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Ruin Porn and Urban Representation in Photography: The Aesthetic and Politics of Appropriation in "The Ruins of Detroit"

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Ruin Porn and Urban Representation in Photography: The
Aesthetic and Politics of Appropriation in *The Ruins of Detroit*

By

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Capstone Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Cultural Studies

Cultural Studies Program
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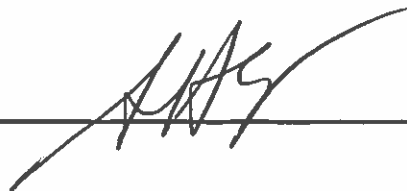
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Abstract:

This project examines the politics of representation in *The Ruins of Detroit*, a book of photography by Yves Marchand and Romaine Meffre in order to understand Detroit as a privileged site of ruins photography, critically referred to as ruin porn. Examining the book as a representation of Detroit's decay reveals an implicit power dynamic which neglects Detroit's complex history and the lived experience of its residents. Paying particular attention to the dialectic of race and labor under capitalism, this project traces the urban history of Detroit in order to contextualize and reframe the state of ruin presented in the photographs. The project argues that Marchand and Meffre's work appropriates Detroit's state of crisis and decay for aesthetic consumption through a process of exploitation of Detroit ruin as a space, while simultaneously almost erasing Detroit's actual residents from this spatial representation altogether.

Keywords: Detroit, the ruins of Detroit, ruins photography, ruin porn, race, labor, deindustrialization, urban decay, cultural appropriation, urban representation

The Ruins of Detroit, a photo book by French photographers Yves Marchand and Romaine Meffre, was published in 2010 and was the result of a five-year collaboration between the two photographers. Spread across its entirety, the book's cover features Michigan Central Station, Detroit's landmark train station which is famously abandoned and has now been commonly photographed. This building is arguably Detroit's most famous ruin, and allows this book to require no front title. Physically, the book is very large, featuring hundreds of photographs of Detroit's abandoned structures and urban decay. Content includes a variety of photos of factories, schools, hotels, apartments, churches, homes, and police stations, offering both exterior and interior views. The photos are stark and eerie, often focusing on crumbling structures and debris. Interior shots show personal possessions, furniture, and other non-scrappable remains abandoned in disarray inside buildings that have been vacant for a decade or more. There is even an apocalyptic feel to this portrayal of the city, aided by the fact that in all 227 pages, there is only one photo in which the viewer can clearly see any actual human beings. Two people stand outside, just barely noticeable on the sidewalk in front of the boarded up Rich-Dex Apartments. If it weren't for these two people, a viewer may think that there is nobody left living in Detroit.

The book includes two essays, "Forward" by photographer Robert Polidori and "City of Ruins" by Thomas J. Sugrue, a professor and accomplished author of several history books. Polidori's short essay describes meeting Marchand and Meffre to see their work, highlighting a level of hype surrounding their collaboration on the popular subject matter. Polidori tells the story of how he himself once attempted to photograph Detroit's ruin, inspired by Camilo José Vergara's *American Ruins*, but failed to find a

new angle, lost passion, and left the project and the city behind. Sugrue's essay provides some much-needed historical context to the book, even stating that, "There is no better place than Detroit to observe the dialectical forces of modern capitalism, often in their most exaggerated forms. Detroit is a place of both permanence and evanescence, of creation and destruction, of monumentality and disposability, of place and placelessness, of power and disempowerment" (9). Sugrue has written extensively about Detroit's situation, most notably in his book *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, so while this essay does briefly cover some of the many elements which make the city of Detroit a "city of ruins," these forces are not at all engaged in the photos themselves.

I will describe in detail a small selection of these photos featured in *The Ruins of Detroit* that I think exemplify some of the larger patterns, trends, and tendencies that the totality of the photos in the book raise. While this small selection of photos does not stand in for the whole book and the entirety of the photos, and while I will engage other photos in passing, the selected photos are in general representative of the whole work and highlight the contradictions and the problems I have with the book, as will become clear in my analysis.

The first image (see Figure 1), which interestingly appears without a title or caption and rests between the title page and Polidori's essay, sets the tone for the rest of the book. It is a photo of a photo, a mural or print that had been transferred onto a wooden surface. The scope is too narrow to know where the image was pasted or what function it served, as no context is provided by Marchand and Meffre. It is a black and white cityscape view of downtown Detroit that has been mostly destroyed. Blue and

black spray paint over the peeling image reads “You are here” with an arrow pointing to the top of a building, perhaps providing a clue as to where the image was originally displayed, or where it ended up. This image serves an introductory function not just as the first photo in the book, but also as an introduction to a particular way of seeing Detroit, as an image that is damaged and decaying. This is a perspective that Marchand and Meffre carry throughout the rest of the book.

