobrement l'état des finances de la ville, invite des réponses émotionnelles par rapport à l'état de la ville où des actions politiques plus perturbatrices sont absentes. Dans le deuxième chapitre, j'utilise la théorisation de l'allégorie de Walter Benjamin pour explorer comment les images des édifices de Détroit diffusées à très gros tirage dépeignent la ville en tant que morte et par conséquence authorisent avec succès la maltraitance des résidents de la ville tout en permettant aux entreprises plus lucratives d'avoir accès à Détroit. Dans le troisième chapitre, après avoir établi que plusieurs représentations de Détroit ne servent pas à re-présentrer la réalité, je m'inspire de l'œuvre de Baudrillard pour comprendre les enjeux d'une relation changeante entre la réalité et la représentation médiatique et financière d'une ville.

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Introduction: Capitalist Time in Detroit

The predominant message in images of contemporary Detroit depicting the largest municipal bankruptcy in American history is that the city is dead. Or, if not completely dead, in the last throes of its soon to be former life as the quintessential land of (American) opportunity; the Fordism that provided the Detroit working classes with a previously unimaginable degree of economic enfranchisement a century ago has dissipated. The glamour of Detroit as a sin city during prohibition evolved into a utopia of stability and security for workers in the postwar period only to be progressively undone through the toll the next half century would take. Even though the city's decline is overwhelmed with images of deprivation that suggest a sensational problem, knowing that current images communicate a heretofore unknown intensity of Detroit's crisis both in terms of content and breadth allows the contemporary historian to rewrite the past, re-characterizing all the *ends* that came before as nothing more dramatic than moments in the narrative that promises to bury the city.

Conversely, while it is undeniable that Detroit has shrunk considerably since the 1950s (although census data is unreliable due to the difficulties of measuring a population that is as spread out, mobile, and justifiably contemptuous of a government that promises improvements only to follow through with austerity; the population is quite possibly larger than the latest estimate of 700,000), the city is home to institutions and new enterprises alike that are the envy of comparably sized municipalities: the Detroit Institute of the Arts remains one of the premiere collections in the country; Wayne State University continues to churn out respectable degrees; and both the Red Wings and the Tigers produce massive profits. In this light, capitalism is alive

and well, it attributes any discomfort experienced by the city's residents to individual shortcomings and the excesses of a century old labour movement. Even closer to the ground, food activists are moving to the city en masse to build urban gardens made possible by the strange mix of available infrastructure, cheap land, and the truism that a garden is better than an empty house.

In much of the media that takes Detroit as an object, there is an intensity that exceeds the sum of the intelligible components in any given rendering of the city. Looking at an image of one of Detroit's many crumbling monuments, the intensity registers on the skin. 'Majesty,' 'gravity,' 'awe,' and 'grief,' used alone or in combination, all fail as descriptors to capture the full force of the image. For Brian Massumi, the excess that cannot be reduced to emotion (or, rather, changes form once it is fixed as an emotion) is *affect* (34-35). In Detroit, the affect that transcends the images of decaying buildings, is also present in news reporting, political statements, and advertising. When those orchestrating the bankruptcy communicate variations on the theme of Detroit's disastrous state, the intensity of their claims surpasses the content of what they are saying (sometimes overpowering the content) to instill a sense that the city is on the brink of something momentous. The content of the momentous shift is less important than its ability to mesmerize. Whether through an ultimate end or the promise of a miraculous comeback, affect escapes the neatness of either narrative and forms a feedback loop where intense feelings about the fate of the city engender more intense feelings instead of disruptions that seek to engage nearly unlivable lives on material grounds.

In the hands of those broadcasting the crisis as well as the eyes of those watching the city tumble forwards, Detroit is variously 'dead,' 'dying,' and 'rejuvenating.' Images of Detroit in

decay or empty tilt the scales towards the more macabre of these possibilities. When it comes to forming a definitive judgment of the city's status, each framing stands more or less discrete. Imagining the city in its final steps towards obsolescence means conceiving of instances of vitality as aberrations. By the same token, the rejuvenation paradigm, with a myopic focus on the parts of Detroit that venture capitalists are remaking, relegates the city's deterioration to the past. Any possibility of rebutting the logic of austerity that has only intensified since the city filed for bankruptcy is limited by the scarcity of available ways of perceiving the city: if Detroit is not dead, then it is thriving. Those resisting the policies of the bankruptcy's architects are limited to answering the polemics over a sick Detroit with a similarly contrived vital one.

For Harry Harootunian, capitalist time is distinct from national time. Where national time revolves with each calendar year through the repetition of annual statutory holidays, capitalist time compounds disparate modes of production (disparate modes of everyday life) and packages the ensuing conglomeration as a sleek, homogeneous modernity. According to Harootunian "the time of capital is more complex; it presents a smooth, unbroken surface that resembles national time, yet it also works to unify immense temporal irregularities—uneven time—in the sphere of production, circulation, and distribution—thus totalizing the various temporal processes resulting from the division of labor" (472). The flow of capital through unique environments is facilitated by the immediacy of capitalist time; capital is free to exploit the spoils of specific modes of production without hitting the barriers that would otherwise slow movement from one temporality into another. Just as the polished surface of capitalist time facilitates rapid circulation through its ability to collapse distance (broadly figured), it "situates the global at the level of the everyday and local, unsettling and segregating it into heterogeneous units" (Harootunian, 472).

By virtue of its aggregate composition, the eventual form taken by the culminating/ reduced surface of capitalist time performs its function while maintaining whatever appearance is most expedient. The image of the microsecond time of Dubai, New York, Tokyo, and a host of other cities is made through firm associations between the cities' near invincible expansion, the elite brackets of the populations, and technological and cultural achievements. Brand new billion dollar apartment buildings, the image of resident financiers employing the latest software that grants the decisive micro advantage that is beyond those less enlightened, 'free' access to the internet from within the city limits, and doing the world the service of providing the grounds for I. M. Pei's latest work, both justify and constitute a city's integrity within capitalist time. However a city articulates itself to capitalist time is secondary to the function of its status in that mode. In other words, cities are modalities of a mode of capitalist functioning. Whether New York's capitalist time takes Wall Street, gentrification in Brooklyn, or the World Trade Center as its face, each has ample capacity to absorb and emulsify the material discrepancies that pervade the city, generating one homogeneous surface. Despite images and statements proclaiming Detroit's anachronistic capitalism, the time of capital in Detroit is in the same register as other major urban cities.[1] What distinguishes the time of capital in Detroit on a superficial level is the conflict between the city's need to assert its place in the same time as New York to the east and Chicago to the west and countless media detailing the city's collapse. Although Detroit may lack the same material from which appropriate, present symbols of modernity might be harvested, Detroit need not fear expulsion from capitalist time. The infrastructural and architectural decay

1 Today, Charlotte, Indianapolis, Columbus, and Jacksonville are all home to larger populations than Detroit. Nonetheless, Detroit has a privileged status within the American imaginary. Despite its relative smallness and due in large part to the role it played as the vanguard of American industrial capitalism, Detroit remains a more significant site of national identity formation and American history than more populated cities.

that have come to serve as a short hand for the city, though far cries from the conventional images of success that play the same role in New York, coalesce Detroit's times. In other modern cities, images of modernity are obvious as such. Economic and social disparity is present in all cities, what makes Detroit unique is how it can continue to exist in the time of capital while being the object of a media frenzy bent on pronouncing the city's death or, in other words, its fall out of capitalist time.

For critics to engage the sensationalization of the city within representation would, in effect, be to attempt to resist the veneer of the time of capital without addressing the flows of capital between different modes of production, circulation, and distribution. Whether Detroit is dying or rejuvenating, impoverished residents face living conditions that are built on exploitation that predates and prefigures the crisis. My goal is not to counter pronouncements of Detroit's obsolescence with evidence of its perseverance but rather to understand how accepting the terms of that distinction will continue to produce crises.

Chapter 1 examines the official justification for Detroit's present insolvency. The statements of politicians and policy makers, along with other media, build a narrative that, on the surface, blames Detroit's decline on fiscal irresponsibility at municipal and individual levels. Behind the thin mask of governmental failure is the more potent accusation that the city's prosperity left with the white residents when Detroit became *overrun* with black people, starting in the 1950s. Under the weight of this distorted view of history, those watching Detroit's insolvency unfold are invited to feel bad about the city's past and present, while attributing Detroit's ills to the ineptitude of the increasingly black population. For those watching the crisis, the poverty and suffering that pervade the city are both tragic and the result of residents' inability

to manage themselves and their city. Regulatory power both ensures that the blame for the crisis rests on individuals who are unable to successfully negotiate the flows of capital and encourages onlookers to pity the sufferers without implicating themselves beyond their feelings of pity. In neoliberalism, white power is disavowed as a historical and structural force and is replaced by the thin veneer of responsible self-management, detached from any historical disparity, that guarantees success in capital for some while ensuring it remains elusive for others. The official narrative of the insolvency is a problem not because a truer account of the bankruptcy exists but because the architects of the bankruptcy themselves belong within histories of race and class subjugation—legacies with profound resonance in the city and nation.

Chapter 2 takes up the distinction between symbolic and allegorical interpretations of Detroit's architecture. Eschewing both the death knell and calls for revival, the enduring structural elements of monuments in Detroit indicate the city's perseverance without sensationalizing it. Working through Walter Benjamin's writing on allegory in the German *Trauerspiel* helps me distinguish surface decay in images of distressed buildings that have come to be synecdoches for Detroit from the endurance and strength of the structures that frame the corrosion. The dynamism of ever-changing piles of garbage distracts from architecture that has been static for decades; the illusion of rapid change masks evidence of the city's permanence. In their 2011 collection of images of decrepitude in Detroit, photographers and ruin enthusiasts Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre concentrate on filthy, fleeting surfaces at the exclusion of the quiet persistence of empty buildings. Like the discursive narrative that relies on spectacular catastrophe to evoke the sense of a general end to the city, images of deterioration that rely on even as they ignore the integrity of monumental buildings elicit a felt response that is akin to the

narratives in the previous chapter. In contrast to Marchand and Meffre's oeuvre, sociologist and photographer Camilo Jose Vergara takes a serialized approach to documenting Detroit. By photographing the same sites over decades, the sensationalism of Marchand and Meffre's photographs subsides revealing instead the relationship between monument and surrounding. Vergara's work wrests back traces of everyday life by refusing to be seduced by epic ends and the promise of rebirth.

After having shown how everyday life is distorted and ignored in the city's official history, politics, and architecture, Chapter 3 is concerned with understanding the relationship between everyday life and the representations that claim to document it. The chapter's objects are diverse: car commercials, a home renovation television show, and the marketing strategies employed by companies desperate to capitalize on the affect that continues to maintain Detroit's fame. The chapter works through the related concepts of Guy Debord's spectacle and Jean Baudrillard's hyperreal to challenge the extent to which the spheres of representation and everyday life are distinct. My intention is for the third chapter to present another look at the insights of the preceding two chapters to question the distance between media about Detroit and its audience.

Criticisms directed at distortions of everyday life run the risk of mistaking alternative accounts as truths by virtue of their opposition alone. In what follows, I have tried to avoid substituting one distortion for another. Rather than repeat the dubious gesture of exposing media that purports to be doing something it is not, I aim to take on the less familiar task of trying to understand the limitations of evaluating representations on the grounds of their veracity.

1. Economic Crisis and the Personalization of Affect

On December 3rd, 2013, federal Judge Steven Rhodes accepted Detroit's Chapter 9 bankruptcy filing. The bankruptcy was filed by Kevyn Orr, the Emergency Manager appointed by Michigan's Governor, Rick Snyder, on March 25th. Detroit's insolvency (or, depending on political motivations, the cash flow crisis[2]) and the city's unique position as both an American metropolis and an object of voyeuristic national attention place the city at the forefront of debates around disparity in the United States. How is it possible for Manhattan to be remade time and again while Detroit shrinks and disintegrates? The problem cannot be a national lack of wealth. There are many ways of explaining Detroit's insolvency; colonization, boom and bust economics, labour organizing, and racial subjugation all come to mind as worthwhile paradigms. At the moment of the bankruptcy, a moment when we might be able to identify an official response to poverty and living conditions that do not fit within the United States' self-image, it is important to reflect on where, after a history rife with hostility towards poor people, any relief might come from: is relief tethered to the same machinery that created the crisis or does it provide a way out?

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2 Economist Wallace Turbeville explains "In a corporate bankruptcy, the judge takes stock of a company's total assets and liabilities because the company can be liquidated and all its assets sold to pay down its debts. However, municipal bankruptcies are inherently different because they do not contemplate the liquidation of a city. Municipal bankruptcies are about cash flow—a city's ability to match revenue against expenses so that it can pay its bills. Under Chapter 9 of the United States Bankruptcy Code, a municipality is eligible to file bankruptcy when it is unable to pay its debts as they come due. This means that Detroit is bankrupt not because of its outstanding debt, but because it is no longer bringing in enough revenue to cover its immediate expenses" (Turbeville, 1-2).

I am concerned with the conditions and techniques that permit those outside of Detroit to keep the city at arm's length. I want to understand the conditions that enable the kind of social disparity that is legible when the poverty in Detroit is contextualized within the wealth of the United States. At the risk of overstating a problem that is endemic to contemporary capitalism my contention is that the constructed barriers that separate poor people in Detroit from flows of capital also enclose the experiences and responses of those watching the crisis unfold from outside the city. The bankruptcy filing brought with it a surge in media coverage that is yet to subside. Even as more people come to know of the suffering that is taking place in the city (although not its history) material aid and more substantial interventions are as far away as ever. Emergency Medical Service response times continue to claim casualties (Abbey-Lambertz), almost as many city lights are burnt out as are operational (Reindl), and the city is starting to cut off the water and sewage 'services' to all homes and businesses whose accounts are more than 60 days past due—very nearly half of the total number of accounts (Guillen). Watching the insolvency, I find it hard to believe that the city's residents are at once residents of a bankrupt city and the world's most powerful nation-state.

At first glance, the official narrative of Detroit's insolvency appears to supplant marginalized accounts of the same history. By appointing a black lawyer as Emergency Manager, Governor Snyder, a white politician, sought to convince Detroiters and non-Detroiters alike that racism is no longer a salient concern in Detroit. Orr's blackness blurs the lines connecting racist governance with racist governors for, at the same time that it serves as a kind of authorization for the implementation of racially targeted initiatives, it makes it harder to accuse the government of anti-black racism. How can a black leader implement policies that have horrific and

disproportional consequences for black people? Orr's blackness is not only an individual characteristic but also a tool at the state's disposal. The general (although not absolute) conflation of blackness and poverty in Detroit gets pulled apart on the level of representation by the public power Orr holds. Because it is impossible to separate Orr from the state whose interests he represents, I run the risk of falling into one of the traps I will describe in greater length: scapegoating black people for the benefit of white people. The state machinery that brought Orr to power and that keeps him in place is the (mostly) white corporate and political establishment in the United States. Orr's allegiance to this institution becomes evident when we ask: Who benefits from the bankruptcy? Where Orr has affirmed time and again that pensions will be cut and continues to suggest that the Detroit Institute of Art's prized collection may be liquidated, the tax subsidies offered to corporate investors in Detroit's downtown core have gone unmentioned (Turbeville, 3). Orr's position at the helm of the bankruptcy proceedings is complex, hence the need to understand his identity in terms that are not solely reducible to white and black.[3]

By looking at the distortions that have taken place in between social history and contemporary representation, one of my goals in this chapter is not only to refute but also to contextualize the official narrative that sees Detroit's present situation as either inevitable or somehow caused by the city's more precarious residents. Thankfully, critical economists have already been challenging the intricacies of the Chapter 9 filing and its possible causes in Detroit. My training is such that I will be unable to offer much in the way of insightful commentary

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3 Although Orr is part of a long history of black conservatives, seeing him uniquely in that light negates some of the specificity that is necessary for Detroit at its current juncture. As I will demonstrate, Orr's personal feelings and well-being are taken more seriously than the material living conditions of pensioners made precarious by the bankruptcy. This bizarre prioritization is more justifiable by virtue of Orr's blackness. My move to situate Orr as a part of a system dedicated to capitalist expansion to the detriment of huge swaths of Detroit's more vulnerable is a way of bracketing individualizing questions in order to elucidate the symbolic elements of the city's complex history that are about more than identity.

regarding the economic specificities of the bankruptcy and Detroit's financial position. Instead, my challenge to the bankruptcy takes place in a more symbolic register (concerning the images, narratives, and statements surrounding it): I am interested in the various media through which responses to Detroit are rendered impotent, unable to relieve the suffering that comes with poverty. As is evident in Orr's appointment as Emergency Manager, one obvious neutralizing element of the insolvency takes place within the field of representation. That is, accusations that the bankruptcy will target black people are pre-empted by the post-racist trope that is mobilized by the association of Orr's race with the symbolic power the Emergency Manager position carries with it. As a means to engage the official depiction of the city's descent into insolvency, I will situate the Detroit bankruptcy in the all too rich history of white people putting black people to death.

At least on the national stage, Detroiters are no longer depicted as in control of their city at all. When Snyder granted himself the power to appoint an Emergency Manager on December 29th, 2012, even formal municipal control of the city was moved outside of Detroit.[4] If Detroit natives no longer have the ability to determine how their city will run, to govern themselves, then the various formal political interventions that have dominated news media since Orr entered office, are without exception instances of outsiders stepping in to take control. In short, while a handful of key political players continue to vie for control of Detroit, the federal government and other major public and private sources of support for the struggling city have chosen to leave Detroit to its fate.

