

# Urban Decay Photography and Film: Fetishism and the Apocalyptic Imagination

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## Abstract

Detroit's perceived social and industrial degeneration has been matched by an unfortunate aesthetic appreciation for the image of urban ruination. Detroit, and other cities experiencing economic disinvestment, have become the inanimate models for a documentary and artistic mode of photography that fetishizes scenes of urban decline and abandonment. Such cities and urban spaces have become real-life stand-ins for the apocalyptic imagination already nurtured in broader arts and media. The fascination with the ruins of contemporary culture and the proliferation of what is sometimes referred to as “ruin porn” photography, point toward Susan Sontag's cautious warning about the photographer's complicity in retaining the photographed object's state of being. Drawing on Sontag's suspicions of photography, I offer a critique of the function and meaning of ruin photography. I draw on both Sontag's and Roland Barthes's cautions about the interpretive function of the photograph in terms of the act of photographing the object as well as the meaning that the photograph proposes. Using this framework, I consider the recent conceptualizations of ruin, particularly the industrial ruin, as ambivalent and multifaceted. I question whether this multidimensionality is evident in the ruin photography of Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre and others, the urban exploration photography of *Detroiturbex*, and the documentary film *Deptropia*. I suggest that the photographer's fascination with places of ruin carries out the double act of fixing such places firmly in a particular melancholic moment and equally fixes any potential meaning potentially represented in such imagery.

## Keywords

Urban decay, photography, Detroit, deindustrialization, apocalypse, post-apocalyptic landscapes, ruin porn

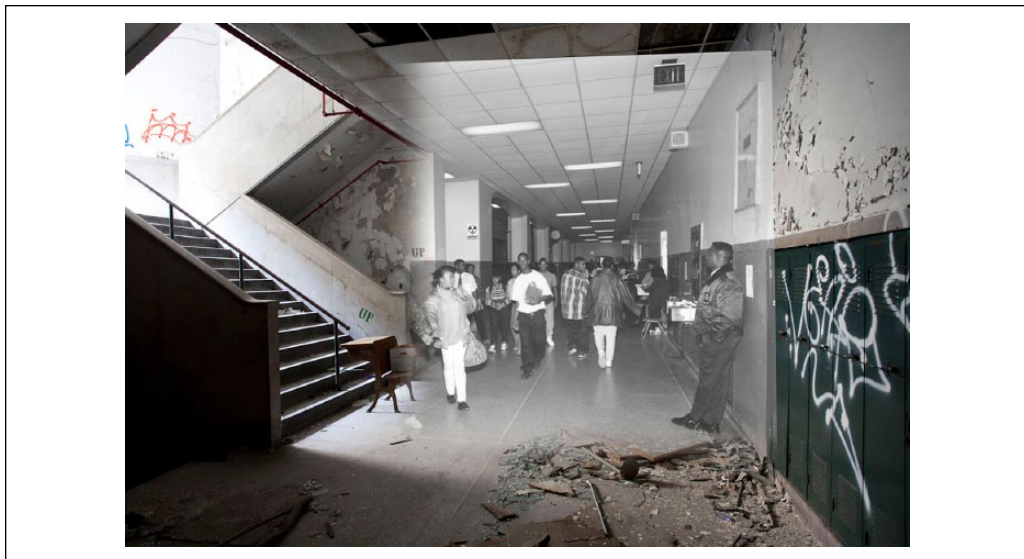
Contemplating the range of examples that might frame the subject of this article—Urban Decay photography—I returned time and again to a set of photographs that had, for a short time, circulated the internet via newspaper websites and blogs.<sup>1</sup> The photo series, which capture several rooms within the Cass Tech High School in Detroit—that is, classrooms, gymnasium, and auditorium—are composites of the contemporary disused and abandoned space, and the school during the years it was used (Figures 1–3). The larger frame of each image represents the current state of the school and the smaller internal (and perfectly aligned) frame represents the student

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**Figure 1.** Second floor hallway, Cass Tech Now and Then.