The second photo (see Figure 2) is entitled Packard Motors Plant (Marchand and Meffre 27). Designed by Albert Kahn, the Packard Plant manufactured luxury vehicles until 1956. This image focuses on one building of many that together make up this hugely expansive plant. The center of the structure has completely caved in, the top two floors destroyed. A water tower looms in the background, coated in graffiti. The sky overhead is gray and gloomy. In the farthest right edge of the horizon, the downtown skyline is just barely visible. This photo is one of many which depict Detroit’s vast industrial ruin. I emphasize the factory as a space of significance in Detroit’s history. The factory is a site of production and a site that carries meaning on the interactions of race and labor, understood through a Marxist framework. The inherent exploitation and history of oppression is missing from the way the factory is represented in this collection of photos.

In the third image (see Figure 3), “Ballroom, American Hotel (Marchand and Meffre 69),” we see the walls and ceiling, once stylish and white, appear peeling and crumbling. Debris is scattered all around the floor, furniture lays haphazardly and broken. Rays of light pour in from the ceiling, giving the image an eerily divine quality.

This image represents the decadence and wealth experienced by some Detroit residents of the 1920s.

In the center of the fourth image (see Figure 4), "M.W. Mt Sinai Grand Lodge, Brush Park (Marchand and Meffre 111), stands a house with empty space overgrown with grass and weeds on either side. The house has historical significance, as evidenced by the caption that reads, "At the beginning of the twentieth century, this house, known as Mercy Hall, was one of the cradles of the fight against cancer. It was subsequently used as a lodge by an unofficial branch of African American Freemasonry" (111). The windows of the house are boarded up, the foundation of the porch is crumbling, and there is visible wear on the brick. In the background on the left side stands a newer apartment building. Brush Park is a gentrifying neighborhood. Further into the distance on the right side is the Renaissance Center, General Motors' riverfront headquarters. The tone of the photo is bleak, the sky white with gray clouds. I include this photo as one of many instances where 'ruined' structures share space with new and functioning buildings.

The last photo I engage here, "Rich-Dex Apartments (Marchand and Meffre 128)," is probably one of the most significant in the entire collection for the scope of this project as it stands in contrast with the rest (see Figure 5). This image portrays life for just one moment, in the middle of hundreds of bleak, lifeless scenes. The Rich-Dex Apartments are not themselves remarkable. They are fairly standard looking, doors and lower windows boarded up while the higher windows are wide open and exposed. A flock of pigeons crowd the street in front. Two people stand on the sidewalk, almost blending in to the trees behind them. One is turned to the side, dressed in a bright blue

winter coat; the other's face is small but turned towards the camera. She is an African American woman in a gray coat and white hat. This is the one moment of interaction Marchand and Meffre offer with the residents of Detroit. The sky is blue and cloudy. This looks like an average day in Detroit.

Key Moments in the Early History of Detroit:

The city of Detroit began as a French settlement, led by Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac, who arrived on the north bank of the Detroit river in July 1701. French control lasted until the 1763 Treaty of Paris, in which England acquired all French claims to the territory east of the Mississippi. From the very start, Detroit was strictly segregated, between the European settlers and the region's various Native American tribes including Huron, Potawatomi, and Ottawa. British control came with much harsher treatment of the natives; however, both the French and the British settlers had captured and kept slaves. In 1783, the new Treaty of Paris following the Revolutionary War passed Detroit into the hands of the United States.

When Michigan gained statehood in 1837, slavery was officially abolished, although there were no longer any slaves reported to be held at the time. However, there was still heavy segregation and racial conflict. Despite being part of the North during the Civil War, Detroit was not entirely friendly to the black population, as they were scapegoated for the war by many prominent voices, including the Detroit Free Press who publicly backed slavery.

Fire has been a recurring problem throughout the history of Detroit, with the first major fire starting by a pipe-smoking worker while tending to horses in 1805 and

burning nearly 200 buildings. Though no one was killed in the fire, this had major detrimental effects on the welfare of the residents. It was from this incident that Detroit derived its poignant motto, "Speramus meliora; resurget cineribus," which translates to "We hope for better things; it will arise from the ashes."

Detroit Becomes Industrialized:

By the 19th century, settling had picked up and population grew throughout the 1800's as Detroit became a major source of agriculture as well as a major harbor and a depot. Invention of heavy machinery turned shops into factories and craftsmen into laborers, as Detroit became dominated by industry. The variety of industries in the beginning was relatively diverse, major products including drugs, stoves, and railroad cars. Detroit was also the largest producer of iron ore and timber in the country. Fire remained a constant threat, as most early factories were powered by massively powerful but dangerous steam-boilers, which would occasionally explode. These industries brought wealth, privilege, and many entrepreneurs, or capitalists, to the city of Detroit.