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4 Section 141.1552 of Michigan State Public Act 436 states that "Following appointment of an emergency manager and during the pendency of receivership, the governing body and the chief administrative officer of the local government shall not exercise any of the powers of those offices except as may be specifically authorized in writing by the emergency manager or as otherwise provided by this act and are subject to any conditions required by the emergency manager."

Predictably but nonetheless disappointingly, President Obama left it to Treasury Secretary Jack Lew to deliver the news that the Federal Government would not rescue Detroit. Ten days after the bankruptcy filing, in an interview on ABC, Lew said: "Detroit's economic problems have been a long time in developing. We stand with Detroit trying to work through how it approaches these issues…(but) when it comes to the questions between Detroit and its creditors, that's really something that Detroit is going to have to work out with its creditors." This statement is of profound significance in a city that watched the federal government spend several times more than Detroit's total debt to bail out GM and Chrysler. Putting aside what this statement says about the importance of working class pensions compared to the lush lifestyles of the auto industry elite, Lew's suggestion that the Federal Government is somehow both standing with Detroit while leaving the city to face its creditors alone deserves further analysis.

In her essay on Google Earth's role in broadcasting the Crisis in Darfur, Lisa Parks delivers an indicting critique against confusing voyeurism with more meaningful political action:

> The crisis in Darfur functions as an *archive of violent conflict that unfolded while being observed but without intervention.* It is an accumulation of information, a database of documents and images being used to represent and produce knowledge about a conflict site/sight that *could have been intervened in*. In this sense, the Crisis in Darfur is a visual display of the *past perfect subjunctive* and perhaps as much as anything it *exemplifies the power to see/know and not act.* (Parks, 540)

There are important differences between media surrounding Detroit's insolvency and the Crisis in Darfur. Representations of Detroit are mediated through Detroit's historical position as a key site of America's industrial might whereas media surrounding the Crisis in Darfur is often saturated

with more straightforward orientalism. However, the phenomenon that Parks names in Google's treatment of the Crisis in Darfur—misreading voyeurism as a kind of helpful intervention—shows up in the Federal Government's stance on Detroit. Before absolving the Federal Government of any kind of responsibility, Lew pays lip service to the hardships that Detroit's residents continue to endure. Notably, Parks' past perfect subjunctive resonates with Lew's passive voice when he references Detroit's economic problems. Like Parks' past perfect subjunctive, Lew's passive voice forecloses the possibility of understanding himself and the Federal Government as agents in perpetrating suffering in Detroit through policy and selective resource allocation. Instead of accepting a degree of responsibility and offering support in the face of economic insolvency and widespread poverty, the Federal Government tries to balance financially washing its hands of the problem with symbolically supporting the city. The Federal Government *stands with* Detroit only insofar as standing with the city does not involve any financial or other material commitment.

More than a stance isolated within the Federal Government, the joint call to symbolically stand with and to economically withdraw provides a model for how other non-Detroiters watching the city with concern might develop what they take to be a responsible, not a political, way of relating to the crisis. What does it mean for those exposed to representations of the city's dire insolvency to imagine themselves standing with Detroit? Like the Federal Government, when someone watching the crisis decides their personal stance will be one of emotional solidarity with the city, individual responses are limited to expressing and presenting the right emotion. The emptiness of this individualized solidarity defines the relationship between the body watching and the crisis—asserting an emotional connection to the city acknowledges the

crisis while situating the asserters as allies to the city without them doing anything to ease the pressure city residents are under. In light of the federal intervention that the city needs, knowing that the Obama administration is standing with Detroit provides little relief. Similarly, retired city workers who are faced with evaporating pensions will not benefit from anyone's warm wishes of solidarity unless that empathy can break out of an affective register and become the basis for resisting pension cuts (I will return to the question of the extent to which interdependencies built on vision and emotional recognition can be productive political tools at the end of the chapter). Just as institutions responsible for Detroit's crisis congratulate themselves on their symbolic solidarity while shirking the obligation to respond to the crisis with anything more than well wishes, individuals follow suit by expressing empathy without any broader grounding. Although Parks' past perfect subjunctive can explain the dominant mode of relating to the crisis in Detroit from outside, the reason the city declared bankruptcy is due to the involvement of select individuals and institutions.

In a press conference following Judge Rhodes' acceptance of the Chapter 9 bankruptcy filing on December 3rd, 2012, Orr said “One of the things we need to do is to recognize first and foremost that we’ve been marching our way here for 60 years, that’s two generations” (Dec. 3rd, 2013). This statement echoes comments made by Snyder six months before, on the day he announced he would support Orr in filing for bankruptcy on behalf of Detroit: “This is a situation that has been 60 years in the making in terms of the decline of Detroit.” Given that Snyder and Orr are the two most visible actors in the orchestration of the bankruptcy, their no doubt agreed upon timeframe for tracing the origins of Detroit's economic crisis is important insofar as it illuminates exactly what they consider to be root causes of the crisis and thus what they consider

logical focal points for intervention. By separating out the last 60 years from an urban history that includes racial segregation and some of the most significant labour organizing of the 20th century, Orr and Snyder imply that everything that came before the mid-1950s has not contributed to Detroit's current crisis.

By naming the mid-1950s as the origin of the citywide decline that would eventually end in bankruptcy, Snyder and Orr avoid the trap of explicitly saying what seems to be fuelling the vitriol that creeps up in other statements through implications and suggestions: namely, the blacker the city's population and government, the worse off the city is. I will return later to explore some of these more obviously charged characterizations in detail. For now, the question remains, why 60 years? From the standpoint of an oversimplified gross measure of total debt (a measure which is favoured by both Orr and Snyder; visible every time they cite the indefensible 18.5 billion dollars that Detroit supposedly owes its 100, 000 creditors [Turbeville, 11-12]) including adjustments for inflation, economic analysts Nathan Boney and John Gallagher cite Detroit's annual financial reports to show that the city's overall debt was in fact lower in the 1980s under Mayor Coleman Young than it ever was in the 1950s. Had Orr and Snyder wanted to attribute the causality of the bankruptcy to debt-run-amok, the timeline would have had to start closer to 2000 when, at least on Wall Street, Detroit was still considered a desirable and smart investment (Boney Gallagher). Orr and Snyder would have been well aware of these far from controversial or for that matter unavailable measurements; in other words, in the minds of its architects, Detroit's bankruptcy is not the result of 60 years of accumulated debt. Instead, by naming the mid-1950s as the beginning of the end of Detroit's solvency, Orr and Snyder see the roots of the problem as social and political, not economic.

Perhaps the definitive work on the history of Detroit in the latter half of the twentieth century is Thomas J. Sugrue's excellent monograph *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (1996). Sugrue offers a complex history of Detroit in which racial inequality and racial violence are not ignored, but instead treated as foundational components of the state of the city as it was when he was writing in the 1990s. In Sugrue's account, the 1950s are a key period because they mark the end of the prosperity Detroit enjoyed as a result of the wave of defence and manufacturing jobs from the Second World War as well as major shifts in the racial makeup of the city brought about by the combination of phasing out Jim Crow style municipal bylaws and the white supremacist beliefs of working class populations unwilling to live in segregated neighborhoods. Sugrue writes:

> Between 1940 and 1950, the number of census tracts in Detroit with more than five hundred blacks increased from 56 to 73; between 1950 and 1960, the number increased to 166. The impact of the movement out of the traditional ghetto was mixed. Between 1948 and 1960, black housing conditions in Detroit improved significantly. The number of blacks in substandard buildings (dilapidated buildings or those that lacked running water or indoor toilets) plummeted between 1950 and 1960 from 29.3 percent to only 10.3 percent, and the number of overcrowded residences fell from 25.3 percent to 17.5 percent. The reason for the decline was simple: blacks moved out of the oldest, most run-down sections of the city into newer neighborhoods, including some that contained some of Detroit's finest housing stock, that had been all-white through World War II. (185)

The 1950s brought the dawn of previously unimaginable upward social mobility for black residents heretofore deprived of desirable neighbourhoods and city services. “All but the most

liberal whites who lived along the city's racial frontier believed that they had only two options. They could flee, as vast numbers of white urbanites did, or they could hold their ground and fight" (Sugrue, 233). The violence perpetrated against new black residents in previously white-only neighbourhoods was relentless and brutal. Sugrue characterizes the organized white resistance to black citizens, which consisted of arson, harassment, and physical abuse, as "paramilitary" (246).

The 1950s in Detroit saw dramatic shifts of racial boundaries within the geography of the city. White residents, reading the changing racial makeup of their neighbourhoods as an attack on their own racial identities, "were unsuccessful in preventing the movement of blacks into many Detroit neighbourhoods, but their defensive measures succeeded in deepening the divide between two Detroits, one black and one white" (Sugrue, 234). Returning to Snyder and Orr's historicization of the bankruptcy, it is clear that the two men also do not see the origins of the bankruptcy in racism. Sugrue is careful to note that the racial inequality was not in essence new, but rather a different articulation of old bigotry. The new element in Detroit in the 1950s was the tension between the deeply held but less supportable Jim Crow beliefs and public and governmental shifts to less overtly white supremacist modes of racial segregation. Had Orr and Snyder wanted to discuss the racial dimensions of the origins of their bankruptcy, their timeline would have had to reach back to the racism that caused white Detroit residents to believe, first, that black migration into the city was a problem, and second, that the only acceptable white responses to the influx of black people in the city limits was to either create paramilitary forces to drive black residents away, or to run away themselves. By locating the origins of Detroit's insolvency in the 1950s, Orr and Snyder imply that the cause of the city's present problems is the

departure of working white people and the demographic shift from a predominantly white residency to a black residency. Snyder and Orr's historical gold standard of what a successful Detroit looks like is a city where affluent white people have the power to both control black labour and maintain segregated neighbourhoods, a model in which black people are denied services and forced to live on the margins. Snyder and Orr are grounded in this bias without ever acknowledging the racial component of the history leading to Detroit's insolvency.[5]

White people who had benefitted from racial segregation in the prosperous years before the 1950s grew more uncomfortable with the increased black presence. As the deindustrialization of the city created new jobs in surrounding rural areas that attracted white workers, the whites who remained in the city became less able to maintain the racial homogeneity of their neighbourhoods (Sugrue, 149). In other words, the bigoted white people who relocated to the suburbs jeopardized the whiteness of the previously exclusively white neighbourhoods they were leaving behind. Over time, as whiteness and economic stability leaked out of Detroit into the surrounding areas,[6] the political decision making power that was once consolidated in the city also moved to the suburbs. The flow of state-level administrative power out of Detroit is understandable: it followed corporate interests and the broader trend of deindustrialization and decentralization that started in the 1950s. As the white bigots fled from new black residents, they

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5 When an interviewer asked Orr if his efforts to consolidate and gentrify the city might be understood as an attempt to attract more affluent white people and, tacitly through economic barriers, to discourage poor people of colour from living in Detroit's better developed and better served areas, Orr asserted that what he is doing in Detroit is "Race-neutral" (Orr, 14 Mar. 2014). He had no answer for how the gentrification he is orchestrating will affect poor people. More troubling than Orr's firm belief that race and class are independent is his readiness to ignore the lives of current poor residents in favour of the capital promised by future, wealthier residents.

6 Although it is generally true that financial stability moved with white people from Detroit into the surrounding areas, there are exceptions, and, as one would expect, some suburbs and municipalities have fared far better than others. For a more in depth look at class, rather than race, in the industrial areas around Detroit, see Michael Moore's documentary *Roger and Me*.

took their controlling interests in the city of Detroit with them. Economic and political power did not change hands in Detroit. It was decentralized. Control of the powerful corporations in Detroit as well as control of the city's governance moved out of the downtown core and into the suburbs.

Sugrue's account is crucial because it provides a historical narrative that is nowhere to be found in the official story of Detroit's descent into insolvency. It is tempting to reduce the difference between Sugrue's and Orr's histories of the city to a distortion. Such a reduction would draw on the historical evidence Sugrue provides to discredit the official narrative. This line of inquiry would take the official narrative to be false and, through the discussion of true evidence, prove that the actions of officials and those watching are misinformed. The hope in levying this kind of resistance would be that, under the auspicious influence of better knowledge, officials and those watching would respond differently, stopping the perpetration of harms and addressing the core inequalities that significantly predate the current crisis. Although this misrepresentation model is persuasive (especially in the hope that it offers: if people were to understand the history of Detroit and the roots of the crisis, then the city's suffering would be eased), it is not able to address the fact that the social history of the city is widely available. Even if Orr, Snyder, and those who confuse political involvement with watching the crisis, have somehow failed to see the history that Sugrue details, an analysis that is limited to misrepresentation will still be insufficient because it cannot place Orr and the bankruptcy within the enduring power relations that continue to create the conditions guaranteeing the suffering of so many in the city. A distinction between representation and misrepresentation does not address how the official narrative has proved more effective than social history. Instead of a distinction between true and false presentations of the city, we might do better to treat each camp as constituting a distinct

structure of feeling.[7] We need not only attend to competing versions of history, but also understand why the purchase of one structure of feeling can render another impotent.

Snyder's intervention into municipal government in his role as Governor of Michigan is troubling in light of the tradition of white power and black subjugation. While architects see the bankruptcy as the only possible way out of a crisis (the result of half a century of citywide and individual mismanagement), for those who see continuity between segregation, white-flight, and the collapse of the city's economy, bankruptcy amounts to nothing more than the most recent manifestation of a history of domination and explotation. Snyder's intervention is consistent with the trend of white residents of Detroit trying to control the labour and lives of black people in the city through both centralized and decentralized governmental and corporate means. In creating the current incarnation of Emergency Manager in 2011, and again in 2012 after the Michigan electorate voted down the initial proposal, and appointing Orr in 2013, Snyder's actions in Detroit are a continuation of the old relationship of traditional white money telling the black residents of Detroit what is in their best interest. It is with these genealogies of race relations in mind that I wish to pursue the theme of twentieth century white supremacy beyond the situation in Michigan, and to situate Orr, Snyder, and the bankruptcy within a larger history of domination.

Amy Louise Wood's monograph, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America 1890-1940*, deals with the role of white spectators in lynching, in both real time and through various mediations. Her scholarship on lynching and spectatorship has provided an

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7 Raymond Williams is careful to point out that the boundaries of any particular structure of feeling are not only temporal but social (134-135). His illustrative example is the difference between the structures of feeling that emerged in different classes in England. Although the case of Detroit may not fit into the same conventional Marxist categories that Williams uses, the notion that differently constituted groups have incompatible ways of reading urban history and explaining the insolvency is vital. Through Williams, it becomes possible to contextualize different formations without getting lost in a true-false distinction.

opportunity (and a challenge) for students of media studies to engage with lynching's influence on representations of suffering and violence in different media instead of dismissing it as an ahistorical phenomenon or minimizing the influence these intense representations have had on how we understand distant suffering. In this section, through Wood's discussion of spectacle, I take lynching as an emblematic case of the exercise of sovereignty in order to trace the path of white power through the twentieth century's changes in social and subsequently governmental conditions. While I see connections between black death as a result of lynch mobs and black life under Orr's mandate, I also wish to signal a significant transformation in power that allows Snyder and Orr to mobilize similar rhetorical tools to exercise power over black people in new ways. By linking these two routinized forms of domination, my hope is to make clearer the specificity of the coercive racial agenda informing Orr and Snyder's characterizations of Detroit.

As Wood's book shows, the impact of representations of lynchings almost a century removed remains intense. Lynchings were public executions conducted under the sadistic supportive gaze of an eager audience, justified by concocted charges that allowed executioners to act with impunity. It is too easy to dismiss these events as aberrations. Casting lynchings as exceptional events repeats the much older problem of ignoring a system of domination by insisting on the isolation of its symptoms. W.E.B. Du Bois found himself facing the same problem in the aftermath of another historic atrocity perpetrated against black people by white people: slavery. Writing in 1903, some forty years after abolition in the United States, Du Bois was grappling with the question of why emancipation had failed to end the exploitation of black people at the hands of white people. Lynchings remain a legacy of this failure. Du Bois writes:

> He [a black person who is standing in for all black people] began to have a dim feeling that, to attain his place in the world, he must be himself, and not another. For the first time he sought to analyze the burden he bore upon his back, that dead-weight of social degradation partially masked behind a half-named Negro problem. He felt his poverty; without a cent, without a home, without land, tools, or savings, he had entered into competition with rich, landed, skilled neighbors. To be a poor man is hard, but to be a poor race in a land of dollars is the very bottom of hardships. (11-12)

Du Bois was attuned to shifts in language and representation that, to varying degrees, white and black people confused with more substantive changes in relations of domination. For Du Bois, the abolition of slavery, no doubt a progressive change in many regards, did not deliver on its promise of liberation.[8] Celebrating emancipation by relegating the violence of slavery to the past enables domination in the present. Where the relation of domination is consistent across slavery and lynching but transposed through the legal apparatus of emancipation, the suffering in contemporary Detroit belongs in this genealogy in which the legal apparatus guaranteeing *freedom* (in the name of emancipation) repeats the gesture toward *freeing* blacks from slavery in order to stage anew the domination of white over black in lynching. I am not reducing slavery to

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8 Because of his writing's relevance to insolvent Detroit, it is worth quoting Du Bois' description of the disappointment that haunted the period following the abolition of slavery at length: “Away back in the days of bondage they thought to see in one divine event the end of all doubt and disappointment; few men ever worshipped Freedom with half such unquestioning faith as did the American Negro for two centuries. To him, so far as he thought and dreamed, slavery was indeed the sum of all villainies, the cause of all sorrow, the root of all prejudice; Emancipation was the key to a promised land of sweeter beauty than ever stretched before the eyes of wearied Israelites. In song and exhortation swelled one refrain—Liberty; in his tears and curses the God he implored had freedom in his right hand. At last it came, —suddenly, fearfully, like a dream. With one wild carnival of blood and passion came the message in his own plaintive cadences:'Shout, O children! Shout, you're free! For God has bought your liberty!' Years have passed away since then, —ten, twenty, forty; forty years of national life, forty years of renewal and development, and yet the swarthy spectre sits in its accustomed seat at the Nation's feast. In vain do we cry to this our vastest social problem: 'Take any shape but that, and my firm nerves, Shall never tremble!' The Nation has not yet found peace from its sins; the freedman has not yet found in freedom his promised land.” (10)

lynching or to urban poverty (each moment has its own specificities), rather, I am choosing to understand the bankruptcy as a regulatory and neoliberal act of governing that draws from the sovereign power that is spectacularly exercised in early twentieth century lynchings. To trace the movement of domination through its sovereign and disciplinary articulations to its regulatory present in Detroit means accepting that lynching and neoliberal racism are part of the same history. For the purposes of my analysis, there is more to gain from exploring the similarities between how lynchings produce bodies and how bankruptcy does.