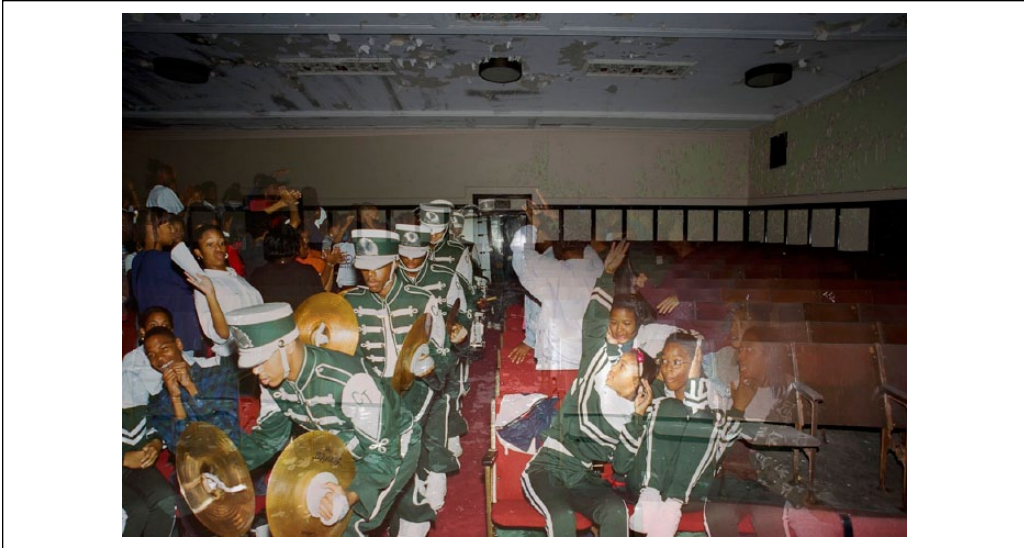
Source: <http://detroiturbex.com/content/schools/cass/thenandnow/index.html>. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.



**Figure 2.** Gym class, Cass Tech Now and Then.

Source: <http://detroiturbex.com/content/schools/cass/thenandnow/index.html>. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.

activities from some years prior. The building has since been demolished. These fascinating photographs captured two historical and conceptual moments: the building during its lived time and the building during its journey toward death. The images are charged with nostalgia and instilled with a sense of the spectral. The ghostly students haunt the hallways and corridors of the contemporary ruin. The school initially looked as if it had been suddenly abandoned because of some



**Figure 3.** Pep band, Cass Tech Now and Then.

Source: <http://detroiturbex.com/content/schools/cass/thenandnow/index.html>. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.

apocalyptic crisis or emergency. The students looked as though they might be long dead. Yet, were one to query a little further, historical fact would quickly dispel any romantic or fantastic sentiment. The school, it transpires, was shut down to make way for a larger, more appropriate school next door, and the students represented in the eerie photographs are now probably in their thirties, having moved on into the wider social community. This is commented upon in the documentary *Detroit Lives* (2010) whereby a local interviewee points to the constant emphasis of the abandoned school despite the newer, successful school sitting right next to it.<sup>2</sup> But this notion of ongoing life is not the popular impression of Detroit; the most widely circulated imagery of the city is that of deindustrialization, depopulation, urban decay, and degeneration. The trend in urban decay photography is complicit in, reflective of, and in many ways productive of this discourse of ruination. This is not to suggest that Detroit is not undergoing processes of deindustrialization, disinvestment, and depopulation. Detroit's recent economic crisis testifies to this. Rather, the continued photographic emphasis of the decay of the city negates the many positive efforts and reformative measures that work toward sustaining and improving the experiences of those in residence.

This points to one of the pressing issues with Detroit urban decay photography, namely, its capacity to produce an identity of the place that becomes more widely believed or experienced than the social reality of Detroit itself. And more than this, such photography has the potential to fix the identity of a place in a certain moment or experience, simply through the overrepresentation of a particular context, which in this case is the "death of a city" evoked in visual depictions of Detroit's postindustrial decline. One might equally consider the creative talent that has emerged from Detroit despite or because of the city's landscape and identity: for example, the continued production of popular musical talent. One might equally refer to the many grassroots initiatives that work to reshape the city in terms of community: for example, through the urban farm movement, which repurposes industrial land into agricultural land or the formation of the Detroit Digital Justice Coalition, which uses digital technologies to respond to the needs to the community. However, such initiatives, perhaps because they contest the dominant discourse of Detroit as a ruin, are relatively invisible. Indeed