Detroit was home to many important contributors to the invention of the automobile including Henry Ford, Ransom E. Olds, the Packard brothers, and more. Ford's contribution to the assembly line, which stationed workers around a conveyor belt to perform the same task over and over again for the entirety of a shift, was the key innovation that shaped the future of manufacturing. While great for increasing productivity, and therefore surplus, the automated assembly line also functioned to dehumanize labor in manufacturing, de-skill individual laborers, and ultimately create an

environment in which workers were interchangeable or disposable in the production process. Ford was a major force in Detroit's industrialization and economy. While he was extremely anti-union, Ford did believe in paying workers well in order for them to become consumers.

Unions in Detroit date all the way back to its early industrial history, however, the union movement has had, and continues to have, many ups and downs. As well as being the most prominent site for labor struggles, factories were major sites for racial politics throughout Detroit's history. By 1920, Detroit was more than half immigrants or first-generation residents. Immigrants settled into ethnically segregated neighborhoods, but were brought together in the workplace, as factory owners began to integrate in the interest of production. Train station signs in 1916 read "LEARN ENGLISH AND GET BETTER PAY," and a Ford program taught workers to "walk to the American blackboard, take a piece of American chalk, and explain how the American workman walks to his American home and sits down with his American family to their good American dinner" (Martelle, 88). Racial tension and white supremacy was strong, but English speaking was often favored over whiteness in hiring practices. The capitalist class pushed English speaking as well as a broader ideological construction of the "American" on immigrant workers.

The 1920s were a time of massive wealth and growth in population as well as space for Detroit. Between 1910 and 1930, Detroit's population tripled. The car became Detroit's one dominant industry, as well as the ultimate consumer item at a crucial moment in the nation's embracing of consumerism. This wealth and expansion led to the building of skyscrapers and roadways, literally altering the landscape of Detroit.

Modern factories such as the Fisher Body 21 and the Packard Plant, both of which now stand as famous industrial ruins to be photographed by the likes of Marchand and Meffre, were being built during this time. Images and texts on Detroit's ruin often gesture back to this heyday period where the population was at its highest, there was an influx in industrial and manufacturing jobs; coincidentally there was perceived to be a general increase in the quality of urban life. Much of Detroit's success and wealth was attributed to the fact that auto industry workers were relatively higher paid, at least enough so that they could afford a house and to buy the products that they made. A closer look at these industrial jobs from a Marxist perspective gives the project a more nuanced view of what is seen as a thriving Detroit.

While many Detroiters' quality of life increased during this time, working class and immigrant Detroiters faced overcrowding and disease. Prohibition led to a stark increase in organized crime, as Detroit's location close to Windsor allowed it to serve as a key pipeline for alcohol from Canada. "In the 1920s, white Detroiters began to define their communities in terms of racial homogeneity, and to make apparent to blacks the high cost of penetrating those communities." (Sugrue, 24) The Michigan Ku Klux Klan also peaked in the 1920s, and particularly the violent vigilante order known as The Black Legion. Racialized hatred in America was not limited to the Deep South.

Marchand and Meffre romanticize this period, stating "These were times of lounging about and spending, big parades, excess and carefree life: the Roaring Twenties. People enjoyed themselves in bars and tearooms, attended variety shows and went to the movies for only a few cents" (42). It is important for this project to challenge any nostalgia for this time if it forgets or ignores the inequalities, exploitation,

and oppression fundamental to the prosperity experienced by some. To situate photos of “the ruins of Detroit” as they have appeared in the last decade next to a blindly idealized version of Detroit in the 1920s is completely problematic and does nothing to help the viewer understand how the city of Detroit came to look the way Marchand and Meffre are presenting it.

Detroit’s Decay: A City in Crisis

The situation in Detroit today is generally characterized as a crisis due to the overwhelming poverty, unemployment, crime, and decay that plague the city and its decreasing population. Much of my understanding of Detroit’s situation comes from Thomas J. Sugrue’s analysis in *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, which presents the postwar era as a significant moment in the origin of Detroit’s crisis. Rather than offer a simple explanation, Sugrue finds it can be understood “only through the complex and interwoven histories of race, residence, and work in the postwar era” (Sugrue, 5). Sugrue describes a particular specificity to the type of postindustrial urban poverty in which poor people are extremely segregated and isolated from the labor market in ways that were not true about poverty prior to industrialization. This is a feature of Detroit’s crisis that is mirrored in many other deindustrialized Rust Belt cities. Attempting to understand the forces that led Detroit to the state of ruin Marchand and Meffre claim to have captured is crucial to a radical contextualization of the photos.