Orr has been the face of the bankruptcy. His presence on different news media platforms has been formidable. Sorting through Orr's public statements has been less complicated than I expected it to be, given the sheer number of statements, because of his unwavering consistency. The statements I have chosen to focus on are those that immediately followed an important development in the bankruptcy (for example, the appointment of an Emergency Manager, the initial bankruptcy filing, Judge Rhodes' ruling, etc) as well as the semi-structured recorded conversations Orr periodically has had with the Editorial Board of the *Detroit News* where he answers questions about his personal wellbeing and the bankruptcy. From the latter stream of media, in a video published on June 18th, 2013, Orr responds to a question about his position on retirees' pensions:

> I'm now starting to get some feedback now on the street. Okay, I was at a funeral yesterday—chief's wife's funeral—um, and the long stares, and, you know, dagger eyes that I'm getting as I'm walking down the street from, you know, retirees and, and city employees and, and I feel like that's okay, that's part of my job so that's, that's not what bothers me. What bothers me is: 'Where were you?'; 'Where were you for the past 30

> years?'; 'Where were you when you decided that it was okay to have a pension in 4 years, to be 100% vested?'; 'Where were you when the reports that you guys (Detroit News reporters) were going on for the past decade, of trustees going to jail, your general council's going to jail, paybacks coming in?'; 'What did you think, what, what was the outcome, of this conduct, going to be?'; 'Nothing was going to happen?'. You know, it's sort of the grasshopper and the ant, you know, that we've learned this in nursery school: there are consequences to behavior and misfeasance, and neglect, and now the consequences are coming home to roost. (Orr, June 18, 2013)

Although unexceptional in terms of Orr's intentions, this statement is somewhat clearer than others. Orr blames the pensioners for, at the very least, the city's inability to pay out its pension obligations, and, more generally, for Detroit's insolvency. Orr makes it clear that, had the pensioners intervened at some point in the past thirty years, their pensions would not be in jeopardy today. Orr's allusion to the Aesop fable, "The Ant and the Grasshopper," follows a similarly disturbing conception of responsibility.

In Orr's view, the retired city workers, who stand to lose much of their, on average, $19 500 per annum pensions, are the arrogant and ultimately incapable grasshoppers in relation to the ant workers: largely private sector employees who proved more prudent at managing their own finances without bankrupting the city through their defined contribution pension plans.[9] In

9 Turbeville states that: "The public characterization of the bankruptcy filing and the supporting documentation make it clear that, through the bankruptcy process, the emergency manager has at least two strategic goals in filing and pursuing the petition. First, he seeks to transform the retirement and benefits systems for city employees to a defined contribution plan, transferring financial market risk to employees. It is a form of the thinking behind the proposals to privatize Social Security. Second, he seeks to organizationally and politically separate the Water and Sewerage Department's system, which serves more than 3 million people in the city and surrounding area (roughly 40 percent of the population of Michigan), from the city government, enabling (a) the department's revenue to be monetized through privatization and/or other means and (b) system employee pension and healthcare benefits to be separated from the city's programs. It is unlikely that either of these actions will actually help the city recover from the cash flow crisis or even improve its long-term prospects.".

relation to the ants, the grasshoppers are characterized by their inability to properly manage their own lives and finances. It matters little that these workers laboured towards the pensions they had been promised; for Orr, their lack of foresight (they should have known that the pensions to which they are contractually entitled were too good to be true), the fact that they have proven unable to responsibly manage their lives, means that they are undeserving. For Orr, living conditions in Detroit serve as evidence that many Detroiters are incapable of surviving the demands of life in the city, of navigating flows of capital, and are thus undeserving of the city services and personal benefits that come with being an ant and not a grasshopper. Orr's characterization of city employees as incapable self-managers is made possible by his dismissal of the social and historical circumstances that deprived the workers of their defined benefit pension plans.[10] Orr's reasoning that these people did something wrong or that they failed to plan for their retirements is faulty.[11] The now retired city workers had every reason to believe that, while they were working, they were also saving for their retirement through their contractually stipulated defined benefit pension plans.

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10 Given his position as the central player in the bankruptcy, Orr's public statements go a long way towards understanding the official narrative and justifications of the bankruptcy. He is, however, not the only official to target Detroit's workers and pensioners, accusing the poor of ineptitude instead of looking at the complex histories of domination. L. Brooks Patterson has been serving as the elected County Executive of Oakland County, which borders Detroit's Eight Mile, since 1992. In an interview with New Yorker journalist Paige Williams in early 2014, Patterson said: "How in the world did one of the top cities in America go from the pinnacle of success during World War Two to where it is today, with recriminations and on the verge of bankruptcy? Oakland County went completely the opposite way. What's the difference? Here, in this county, we understand the role of business and free enterprise." Patterson believes that Detroit is in the position it is in because Detroiters cannot manage their own lives and city. As with Orr, this understanding is only viable once socio-historical questions are ignored.

11 Employing a less inflammatory rhetoric than Patterson, the Detroit mayor who overlapped with the first half of Orr's tenure as Emergency Manager, Dave Bing, shied away from criticizing Detroit residents but nonetheless advocated forgetting questions of race to focus on financial management. In an interview with ABC shortly after the initial bankruptcy filing, and in response to a question about the role race will play as the process unfolds, Bing said: “I don't want to make this a black and white issue, it's a financial issue—it's green. We've got to get some funding that's necessary to help us fix our problems right now. I don't want to stir the pot and bring up all kinds of historically racial issues. We got to get beyond that.”

Under this regulatory mode of governance, Orr interprets poverty as an individual, not a social or political, failure and in so doing justifies persecuting pensioners in the context of bankruptcy. The imperative to evaluate citizens on their individual ability to negotiate flows of capital while ignoring the different ways people are affected by history and identity is neoliberal. Even though regulatory power is the dominant force behind Orr's actions and the bankruptcy more generally, the technique of defining a group of undeserving subjects and then persecuting them relies on other articulations of power. Due the bolstering of connections via recurring techniques of domination, the kinds of bodies that constitute the subjugated group have remained more similar than different over time. It is not a coincidence that the largest municipal bankruptcy ever is happening in one of the United States' blackest cities. Where Orr depicts pensioners as incapable grasshoppers, lynch mobs characterized the objects of their fatal derision as criminal and violent.

Instead of allowing her analyses to remain within politically immobilizing sentimentality vis-à-vis state-sanctioned white supremacist murders, Wood expands the scope of lynchings so that she can interrogate the role played by the rank and file of the audiences (or mobs) that gathered to watch and participate. She writes:

> Executions, as spectacles of white power and black culpability, also produced a sense of white solidarity among the crowd that was founded on a shared sense of white moral virtue and authority. The spectators could feel united in their shared act of witnessing something important, but they were also united in beholding a drama of retribution against sin and criminality that, as white people, they believed themselves removed and absolved from. (40)

Extending Wood's argument beyond representations of lynching and into contemporary Detroit, we can see how Orr's hostility towards retired city workers is politically invested, insofar as it entails the parsing of subject positions, separating the ants from the grasshoppers. In Orr's Detroit, as in the culture of lynching discussed by Wood, those with political power promote the idea that, whether it is due to inability or criminality and sin, there is an underclass, and its members do not deserve the same life as the virtuous, if they deserve a life at all. Just as lynch mobs would invent crimes as justifications for lynching poor black men, so the authority to cut pensions in Detroit comes from a social and ethical standpoint, which Orr hammers home: poor Detroiters are incapable of proper self-management and forever destined to drain the resources of those who have responded to the demands of capital with the appropriate thrift.

By suggesting that pensioners are somehow responsible for the city's inability to meet its obligations to retired workers, Orr produces some of the same conditions of representation that Wood describes emerging around lynchings. Orr's insistence on focusing on the pensioners, who, by all reasonable accounts, have done nothing wrong, manufactures a media event that can then be used as a means to not only channel blame, but to create a sense of solidarity, shared virtue, and authority between certain subjects. Those not dependent on city pensions (the ants from whom the inept city workers are stealing) are then invited to collectively shake their heads over the city workers' negligence and subsequently pulled across the floor into sympathy with Orr. Here, insofar as those not dependent on city pensions are rewarded when they condemn city workers, the implication, never far below the surface, is that a failure to behave properly in the face of the bankruptcy might have dire consequences. Just as lynchings served as a threat to

black people, reminding them of what may happen should they fail to behave appropriately, so Orr makes an example out of city workers and promises a similar fate to anyone who dissents.

In accounting for the effects lynchings had on grieving families and immediate communities, Wood dramatizes her broader claim that "it was the spectacle of lynching, rather than the violence itself, that wrought psychological damage, that enforced black acquiescence to white domination" (2). She goes on to say:

> …mobs performed lynchings as spectacles for other whites. The rituals, the tortures, and their subsequent representations imparted powerful messages to whites about their own supposed racial dominance and superiority… Lynching thus succeeded in enacting and maintaining white domination not only because African Americans were its target but also because white southerners were its spectators. (2)

The spectacle of lynching in many ways depended on a strong white presence within its diverse representations, visually and rhetorically asserting white domination over blacks, whereas representations of bankrupt Detroit, on the surface, deny the role whiteness plays in perpetrating suffering. In the strict sense, there are no lynch mobs in the Detroit bankruptcy. Instead of responding to representations of black criminality with a self-righteous white mob, the response in Detroit is institutional. Detroit residents have no choice but to attempt to remake themselves to meet the demands of capital in order to avoid Orr's veiled threat of economic violence. The replacement of visible mobs, armed and ready to kill, with institutional structures primed to dish out a much slower death[12] in the form of systematic economic and social deprivation is

12 For further discussion of slow death, see Lauren Berlant's work on obesity, sovereignty and lateral agency in *Cruel Optimism.*

indicative of a broader social transition from Jim Crow style racism to more neoliberal techniques.

This shift from a racial order maintained through the spectacle of carrying out individual murders to the more neoliberal technique of control at the level of population resonates with what Michel Foucault calls one of the "greatest transformations of the political right" (241). He writes:

> I wouldn't say exactly that sovereignty's old right—to take life or let live—was replaced, but it came to be complemented by a new right which does not erase the old right but which does penetrate it, permeate it. This is the right, or rather precisely the opposite right. It is the power to 'make' live and 'let' die. The right of sovereignty was the right to take life or let live. And then this new right is established: the right to make live and let die. (241)

Lynching is a salient instance of the right of sovereignty to take life (here enacted by extra-legal bodies with the de facto sanction of the state insofar as they were never condemned). In fact, the lynchings discussed by Wood are archetypes for understanding this kind of power. On the other hand, the state exercises the opposite right in the case of statements detailing where responsibility lies for Detroit's insolvency. The complexity of Foucault's distinction between sovereign and regulatory power lies in how he positions sovereign power as both oppositional and internal to regulatory power. Regulatory power is distinct from sovereign power even as the former is in part constituted by the latter. This dynamic plays out in Detroit when Orr appeals to neoliberal ideals of multiculturalism and of equality born out of the free market, while legacies of sovereign power allow that historic identity-based subjugation to persist.

In a statement to the press on December 3rd, Orr made it clear that the bankruptcy will not discriminate between creditors: "We have to be fair and equitable in our treatment of all creditor classes. Whether they're financial creditors or whether they're retirees, pensioners, and the like. And that's what we're going to try to do." Orr sees no important difference between obligations to pay off sky high interest rates stemming from questionably legal swap exchanges (Turbeville, 28) and obligations to pay pensions that do not amount to much more than subsistence for individuals, families, and communities. In other words, for Orr, and for the state upon whose behalf he is acting, the fatal decline in living conditions that will be brought about by pension cuts is not even a consideration: equitable treatment of all creditor classes is what matters. The state is only interested in pensioners as individual enterprises in a market economy—once individuals have nothing left to contribute, the state turns its back. Foucault is again helpful:

> In the right of sovereignty, death was the moment of the most obvious and most spectacular manifestation of the absolute power of the sovereign; death now becomes, in contrast, the moment when the individual escapes all power, falls back on himself and retreats, so to speak, into his own privacy. Power no longer recognizes death. Power literally ignores death. (248)

It is in this light that the distinction between the presence of white spectators at lynchings and their invisibility in representations of insolvent Detroit becomes visible as a political act. Following Foucault, I understand the diffusion of the presence of white spectatorship to be more about an increasing disinterest in the moment of death and less about a move towards anti-racist governance. Ignoring the impending deaths does not mean that they will not happen, rather, it

demonstrates a commitment to a form of governance that exercise violence differently, through an indifference to dying in the context of supporting capitalist expansion.

Foucault's description of the transformation of the right to make die and let live into the right to make live and let die illustrates the limitations of building resistance based on models of recognition. For example, take Orr's implication that pensioners have nobody but themselves to blame for Detroit's inability to uphold its obligations to retirees. As I have argued above, this characterization is only viable once an individual's ability to navigate flows of capital is considered more important than socio-historical conditions: instead of questions about how pensioners will survive without their pensions, those watching the crisis are invited to pity the poor Detroiters who, try as they might, cannot manage themselves or their city. In this framing, pensioners are responsible for their own undoing, while Orr forecloses the possibility of allocating responsibility elsewhere. Rather than directly kill the inconvenient pensioners, the state allows them to serve whatever purpose is most useful for sustaining the municipal economy that the bankruptcy is supposed to rescue (in this case, turning pensioners into scapegoats to support broader scale privatization and other corporate, not human, interests), and once their labour and symbolic power have been fully exploited, the state turns away, forcing what is left of the now worthless individuals and groups to face poverty and crumbling social infrastructure alone.

While this technique of governing is harmful, resistance to it through a politics of recognition is limited because of the inclusion of sovereign power within regulatory power. In neoliberalism, politics are only conceivable at the level of the individual, this is why Mayor Bing can acknowledge histories of racism before dismissing them as irrelevant. Recognition of

suffering in Detroit, even on the level of identity, becomes folded back into neoliberal discourses which understand suffering and success on meritocratic grounds. In representations of insolvent Detroit, the political issue is that capitalist interests continue to take precedence over ensuring that those who live in the city can survive even while those watching and those controlling the bankruptcy claim to recognize ongoing subjugation. This investment is carried out first by those invited to act as supplements to state violence through accusing the greedy pensioners of wrongdoing, and then by institutions accountable only to growing profits. Although built on racial histories of domination, Orr's gesture of turning pensioners into scapegoats poses a problem for identity and recognition politics. While it would be untenable for Orr to have gone after black people as a group in the same way in which he has gone after city workers, the ease with which he simultaneously constitutes and demonizes pensioners as a group relies on techniques of segregation and domination that have much longer histories. Certainly, the racial implications of characterizing a mostly black group of people as incompetent is crucial, but taking these claims as constituting racial identities would miss the important point: after the pensioners have lost everything, there will be another group; it would be naive to think that the next group will dispense with old standards of racial and class based subjugation. In this context, struggling to correctly identify perpetrators and victims has limited effect.

Developing an analysis that is not over-determined by identity but can instead situate it within a larger context of capitalist expansion both from Orr's self-declared race-neutral approach and from an understanding that reduces power in the city to any or all of race, class, and citizenship requires looking at what I take to be one of the principle sources of confusion obscuring the political landscape in the city: affect. In the Federal Government's affirmation that

they stand with the city, Detroiters and non-Detroiters are bound together through the feeling that comes from their recognizing the unfolding crisis. The Federal Government asserts that they feel bad about what is happening and subsequently expect that feeling to resonate with citizens. In this sense, feeling bad about the crisis and saying so gets mischaracterized as a political act. Affect is also at work, albeit more subtly, in the impulse to over-invest in identity claims. The emotional investments that are attached to histories of racial domination make it difficult to understand modes of repression to be related to but distinct from static racial hierarchies. In my opinion, the challenge lies in understanding the continuity running through the white lynch mobs at the beginning of the 20th century to the mostly black pensioners who have been abandoned and left to die in Detroit without collapsing those events into one another. The two historical moments are not carbon copies of white over black, they are rather related instances of complex capitalist and nationalist interests coming together and mobilizing race.