both photography and the city of Detroit are commonly associated with pastness, of something having taken place before and, therefore, being over or finished, even if many of the movements and voices of the city indicate otherwise. Photography's relationship with history and pastness has, of course, been an object of fascination for theorists and academics such as Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, and Susan Sontag.<sup>3</sup> For Benjamin, photography results in the loss of an object's aura: the aura being that quality of an object that bears "testimony to the history it has experienced."<sup>4</sup> Photography undoes this since it can endlessly reproduce the object. Thus, the photograph interferes with the object's relation to time and history. Both Barthes and Sontag refer to notions of the past and also death. Barthes notes that the photograph suggests what he terms the "that-has-been."<sup>5</sup> This reference to a past moment also reveals that the moment is no longer. Sontag likens the act of photography to the freezing of time.<sup>6</sup> All have, therefore, pondered the means by which the photographic image can capture a moment in time and retain its visual reference in the present. A moment that is now gone from experience can be, at least, evoked in the photograph. Ruin photography demonstrates these concerns in that both the photograph and the ruin have complex relationships to the past. Like the photograph, the ruin references a historical moment. However, where the photograph is a static marker of a precise historical moment, the ruin is always undergoing a process of change. The ruin represents the process of history, as Benjamin has suggested.<sup>7</sup> It might crumble, it might collapse, it changes shape, and it is sometimes restored or repurposed. Both ruin and decay are active processes. Where the photograph can refer quite explicitly to the historical object, the ruin is the physical, ongoing legacy of the object. And it is precisely this ongoingness and this persistence of being that the photograph fails to capture. Detroit evokes this complex association with history and pastness. It is bound to the passing of time—in terms of its perpetual changing—where the photograph transcends it as it is not bound to change. However, the cultural idea of Detroit functions somewhat like the photograph in the sense that its visual discourse evokes the past. Despite the passing of time, the city's most (in)famous architecture and landscape point not to an industrious present or future but to its past. More pressing, the image alone, while producing a historical spectacle, does little to reveal anything about the circumstances that produced the represented historical moment. To emphasize decay is to undermine the productive and generative history behind the photograph. The fetishization of decaying structures, as evidenced in photographic books such as *Beauty in Decay* by RomanWG<sup>8</sup> or *States of Decay* by Daniel Barter and Daniel Marbaix,<sup>9</sup> works to celebrate the ruin. This apparent celebration undermines the drive toward economic and social growth that the buildings and landscapes represented. In other words, such photographs could be understood as a cynical attack on economic idealism. The photograph does not represent the past; rather it discursively produces it.

## Photographic Discourse

Barthes suggests as much in early works *Michelet* (1954) and *The Discourses of History* (1967). For him, the photograph offers not the reality of a past, historical moment; rather, it is part of historical discourse. Historical discourse, Barthes writes, "does not follow reality, it only signifies it."<sup>10</sup> The photo, then, can be understood as discursive rather than objective. It seems revelatory but it, instead, makes a claim about the object. Further, the photographic discourse is a narrow one. The temporal and contextual limitations of the photograph exclude a good deal more detail than they include. For example, a photograph of a building, in its revelatory capacity, seems to bring it to representation. However, while it evokes the building (its present), it can also negate it (its sociohistorical function, the historical experiences of it, and its role or place in culture). Barthes demonstrated this in his historical examinations of the French historian Jules Michelet and, later, himself, whereby he collected and presented series



**Figure 4.** Charles Sheeler, *Criss-Crossed Conveyors—Ford Plant*, Negative date: 1927. Photograph, gelatin silver print.

Source: The Lane Collection. Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Fair Use Permitted [www.mfa.org](http://www.mfa.org).

of photographs accompanied by biographical detail and contextual information.<sup>11</sup> In doing this, he showed how the photograph alone offered merely a visual marker that required further narrative detail in order to be more fully understood. Thus, although each photograph tells a story, it is also accompanied by an invisible and transformative story that can shape the interpretation of the image it depicts. For example, the photographs taken of the magnificent Ford River Rouge industrial plant near Detroit by Charles Sheeler in 1927 evoke the dominance of industry in the area (Figure 4).<sup>12</sup>

Huge conveyor belts cross over the site, towers stretch to the sky, machinery creeps into all free space. This image, “Criss-Crossed Conveyors,” might signify the sheer power of the motor industry. Its evocation of the religious, in the form of the crucifix, elevates the scene to the level of the symbolic, if not the mythic. Yet, the wealth of historical and contemporary context reshapes the story of the image: histories of modernity, labor relations, race relations, deindustrialization, and mass unemployment. Absent of the human labor central to industry, this photograph undermines the social role and meaning of factory production in Michigan. The human population that produces and makes use of such mechanization is eradicated.





**Figure 5.** *Fisher Body 21 Plant*, Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre.  
Source: Yves Marchand & Romain Meffre.

### **Aestheticizing Detroit's Decay**

More recently, and in a similar vein, the photographs of Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre in *The Ruins of Detroit* as well as the wealth of abandoned industrial site photographs on urban explorer<sup>13</sup> websites and blogs (discussed later on in this article) tend toward the aestheticization and romanticization of urban decay.<sup>14</sup> For instance, the Marchand and Meffre photograph “Fisher Body 21 Plant” stresses the empty void of the factory space and emphasizes the deterioration of the building in order, it seems, to secure it primarily as an artistic scene, not a documentary one (Figure 5). One might read the photographs in the series as a critique of the economic forces that shape the contemporary urban landscape and economy. Indeed, the photographs seem to evoke the consequences of creative destruction, whereby the decline in manufacturing is merely an inevitable facet of modern capitalism. One could even read the photographs as a positive testament to the potential of these spaces: the tunnel filled with light leading to an opening, perhaps an indication of the processes of decline *and* renewal at play in modern capitalism. In either case, however, there is a glaring omission: the social reality of Detroit. This photo, and many like it, suggests that Detroit be understood solely in terms of industrial decline and not the on-going movements and efforts of people to redefine their spaces not dependent upon or defined by industrialism and postindustrialism. By invoking Detroit in the abstract—via decayed structures and objects—the photographs propose that an apocalyptic moment has already materialized. This post-apocalyptic discourse, however, is challenged by the growing pockets of initiative and enterprise, evidenced in urban investment in buildings such as the Argonaut—now the Taubman Center for Design Education—and in the various brands and companies—for example, Shinola, Red Bull, and Twitter—that have attached themselves to the art and cultural movements that have emerged from the city. Creative destruction may be evident in Detroit, but the Marchand and Meffre photographs seem to represent much less the creative initiatives that work to move beyond Detroit’s industrial past. In the construction of an aesthetic of contemporary urban ruin,