Having already problematized the idealization of the 1920s as a heyday period from which Detroit fell, I will now examine some of the systemic forces which created the current environment in Detroit, drawing on such scholars as Sugrue and Scott

Martelle. During World War II, Detroit's position as a major industrial force in the United States led to it becoming a major manufacturer of war materials. This created a greater demand for labor, led to some economic gains for African Americans and women, and gave Detroit the slogan, "arsenal of democracy," a phrase used by Franklin D. Roosevelt. However, the war also contributed to a housing shortage. Sugrue goes into detail to describe how African Americans were disproportionately burdened by this shortage, through private-sector discrimination and systemic refusal from lending institutions. Public housing such as the famous Brewster-Douglass projects, which Marchand and Meffre also feature, harmed as much as they helped. Sugrue notes that, "Officially sanctioned segregation in public housing legitimated private-sector housing discrimination" (Sugrue, 87). Geographic segregation in the 1940s was just one of the underlying issues which led to the 1943 riot, the first of Detroit's two major race riots.

The 1950s marked the height of white flight, in which white workers and families relocated to Detroit's suburbs, where segregation was enforced even more strictly. This was made possible by the building of expressways, which linked suburbs to the inner city. Decisions regarding where to build these expressways, which destroyed black neighborhoods and cultural centers, were justified through urban renewal policies. Displacement of black families in the building of expressways was labeled as "blight" or "slum" clearance. According to Sugrue, "The most obvious problem with slum clearance was that it forced the households with the least resources to move at a time when the city's tight housing market could not accommodate them" (50). Relocation assistance was inadequate and many were left struggling to find homes.

Another major issue was unemployment caused by rampant employment discrimination, largely through hiring practices. African Americans were often left in the least desirable and most insecure jobs. Race relations remained extremely hostile in Detroit and throughout the United States. In 1967, Detroit experienced its second riot in which 43 people were killed, more than 1,100 were injured, and 2,000 buildings were burned. Decades of discrimination had led up to this rebellion, which impacted Detroit in ways that have carried on for years to come. The riot accelerated white flight in terms of both homes and businesses leaving the city. In the 1980s and 90s, joblessness and gang violence turned white flight into class flight; most of those who could afford to leave the city did.

Issues of systemic racism were exacerbated by the process of deindustrialization which hurt Detroit and other American industrial centers, especially in the Rust Belt. Major players in the auto industry began closing their Detroit factories beginning in the 1950s, moving elsewhere for a variety of reasons which would allow them to make more profit or to compete with global automakers. Many of the jobs they had previously brought to the city of Detroit, were now being outsourced to locations where labor could be exploited even more. Citywide austerity policies hurt other major sources of work for Detroit residents, particularly government and public schools. Though there is always work to be done, there is little profit to be made, and so there are very few jobs in the city of Detroit.

Today, Detroit still faces overwhelming poverty. The city declared bankruptcy in 2013. The state government appointed Emergency Financial Manager Kevyn Orr, a bankruptcy lawyer, through a process that did not give Detroit residents any democratic

process or control over decisions regarding the fate of their city. Though certain neighborhoods, particularly Downtown and Midtown, are experiencing population growth, the situation for many Detroit residents remains one of poverty and decline. This is the history and the reality that *The Ruins of Detroit* does not capture.

From Ruin Art to “Ruin Porn”

In order to contextualize *The Ruins of Detroit* as an artwork, I situate it within an artistic tradition of ruin fascination, which Brian Dillon has compiled in various forms dating back to early modernism in the books *Ruins* and *Ruin Lust*. Depiction of ruin has a broad history, many times invoking ideas of nature taking back what humans and human civilization have done to it. Ruin is described many times by Dillon as ‘picturesque.’ There is a tendency in the literature on ruins in art to focus on the visual nature of the work but not as much on its meaning in relation to the reality of the ruins being depicted. However, it is important to understand that the ruins themselves carry meaning that is impossible to detach from their image.

As he traces the history of ruin depiction, Dillon describes cities such as Rome, Pompeii, Babel, Sodom, and Gomorrah as symbolizing warnings as they appear in various art forms. Writing specifically about Detroit, Dillon states, “The ruination is real, and perhaps even permanent, but the images that are made of it are surely also the result of a specific, largely unconscious, desire: a fantasy according to which our modernity and modernism have decayed or been erased, and the city become once more, (...), a terrible warning about human ambition and hubris” (*Ruin Lust*, 31). Artists’ depiction of ruined cities reminds the viewer of a historical moment of failure, a

structural lesson in 'what not to do.' I am not convinced that photographers capture ruin because of a fantasy of decaying modernism, but I would argue that if images of Detroit's ruins are a warning of anything, it should be of the crisis inherent to capitalism.