Although an unusual choice for explaining any aspect of the Detroit bankruptcy, Dorothy Parker's 1939 short story "The Custard Heart" illustrates the futility of continually focusing on emotion as a force of political change. Parker introduces Mrs. Lanier as a wealthy, ageless socialite who is overcome with empathy at the sight of the smallest instance of human suffering. Mrs. Lanier's staff do their best to protect her from coming into contact with any of the downtrodden who might trigger her grief:

> Often there would be pencil-sellers in her path, a half of a creature set upon a sort of a roller-skate thrusting himself along the pavement by his hands, or a blind man shuffling after his wavering cane. Mrs. Lanier must stop and sway, her eyes closed, one hand about her throat to support her lovely, stricken head. Then you could actually see her force

> herself, could see the effort ripple her body, as she opened her eyes and gave these miserable ones, the blind and the seeing alike, a smile of such tenderness, such sorrowful understanding, that it was like the exquisite sad odor of hyacinths in the air. Sometimes, if the man was not too horrible, she could even reach in her purse for a coin and, holding it as lightly as if she had plucked it from a silvery stem, extend her slim arm and drop it in his cup. (257)

Parker's incisive critique resonates across the 75 years separating the story's publication from the Bankruptcy in Detroit. It is worth pointing out that Parker was writing during the Great Depression, a time reminiscent of the economic uncertainty of present day Detroit.[13] In gross terms, Parker demonstrates that affect does not guarantee politics. The secondary question is whether affect provides a basis for more meaningful political engagement or, as I understand Parker to be suggesting, runs the risk of turning questions about suffering into concerns over how those watching suffering *feel.* Like Jake Lew's empty solidarity, Mrs. Lanier's absurd compassion is premised on the narcissistic celebration of her ability to recognize suffering. Recognition, as a political end, will necessarily privilege identity over structural analyses because it requires identifying a victim.

Exploring the intersection of affect theory and recognition theory, Kelly Oliver argues against privileging seeing as the primary mode of recognizing suffering. Instead, she turns to affect as an alternative. Oliver writes "we need to become consciously aware of affective energy not only to continue to try to understand ourselves and enable a process of interpretation that

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13 Whether or not times of economic uncertainty lend themselves to Mrs. Lanier's (or Jack Lew's) self-righteous empathy is an interesting idea that deserves more attention but unfortunately falls beyond the scope of this project.

opens up rather than closes off the possibility of relationship, but also to fulfill our ethical obligation to do so" (196). This positive assertion is odd for Oliver given that at other points in her book she enumerates the pitfalls of recognition as a political paradigm (9). She tries to move away from recognition by insisting that a recognition that can disrupt the kinds of hierarchies that these political mobilizations seek to overcome means that "we must recognize that not everything that is real is recognizable to us" (106). By recognizing that not everything is recognizable, Oliver argues that we are better able to respond to things we cannot understand. Oliver is interesting because she sees the problems tied up with making visual recognition a necessary precondition for meaningful political action but fails to grasp the limitations of affect's role in the same project. Despite her attempt to break out of a myopic relation between sufferers and those watching suffering, Oliver's call is to reinvest in the connection by prioritizing affect over visuality. For Oliver, what stops those like Mrs. Lanier from becoming a more responsible political actors is their inability to feel the right things, to be properly moved by the suffering that they encounter. In this paradigm, action becomes predicated on trying to illicit a more progressive response by proving that suffering matters. Whether Mrs. Lanier can see suffering and whether she can feel it are of little consequence where neoliberalism has determined, as in Detroit, that suffering is evidence of an individual incapability and not a social problem.

For his part, Orr illustrates how the failures inherent in building a politics around recognition are also present regardless of whether the mode of recognizing is visual or affective:

> The real world consequences to the 71 year old retired city worker who—I've met someone who said: 'look, I have 1300$ a month and by the time I pay my taxes at my rate, my rent, um, food, fuel, uh, power, I barely have anything left over, how am I going

> to live?' That's tragic. That, that is the hardest part of my job. Because all I can say to them is: 'I have to do this. There's, there's, there's no money, there's nowhere else to go. (Orr, 18 June)

Taking him at his word, Orr understands the pain of a 71 year old pensioner about to lose their livelihood—it is a tragedy. Orr *feels* bad. The problem with advocating for the political power of recognition is that the only response to Orr's emotional understanding—and his own personal pain rooted in his unfortunate position as the bearer of bad news—is to tell him that he has misunderstood; that he has failed to be properly affected by the tragedy because, had he been appropriately affected, had he *felt* more accurately, he would be able to see how retirees' pensions are more important than exorbitant interest rates on potentially illegal loans. Intervening at the level of recognition will privilege debates over the authenticity and humanity of Orr's emotional response instead of foregrounding his position as a mouthpiece and tool of state violence. Recognition needs to be supplemented with a theory of the state that does not reduce state power to the emotions of either governed subjects or state administrators.

What in Oliver's hands is an ineffectual means of analyzing suffering becomes an authorization of state violence in Judith Butler's recent work. Where Oliver looks to recognizing affect and later love to build the kind of interdependent connections that will resist domination, Butler invokes precarity (3). For Butler:

> Precarity also characterizes that politically induced condition of maximized precariousness for populations exposed to arbitrary state violence who often have no other option than to appeal to the state for protection. In other words, they appeal to the state for protection, but the state is precisely that from which they require protection. To

> be protected from violence by the nation-state is to be exposed to the violence wielded by the nation-state, so to rely on the nation-state for protection *from* violence is precisely to exchange one potential violence for another. There may, indeed be few other choices. (26)

In this telling passage, Butler misses the nuance of Foucault's attention to how violence gets employed by the state. While I agree with Butler's point that violence is inherent in the act of identifying with a state, her acceptance of the inevitability and uniformity of state violence is troubling. Operating under the assumption that all citizens at least tacitly rely on the state for some kinds of protections from violence, it is crucial to note that not all citizens are subjected to the same state violences. Furthermore, Butler's resignation that state violence is inevitable is much easier to fathom from a well-insulated subject position that is yet to be made the direct target of state violence. The state violence Butler experiences by her appeal to state protection through her citizenship is not comparable to the state violence, the slow death, being forced on retired city workers in Detroit. Shared precarity and shared exposure to and protection from state violence cannot be the grounds for building social interdependencies that can resist domination because the state's subjects endure violence that is irreducible in content and intensity.

Butler's and Oliver's call to feel our way into solidarity and progressive politics are doomed because, as Orr's statements illustrate, although he feels the pain of the 71 year old pensioner, that pain is less important than the economic interests of the state. Butler and Oliver take affect as a means for political resistance even when, as we can see in Detroit, convincing watchers that feelings are political is one of the most effective tools at the neoliberal state's disposal. Feelings about Detroit—pitying the city's residents—are political but instead of

creating a basis for resistance as Butler and Oliver would expect, they enforce the gap between watching suffering and doing something about it. Resistance through feeling stays in the affective register. Like Mrs. Lanier demonstrating her virtue through perfect and genuine distress in response to the pain of others, those watching the crisis are invited to engage by feeling. The difficult question that remains is then, if not on the grounds of recognition, how can we resist the kinds of state violence being carried out in Detroit?

The irony of the problems with recognition I discuss in the context of Detroit and my own project in this chapter is that, if I have succeeded, I have done nothing more than offer a different way of recognizing the bankruptcy. My hope is that I avoided some of the traps that I have described. First, I tried to contextualize identity instead of accepting it as immovable and in so doing was better able to attend to the structural forces (variously capitalist and nationalist) that propel so much in Detroit. Second, I have tried to dislocate affect as a political end. The kind of political recognition to which I hope to ascribe is not interested in revealing a deeper individualistic truth but rather in uncovering how capitalism and different formations of regulatory power continue to draw from long histories to create new articulations of segregation, exploitation, and prosperity. Maybe in this register our resistance will not be so futile.

2. Towards an Allegorical Understanding of Detroit's Buildings

In "The Condition of Postmodernity," David Harvey suggests that buildings and cityscapes are essential components to appreciating the relationship between environment and everyday life:

> Architecture and urban design have been the focus of considerable polemic debate concerning the ways in which aesthetic judgments can or should be incorporated in spatially fixed form, and with what effects on daily life. If we experience architecture as communication, if, as Barthes insists, 'the city is a discourse and this discourse is truly language,' then we ought to pay close attention to what is being said, particularly since we typically absorb such messages in the midst of all the other manifold distractions of urban life. (67)

Harvey is interested in reading the aesthetic merits of architecture, evaluating the artistic choices of the architect, and examining the design of buildings and cities. While Harvey focuses on the creators of urban space, the buildings and designs that are the objects of his attention are able to communicate profound concepts that extend beyond the intentions city-planners and architects (here I use the term to invoke both the architects who make buildings and the architects who determine the conditions that are the social grounds upon which buildings and communities are built): e.g. the gaps between how designed spaces are intended to be used and how they end up being used. Harvey's approach is tailored to apply to the production of new structures. As such, his call to examine what urban design is communicating demands some adaptations in the

context of Detroit.

Harvey is interested in questions concerning how a city is made. While his call to attend to architecture and infrastructure remains relevant, images of Detroit pose a different problem: for the most part, visual representations of Detroit hysterize and sensationalize the deterioration of the city. It is easy to be convinced of Detroit's municipal death by the slideshow of blight, garbage, and hollow streets that has become synonymous with the city. While some of the evidence in this archive is irrefutable (parts of Detroit are indeed empty and dirty and the population is in fact much smaller today than it was 60 years ago), glimpses of decay do not prove that the city, in any general sense, is on the verge of disappearing. Like the feedback loop engineered through a confused belief that individual feeling constitutes a political challenge, many images of Detroit appear calculated to convince their audience that the decay in a photograph is tantamount to the end of the city. The extent to which images of blighted buildings can mark the demise and eventual obsolescence of a city is an open question; certainly, scattered images cannot do justice to the complexity of Detroit's historical moment—especially images that are eager to exploit light, hollowness, and surfaces in order to tap into the seductive epochal intensity that guarantees the illusion of significance in the absence of (or over) more material evidence. The leap from seeing images of decay in Detroit to the understanding that the city is dead, ready to rise from the ashes, is not a rash one.[14] First, the images overstate the decay through a series of procedures that I will try to expose in some detail. Second, the end of Detroit implicit in each statement welcoming cultural, economic, industrial, or urban renaissance is a

14 Since 1805, Detroit's motto has been *Speramus meliora; resurget cineribus* (We hope for better things; it will rise again from the ashes). The Latin is ambiguous. 'Resurget' could be translated as 'rise' or 'rise again'. The prefix 're' could connote either emphasis or it could mean 'again' as it does in English. I prefer the latter translation because it suggests that Detroit will rise and fall in perpetuity for its existence. The eerie prophetic message for the city's present juncture is that to rise again from the ashes, everything first must be burned.

political act, not a fact.

In a city many people consider too dangerous to visit, it makes intuitive sense that the distressed infrastructure has become a synecdoche for Detroit's current state of crisis, and has a powerful grip on news consumers. It is hard to imagine contemporary Detroit without calling to mind the images that illustrate the bankruptcy. this chapter offers some ways of thinking about what these images of decay do and strives to elucidate the role these images play in the relationships discussed in the previous chapter—between Orr, Detroiters, those watching the bankruptcy, the crisis itself, and the city's future. Despite the fact that the city's economy is depressed, demand for guided tours of Detroit's buildings is booming.[15] More and more people are taking it upon themselves to travel to Detroit to see the toll the rise and fall of capitalism can take on a metropolitan industrial hub. However, the numbers of people who can walk through and see the wreckage firsthand amount to next to nothing when compared with the number of people in the United States, and around the world, who experience contemporary Detroit through printed and online images. Not because the potential terrain of exploring the significance of disaster tourism[16] in Detroit would be irrelevant for building my larger argument about the role these material traces play in contributing to the landscape of late capitalism (in fact, the contrary is probably true), but rather because digital and print images of Detroit are coming to define the city to a global audience to whom they illustrate the bankruptcy, I shift my focus to attend to the specificity of images (mostly digital, some print) of Detroit rather than the experience of touring the city.

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15 For a longer discussion of touring Detroit, see Mark Binelli's *Detroit City is the Place to Be: The Afterlife of an American Metropolis*.

16 For further discussion on the political dimensions of disasters, see Dylan Rodriguez' essay "The Meaning of 'Disaster' Under the Dominance of White Life."

In the pages that follow, I try to read such images of Detroit. I argue that, by neglecting to distinguish the permanence of ruins from more fleeting decay, symbolic interpretation overdetermines the presentation, circulation, and reception of images of Detroit. In order to move away from symbolic approaches and ask a different set of, perhaps more cynical, questions about the tension inherent in employing images of devastation as justification for rebirth in the form of clear-cutting for growth, I will draw from Walter Benjamin's writings on German tragic drama to examine the relationships between symbolism, allegory, time, and history in Detroit. The knowledge produced by symbolic readings of decay is incongruous with the history that might be wrested back through allegorical readings of infrastructure and architecture. The widespread fascination with seeing decay in Detroit has little to do with building excitement over the futures Detroit's current state might anticipate, but is about something else entirely. In other words, once we dismiss the notion that remnants of the failures of twentieth century capitalist excess promise enviable twenty-first century capitalist futures and work through critiques of disaster tourism, we are left with images of a shrinking city that are saying something. By choosing to remain unconvinced by the visual evidence that signals an end to Detroit, I am able instead to address how, in the face of such a force trying to persuade otherwise, the city, its residents and its architecture, perseveres.

There are too many professional and amateur photographers documenting Detroit's decay to render a comprehensive close reading of each oeuvre. From blogs to professional art books, the content of much of this work is uniform. Of the professional photographers, Andrew Moore, Julia Reyes Taubman, and Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre all include their own interpretations of the Packard Plant and Michigan Central Station as well as the requisite shots of

blighted houses, empty potholed streets, and hollow theatres. Oddly, both Moore's and Marchand and Meffre's published collections feature a photograph of the same clock—in a 138 square mile city, the coincidence suggests that something is amiss: perhaps both projects shared a guide who had an affinity for that particular clock or maybe the melting clock is locally famous. In either case, the duplication serves as a reminder that, to varying degrees, aspects of the photographs are curated and not pristine traces of the photographers' adventures in a danger zone.[17] Part of the appeal of the photograph is how the clock, a banal enough object in an empty school, serves as a perfect symbol of Detroit. The clock's warped face is at home in the classroom's rubble while at the same time it is invites viewers to imagine the state of the rest of the surrounding city. In other words, the broken clock is a synecdoche of Detroit's decay at the same time as it explains something more general about the city: in Detroit even time is broken.

Left: Fig.1 Moore's photograph of the melted clock from Cass Technical High School
Right: Fig. 2 Marchand and Meffre's photograph of the same clock

17 In his monograph, *Watching Babylon: The War in Iraq and Global Visual Culture,* Nicholas Mirzoeff argues that "Audiences all but expect photographs to be manipulated" (69).

The mimetic images would have been less noticeable if these photographs were only available to those with access to art books. Preoccupation with Detroit coupled with the aesthetic appeal of the large scale decay that, in one way or another, is the subject of almost every one of the published images, has meant that many of the photographs have a significant virtual existence. Both Moore's and Marchand and Meffre's projects are accessible through sleek websites. Marchand and Meffre in particular have enjoyed a good deal of success. Excerpts from their massive volume *The Ruins of Detroit* have been featured in *The Guardian* (O'Hagan), *New York Times Magazine* (Brubach), and *The Economist* (The Economist, Graphic Detail), to name a few. Their work arguably constitutes a large part of the archive of recent images documenting Detroit's decay. While Detroit has been their most significant undertaking to date, the photographers' interest in ruins extends beyond Motown: they have also published a similar collection of photos of Gunkanjima. As the central theme in their work, the artists' statement on their website is devoted to ruins:

> Ruins are the visible symbols and landmarks of our societies and their changes, small pieces of history in suspension. The state of ruin is essentially a temporary situation that happens at some point, the volatile result of change of era and the fall of empires. This fragility, the time elapsed but even so running fast, lead us to watch them one very last time: being dismayed, or admire, making us wondering about the permanence of things. Photography appeared to us as a modest way to keep a little bit of this ephemeral state.

Although the English translation lacks some of the grace of the original French, Marchand and Meffre are clear about how they imagine ruins, that is, as fleeting symbols of historical pasts. The artist statement oscillates between situating ruins inside or outside of history. According to

the photographers, ruins are both history in suspension and a historical, epochal transition.