what seems missing or negated—as in “Fisher Body 21 Plant”—is the life and community force that did and continues to negotiate the meanings and uses of such spaces. Again, bigger, possibly more significant and interesting, stories are undermined in the stylization of derelict structures. A cursory glance at any of these photographs would, one would imagine, leave the viewer with the sense of Detroit itself as a derelict and abandoned city: a ghost town that now serves as a museum of an industrial past. Such an identity surely makes any attempts at industrial or broader economic revival difficult.

There is a need, perhaps, to reflect as much on how and why the photograph represents in addition to what it represents. For the photograph, while honoring a moment of time, also spectacularizes the object, infusing it with a weight that then folds meaning back onto the object. In other words, as much as the photograph reproduces the visage of the object, it also has the capacity to determine the object. This determination of the object remains in the photograph, even if the object itself persists in time. And given Detroit’s pressing need to move forward, photography that repeatedly echoes past moments might operate counter to this need.

### **Photography’s Relationship to Time and Death**

The capacity of photography to suspend the object in time has remained central to the understanding of photography’s relationship to time, the past and present and death. For there are two possible ways of reading photography’s relationship to time and death. It can free the object from time: one can gaze upon a long gone person or object in a photograph that captured a moment now lost. However, in another respect, the photograph can interfere with time, with movement, transformation and renewal. And it can do so in a number of respects. First, the photograph separates the object from broader temporal contexts: something that was a concern of Siegfried Kracauer and is particularly significant when assessing urban decay photography.<sup>15</sup> Kracauer critiques the historicist impulse that seeks to identify and narrativize every moment in history. Photography is, for him, a historicist tool. Yet the photograph also results in a lack of structural context. As much as the photograph captures the object, it also has the effect of negating the context. For example, one might think of the fascination with abandoned psychiatric hospitals. I grew up nearby such a hospital, St. Brigid’s, in my small hometown in Ireland. Parts of the hospital were decommissioned when I was young. Other parts remain open on a much smaller scale today. Photographers have ventured to these buildings to represent the space more specifically in terms of its more problematic past. For many years, the care facilities were dreadful and, as such, many of the hospital wards are now unoccupied because of health and safety concerns. But what such photographs cannot reveal is the broader history of psychiatric care. This hospital began as a progressive endeavor to provide treatment to those who otherwise would have none. The hospital functioned as a self-sufficient enterprise with its own garden store that was open to the public. The buildings that no longer serve as wards now operate as apartments, a creche, and an enterprise center. But photographs of various historical moments render the history of the place as a discontinuous one. They produce an uneven history, one that tends to prioritize a narrow context at the cost of a richer one.

Second, the photograph of an object can risk dehumanizing the social history that intersects with it. The human history that developed, used, shaped, and lived the object can be erased in the photograph. This is no more obvious than in the proliferation of photographs of Detroit’s disused industrial sites. These photographs often emphasize the colors and tones associated with decay: rusty browns, blue and green colors of organic growth, the greyness of damp. But, despite their aesthetic brilliance, one would do well to reflect on the human stories that are connected to such spaces. Any one building photographed contains a miniature biography of the city of Detroit. But photographs alone are ill suited to such biographical elaboration. And perhaps more than any city, Detroit’s biography is one worth exploring in more detail. The

rusty facades of these photographs conceal a political narrative of the way in which modern capitalism negotiated with labor communities and the consequences of dire economic crises on urban centers and communities.