The Ruins of Detroit belongs to the specific genre of imagery depicting urban decay that has gained popularity and recognition in contemporary photography called ruins photography. Other major examples of this type of work include Camilo José Vergara's *The New American Ghetto* and *American Ruins* of the mid to late 1990s. Detroit, due to its unique state and situation, has become a privileged decay site, drawing new attention from photographers and even tourists to the city. It is from this trend that "ruin porn" emerged as a term critical of the genre, pointing to an idea of exploitation and harm that is involved in photographing urban ruins, where the site is still a functioning city with a history and residents that have been and will continue to be affected by the subject matter long after the photographer leaves the city. This detachment and lack of concern for residents is a common criticism.

John Patrick Leary gives a detailed account of this trend, stating that "So much ruin photography and ruin film aestheticizes poverty without inquiring of its origins, dramatizes spaces but never seeks out the people that inhabit and transform them, and romanticizes isolated acts of resistance without acknowledging the massive political and social forces aligned against the real transformation, and not just stubborn survival, of the city" (Leary, "Detroitism"). This quote reflects one of my central criticisms. *The Ruins of Detroit* aestheticizes Detroit's ruin, presents it as material that is visually provocative but not in any productive way. This type of work ends up fetishizing and even

celebrating decay which is, in Detroit's case especially, inextricably linked to poverty and racial inequality.

One thing *The Ruins of Detroit* does not do is 'romanticize isolated acts of resistance' in Detroit. In fact, mentions of people interacting with the ruins refer mainly to 'scavengers' and 'vandals' who remove scrappable remains from long abandoned structures or graffiti their walls. Considering the poverty faced by so many Detroit residents, one can hardly blame those who turn to scrapping. Chastising scrappers and graffiti artists shifts the blame for the decay and destruction of property from those who have abandoned their properties in Detroit and the capitalist structures that allowed and encouraged them to do so, to individuals who are left to navigate the remains. Though not mentioned by Marchand and Meffre, there are people in Detroit who are actively resisting the structures of racism and capitalism which disadvantage them. Perhaps *The Ruins of Detroit* would be a more productive work if these forms of resistance had been included in the series.

On the Politics of Photography

This project seeks to challenge the notion that photos are inherently documentary. Rather, photos are constructed works of art that carry meaning as well as power. Susan Sontag utilizes the term "photographic seeing," which has the ability to transform our perception of reality, acknowledging that a photo is not a truth.

Throughout my experience studying *The Ruins of Detroit* it seemed that each time I combed through the photos, and especially when I showed them to new people, different questions emerged of how the photos were created. Technical elements of

photography such as lighting, editing, focal points, exposure, and lines are transformative decisions made and considered by the photographer(s). There are also physical elements within the setting that can be manipulated to make an image. Objects can be positioned and repositioned, even placed, people can be vacated. Sontag also describes how a caption can entirely change the meaning of a photograph. The ways in which Marchand and Meffre have manipulated their work remains unknown to the viewer, but this critical acknowledgement is crucial.

Visual images carry meanings, and many scholars have theorized at what point and how exactly meaning is created and transmitted. Sontag holds the photographer in a position of power with photography functioning as an intervention that is determined by the ideology and subject position of the photographer, whether they intend the influence or not. Sontag theorizes an aggressive tendency towards ownership which is present in the act of taking a photo of something.

Photographs have the ability to influence cultural standards of beauty. A photographer can create an image that is aesthetically pleasing in ways that may or may not correspond to reality. There is power, then, in the hands of the photographer in deciding what they choose to photograph and how. How is it that the viewer can find images of Detroit's ruin beautiful, when the ruin is in many ways so closely tied to poverty and suffering? Would a viewer find Detroit ruins beautiful if they saw them every day? What if the photos showed homeless people or squatters living inside? Whether intentional or not, the fetishization of these ruins relies on the human realities being out of the picture.

The Ruins of Detroit as Appropriation of Decay

Bell hooks describes the white supremacist process of othering and cultural appropriation in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. She writes, "Currently, the commodification of difference promotes paradigms of consumption wherein whatever difference the Other inhabits is eradicated, via exchange, by a consumer cannibalism that not only displaces the Other but denies the significance of that Other's history through a process of decontextualization" (hooks, 31). Cultural appropriation involves the use of elements of a culture, outside of their original context or significance. I utilize the concept of 'appropriation' in this critical manner to refer to the ways in which Marchand and Meffre present images of Detroit's ruin for aesthetic consumption in an exploitative and inadequately contextualized manner.