Artists who are making a career out of traveling to sites of infrastructural decay to see ruins as the bridge between eras, are not unusual. This understanding fits with the notion that ruins are symbols of the eras they follow. Taking a linear view of history in which ruins punctuate epochal declines and thus announcing the coming of the next era has its appeal, and yet interpreting ruins in this way cannot account for instances in which ruins have a relationship with a present that cannot be reduced to a city's last breaths. Images of blighted buildings in Detroit get passed from platform to platform, escaping the gaze of only the most secluded North Americans. If they were symbols of a past epoch, that is, vanishing traces within linear history, they would offer the audiences witnessing Detroit's death a window through which the city's failures could be recognized and mourned, before disappearing into a revitalized Detroit, or, more likely, fading back into nature. Despite all of the news narratives and photojournalism aimed to persuade its audience otherwise, the city's ruins are remarkable for having largely refused both revitalization and obscurity.

Marchand and Meffre's photographs sometimes undermine their own understanding of ruins. By conceiving of ruins both as the denouement of linear, localized histories and as instances of history in suspension, they confuse two irreconcilable concepts. Insofar as they believe ruins to be within history, as symbols of the time and social order preceding the present, the images of the insides of cheap, crumbling buildings, of garbage heaps, of disappearing infrastructure all make sense. These images are in time; the viewer can imagine how the subject of any of these photographs is in a state of change. Even an image of the same site a month later would bear the mark of time passing: refuse rearranged or the incremental movement of paint

chips from wall to floor. But, for Benjamin, a defining feature of ruins is their incorporation into nature rather than their location in a historical narrative—ruins are the visions from antiquity that provide the material from which new presents are constructed (1977, 177-179). In much of their work, Marchand and Meffre are photographing processes of decay instead of ruins. The photographers misunderstand what insights and meaning might be found in ruins by confusing processes of decay with history suspended. Furthermore, the symbolic interpretive frame that is established through images of decay in time (where it makes sense) is then forced onto ruins that are outside of history. Before examining the subsection of images of Detroit's architecture that meet Benjamin's criteria for qualifying as ruins, I will look more closely at these other images of decay.

In Marchand and Meffre's *The Ruins of Detroit* and in the section of their website dedicated to Detroit, there is an image of a dentist's office; the equipment is recognizable but outdated (57). The palid yellow paint has mostly peeled off the walls and is strewn across the room's surfaces in brittle chips. Light fills the room from a large window towards which the patient's chair is oriented. There is little question that the overhead lamp that arches over the top half of the photograph has been incapable of producing light for years. The juxtaposition of the broken lamp against the glare from the window reminds the viewer that nature endures where our best technology can be made obsolete in a moment and left to decay for decades alone. The searing whiteness coming in through the window obscures any view of the outside, leaving a tabula rasa upon which we are invited to imagine what comes next, at the same time that it hollows out the office. The room feels cavernous, which has the effect of calling the viewer's attention to the objects within the room instead of the room itself. The bland walls that are the

boundary of the action seem insignificant compared to the animated mess of decomposing furnishings. Under the flood of sunlight, everything but the bare bones of the building is overwhelmed; the chair, cabinet, and basin appear on the verge of crumbling. The viewer is excused from mourning the loss of the building and the livelihoods of the people that it housed because the light from the window is already offering a new beginning. Allowing the viewer to situate the current state of decay within a longer history of decline and, ostensibly, of prior prosperity, this image is a symbol. It symbolizes the unfortunate history of the dentist's office. The wrecked office symbolizes the office's past which we can imagine including the practice's beginnings, some relative success, decline, obsolescence, and, now, obscurity. By focusing on the closing instances of this historical arc, where the last elements of what make the office recognizable are given over to nature and are not incorporated but rather erased by its force (lacking the endurance of more monumental structures), and by conflating that arc with Detroit as a whole, Marchand and Meffre affirm that something is dead and it is time for a renaissance.[18]

18 Sure enough, as of March, 2013, and after extensive renovations, Broderick Tower is again 100% leased. No longer a commercial space, the tower is now exclusively luxury condominiums.

Above: Fig. 3 Marchand and Meffre's photograph of the dentist cabinet on the 18th story of the David Broderick Tower.

The image of the dentist's office in decay has a sense of harmonious composition. The *beauty* in the details of disintegration invites viewers to get lost in awe before rejoicing in

rebirth. But, for Benjamin, ruins (and allegory) are beyond beauty.[19] To look for meaning in ruins is then to ignore the impulse of rebirth. In addition to failing to meet Benjamin's temporal requirements for figuring as ruins, Marchand and Meffre's images of deterioration encourage a symbolic reading that gets caught in celebrating sensational aesthetics instead of pursuing meaning that is not consumed by ostentation. Symbolic interpretation latches onto an image's theatrical elements where an allegorical interpretation is not similarly confined. Helping establish what it means to analyze destruction through symbols, Benjamin writes:

> In the symbol destruction is idealized and the transfigured face of nature is fleetingly revealed in the light of redemption, in allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape. Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face—or rather in a death's head. (1977, 166)

As Marchand and Meffre have suggested (despite contradicting themselves), there is nothing petrified about the dentist's office. The process of decay dominates the photograph. The image elicits an emotional reaction as it is easy to imagine how even the air in the office is rotting. However, while the intended object of the photograph is the degradation of the perishable parts of the once office, the very structure of the building that is obscured by the orientation of Marchand and Meffre's gaze feels more durable.

The rubble that the photographers mistake for a ruin is encased within a building that might endure to Benjamin's satisfaction. At first glance, there is nothing timeless about the

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19 Benjamin writes: "In the ruin history has physically merged into the setting. And in this guise history does not assume the form of the process of an eternal life so much as that of the irresistible decay. Allegory thereby declares itself to be beyond beauty. Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things" (1977, 177-178).

image: it seems to be a dynamic snapshot of becoming ruined where ultimate ruin is disappearance. While the dentist's office disintegrates before the camera's lens and the viewer's eyes, the skeleton of the building is, at least insofar as the office is concerned, primordial. The debris in the snapshot provides evidence for the end of the location's history as an office and, taken in the context of the archive of images of decay to which it belongs, a symbol of the failure of everyday life in the city. On the other hand, the skeleton of the building is almost invisible. In Marchand and Meffre's photograph, the structural lines of the room frame the detritus. As an element of decay and central interest, the architecture of the building is invisible to the photographers. The solid structure of the building is both disavowed and exploited. Against the eternal form of the room whose durability prevents it from becoming a part of Marchand and Meffre's wrecked Detroit, the remnants of the dentist's office register as what is left of daily life in the city. Marchand and Meffre manipulate the gravitas of the Tower (a gravitas borne in the building's capacity to weather cycles of boom and bust) to magnify the significance of a defunct dental practice. The office is soon to be turned into ash by the natural light while, ambivalent, the 34 stories of the Broderick Tower await rebirth.

I point out the photographers' confusion around what distinguishes ruins from decay and their subsequent leap to understand every piece of architectural deterioration symbolically because the slip into the political position that allows the Detroit ruins to become a symbol of a bygone era is repeated throughout the coverage of the Detroit bankruptcy. Just as Kevyn Orr invited those watching the crisis to shed a tear for hopeless pensioners, Marchand and Meffre's photography encourages an appreciation for decay in which beauty takes precedence over the harmful material conditions that are affecting people's lives. Marchand and Meffre's photography

supports Orr's take on bankruptcy: rejoicing in the rebirth of a city in which many residents are unable to survive, let alone be reborn, authorizes abandoning current residents in favour in of new investment and expansion. Although it is an obvious point, it bears mentioning that by posing as a symbol of the end of an era, the seductive imagery of destruction in Detroit allows more salient questions—like how the destruction came to pass—to go unasked. Instead of seeing the cycle of new construction followed by deterioration as a characteristic of the present in Detroit, the architects of the bankruptcy and those interested in the city's renaissance take one cycle as a totality, pronounce the end of Detroit as we know it and level symbolic decay, branded as ruin, as evidence.[20] This process sets the stage for new enterprises to come invest in the city, a continuation of the cycle rather than a new beginning.

Writing about modernist ruins in Rio de Janeiro, Beatriz Jaguaribe recognizes a similar obsession with newness: “The modern project itself is the new, the actual, the contemporary. While remembering former modernities, we evoke their pastness to authenticate the newness of 'what's new' and yet filter the contemporary through a gauze of the particles of the past” (333). Because, for Jaguaribe, the new figures are such a prominent part of the modern project, the material repercussions in the realm of urban architecture are immediate. New buildings age quickly and in so doing will soon fail to satisfy modernity's bias towards novelty, becoming instead that against which new new buildings can distinguish themselves. The decay of buildings that are no longer new adds caché to new new buildings as they are made even more desirable by virtue of the increasingly dramatic comparison. In Detroit, newness is a condition of the era of

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20 Benjamin writes: “once the ethical subject has become absorbed in the individual, than no rigorism—not even Kantian rigorism----can save it and preserve its masculine profile. Its heart is lost in the beautiful soul. And the radius of action—no, only the radius of the culture—of the thus perfected beautiful individual is what describes the circle of the symbolic.” (1977, 160)

crisis and not its definitive beginning. The overgeneralization of symbolic interpretation allows critics to periodize architecture's aesthetics instead of entertaining the possibility that the intensity of the pursuit of newness might be a better measure of an era. An era that is defined by constant newness cannot invoke the material traces of its recent past to declare its own end.

The dynamism of the decay in the dentist's office stops this kind of imagery from becoming suspended in time. Marchand and Meffre monumentalize the decay in the office and in so doing miss the structure of the building that places the object of the image in context. In the object of the photograph, history is not petrified, rather it is disappearing either into nature or into new expansion while the form of the building looks on with indifference.[21] The focus on decay, which lacks the unique status of ruins' durée, eclipses history's *facies hippocratica*—an epoch does not end with every failed or abandoned business; a dentist's office in disrepair is just that—presents, not history petrified, but a localized arc of the dentist's office. A political misstep occurs at the moment that those viewing the image (photographers included) generalize the end of the dentist's office so that it becomes the end of Detroit.[22] This misinterpretation is implicit in the categorization of images of decay as images of ruins. By elevating the status of decomposing garbage, the photographers and their complicit audience overstate the importance of a fragment of the city's decline to pronounce a generalized premature rebirth (which necessarily implies a

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21 Because no substantial use of Benjamin's work on the past can escape his IX Thesis on the Philosophy of History: the structure of the building, the ruin that is obscured by Marchand and Meffre's obsession with decay, is akin to Benjamin's Angel of History. Where Marchand and Meffre present their viewers with a manifestation of a chain of events, the building sees only wreckage upon wreckage (2007, 257).

22 Interestingly, and despite the assertiveness with which Marchand and Meffre insist that the ruins are symbols of the end of *something*, they are never able to articulate what has ended. An end to capitalism? An end to industrial manufacturing in America? An end to the lives of poor and black Detroiters? Most realistically, perhaps an end to Fordism in Detroit—but even then, we would need to account for Fordism's failure to transform itself into post-Fordism.

preceding death).[23] In Jaguaribe's terms, "The monument as ruin either acquires a different symbolic aura on the rubble of its very deconstruction or is refunctionalized to project something distinct from its original architectonic purpose" (333). The symbolic aura of the disintegrating office is decline ending with obsolescence—primed to be reborn. That aura then gets taken as a general condition of Detroit as a whole. Through this specificity, Jaguaribe is pointing towards the importance of recognizing the limitations of a symbolic interpretation of decay. Symbolic interpretation of decay—taking a decaying object as the end of a localized history and then using the object to tell a more general story—when generalized, allows Marchand and Meffre's images (as well as many others) to create the illusion of an end that justifies the city's neoliberal rebirth before ever specifying what exactly has ended.

Depending on the extent to which these two profound misunderstandings (first, overstating the significance of decay, and second, when it comes to monumental ruins, allowing symbolic interpretation to take precedence over allegorical interpretation) constitute a default position for those with the power to influence the bankruptcy proceedings, the crisis in Detroit might not end. In other words, these two levels of symbolic interpretation create a feedback loop in which the crisis will perpetuate itself by defining each decline as a definitive end and treating that end as an opportunity for more expansion, more capital investment, and more newness. Benjamin writes: "It is nevertheless legitimate to describe the new concept of the allegorical as speculative because it was in fact adapted so as to provide the dark background against which the bright world of the symbol might stand out" (1977, 161). It is not impossible to read allegory into Marchand and Meffre's work. However, the photographers are more invested in sensational

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23 For a more detailed definition of what constitutes a monument, see Harvey (83-85).

devastation than they are in the less exciting details, making the dark background hard to discern behind the hysteria. In Detroit, the bright symbols that get swept up in flows of capital distract from the unchanging background of the ruins that communicate something other than the end of a city. Here, allegory invites speculation about a complicated history whereas the symbol starts from rebirth and reads history backwards, manufacturing a narrative to justify moving forward with a blank slate. This narrative determines how viewers see and negotiate the visual archive of decaying Detroit.

Thus far I have suggested that what for Marchand and Meffre are Detroit's 'ruins' do not amount to much more than refuse. As such, the ability of these images to either announce or determine an end of the city in any general sense is overstated. Furthermore, I have argued that the symbolic interpretation of Detroit's garbage has polluted an allegorical interpretation of its ruined monuments. I want to devote the rest of this chapter to reading the images of Detroit's ruins allegorically, that is to say, taking the ruins as a dark background devoid of beauty. Instead of falling into the trap of a symbolic interpretation—following a line of questioning that focuses on aesthetic beauty, accepting the finality of an ending, whatever that ending is, and orienting itself to rebirth and the future—my understanding of the images of these ruins point to a different set of questions. How can a city in ruin still be home to 700,000 people? If not an indication of a definitive end, what story do the ruins tell? To what extent is crisis built into the system that created these ruins and the devastating living conditions to which much of Detroit's population are subjected? How can resistance efforts disrupt the closed loop of symbolic interpretation?

Looking at ruins with an eye towards mitigating the voyeuristic tendencies that are part and parcel of Marchand and Meffre's project, Chilean photographer and sociologist Camilo Jose

Vergara's work in Detroit spans decades. Vergara has been working on his Detroit project since the early 1990s. Since then, he has been traveling to Detroit periodically to photograph the same sites, from the same perspectives. Vergara has never dedicated a book to Detroit, although some of his photographs of the city alongside his sociological observations can be found in *American Ruins* and *The New American Ghetto.* Vergara has devoted a website, "Tracking Time," to documenting Detroit and a handful of other American cities. The Detroit section of the site includes 134 photographs of the city, almost half of which are of either the former Michigan Central Station, the former Metropolitan Building, or the former Packard Plant. By committing himself to documenting longer periods of time, instead of just snapshots, and, out of temporal necessity, focusing his gaze on architecture and infrastructure that endure, Vergara's work allows ideas to emerge that are not as visible through the symbolic haze of Marchand and Meffre's photographs.

Vergara distinguishes himself from his contemporaries by conceiving of his work as an extended process of documenting communities instead of a misconceived ephemeral moment. In the artist statement to the collection of work on "Tracking Time," Vergara writes:

> For more than four decades I have devoted myself to photographing and documenting the poorest and most segregated communities in urban America. I feel that a people's past, including their accomplishments, aspirations and failures, are reflected less in the faces of those who live in these neighborhoods than in the material, built environment in which they move and modify over time. Photography for me is a tool for continuously asking questions, for understanding the spirit of a place, and, as I have discovered over time, for loving and appreciating cities.

Less a stated goal than a formative component of his practice, Vergara's devotion to seriality distinguishes his photographs. Unlike Marchand and Meffre, Vergara does not assume the historical moment of his photographic subjects. Instead, the serial aspect of his presentation uses the structure of the building (the ruin) as a constant and enables the audience to appreciate the small changes that take place over time. The hysterized moments of Marchand and Meffre's photography are contextualized in Vergara's opus; the sensational and emotional appeal becomes flattened out. A moment of epic decay becomes a blip in Vergara's wider spatial and temporal perspective. Vergara avoids using the word 'ruin', likely aware of how the term is being mobilized elsewhere and wanting to distance himself from those photographers whose concerns are predominantly aesthetic. Vergara's pursuit of history through his exploration of built environments over time is indicative of an allegorical reading—we can see history suspended in buildings rather than accepting the claims of one-off photographs as gospel. Where Marchand and Meffre have already decided that they are documenting the last chapter of a long decline through capturing fleeting decay, Vergara does not try to hang his work on existing narrative lines. The vitality of Vergara's output does not reside within any particular photograph but emerges when, through seriality, he is able to affirm the traces of everyday life (or, in Benjamin's terms, history) that are denied in Marchand and Meffre's myopia.

Perhaps the most iconic abandoned monument in Detroit is the former Michigan Central Station. Marchand and Meffre use their image of the building as the cover to their book. It is also one of the few buildings that Vergara documents in “Tracking Time.” Vergara's pictures of the former station run from 1993 to 2014, including nine consecutive shots spanning the chronology, all from the same vantage point with the same composition. At first glance, the twenty-two year

gap is almost unbelievable: ignoring the superficial considerations of landscaping, the season, the number of broken windows, and a misplaced attempt to bring some cheer to the building's facade with oversized Christmas snowflakes, the blighted station of 1993 could easily be mistaken for any of its future incarnations. In Vergara's series, Marchand and Meffre's conception that ruins are fleeting is undone; the station in ruin is not temporary. Furthermore, the images in Vergara's series even fail to convey any sense of struggle; the station is effortlessly static, content to play backdrop while history unfolds around. The series of images demonstrate the building's unchanging state despite other visual markers (least of all the captions, dating the photos) that suggest the passage of time. If ruins are, indeed, the allegories of the world of things (Benjamin, 1977, 177-178) then the mode through which they need to be understood is that of explanatory interlude instead of dramatic climax.[24]

In Vergara's suite of photographs of the station, after the viewer has refused to get caught in the superficial loop that a symbolic interpretation guarantees, the question of what constitutes an allegorical interpretation remains. Benjamin defines allegory as a form of expression that betrays a conventional relationship between an illustrative image and its abstract meaning (1977, 162). Later, he writes that "an appreciation of the transience of things, and the concern to rescue them from eternity, is one of the strongest impulses in allegory" (1977, 223). As a concluding remark and to reaffirm allegory's exceptional relationship to history Benjamin writes: "allegory established itself most permanently where transitoriness and eternity confronted each other most closely" (1977, 224). One of the key benefits of the interpretive frame Benjamin lays out is its flexibility. Instead of imposing a rigid mode of interpretation, he posits allegorical writing as a

24 Benjamin writes: "But even in its functional use allegory is not associated with the climax of the dramatic action, but it is an extended explanatory interlude" (192).

schema; he tells interested interpreters where and how to direct their attention and does not limit what comes after.