Third, the photograph can actually put to death the object by fixing it firmly in a particular moment. Here we might think of the early practice of Victorian death photography: a fitting analogy of the current trend in urban decay photography. During the Victorian era, there was a brief trend in photographing a corpse, especially of a child, in full funeral clothing in either a sitting or lying position, sometimes with family, sometimes alone. In some cases, these were the only photographs of the deceased, especially if she or he were an infant or child. The photograph, thus, memorialized a person in their death rather than in their life. Such a photograph certainly freed the object/person from time, but imprisoned them in an eternal death. To look on such an image would surely conjure the more sombre aspects of the person, perhaps in illness or in that moment of life passing from them. Or perhaps they suggested peacefulness and serenity. Yet, the photograph itself had the power to represent more specifically than any memory could. Photographs of industrial ruins might function in much the same way, overshadowing the heritage of a place, memorializing it in its decline, rather than remembering its productive years and the social and labor relations that contributed to its existence. The perpetual photographing of specific sites—the Packard plant and the Fisher Body 21 plant—supplants the human experience of such spaces. The contemporary photographs of the unoccupied and decaying buildings are often used as the frame through which its history is understood. For example, the website *Atlas Obscura* juxtaposes images of the unoccupied Packard Plant with a textual history of the place.<sup>16</sup> The written history appears after the scrolling series of photographs of various vistas which document the emptiness and ruin of the building. Thus, ‘death’ becomes the representative framework for the Packard Plant.

In all three aforementioned cases, the photograph narrows rather than broadens understanding. This echoes Susan Sontag’s warning about photography, in which she claims,

To take a picture is to have an interest in things as they are, in the status quo remaining unchanged . . . to be in complicity with whatever makes a subject interesting, worth photographing—including, when that is the interest, another person’s pain or misfortune.<sup>17</sup>

The photo, in other words, keeps things as they are, even when that state of being is counter-productive or inhibiting. Undoubtedly, the photograph and the film have a power to create an imprint of time; this is also the wonder of photography. However, the centrality of decayed objects in the photographic and moving image—industrial sites, factories, institutions—warrants some consideration. These images capture the object in very specific moments of time: moments that signify death, decay, loss, emptiness, and the trash of civilization. These are objects and places that may no longer have any practical or economic use value, but they have come to have profound aesthetic value, nowhere more obviously demonstrated than in the fascination with urban decline. Photography functions, in part, to constitute the object and to illuminate and reveal that which neither memory nor narrative can provide. However, at the same time, photography can generate an impression of a place or object that is so strong that it surpasses, if not displaces, the actual experience and being of the place or object. Urban decay photography seems to freeze the industrial site, the institution, or the building in a moment that evokes death. The once heavily occupied spaces lie empty in such images, stripped of any human presence. This produces an impression of cataclysm, of some temporally distant upheaval that resulted in the abandonment of the building. In some cases, as in the cases of environmental disaster or the sudden closing of an industrial factory, this might have been the case. Equally, many of these buildings gradually became decommissioned over time. However, the photography of such places suggests what might be referred to as an apocalyptic imagination.





**Figure 6.** Fisher Plant by Brian Przypek.

Source: Brian Przypek, <http://detroitinruins.blogspot.co.uk/2010/02/fisher-plant.html>.

## The Apocalyptic Imagination

The apocalyptic imagination is concerned with aestheticizing and romanticizing the impression of disaster and sudden ruination, even if this is not part of the photographed object's history. In such photographs, an individual site or building bears the weight of the decline of capitalist empires, the failure of industry, and of the end of modernity. This is perhaps why photographers find it so necessary to rid each image of any trace of human life and why large cavernous spaces proliferate such imagery. The photographs seem to speak to an imagined architectural, industrial, and human extinction. Obsolete and disused objects become fetishized and instilled with a tragic beauty. The fetishization of ruins and urban decay, and the overinvestment in them as spectacles of our epoch, evokes a trend in pictorial representation that has existed if not for millennia, certainly for centuries. However, the context of such apocalyptic imaginings shifts across time. For example, Tim Edensor, in his book *Industrial Ruins: Space, Aesthetics and Materiality*, notes that the initial period of industrialization produced a romantic nostalgia for the past, which was manifested in the growth of heritage aesthetics and industries.<sup>18</sup> Ruins of castles, monuments, and churches came to represent a route to, and connection with, an idea of the past and of continuity rather than cessation. Even today, many of the more ancient or eventful ruins function as tourist sites, accompanied by tours, historical literature, and the occasional gift shop. These are places that heritage groups work to connect back to human history. Conversely, however, the current trend in urban decay photography of disused industrial sites signifies the opposite. Rather than valuing, and connecting with, the past, images of industrial and urban decline almost memorialize it, like Victorian death photography.