The 'ruins' of Detroit are sites with significant histories and meanings attached and embedded within them. The histories and meanings may differ for people who had different relationships to and interactions within these spaces. For many, these spaces are historically and currently sites of struggle. 700,000 people still live in the city of Detroit. They are overwhelmingly working class, poor, and African American. Around 36% of Detroit's residents live beneath the official poverty line. Approximately 20,000 are homeless. Residents of Detroit are excluded almost entirely from this representation of the environment in which they live. *The Ruins of Detroit* only depicts two human beings in all 227 pages. While there is some historical context given to the state of ruin, there is heavy focus throughout the book on the architecture and very little mention of the people who remain in the city.

There is no isolated ruin site, no section of the city which is fully abandoned. What I mean by this is that these ruins are often situated in and share space with functioning and habitable spaces. One photo that stopped me several times as I was flipping through the pages of *The Ruins of Detroit* is on page 91 (see Figure 6), "View from Lafayette Building rooftop." The photo was taken at either dusk or dawn; almost all of the surrounding buildings are occupied, as evidenced by the lights seen scattered throughout the windows. What the viewer sees is not ruin at all, it is only because the photographer stood on the roof of a 'ruin' building that this photograph makes sense as part of the book. To me, this is a photo of a living Detroit. Spaces marked as 'ruin' are spaces that Detroit residents see and navigate every day. To perceive these images as shocking or beautiful requires a certain level of detachment and difference from ones own typical surroundings.

Marchand and Meffre had no prior connection to the city of Detroit. They are French photographers whose interest stemmed simply from an artistic focus on documenting ruin. Now, after having spent time over a period of five years photographing these spaces, they profit from images of Detroit's difference. These photos in the context of a coffee table book also carry certain implications of its purpose, consumption in the form of display or flipping through casually. The book is printed in Germany by the publishing company Steidl, to be bought and consumed by people all over the world who have disparate information about, relationships with, and perceptions of Detroit.

The Ruins of Detroit as a Form of Representation

Stuart Hall's concept of representation is crucial to this project. In "Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices" Hall lays out many different approaches to the problem of representation, which connects meaning and language to culture. Hall is operating with an understanding of meaning that is constructed in and through language, or signs. A broad usage of the term "language" is used in theorizing representation, so the language of visual images is included, as well as other forms that are not explicitly linguistic. Hall writes, "Visual signs and images, even when they bear a close resemblance to the things to which they refer, are still signs; they carry meaning and thus have to be interpreted." (Hall, 5). *The Ruins of Detroit* and the photos featured can be read in this way, as having a language. Hall's main point in *Representation* is that meaning is not inherent, but constructed through the practice of representation, a signifying practice. Meaning is not entirely dependent on the materiality of a sign, but also its symbolic function. If *The Ruins of Detroit* is functioning as a form of representation, the book and the photos are active in a process of constructing meaning about the city of Detroit, its history, and implicitly about its residents as well.

Hall draws upon the work of Ferdinand de Saussure in order to explain the semiotic approach to the problem of representation. Saussure provides new concepts and tools with which to theorize the sign, such as signifier, the form, and signified, the idea or concept, which can only be understood through a system of differences. A major idea Hall draws from the semiotic approach is the historic and cultural specificity of meaning. He writes, "If the relationship between a signifier and its signified is the result of a system of social conventions specific to each society and to specific historical

moments, then all meanings are produced within history and culture” (Hall, 17).

Following this idea is an active process of interpretation, which is also historically and culturally specific.

Next, Hall examines Michel Foucault’s discursive approach to the problem of representation, which defines discourse as a system of representation involving power, knowledge, and the subject. *The Ruins of Detroit* belongs to the larger discursive formation of ruins photography or ‘ruin porn.’ In this section, Hall identifies different elements in discourse of which to study. One of these is “‘subjects’ which personify the discourse (...) with the attributes we would expect these subjects to have, given the way knowledge about the topic was constructed at that time” (Hall, 30). In *The Ruins of Detroit*, there is a lack of subjects appearing in the photographs. However, this lack of visible subjects does not necessarily mean that the reader is to imagine a lack of subjects in the city of Detroit, rather they may have their own discursively formed imagined subject who would occupy or navigate the spaces represented in the photographs. Another element Hall identifies is “how this knowledge about the topic acquires authority, a sense of embodying the ‘truth’ about it, constituting the ‘truth of the matter’, at a historical moment,” (Hall, 30). *The Ruins of Detroit*, or more broadly ‘ruin porn’ as a discursive formation constructs a ‘truth’ of this historical moment for the city of Detroit which is void of life.