Above: Fig. 4 Vergara's photographs of the former Michigan Central Station in (left to right) 1993, 1997, 2011, and 2013

Vergara's record of the former Michigan Central Station pulls together the eternity of the monument with a somewhat mundane history of Detroit over the last two decades. As Benjamin predicted, one of the most interesting elements of the series is the juxtaposition between the building's unchanging facade and the variations in the immediate environment. Where the viewer would expect the photograph series to follow the story of sharp but steady decline that is the backbone of both the bankruptcy and Marchand and Meffre's brand of photography, the building

is instead the backdrop for innocuous shifts in landscaping and maintenance. Between 2008 and 2011, difficult years for many cities in the country, a simple grass garden materializes in front of the building and, in the photograph from 2011, three new looking cherry pickers are parked in front of the station's gothic entrance. Between 2012 and 2013, a few glass windows inexplicably reappear on the upper stories and an American flag starts flying at the front entrance. Instead of historicizing the ruins, which involves taking them as an end of an era, reading the ruins as ahistorical allows a different kind of image to appear. The station and its surroundings are not a totality but a relation in which the assumed constant decline of the city is refuted. By refusing to accept the certainty of Detroit's demise in the symbolism of Michigan Central's ruin, we can see traces of a city that is very much alive.

The vital minutiae that comes through in Vergara's photographs challenges the viewer to conceive of a city that is both shrinking and living. I am not appealing to a nationalist ideal in which American ingenuity and elbow grease are taken as indestructible by asserting that nothing can kill the American spirit, but rather, through Vergara's photography, I am trying to open a conceptual space where a city's existence is not reducible to its perpetual expansion. Even in the extreme case where blight means that the city, from a municipal service provision perspective, is too big, the only kind of downsizing that city officials can imagine is geographic. However, even this potential consolidation fits within a desire to expand the city; the hope is that tearing down old buildings will make way for new industry. For the architects of the bankruptcy, shrinking the area of the city, concentrating the city's current residents into a more manageable square mileage,

is a means to eventually expand its population and production.[25] By depicting the relationship between Michigan Central and its immediate surroundings, Vergara rejects the binary that casts expansion as the only alternative to obsolescence. While it is true that Michigan Central has been empty for decades, it need not pose a problem. It is absurd to expect that a city that has shrunk as much as Detroit has could maintain the massive station. Furthermore, if, for some reason, the station becomes a threat to city residents (akin to the fire hazards posed by overgrowth and rotting houses in mostly empty neighbourhoods) then that threat can be mitigated in whatever way is most efficacious. When stated political priorities confuse growth with helping the city's current residents, that is to say when an allegorical understanding of Vergara's photographs gets ignored in favour of a symbolic analysis more readily available in Marchand and Meffre snapshot, Detroit's boom and bust future is all but guaranteed.

True to the allegorical betrayal of symbolism's linear history, the former Michigan Central Station tells a number of intertwined stories simultaneously: an era's obsession with newness; the injunction against shrinking in capitalism; and the cheapness of ceaseless attempts to reinvigorate a city from the top down, or, in this case, from the surface in. When contextualized, Michigan Central Station and a handful of other monumental ruins in the city are not fading into

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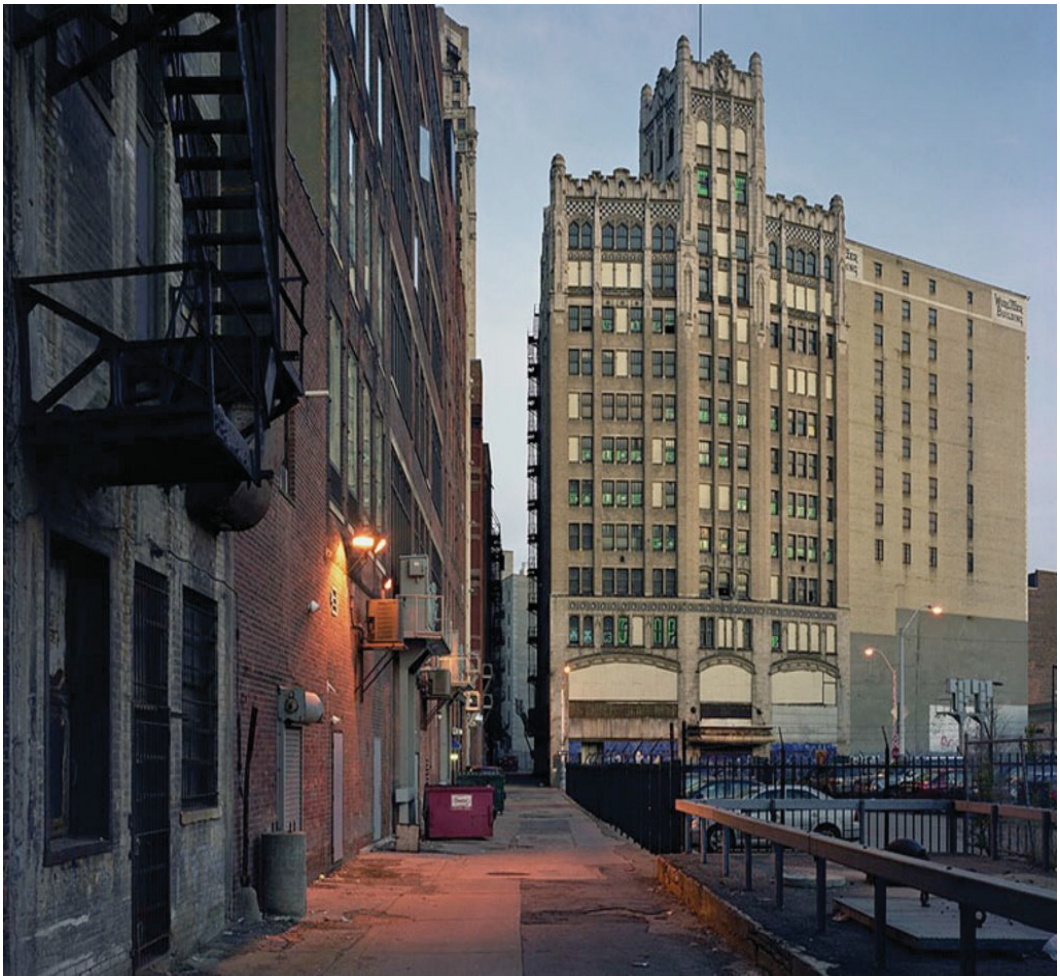
25 In an interview given to the Michigan Citizen Kevyn Orr said:

> "Our future cities, which was done over a long time with Mayor Bing, has certain 5, 10, 15, 30 year increments of proposal. And part of what that plan is trying to do is shrink the footprint of the city. It's a 139 miles of land and 143 miles including rivers and lakes. It's a huge city. You've got Boston, Manhattan and San Francisco can all fit within our borders. So what Detroit Future Cities has as a proposal is to try to shrink the footprint of the city which has real world consequences. For instance, just as an example, if there is one house on the block but you still have to flow power systems and maintain water and sewer systems and police it then your cost as a percentage of the actual burden is high, to police huge swaths of city that are not densely populated—that costs a lot of money. Detroit Future Cities seeks to shrink the footprint buy it seeks to grow the population, and so when we say grow the population, we see growth in the city, it's not growing the physical size of the city. That is going, hopefully, reduce in some fashion and we can manage, police, service, but it's growing the population and therefore, market theory: population creates demand, demand creates cost increase, cost increase creates value and you grow the value of the property. So that's, that's the plan." (14 Mar. 2014)

nature—dissolving in anticipation of the city's rebirth—but rather are sitting among other buildings that are neither decaying nor in ruins. The connection between the ruin and its environment is the material counterpart to Benjamin's important consideration of allegory's proximity to where eternity confronts transitoriness. Where this relationship is legible between Michigan Central Station and its landscape, it is prominent between the Metropolitan building and its immediate surroundings.

The Metropolitan Building has stood in Downtown Detroit since the 1920s and has been vacant since the 1970s. Marchand and Meffre's photograph of the building foregrounds a lit alley adjacent to the building's facade which fills the photograph's background (2010, 90). The photograph was taken between 2005 and 2009, at which point, the building would have been empty for around thirty years. The streets are lit and the sky in the upper right corner is suffused with pink and blue placing the photograph at either dawn or dusk. A casual audience could miss the fact that the building is derelict. What, upon closer inspection, turn out to be boarded up windows and neat, uniform, green graffiti are the only signs giving away the building's abandonment. In Marchand and Meffre's book, their photo of the Metropolitan building stands out because of the quietness of the scene: the image is almost speculative. Where active decay is visible in most of the other photographs, the plain alley, half full parking lot, and illuminated street lamps set the image apart because it is not dominated by simple symbols asserting the end of the city (as with the broken clock or the devastated dentist's office). Within their collection, one of Marchand and Meffre's few wide angle depictions of a blighted monument fulfills Benjamin's conception of ruins as backgrounds. The decay that dominates most of the images is made all the more spectacular when taken in relation to their plain representation of the

Metropolitan building. The modern cars parked in the vacant building's lot do not communicate finality but something more complex; through this image, the reality of a shrinking population in a massive city takes precedence over the illusion that the city has died.



Above: Fig. 5 Marchand and Meffre's photograph of the Metropolitan building

Below: Fig. 6 Moore's photograph of the Metropolitan building

If Marchand and Meffre's image of the Metropolitan building is uncomfortable in its refusal to join the chorus of sensational decay, Andrew Moore's take on the building is even harder to situate (43). In some ways, Moore's photograph is the inverse of Marchand and Meffre's. Instead of the whole facade, Moore captures three windows, a small balcony, and some of the ornamentation along the top of the building. Instead of allowing the ruin to take up its position as a background, Moore foregrounds his chosen section in sharp focus while Detroit's impressive skyline fills out the rest of the frame. In Moore's image, the building is glowing to an

extent that seems too perfect for real life.[26] Whereas Marchand and Meffre's photograph shows the building in tired beige, Moore has filtered his image rendering the structure almost unrecognizable. Perhaps the most unusual visual trick in Moore's photograph is what appears, at first glance, to be a garden on the building's top balcony. Fresh green and rust coloured leaves complement the still regal gilded exterior in what is in fact a mess of happenstance overgrowth. Moore's photograph is striking. With the knowledge that the building has been empty for over three decades—the structure that is the centre of Moore's image, apart from a few partially broken windows, gives no indication that the building is abandoned—the photograph reveals the static nature of the building: it is almost frozen in the warm, possibly artificial light. Here, the Metropolitan building is not caught between competing forces but rather the background for two intertwined processes that are happening simultaneously. First, the city's historic prosperity and its present echoes are visible upon the stunning horizon where impressive infrastructure (with no discernible traces of decay) mixes with a smokestack, an oversized ATT billboard, and an American flag. Second, the natural decay that makes up such a large part of the archive of contemporary images of Detroit is downsized in the plants that are scattered over the balcony. On the balcony, nature claws back, reclaiming unused terrain while the threat of more investment and expansion is legible in the smoke stack that animates the space between the abandoned Metropolitan building and buildings that have managed to stay more relevant. The strange glamour of Moore's manipulated image is in tension with the complex assemblage (accidental or intentional) of processes that are cropped out or ignored in most of the photographs documenting decay in Detroit.

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26 Fulfilling Mirzoeff's observation that an audience expects all images to be in some way doctored.

Above: Fig. 7 Vergara's 1995 photograph of the former Metropolitan building

Adding a third interpretation to contemporary visual records of the Metropolitan building, Vergara's serialization spans 1991 to 2013. Moore's photograph allows for an allegorical interpretation by showing nature's movement together with markers of current and historical civic prosperity all against the endurance of the Metropolitan building's balcony. Making a similar point about the importance of understanding the monument in context, a 1995 photograph breaks with the perspective Vergara had established in earlier shots. Still at the centre of the image, the Metropolitan building stands amidst the Wurlitzer building, the alley from Marchand and Meffre's shot, the hulking upper stories of the Book Tower, and the People Mover.[27] Through this wider window, Vergara conveys the banality that is missing from so many of the images of

27 The Motor City's dismal attempt at a public elevated rail transportation.

the city. The Metropolitan building is a ruin amid the buzz of urban life—albeit a buzz half muted by the interval between the amount of developed urban space and the number of people using it. Vergara does not invite his audience to lose themselves in the awesomeness of epic decay but instead challenges us with the banality of the image. The panic around Detroit's rebirth does not register in the wide angle image of the Metropolitan building in the same way as it dominates the snapshots of rapid decay. Vergara's depiction gives a simple explanation of the building's blight: it is not of any use to the residents of the city so it is not being used. The Metropolitan building and other monumental ruins in the city are made to appear dangerous through their associations with Detroit's imagined fatal deterioration. Reading the ruins allegorically allows us to understand their eternity and to see attempts to remake the city as investments in expansion and capital that will privilege future newness over present viability.

Vergara's photography situates everyday life in Detroit by expanding temporal scope and relying on the solidity and permanence of allegedly ruined buildings to provide a backdrop for the quiet traces of history that become distorted in much of Marchand and Meffre's work. Detroit is not dead, it is only unfamiliar under the sensational glaze of a concocted catastrophe, which has been built on its ability to elicit an effect instead of on material grounds. The symbolic interpretation of Marchand and Meffre's dentist's office implies an imagined arc in which the rise and fall of the practice is re-inscribed as the rise and fall of the city. An allegorical interpretation pinches together the ends of the arc, and through the relationship between dynamic environments held against static ruins, exposes the circularity of Detroit’s time: decay aggregates and dissipates in a cycle not a totality.

My goal in this chapter was to challenge the narrative calling for rebirth in Detroit. The

proliferation of images of the city's crumbling architecture and infrastructure conjure up an urban death that, in turn, determines how residents and those watching the bankruptcy unfold relate to the city and imagine its future. Mourning the death of the city as a *fait accompli* justifies expansion and new investment while it allows Orr and his team to refuse to take the living conditions of current residents as a primary concern or a general indicator of the city's well-being. Just as Orr privileged his own emotional responses to incite public engagement on an affective level, relegating political action to individual statements about feeling, Marchand and Meffre encourage emotional responses to Detroit by hysterizing decay.

The political imperative to accept a symbolic narrative allows those on the outside, watching the destruction in Detroit, to reassure themselves that the suffering in Detroit has come and gone. Non-Detroiters may take a more realistic, cynical view and understand that in many ways, Detroit is not exceptional, that it is not beyond reason, and what *has happened* in Detroit might play out in other cities (including their own). And yet, the symbolic interpretation of the ruins allows non-Detroiters to imagine that, should a crisis come, it will permanently pass. Reading the ruins allegorically (especially with an awareness that those who have the power to determine which reading will guide political action refuse allegory) does not provide the same comforts. Allegorical interpretation suggests that the crisis in Detroit will not be ultimately eclipsed by rebirth and reinvestment, constituting a neat historical package; the crisis happens on a different register.

3. Detroit and Sign-Value

In the first two chapters of thesis I have tried to call attention to everyday life. My main concern up to this point was to contextualize some of the dominant representations of everyday life in Detroit, ranging from Kevyn Orr's official justification for the bankruptcy to the international fascination with the city's deteriorating architecture. After working through the diverse political origins of images and narratives that claim to be portraying a simple reality, the next logical step would seem to be challenging the illusory renderings of the city with the truth. However, even though the city's crisis continues to be manipulated in the media coverage of the bankruptcy, disputing the veracity of one account by proposing an alternative that is different in content while the same in kind is shortsighted. Even in the 1930s, Walter Benjamin saw the ease with which audiences would accept mechanical reproductions of everyday life as mimetic totalities, able to translate all the detail and complexity of experience into an image or images, static or moving. “The situations into which the product of mechanical reproduction can be brought may not touch the actual work of art, yet the quality of its presence is always depreciated” (2007, 221). No matter how convincing, reproductions of art and experience are not adequate substitutes for an original. “Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be” (2007, 220). Benjamin understood that, as the means to represent reality became more sophisticated, the risk of slipping into a perspective premised on blind faith in media’s eventual ability to convey all of the intricacies of life intensified. The very task of pointing out misrepresentation is too often premised on the belief that a perfect representation is possible. In

this last chapter, I am still interested in everyday life but from a different perspective. In chapter 1, I addressed how mass media presentation of economic crisis enabled the personalization of affect, which contributed to producing a feeling of political engagement in the absence of any political action. In chapter 2, I addressed how media (mass-circulated photography) tended to produce epochal history without regard for everyday life. In chapter 3, I propose to look at how media—or more precisely, media and economy—hyper-represent everyday life, thus transforming it into sign-value. Benjamin's concerns with representation lay the foundation for moving beyond a traditional model of analyzing misrepresentation against an outside reality. Instead of understanding misrepresentations and media distortions as fallacies in need of debunking, I wish to draw on Baudrillard to consider certain modes of representation of Detroit whose effects are comprehensible not in terms of truth or falsity but in terms of their very real effects. Baudrillard addresses this issue in terms of the hyperreal and simulation, in which the complex realities of everyday life are absorbed into a regime of sign-value, to which use-value or exchange-value are subordinated. Through Baudrillard's approach, I propose to open essential questions about new economic and media ventures in Detroit without falling into futile debates over which image or narrative is true. Ultimately, however, I use Baudrillard's insights to provide another perspective on media representations of Detroit rather than to confirm Baudrillard's larger vision of our sociohistorical juncture.