If the practice, and technological emergence and progression, of photography mirrored the technological rise of modernity, maybe it should seem fitting that photography captures the decline of industrial and urban modernity. However, the demarcation of a particular epoch through an aesthetics of the spectral and a motif of the apocalyptic fails to note the transcendence of time and space beyond the photograph. Edensor, in fact, notes how depopulated and "decaying" spaces are dynamic with life and movement. Time continues to pass. But urban decay photography often (but not always) dedicates itself to the fetishization of ominous and sublime End Times. A whole host of camera techniques, like HDR (high dynamic range), enable this rendering of the apocalyptic imagination. HDR photographs enhance the color and light of a photograph, giving objects the effect of a halo. The technique makes the photographs seem somewhat animated and, therefore, unreal. A chimney stack becomes a gateway to the heavens. A factory floor resembles an ancient catacomb. Clouds in the sky reign in over the Fisher Plant (Figure 6). The

latter image exposes the image in such a way as to emphasize the colors of the ground, the sky, and the clouds. The resulting effect is to suggest the engulfment of the building. Such photographs resemble more fictional dystopian settings than actual existing structures. Essentially, techniques such as HDR enhance the atmosphere of ruination. They turn the present state of being into a relic, a monument to the death of enterprise. Life gives way to concrete and mechanical ghosts. But, where the photograph signifies the twilight of human social and industrial endeavor, beyond the photograph, such places and buildings are connected spatially and politically to Detroit's continued narratives of past, present, and future.

Edensor suggests that the current fascination with urban decay represents a neo-Gothic attempt to deal with the anxieties of the present deindustrializing landscape. For him, these representations indicate broader fears about the crisis of the failures of modernity and of the idea of progress. Not only does it point to previous catastrophe but to "future degeneration."<sup>19</sup> Edensor himself finds such decayed spaces liberating and full of potential. He refers to the materiality of the ruin and infuses it with a corporal and organic quality. They are, for him, indeterminate and alive with activity. This understanding is an experiential one. Edensor visits these places to get a sense of the tactile. Rather than empty, he sees the buildings as occupied with an abundance of physical experience: the tangible materials of the building, the natural elements that shape the building—animals, insects, weeds, weather. The ruin, here, is dynamic. However, where the spaces themselves can be read optimistically, I would suggest that the photographs seem to undermine this dynamism. For example, the highly stylized urban decay images in the technical guides to urban exploration photography (which can easily be sourced via the Internet) represent the apocalyptic imagination. Even in the most negative manifestation, these images are iconicized and romanticized. Much has been written about apocalyptic anxieties and dread in film and photography (especially in the context of postindustrial and postmillennial ones), and the apocalypse has equally been understood in a different sense: one that emphasizes renewal and transformative potential. These take the form of doomsday films, zombie films, and the likes, which tend to point toward revived civilizations after the apocalypse. However, the apocalyptic imagination that I speak of neither laments the past, nor hopes for the future; it fetishizes and obsesses on the moment of obliteration, the ruins that remove a place from its (current, historical) time and space. The photograph becomes a sort of gravestone. Detroit serves as a useful way of considering the impact of urban decay photography and film on a city's identity, especially given its most recent troubles.

Detroit has come to symbolize the social and environmental consequences of industrial and urban decline in North America. Its recent history is representative of the limits of modernization, industrialism, and of social and economic progress in the wealthier West. The history of Detroit, as a result of this transformation, is utterly bound up in this riches to rags narrative. The very markers of Detroit's newness, its utopian identity—its industrial landscape and products—have now come to signify the reverse. The same objects that once indicated progress, now point to decline.

All of this might seem obvious, and it is. But what is worth dwelling on and interrogating is the extent to which this transformation has become fetishized, how Detroit becomes the unwilling icon of industrial and capitalist apocalypse, and how this apocalyptic imagination works not to point toward renewal, but instead seems intent on keeping Detroit's image of decay as it is. This image of urban decay has circulated widely once again due to the city's dire financial problems. There are endless narratives of Detroit which focus on its rise and fall, among which three concluding examples may suffice here: from the 2012 documentary *Detropia*,<sup>20</sup> the Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre photographs of decayed opulence and industriousness from the book *The Ruins of Detroit*, and images from *Detroiturbex.com* (Detroit's urban explorers' website).<sup>21</sup> All of these texts define Detroit as a city of decay and all three tend toward the apocalyptic imagination by using visual and aesthetic strategies that give excessive detail to decayed objects, spaces, and even subjects.

*Detropia* is perhaps the most critically aware of its responsibilities in re-presenting Detroit. It emphasizes the socio-political events that have and continue to shape the city's industry and population and it points toward the anxiousness to redevelop the city through arts programming and patronage. Interestingly, though, the film catches itself in a moment of contradiction. One particular scene highlights the very problem with the documentary itself. In it, a café owner, whose main business comes from the arts center opposite, talks with two Swiss tourists about the nature of their trip to Detroit. Rather than visiting the city for the arts community opposite, they are more interested in visiting the decayed and disorderly sites of the city. The café owner is dismayed by this. She says that this is offensive. The tourists, here, are engaged in what has become known as "dark tourism." John Lennon and Malcolm Foley, in their book *Dark Tourism: The Attraction of Death and Disaster*, outline the means by which spaces that evoke death generate a form of cultural tourism. Battlegrounds and sites of genocide or disaster, for them, come to signify "anxiety and doubt about the project of modernity."<sup>22</sup> In certain respects, some dark tourism sites educate people about recent crises and serve to contextualise difficult experiences. However, in the case of Detroit, what results instead is the spectacularization and aestheticization of a city in decline. This scene in *Detropia* points to this problem. Dark tourism risks stalling Detroit's progress, which as the tourists in the film imply, is less interesting than its decline. But the film also partakes in this dark tourism itself, with its endless return to images of failed grandeur and industriousness. As much as the documentary filmmakers attempt to find some indicators of urban regeneration, they constantly fall back on the image of apocalyptic ruin.