The human subject is complicated in the discursive approach to representation. Foucault did not find it necessary to point to a particular subject, or even class of subjects as Marx does with the ruling bourgeois or capitalist, who holds power. Instead Foucault uses the concept of power/knowledge which is embedded in discourse. Hall

writes that for Foucault, the subject is produced within discourse, and must always be *subjected to* discourse. It is not that Marchand and Meffre are the sole powerful actors who are themselves producing an apparent 'truth' about Detroit. Rather *The Ruins of Detroit*, Marchand and Meffre's work, belongs to a discursive formation, within which meaning and power/knowledge is constructed and distributed. The discursive formation could be 'ruin porn,' a type of photography, or it could be thought of even more broadly as popular representations of Detroit as space that is abandoned or 'ruined.' The residents of Detroit are also subjects implicated in this process, their subjectivities being produced within a discourse that highlights decay and abandonment of a city but neglects remaining life or humanity within the space. Within the discourse of *The Ruins of Detroit*, and the discursive formation it belongs to, the people of Detroit do not matter.

Conclusion

As I have shown in this project, the people of Detroit do matter, and the city of Detroit matters. I grew up in a small suburb on the East side of the city. As I began to mention in my history section, the suburbs and the city have a complicated relationship that is heavily rooted in issues of race and class. Even though my suburb is lower middle class and less than a mile outside Detroit's city limits, there are still negative perceptions that are part of the dominant ideology and discourse. I believe it was during my year at Wayne State University that I began to appreciate and understand Detroit more fully, and probably when I began feeling the need to defend it.

In this project I have contextualized Detroit's 'ruin' within a broader history and within the contemporary trend of "ruin porn," using theorists such as Susan Sontag, bell

hooks, and Stuart Hall to examine the politics of representation and and relationships of power at work in this photo series. I have argued that *The Ruins of Detroit*, as a form of representation, appropriates Detroit's state of crisis and decay for aesthetic consumption through an exploitative process that devalues and erases Detroit residents who see and navigate 'ruined' spaces daily.

Appendix

Figure 1.

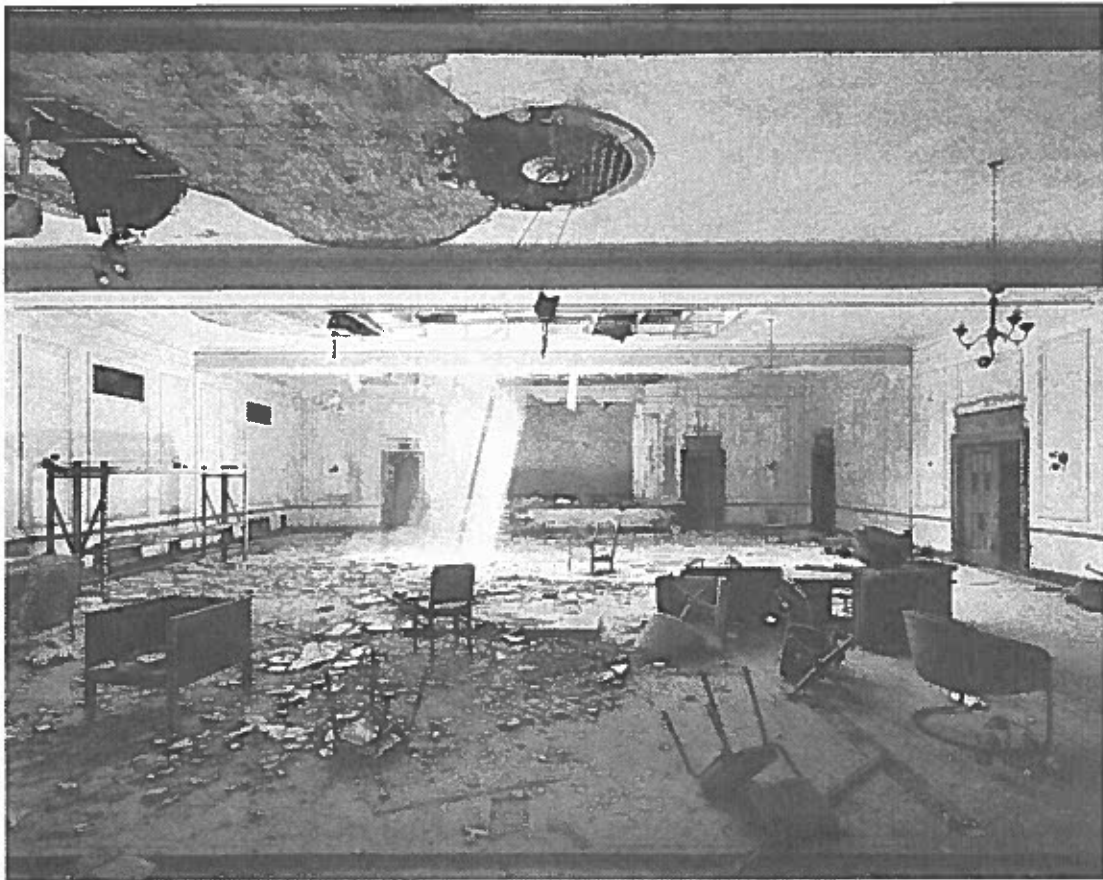


Figure 2.