Where most Marxists rely on modes of production as the definitive characteristic of historical change, for Baudrillard, historical periods are better defined through what he calls the order of simulacra. Since the Renaissance, there have been three such orders: counterfeit, production, and simulation. Baudrillard's stucco angel is of the order of counterfeit simulacra

(1993, 50-52). “In the churches and palaces, stucco embraces all forms, imitates all materials: velvet curtains, wooden cornices, and fleshy curves of the body” (1993, 52). Stucco is a first order simulacrum, it is distinct from and immediately tied to that which it imitates. “It is the reflection of a profound reality” (1995, 6). In this sense, Baudrillard's counterfeit is akin to Marx's use-value. In Detroit, counterfeit simulacra may once have been legibly scattered across the city, only to disappear or transform as the pace of industrialization intensified. Detroit's nineteenth century churches would have been full of counterfeit objects and architecture that held their value in use independent of exchange. At the turn of the twentieth century, Fordism and a new order of simulacra eclipsed what was left of the older regimes. In this period of transition Pewabic Pottery, perhaps Detroit's best-known outpost of the international Arts and Crafts movement, clung to the virtues of use-value and the counterfeit.

As a direct response to rapid industrialization, the Arts and Crafts movement resisted the shift from guild to factory, from counterfeit to production, and from use-value to exchange-value. The goods coming out of Detroit's Pewabic Pottery were handmade, of lasting quality, and free of the ornamentation and excess that would come into vogue with the flourishing of the newly minted automotive industry. Like much of the Arts and Crafts movement, Pewabic Pottery prioritized function: its pieces were crafted to serve a purpose and to last a long time. The ideals of the movement (function, craftsmanship, a suspicion of mechanical innovation that verged on Luddism) proved to be no match for the deeper reorganization of the economy. In other words, Pewabic’s arts and crafts resistance to factories was corrupted by the shift to mass production. Pots once prized for their function alone were produced in increasing by large numbers as artisans became workers in step with their counterparts on the shop floor. Pewabic’s resistance

was inevitably absorbed into the new regime; Fordism ensured production order simulacra's dominance in Detroit.

Counterfeit simulacra refer to a nature that is still intact whereas industrial simulacra are equivalents in a series derived from an original referent. Just as counterfeit simulacra operate within the natural law of value, industrial simulacra operate within the market law of value. For Baudrillard, the new equivalence of the industrial simulacra breaks the relationship that counterfeit simulacra had to their referent:

> A new generation of signs and objects arises with the Industrial Revolution—signs with no caste tradition that will never have to be *counterfeits*, since from the outset they will be *products* on a gigantic scale. The problem of their specificity and their origin is no longer posed: technics is their origin, they have meaning only within the dimension of the industrial simulacrum.
>
> That is, the series: the very possibility of two or *n* identical objects. The relation between them is no longer one of an original and its counterfeit, analogy or reflection, but is instead one of equivalence and indifference. In the series, objects become indistinct simulacra of one another and, along with objects, of the men that produce them. The extinction of the original reference alone facilitates the general law of equivalences, that is to say, *the very possibility of production*. (Baudrillard, 1993, 55)

Production, in this sense, is at home on the production line. One imagines a Ford factory line producing axel after axel, each one identical. For Baudrillard, the regime of equivalency that arrived with industrialization and mass production shifted value away from a natural understanding by forcing simulacra into relation with one another. The ensuing market would

come to define Detroit through the city's success as a hub of American manufacturing. However, just as counterfeit simulation dissolved in the face of industrial simulation, industrial simulation waned as the twentieth century progressed, eventually giving way to the third-order simulacra: simulations.

The transition from first to second order simulacra is relatively easy to identify; it is the difference between almost artisanal replication and massive reproduction; the façade of a nineteenth century church capturing some of the majesty of nature's lines and the cold grey of a car's anatomy falling off the ends of assembly lines. The transition from second order to third order simulacra is harder to pin down because of simulation's ability to harvest material from the previous two orders, effectively simulating the past. In a sense, production and counterfeit have survived their historical epochs but only as simulations. First and second order simulacra are gone from Detroit. What remain are the shells of the two previous orders. Pewabic Pottery still exists but its pots are no longer defined by their use-value or exchange-value. Their value is only sign-value. Utility and commercial viability are ghosts in present day Pewabic. The Pewabic tiles that decorated Detroit's Guardian building in the 1920s performed a very different function from Pewabic's contribution to ornamenting Comerica Park in the early 2000s.[28] Value remains tied to the pottery but now it is through images that illustrate Pewabic's history and not the price of their commodities (exchange-value) or the functions they serve (use-value). Acquiring a Pewabic pot no longer has anything to do with the functional qualities of the piece or its market value, Pewabic Pottery is valuable because of the richness of its sign. The persistence of Pewabic in the present is an example of simulations picking through the counterfeit simulacra of Detroit's past.

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28 In addition to providing the centrepiece to Pewabic's ceramic tile installation at the stadium, the pottery's Detroit Tigers Old English 'D' tile is available for purchase at their Museum Store.

Although counterfeit simulacra are widely available for transformation into simulations in present day Detroit, the city's history as an industrial giant has meant that third order simulacra find particularly rich ammunition in the production era.

A recent reincarnation in Detroit of a production era darling is the rebranded Shinola Company. If the moniker sounds familiar, it is because the venture capital firm Bedrock Manufacturing acquired the name that was once the trademark of the iconic American shoe polish institution.[29] Although Bedrock Manufacturing is based in Dallas, Texas, the company decided to establish its Shinola division in Detroit. Looking to mine the residual fantasy of America's manufacturing legacy, long a part of national identity, Bedrock Manufacturing set up shop in 30,000 square feet on the fifth floor of the Alfred A. Taubman building in Detroit, a former automotive research lab. Shinola's product line has two pillars: industrialism and Americanism. The company's bread and butter is their line of high end watches that use Swiss parts but that are assembled entirely in the Detroit facility. Shinola also manufactures and sells boutique bicycles, leather goods (sourced from the country's oldest tannery), journals, and a curated collection that ranges from distressed leather footballs and baseballs to antique American flags, the most costly of which sells for $50,000. Pedaling watches and bicycles, Shinola is the shell of a manufacturing company.

For the first half of the twentieth century, Ford's factories exploited industrial labour to create a commodity that held enough exchange value to turn big profits; labour, resources, and surplus value came together to produce a profit in exchange. Although it is certain that Shinola

29 Bedrock executives were able to draw from brand rewcognition derived from not only the name's legacy as a patriotic American corporation but also from the once popular figure of speech, "you can't tell shit from Shinola".

exploits the labour of its workers,[30] it is not by the same means. The appeal of Shinola is not that the products are well-made or innovative, but that they are shown to be made on an assembly line in Detroit. In the production of commodities for exchange value, labour gets incorporated into manufacturing. With Shinola, labour is not incorporated into the market price of a watch through production but it is rather part of the sign-value that the company is creating. The Shinola factory labourers simulate production for the benefit of sign-value, not for the market price of the watch. The production of the watch is simulated in order to tap into the nostalgic American sensibility that is Shinola's trademark. The watches available for sale on the company's website are themselves simulations of American manufacturing and engineering; buying one does not constitute exchange in the same way as trading gold-backed currency for a timepiece in the nineteenth century. Rather, trading floating currency (either cash or, more likely, balances in bank accounts and on credit cards) for a sign of Detroit's trendiness—in this case a watch—is a symbolic exchange. In reaping the industrial past for production order simulacra to simulate, Shinola draws on the Americanness of that legacy. Shinola plays up its nationalism by exploiting the nostalgia that is attached to industry in Detroit.

To the point of obsession, Shinola is rooted in nostalgia for America. The nostalgia is fickle insofar as bikes and watches might come across as quaint, especially in the digital age. Yet Shinola's is not a nostalgia for the past, but rather as Frederic Jameson says, a nostalgia for the present. Shinola does not long for a return to the past but rather simulates a desirable present by

30 The entry-level wage for a job on the assembly line ranges from twelve to fifteen dollars an hour. Even working forty hours a week, fifty weeks a year, the wage cannot compete with that of Detroit's assembly line workers of old who could not only afford to own their houses but could own the cars they were building. The economic prosperity that benefitted autoworkers in the 1950s does not exist for Shinola's assembly line. Instead, Shinola's image of its workers as well-compensated, happy, and grateful—the simulation of the workers' prosperity—produces sign-value in the absence of any exchange-based prosperity.

regurgitating past icons, newly branded. Where what matters is sign-value, Shinola's cunning strategy turns out simulations of past representations of labour and America: the factory itself, its workers, and its over the top nationalism feed into simulation. Labour's old role of investing a commodity with use-value and with exchange-value are gone yet images of labourers remain. Labour now feeds simulation instead of exchange-ready commodities. Shinola's workers still produce surplus value but the surplus is in signs to be consumed en masse, not exchanged in a market. The company's slogan, "where American is made," is telling. There is no delusion: Shinola does not produce market ready commodities, instead, through images of itself, the company makes American. Images that simulate old production in the present, and the company's fetish for any symbol of America (from flags to footballs) make American. Shinola's association with Detroit feeds into the simulation of an American present filled with the values of an American past. Just as use-value and exchange value have given way to sign value, *Making American* replaces *Made in America*.

In Detroit, making American is not restricted to the realm of luxury watches, bicycles, and leather. As a further example, showing that Shinola is not an anomaly, Chrysler's wildly popular "Imported from Detroit" advertising campaign foregoes the more conventional car commercial format of listing mileage, horsepower, safety ratings, and all the exciting features that come standard. Instead the campaign presents image after image of American symbols. The campaign started with Chrysler's two minute, 2011, Superbowl commercial slot. Since then, the campaign has included regular television ads and an online collection of inspirational videos featuring model Americans. For the 2012 Superbowl, amidst high expectations for the new

chapter in the viral ad campaign, Chrysler hired Clint Eastwood to narrate a dramatic ode to American perseverance:

> It's half time. Both teams are in their locker room discussing what they can do to win this game in the second half. It's halftime in America too. People are out of work and they're hurting. And they're all wondering what they're gonna do to make a comeback. And we're all scared because this isn't a game. The people of Detroit know a little something about this. They almost lost everything. But we all pulled together, now Motor City is fighting again… We find a way through tough times, and if we can't find a way, then we'll make one. All that matters now is what's ahead. How do we come from behind? How do we come together? And, how do we win? Detroit's showing us it can be done. And, what's true about them is true about all of us. This country can't be knocked out with one punch. We get right back up again and when we do the world is going to hear the roar of our engines. Yeah, it's halftime America and our second half is about to begin.

The background to the narration cuts between Eastwood looking American and generic footage of people working hard in depressed environments. When Eastwood shifts from explaining the nation's dire straits to hailing relentless American spirit as the nation's inevitable saviour, the video runs through shots of a young couple, a mother and a baby, a family, and firefighters, all of them with stern, sincere expressions looking straight into the camera. This is not an advertisement trying to convince consumers of either the use or exchange value of a car.

The cycle of images revolving under Eastwood's unmistakable growl might be read as either representations or misrepresentations of Detroit and America. This mode of analysis,

perhaps most clearly characterized by Guy Debord's society of the spectacle, assumes a reality that is separate from the images that flash alongside Eastwood's monologue. Debord writes:

> The spectacle presents itself simultaneously as society itself, as a part of society, and as a means of unification. As a part of society, it is the focal point of all vision and all consciousness. But due to the very fact that this sector is separate, it is in reality the domain of delusion and false consciousness: the unification it achieves is nothing but an official language of universal separation. (1)

For Debord, the spectacle is a distortion of real events: the images in the Chrysler commercial are harmful because they obscure the material conditions that they claim to represent. Debord's appeal lies in the stark terms in which he poses the problem and the relatively clear path towards a solution. If "Imported from Detroit" is only a misrepresentation of a distinct reality, then all that is left to do is to reveal the underlying truth and in so doing discredit the fictions of the ad. Although the ease with which resistance can take place if the commercial's images do indeed constitute a spectacle is alluring, Debord's assumption that reality and representation are separate falls apart once exchange-value dissolves into sign-value.

For Baudrillard, there is no difference between the representation and what it represents; no difference between the image and the real. In his formative essay "The Evil Demon of Images" he says:

> I do not believe in a dialectic between image and reality, nor therefore, in respect of images in a pedagogy of message and meaning. The secret of the image (we are still speaking of contemporary, technical images) must not be sought in its differentiation from reality, and hence in its representative value (aesthetic critical or dialectical), but on

> the contrary in its 'telescoping' into reality, its short-circuit with reality, and finally, in the implosion of image and reality. For us there is an increasingly definitive lack of differentiation between image and reality which no longer leaves room for representation as such. This collusion between images and life, between the screen and daily life, can be experienced everyday in the most ordinary manner. (2007, 93)

The ultimate implosion of image and reality results in what Baudrillard calls the hyperreal. The hyperreal is different from Debord's society of the spectacle in that the latter continues to depend on the distinction between spectacle (distorted representation) and reality.[31] The spectacle complicates representation by attending to extreme distortion while the hyperreal is characterized by the impossibility of representation because of reality's collapse into simulation. Baudrillard writes: "The hyperreal is beyond representation only because it is entirely within simulation, in which the barriers of representation rotate crazily, an implosive madness which, far from being ex-centric, keeps its gaze fixed on the centre, on its own abyssal repetition" (74, 1993). In the hyperreal, reality as a pure ideal is no longer relevant because it no longer exists. Instead, the hyperreal mines itself to reproduce iteration after iteration of simulation. The spectacle society is the dramatization of a sensational false-consciousness contingent on the fundamental separation of reality and representation: the spectacle is a pervasive misrepresentation. In the hyperreal, on the other hand, reality unadulterated by the influence of simulation no longer exists. Instead, simulations feed off of signs to produce ever more simulations which in aggregate make up the

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31 For Debord, the relationship between spectacle and reality is complex: the two poles interact and are far from isolated from one another, however, they are nonetheless fundamentally discrete. Debord writes: "The spectacle cannot be abstractly contrasted to concrete social activity. Each side of such a duality is itself divided. The spectacle that falsifies reality is nevertheless a real product of that reality. Conversely, real life is materially invaded by the contemplation of the spectacle, and ends up absorbing it and aligning itself with it. Objective reality is present on both sides. Each of these seemingly fixed concepts has no other basis than its transformation into its opposite: reality emerges within the spectacle, and the spectacle is real. This reciprocal alienation is the essence and support of the existing society.

hyperreal. Simulations in the hyperreal do not require a referent; in Shinola, labour is simulated to produce surplus sign-value. Shinola's nostalgia for Detroit's rugged Americanness and manual labour is in effect a strategy to exploit whatever value might be culled from the city's history. Baudrillard shows that Shinola is not misrepresenting their relationship to labour but instead extracting surplus value in the only paradigm that still exists. The logic of the spectacle still depends on a fundamental distortion (even if the distortion renders an image that is a great distance from the original) of reality. Although Debord recognizes that one end of the dichotomy makes up the other, he nonetheless maintains that they are locked together as discrete categories and not collapsed one into the other, inseparable and indistinguishable. In the hyperreal, the lock is broken, simulation and reality are the same.

In the hyperreal, the excesses of the "Imported from Detroit" campaign are not misrepresentations. The 2014 version of the campaign's Superbowl ad features Bob Dylan in a city we assume is Detroit while his song "Things Have Changed" plays in the background.[32] As with Eastwood, clips of Dylan are interrupted by a fast slew of Americana: a baseball game, a "Route 66" sign; Marilyn Monroe laughing; James Dean; a cowboy; Rosie the Riveter; and several takes on open roads, industrial manufacturing, and beautiful women ("The American road and *the creatures* that live on it"). Again, like Eastwood's commercial, Dylan's rhetoric is as vacuous as the simulations of American images that propel the commercial. In his aging nasal drawl, Dylan says "Yeah, Detroit made cars and cars made America. Making the best, making the finest, takes conviction and you can't import the heart and soul of every man and woman working on the line." He goes on to cite belief in the "zoom, the roar, and the thrust" as evidence

32 In an unintended message that speaks to Dylan's decades long shift from counter-culture icon to Chrysler spokesperson, the refrain of the song (which is never heard in the commercial) is "I used to care but things have changed."

for a shared and uniquely American sensibility. Dylan saves the most dramatic part of his monologue for the end: "And when it's made here, it's made with the one thing that you can't import from anywhere else: American pride. So let Germany brew your beer. Let Switzerland make your watch. Let Asia assemble your phone. We [pauses for effect] will build your car." Throughout the commercial, Dylan struts around twirling a guitar, lending his voice, music, and image to the American vision Chrysler effects.[5] If the two minute commercial does not seem to be all that concerned with selling cars (Dylan never actually says the word "Chrysler"), it is because it is not. The images and narrative remain interested in expanding capital, but expansion happens on the register of simulation. Chrysler pulls images of Detroit's blue collar factory workers into simulation, thereby satisfying capital's demand for surplus sign-value through exploitation. In an ironic twist, even Dylan's image as the legendary antiestablishment figure feeds into simulation to serve the expansion and intensification of capital through signs.