The photo book *The Ruins of Detroit* also partakes in this form of dark tourism. And, more significantly, it undermines any attempts at regeneration by visualizing spaces of bourgeois decadence through the evocation of the sublime. Here, nostalgic representations of once important and active spaces function to embed the identity of Detroit in "pastness." Such imagery has been referred to as "ruin porn"—a colloquialism often attributed to James Griffioen in an interview for a Thomas Morton article in *Vice* magazine in 2009.<sup>23</sup> The word is typically invoked by photographers, critics, and residents as a critique of urban decay photography. The word porn here is somewhat appropriate. Although it unfairly classifies the images in commoditized terms (and the term has been the subject of much criticism), it does bear some kind of relation to the objective of porn in its use of representational excess—in this case the excess of decay at the cost of narrativization. The overt emphasis, in the book, on waste, forgotten and misplaced objects, peeling paint, dust, and graffiti demonstrates this excess. Theaters and grand homes are almost caught in the moment of collapse. Photographs of factories and docks are set at infinity—not an infinite time, but an infinite emptiness. In his essay "The Forgetting Machine: Notes Towards a History of Detroit," Jerry Herron refers to the means by which photo-books such as this enact a process of mystification, whereby the artistic treatment of actual places and buildings renders them unreal.<sup>24</sup> The viewer of such images is exempt from any social responsibility when aesthetic practice overshadows documentary or social action. The context of such photographs is mystified for the viewer, who considers the photographs as art or museum pieces more than real places.

And what is particularly significant in this is the absence of people from these and many other urban photographs. As a photographic series, both this and the *Detroiturbex* photographs insist on the absence of community, of social activity and of regeneration. This is the apocalyptic imagination: urban landscape in a moment of death, devoid of the renewal of life that other apocalyptic narratives sometimes afford. In the book *Corporate Wasteland: The Landscape and Memory of Deindustrialization*, Steven High and David Lewis point to the lack of historical context provided within urban exploration photography forums, where the immediate physical experience of a place takes precedence over historical narrativization to the extent that information provided is sometimes inaccurate.<sup>25</sup> This is sometimes evident on *Detroiturbex.com*, whereby archival research is often limited and discussed in terms of the absence of it. And so the decayed object itself becomes fetishized as a monument of apocalyptic devastation. For example, little

information accompanies the photographs of the Trenton McLouth Steel factory on the website. It is perhaps telling that while photographs of the building in its heyday are sometimes provided, there are rarely any pictures of those buildings that are refurbished or repurposed. The Detroiturbex account of the Trenton McLouth Steel factory briefly mentions that “there were” plans to revive the factory building.<sup>26</sup> This gives the impression that these plans are in the past and that the building belongs only to history. However, while the Trenton McLouth Steel factory is currently unoccupied, there has been continued interest in repurposing the building. It is not simply the case that the building has been forgotten and left to decay, rather the processes of planning, rezoning, and repurposing take time.<sup>27</sup> In other words, while it seems from urban decay photography that Detroit has been abandoned, in many ways it is going through the process of reinventing itself. While its productivity as the motor city might be in decline, there are many efforts, especially grassroots efforts, to make the city productive once again. This type of renewal, which initially bypasses the typical official economic renewal efforts of government or state offices, often in turn generates such official renewal efforts once some level of success has been documented and acknowledged. This has occurred in cities such as New York and London. Yet, the continued representation of such spaces as devoid of life and activity does little to nurture or promote such endeavors.

The recent announcement of the bankruptcy of Detroit seems only to confirm the status of the city of an urban apocalypse. With an ever growing debt and continued depopulation one might be tempted to think of this as a city without prospect. The danger with this is that, if the image of decay comes to take a firm root in the public imagination, then as Sontag suggests this is to be complicit in its misfortune: to desire acquiescence to the current state of things rather than change. Photography and film that perpetuate this image and, indeed, capitalize on it do little to generate alternative ways of thinking about or acting toward urban regeneration. The documentary *Detroit Lives* is far more careful in its representation of Detroit. While acknowledging its image of urban decay, far more attention is paid to imagery and accounts of grassroots-led renewal. Here, Detroit serves as a blank canvas for young entrepreneurs, artists, activists, and businesspeople. Necessity, as the saying goes, is the mother of invention. And here it offers the prospect of a reinvention of sorts. Old buildings become artistic installations; factories become design workshops, kitchens, apartments, or shops. To call it a utopia would go too far. After all, the city once invested in such a mythology much to its disappointment. However, the image of such activity and vitality does render the dystopian image, if not obsolete, at least suspect.