Packard Motors Plant, Page 27

Figure 3.



Ballroom, American Hotel, Page 69

Figure 4.



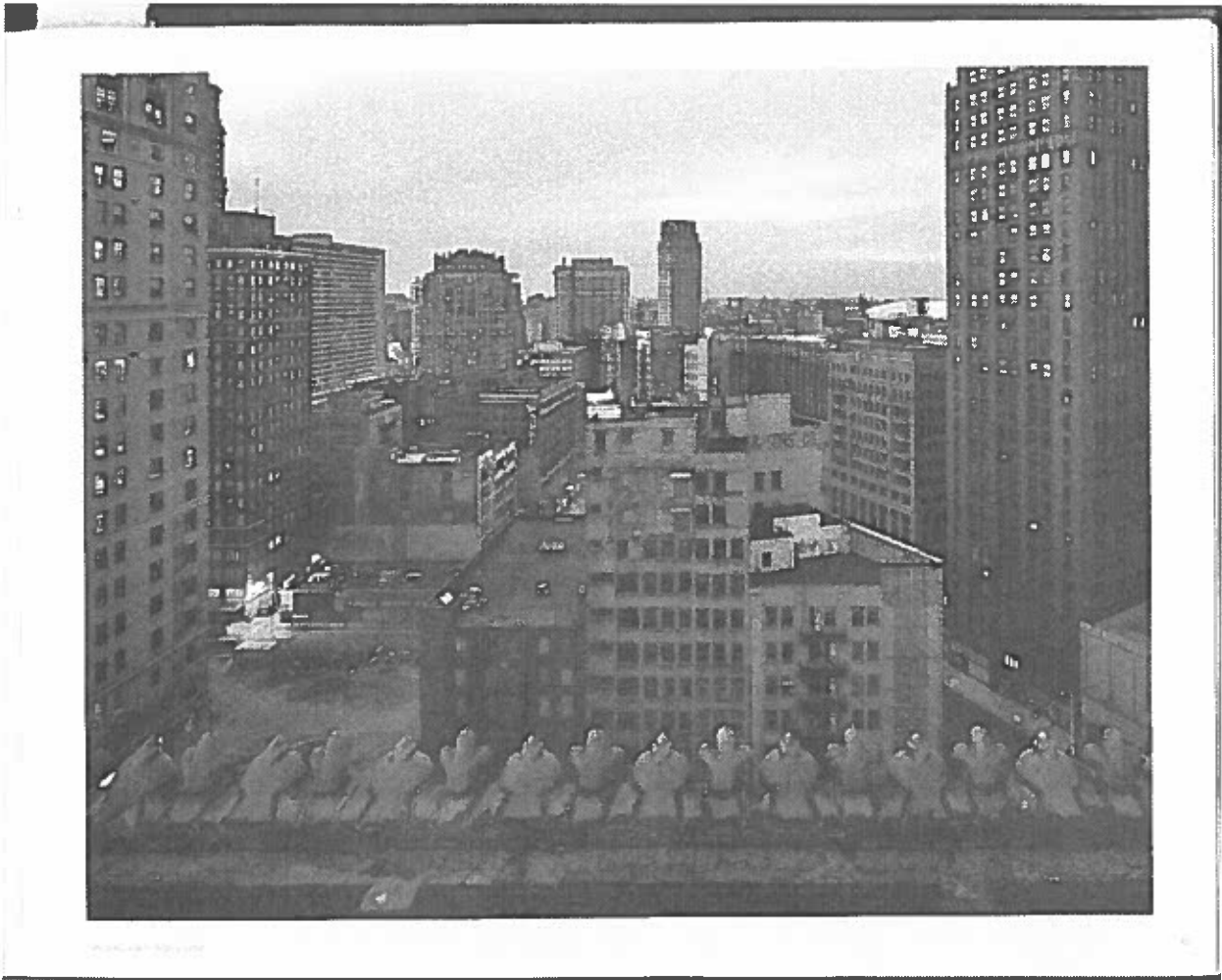
M.W. Mt Sinai Grand Lodge, Brush Park, Page 111

Figure 5.



Rich-Dex Apartments, Page 128

Figure 6.



View from Lafayette Building rooftop, Page 91

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