Above: Fig. 8 A digital banner from Chrysler's Imported from Detroit campaign

If sign-value is in fact capital's only remaining and relevant means to extract surplus value, then the images of Detroit in the Chrysler ads and in Shinola, both examples of Detroit's high value as a sign, are at odds with the flood of news and images detailing the city as one of capitalism's larger failures. It is not unusual for journalists covering the bankruptcy to compare

Detroit to Babylon (Babad) and Pompeii (Macdonald). As I discussed in the previous chapter, whether Detroit is being absorbed into its own history or is emerging from the past to reclaim its former status as a great American metropolis is one of the main concerns fueling the media frenzy. In this paradigm, whatever Detroit's future, the city is currently in crisis. Segregation in the city is reportedly more extreme than in any other metropolitan area (Logan and Sults, 5). One of the most arresting incongruities in images of Detroit is the lack of city services, long considered staples of even the most limited municipality. Despite Kevyn Orr's assurances that the bankruptcy will lead to reliable public works, water is shut off and garbage piles up (Glover). Although it is tempting to succumb to representational criticism, countering the sensationalism of Detroit's crisis with evidence that the city is far from abandoned, frozen, or dead, such an analysis intervenes in the wrong register. Garbage lined streets are not indicative of failed capitalism but are rather a vital sign of Detroit's poverty. Water that stops running, grandiose associations with other failed cities, and the onslaught of images of buildings in disrepair all provide value to the simulation of Detroit as poor. Though it seems counter-intuitive, these images demonstrate capitalism's resilience as they bolster the credibility of Detroit's crisis and, through a simulated juxtaposition, feed into simulations of prosperity in other cities.

Detroit's poverty and its crisis are both signs; media coverage of the bankruptcy and the state of the city invest these signs with value. These media events do not hide, displace, or erase reality, rather they generate it. It can be hard to see how the "Imported from Detroit" campaign and Shinola's general enterprise are generative because the signs they rely on are taken from the past, necessarily emptied of their former significance and put to work as simulations in the hyperreal. Shinola's dependence on the old trope of the assembly line and Chrysler's alluring

presentation of all kinds of American spirit seem historical even though they are generating a present. These simulations are sophisticated because they mask the fact that they pretend to be something other than a concoction of simulation.

Where some subtlety was necessary in understanding the Shinola and Chrysler simulations that appear historical while constituting a hyperreal present, reality television does not even feign historicity. The *Home and Garden* network's (HGTV) "Rehab Addict" compounds reality television's blunt artificiality—even the most naïve viewers understand that the reality of reality television is a made-for-tv invention—with what is perhaps one of the more explicit examples of the economic shift to sign-value: character home restoration. The show's host, Nicole Curtis, is a Detroit native now based in Minneapolis. In the fourth season of her show, Curtis devoted six episodes to a renovation project in Detroit. No matter where it is filmed, the show is formulaic: Curtis discovers a decrepit house full of *potential*; she gets her hands dirty restoring the house, always careful to balance original features with the comforts of modern design; after the renovation is complete, the show concludes with a series of before and after details where Curtis narrates her passion for all things antique while she revels in the transformation she has achieved. There was a minor controversy in early 2013 when Curtis unsuccessfully tried to stop the demolition of a house in one of Minneapolis' poorer neighbourhoods. As the camera crew Curtis brought with her to the demolition set to work capturing the house before it was leveled, Curtis mourned the loss: "When they started demolishing it, I was scared. I didn't think they'd do it with me in it. I wouldn't show up if I knew they were going to tear it down. I don't watch houses go down — it's like watching someone get tortured. I spent five hours in the cold, bawling" (Palmer). While Curtis cried,

neighbourhood residents who had been trying to get the house knocked down for some time gathered. On the behalf of neighbours, Chris Hannon told a reporter "We'd been working on this [getting the house demolished] way before she [Curtis] appeared with a bunch of cameras, crying. She wanted to rehab it and get a nice family in there, but the bottom line is, this is a rough corner. A family with children is a stretch. It's not as simple as 'Let's fix it up'" (Palmer). In the news accounts of the demolition, Hannon resents Curtis' commitment to stopping the demolition and beautifying the house. To an extent, the conflict between Curtis and Hannon dramatizes sign-value's autonomy from exchange-value and use-value. Even though her interaction with Hannon might leave Curtis sounding out of touch with the *real* needs of the neighbourhood, she understands her own position in the hyperreal with striking clarity. By turning blighted homes into artisanal restoration projects and filming the whole undertaking, Rehab Addict generates sign-value. Curtis has grasped that the appearance of progress and progress itself are one and the same while Hannon's responses depend on a reality beyond simulation. The only value to be found in Hannon's position is as Curtis' foil; in other words, once we understand that Hannon's contention that the everyday lives of the neighbourhood's residents would be improved by the demolition of the house is itself a simulation packaged for easy image consumption, the effect of her presence in the coverage becomes completely detached from her stated purpose. Instead of guaranteeing the kind of change Hannon wants to see in her neighbourhood, her stated concerns and grassroots advocacy feed simulation.

Above: Fig. 9 Rehab Addict's Nicole Curtis watches as the house at 1925 Park Avenue South in Minneapolis is demolished

There is some of Dorothy Parker's Mrs. Lanier in Curtis' tears for the demolished house. But where Mrs. Lanier's anguish is frustrating given her comfort relative to people enduring far more trying conditions than having to see poverty, Curtis' is generative. Mrs. Lanier's grief was baldly narcissistic whereas Curtis crying for a camera joined with the narrative of her passion for old homes and restoration creates an entrancing simulation, ready for circulation and consumption. Despite their differences, Mrs. Lanier and Curtis share inaccurate perceptions of how reality feeds into either a perfectly cultivated persona or simulations of prosperity. Intent on constructing and maintaining her delicate identity, Mrs. Lanier feeds off of the pain of others; she uses visible signs of poverty as fuel. In a similar fashion, Curtis' focus on pursuing restoration—producing sign-value—prevents her from seeing how reality (by which I mean the contemporary order of simulation which is the effect of the mutual implosion of reality and representation) feeds into simulation. By failing to grasp this process, Curtis does not realize that transforming history, reality, and simulations into sign-value produces casualties. The regime of sign-value

remains ambivalent to any suffering that it might cause and instead waits for the opportunity to recuperate the byproducts of its havoc as yet more simulations.

Rehab Addict does not represent reality but has itself joined the spiral of images and narratives that have dissolved any distinction between representation and the real in and beyond Detroit. In a promotional spot for her time in Detroit, Curtis narrates while *before* footage of her project alternates with longer shots panning the neighbourhood. Curtis says: "The sad truth is there are thousands of homes in Detroit that are abandoned and in danger of being torn down. I want to save them all but I have to start with just one... my theory is that if you do one house the rest will follow." Curtis' fantasy evokes a Detroit transformed by HGTV hosts; thousands of houses saved from the wrecking ball and painstakingly restored to satisfy the voracious consumptive impulses of a mass audience. The fantasy seems absurd but in simulation the deficit in exchange-value that would otherwise be a barrier to realizing the complete overhaul of a city's infrastructure no longer imposes a limit. Exchange-value persists as a sign and not a material concern. Simulation is indifferent as to whether poverty or prosperity dominates any paradigm as long as signs proliferate unmolested. Disparity within Detroit or even between Detroit and other cities is important in so far as it facilitates reality's return into simulation. Poverty and prosperity rely on one another to define themselves. Because simulation's only interest is its own multiplication and expansion, the shift necessary to turn the city into Curtis' vision is not far below the surface of excited reports hailing Detroit's midtown as "the new Brooklyn" (Conlin). Because Rehab Addict is not a representation of a renovation project but rather a reality unto itself, the potential outcomes of the show's simulations do not bear upon anything other than sign-value. We can imagine a *where are they now* follow up in which all of

Curtis' efforts are shown to have been no match for the ruthless economic crisis that continues to devastate the city. Conversely, it is just as easy to imagine the restored house strung together with images of other successful projects, announcing the next step in Detroit's comeback. Whether it is prosperity or crisis, images fulfilling either ever-after depend on their own potential to generate further simulations and not on the success or failure of a reality that no longer exists.[33]

The regime of sign-value is nothing if not pervasive. Archaic conceptions of capital premised on money as a universal commodity fail in the regime of sign-value; the hyperreal is only interested in simulations of exchange. Despite his various departures from orthodox Marxism, Baudrillard's hyperreal hinges on Marx' relentless insistence that capital is first and foremost a relation. In many ways, the hyperreal is an accelerated capitalism in which exploitation leads to surplus value without having to pass through cumbersome markets. Where capital in exchange ultimately outpaced its resistance, it is perhaps even more discouraging to think of confronting what seems to be the inevitable procession of simulation. Shinola's simulated assembly line, Chrysler's nostalgia for the present, and Rehab Addict's canny negotiation of the regime of simulation justify Baudrillard's cynicism. However, in a corpus that is not known for compromise, even Baudrillard relented when, after proclaiming the inescapability of the hyperreal in the mass media, he said that "other images, such as those in painting, drawing, theatre or architecture, have been better able to make us dream or imagine" (2007, 94). Imagining otherwise is one of the only consolations Baudrillard offers, because, for him, the regime of simulation is an inescapable totality. Though Baudrillard might

33 For Baudrillard, this state of affairs is the "referendum mode": questions are no longer posed as questions but are rather stated in such a way to provide the desired answer.

think it hopeless, anthropologist David Graeber believes that space exists inside of the regime to redefine the kinds of relationships that threaten subjugation under sign-value.

Graeber has devoted much of his work over the last decade to providing a corrective to the totalizing tendencies of economic—especially Marxist—analysis. Drawing inspiration from Marcel Mauss (an intellectual ancestor he shares with Baudrillard), Graeber argues that while any society is dominated by particular forms of economic and social organization, other kinds of relations persist. Graeber defines three different kinds of social relation: communism, exchange, and hierarchy. For Graeber, communism is the only kind of relation that is based on reciprocity. He defines communism as "any human relationship that operates on the principle of 'from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs'" (4). In exchange, social relations are limited to an isolated interaction in which two people trade goods or services of equal value. If the goods do indeed share an equivalent value (markets often ensure that the condition of equivalence is met), then the brief social relation is severed with the end of the transaction, eliminating the possibility of a sustained and reciprocal relation. In hierarchy, the problem is not a lack of relation but rather an excessive imbalance of power. Hierarchies operate through precedent instead of material exchange. Legacies of conquest or even old customs can produce the one sided social relations of hierarchy. Graeber uses the example of peasants paying huge tributes to feudal lords who provide nothing in return (11-12). For Graeber, reciprocity is a means of resisting the social alienation of exchange as well as the domination of hierarchy.

I take Graeber's call to attend to reciprocity even in economic and social systems operating primarily within the logic of equivalence or domination as a challenge to theorizing the hyperreal and a regime of sign-value. If Graeber is right, somewhere folded into the mess of simulations of Detroit, reciprocity exists. The remaining choice is whether to follow Baudrillard's

cynicism deep into the hyperreal having given up on reciprocity's capacity to do something other than feed into simulation or to accept Graeber's challenge to pursue reciprocity as a potentially disruptive force. For the sake of avoiding hopelessness, Graeber's path is the obvious choice, though it is impossible to shake the suspicion that even the most radical resistance might have nowhere else to go than into another simulation.

Conclusion: Reciprocity in the Hyperreal

Images and narratives surrounding Detroit are not simple representations of an underlying reality. I have tried to demonstrate from different perspectives that media which purport to be documenting a crisis in the city are otherwise implicated: either in a broader historical context or in a more complex relationship between representation and reality. When images and narratives are convincing their various audiences that Detroit is in crisis, a reading of these artifacts that refuses to be distracted by sensationalism disrupts their seamless persuasiveness. In writing this thesis it was a challenge to resist the impulse to force incompatible analyses into a neat narrative. My hope is that by pursuing instead of ignoring some of the contradictions of media surrounding Detroit and its bankruptcy, I have done the complexity of my object some justice.

Kevyn Orr, the photographers Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, and Nicole Curtis all share a relationship to the city that resonates across their disparate platforms. Although their political and social positions are diverse, they all rely on producing images of crisis in Detroit to engage their audiences. One of the first signs that something is amiss with their articulated versions of the city is the inability of their depictions of extreme suffering to elicit any kind of engaged or sustained response from their viewership. Orr's justifications for the bankruptcy, the theatrical photographs of Detroit's abandoned monuments, and the extreme poverty on the periphery of Rehab Addict have thus far all failed to bring about a direct response to the suffering that seems to be such a crucial part of their portrayals of the city's problems. In all three cases, the space for a political response is instead taken up with making those watching the crisis feel a

certain way. While images of homelessness, blight, and crumbling infrastructure spiral out of control, the Federal Government promises to stand with the city without committing any other kind of support, encapsulating a model for how those who are outside of Detroit should continue to relate to its crisis. This inability or refusal to act is not a political short-coming or a bad-faith subjugation (although there are registers in which reading this media through a lens of identity politics is absolutely necessary) but rather the result of the larger shift in media and economics away from exchange-value and into sign-value.

Although I would have felt some immediate satisfaction if I had devoted a large part of this project to exposing Orr's, Marchand and Meffre's, and Curtis' Detroits as inaccurate and consequently harmful to the city's residents, such an analysis misunderstands the central role sign-value has played in sustaining the city's image (which is indistinguishable from the city itself). Jean Baudrillard's hyperreal provides a way out of the true-false distinctions that are at the core of debates around representation and towards a means of accounting for the effects of images, all contrived, that trick us into believing in their perfect fidelity. Through Baudrillard, the epochal ends announced in every picture that exploits fleeting decay as a grand symbol cannot be reduced to a photographic manipulation but are themselves generative. The determinant garbage in one image flows into the next as it collects meaning and momentum, making the end of Detroit as we knew it. The city's empty streets and decrepit infrastructure are synecdoches for the city, however, unlike traditional understandings of synecdoches, images of decay in the city are free floating; they are synecdoches where the part can generate its own whole. Like the sensational elements of Marchand and Meffre's ruin photography, Shinola and Chrysler's marketing depended on building a powerful image of Detroit. Whether the image is of

poverty or prosperity is of no consequence because sign-value is not beholden to the concerns of exchange-value.

One of the main difficulties of applying Baudrillard's insights to Detroit is the inescapability of the regimes he defines. Through Baudrillard, we might even take the dramatic view that 'the bankruptcy did not take place.' The benefits of that more orthodox Baudrillardian position come of the ways in which such an uncompromising perspective can draw attention to under-theorized aspects of the generative role media plays in the production of sign-value. By refusing to entertain the possibility that, away from the media coverage of the bankruptcy, Detroit's financial standing is hurting city residents, the hyperreal targets the limitations of representation as a means of resistance. The sole objective of more images and more narratives of suffering is to feed simulation. Bearing witness, keeping track of unfolding images of crisis, and feeling the right kind of solidarity with Detroit and its residents hold as much potential for political disruption as watching *RoboCop*. While I am ultimately sympathetic to Baudrillard's critiques, I am reluctant to apply his theories without taking into consideration a possibility for resistance even within simulation and the hyperreal. It is because of this reluctance that I turned to David Graeber's work on reciprocity.

Despite theorizing different kinds of economies, Graeber's attentiveness to the central role of relations in any form of social organization is refreshing. A logical continuation of my project is an analysis of the intersection of the cynicism of Baudrillard's hyperreal and the practical and ubiquitous resistance of Graeber's reciprocity. Where does reciprocity fit into symbolic exchange? In all the examples I have discussed, both when they celebrate the indomitable American spirit and when. they mourn the loss of a city and an epoch, the media

objects are consistently sensational. Shinola and Chrysler's hyper-representation of American is a relentless flood of hyper-national symbols and the images of Detroit's ruined monuments draw comparison to history's most iconic civic failures. The extreme nature of these figurations makes Graeber's key to reciprocity, "permanent mutual debt" (9), all but unimaginable. However, Graeber's faith that reciprocity must exist even within a system of simulations might yet provide a way forward. The dynamic play of poverty and prosperity illustrate the ease with which simulation can exploit disparity to produce sign value but even within that system it is impossible to eliminate all traces of more reciprocal relationships. Just as extreme simulations harvest history, perhaps one of the places to look for reciprocity is in past instances of political confrontation. Although guarding against the slip from reciprocity into a sensational image that feeds simulation is constant threat, I can think of worse places to build a basis for resisting the new exploitation of sign-value than in Detroit's history of labour organizing and militant anti-racism.

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