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### **Notes**

1. See, e.g., Mark Duell, “Ghosts of students past: Fascinating pictures of a derelict Detroit school . . . mixed with evocative images from its heyday,” *DailyMail.co.uk* (2013), <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/>

news/article-2246952/Extraordinary-photos-combine-teenage-life-bygone-era-abandoned-building-housed-Michigans-largest-school.html (accessed July 25, 2013); also in *DetroitUrbex.com*, <http://detroiturbex.com/content/schools/cass/current/index.html> (accessed July 25, 2013). Here, there are some photos that show the new school and famous past pupils. However, the most visually compelling photos are of the derelict school.

2. *Detroit Lives!* Documentary, USA, Dir Thalia Mavros, 2010.
3. See Walter Benjamin, "A Small History of Photography," in *One Way Street and Other Writings* (London: Verso, 1985); Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981); Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Rosetta Books, 2005).
4. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Fontana, 1992).
5. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 77.
6. Sontag, *On Photography*, 15.
7. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedmann, trans. Kevin McLaughlin (New York: Belknap, 2002).
8. RomanyWG, *Beauty in Decay: Urbex: The Art of Urban Exploration* (Durham, NC: Carpet Bombing Culture, 2010).
9. Daniel Barter and Daniel Marbaix, *States of Decay* (Durham, NC: Carpet Bombing Culture, 2013).
10. Roland Barthes, "Historical Discourse," in *Structuralism: A Reader*, ed. Michael Lane (London: Routledge, 1970), 154.
11. See Roland Barthes, *Michelet*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).
12. See Theodore E. Stebbins and Norman Keyes, *Charles Sheeler: The Photographs* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1987).
13. Urban exploration has become increasingly popular over the past fifteen years. The term refers to the exploration of, often, obscure city spaces that may be abandoned or decayed. Photography has become somewhat central to the urban explorer's journey and there are a wide number of websites dedicated to exhibiting work and documenting the urban explorer's journey. Part of the appeal of such spaces is their mystery and the absence of any official heritage status. Certain types of places seem to dominate urban exploration websites: abandoned factories, hospitals, and asylums.
14. Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, *The Ruins of Detroit* (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2010). Alternatively, a range of photographs are available on the photographers' website, *marchandmeffre.com*, <http://www.marchandmeffre.com/detroit/> (accessed July 25, 2013).
15. Siegfried Kracauer, "Photography," in *Critical Inquiry* 19, no. 3 (1993): 421–36.
16. "Packard Automotive Plant," Atlas Obscura, <http://www.atlasobscura.com/places/packard-automotive-plant> (accessed February 1, 2014).
17. Sontag, *On Photography*, 18.
18. Tim Edensor, *Industrial Ruins: Space, Aesthetics and Materiality* (Oxford: Berg, 2005).
19. *Ibid.*, 14.
20. *Detropia*, directed by Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady, 2012, documentary.
21. [www.Detroiturbex.com](http://www.Detroiturbex.com) (accessed July 25, 2013). This website contains a range of urban explorer photography relating to the city of Detroit. Some pages contain historical data and others do not. Among photographs of industry, e.g., is a set of photographs of Merkur Steel. This contains relatively detailed historical information about the site and its use. However, other photographed places such as "Arc Auto Parts & Salvage" as well as "Cement Plant" contain little to no contextual information.
22. John Lennon and Malcolm Foley, *Dark Tourism: The Attraction of Death and Disaster* (London: Thompson, 2010), 11.
23. Richard B. Woodward, "Disaster Photography: When Is Documentary Exploitation?" *Art News*, February 6, 2013, <http://www.artnews.com/2013/02/06/the-debate-over-ruin-porn/> (accessed February 1, 2014).
24. Jerry Herron, "The Forgetting Machine: Notes towards a History of Detroit," *Places* (2012), Designobserver.com, <http://places.designobserver.com/feature/the-forgetting-machine-a-history-of-detroit/31848/> (accessed July 25, 2013).



25. Steven High and David Lewis, *Corporate Wasteland: The Landscape and Memory of Deindustrialization* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007).
26. "Trenton McLouth Steel Plant," <http://detroiturbex.com/content/industry/mclouth/> (accessed July 30, 2013).
27. Patrick J. Pepper, "Trenton: Efforts to Repurpose McLouth Could Finally Bear Fruit," *The New Herald.com* (2013), <http://www.thenewsherald.com/articles/2013/04/10/news/doc516470ece9a8f326422166.txt> (accessed July 30, 2013).

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