
POINTS DE VUE

Detroit : Ruin of a City

March 2014

Blending historical footage with conversations on the move with residents, artists and social scientists, the documentary reflects on race, inequality, urbanism, mobility, the past and the future. Is Detroit a taste of things to come?

The shining, futuristic-looking high-rises of the Renaissance Centre host General Motors headquarters in Detroit, once a thriving city of two million, home to the USA's automobile industry, but today a devastated landscape of deserted roads, burnt-out cars, crumbling buildings, violence, unemployment, racial segregation, and dwindling tax revenues and public services. What was once the world's fastest growing city is today a shrinking place being claimed back by nature, where prairies are expanding into downtown. The contrast between the Renaissance Centre, which connects General Motors to global industrial manufacturing through high-tech infrastructural networks, and its surrounding desolation speaks of a splintered, broken city. 'A city in ruins', as the media refers to it. How did the vibrant streets of Detroit, the home of Motown music, become the silent paradigm of urban decay and poverty? In *Detroit: Ruin of a City*, documentarist Michael Chanan and sociologist George Steinmetz provide a riveting and sophisticated sociological analysis of this decline.

Founded in 1701, Detroit mushroomed between 1880 and 1920 when its population grew from over a hundred thousand to a million. Before 1905 car manufacturing was just one among other industrial activities, but, within six years, most of the growth in the USA automobile industry came to be concentrated in Detroit. Fleeing unemployment and racial discrimination, waves of migrant workers from the southern states helped to sustain the city's industrial expansion which, in the interwar period, made up to half of the American automobile workforce. However, processes of decentralization (division of large production plants into smaller, geographically scattered units outside the city) and deindustrialization in the US North West were already under way, their full severity only masked by the industrial war-effort. Migrants had been arriving to a place with an uncertain future and the end of the war left Detroit's 1.8 million population in a *cul de sac*, physically and metaphorically. Its economic basis was seriously challenged and existing jobs were

...phenomenon, the economic base has steadily changed and existing jobs were increasingly found in suburban areas, out of the reach of an impoverished population stuck in the inner city, without access to private or public transport. This process affected mostly the black population. By the 1950s the whites had already begun to move out of both industrial jobs and the inner city, to the suburbs, benefiting from housing loans and the construction of highways subsidized by the Federal Government. Thus, within a few years of 'white-flight', Detroit's population had become predominantly black (today it is 80%), a key factor in understanding why, according to the documentary, no government came to the rescue and the city was left to decay. No other major USA city with a predominantly white population, it is argued, would have been abandoned in the way Detroit has been. Ultimately, the fate of Detroit is the fate of a city built with and for the automobile industry and subsequently abandoned by both industrial capital and the state. In a telling moment of the documentary, it is noted how, sixty years later, the result of these policies is that Detroit has cars and highways but has no city. Detroit's decline continues today. In July 2013 the city went bankrupt, but unlike the still politically influential automobile industry only four years earlier, salvation in the form of government aid was not forthcoming.

This history of Detroit needs to be understood within a broader general process of social and economic change known as Fordism, a mode of industrial organization consisting of an intensified work regime around a moving assembly line run according to the principles of 'scientific management' (Taylorism). Workers' acceptance of the working conditions is facilitated by a relatively higher salary than average allowing them to participate in consumer society and a set of social institutions outside the production plant that help legitimize the new economic order. The rise and fall of Detroit is the story of the rise and fall of Fordism. The documentary tells this story through a number of interviews, some filmed within a moving car, interspersed with historical footage accompanied by a background music of repetitive notes composed by the eminently suitable Michael Nyman, which evokes the monotonous movements of the assembly line. The documentary is a journey into the city's past as well as a contemporary journey through its wretched streets and abandoned buildings. In many respects the documentary can be seen as a journey into the future to the extent that Detroit evokes an American dream, a utopia of car-dependent suburban living, gone wrong. This has generated its own forms of cultural production. Its abandoned buildings, graffiti-marked ruins and desolate spaces are being used by artists to prompt critical reflections about the fragility of our dreams of progress and as a reminder of the possible futures facing cities and industrialized societies. Detroit has captured the public imagination as an epitome of the rise and fall of civilizations, an issue of intermittent concern in western societies since at least the nineteenth century but which peak oil, climate change and the current economic might of Asia has made particularly poignant amongst American intellectuals. Mobility is central to these imaginaries of decadence and one of the most powerful images of the documentary is that of the ruins of the once

one of the most powerful images of the documentary is that of the ruins of the once splendid theatre house turned into a car park.

 Detroit: Ruin of a City - Michigan Theatre - Michael Chanan

Photo by Michael Chanan

Viewers will identify aspects the dystopic future scenarios elaborated by mobility scholars such as Urry (2013) or Geels and his colleagues (2012) in Steinmetz's and Chanan's portrayal of contemporary Detroit. These reflections of urban and civilizational decline are rehearsed once more in a recent and recommended documentary entitled *Detropia* (2012) , by Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady which has been a success in the USA.

Several aspects of *Detroit: Ruin of a City* will be of interest to mobilities researchers. Firstly, some of the historical footage was made by Ford's own film production unit, set up under direct orders from Henry Ford who soon realized the ideological potential of moving images. Secondly, the documentary also reveals how the new culture of mobility gained expression in diverse ways and involved attempts to control and regulate it in different settings, from the street to the factory. In particular the documentary shows how the movements of workers were subject to detailed study and control, an issue beautifully analyzed by Tim Cresswell in his book *On the Move* (see a book review [here](#)). Last but not least, *Detroit: Ruin of a City* is an exemplar of alternative ways of presenting social science research. Partly due to academic imperatives, social scientists are still restricted to the journal paper as the preferred form of disseminating research which severely limits their audiences. The independent documentary offers more promising possibilities to participate in the public sphere and has experienced a revival recently partly because of lower production and circulation costs afforded by digital video (*Detroit's* production budget was £15,000) and partly because, as Michael Chanan has noted elsewhere, 'television documentary is not being allowed to fulfill the potential of its educative and socio-political role of speaking to the public sphere about things that matter in a tone that respects both subject and audience.' The proliferation of documentary festivals worldwide speaks of this desire for forms of communication that divert from the contrived and formulaic styles of mainstream media. These forms of disseminating research open up avenues for expanding the skills and sensibilities of researchers and for new collaborations between social scientists, artists and film-makers. *Detroit: Ruin of a City* is itself an example of this. Its authors are a professor of sociology at Michigan University (George Steinmetz) and a documentary film-maker and professor of film studies at the University of Roehampton (Michael Chanan). The documentary features conversations with French sociologist Loïc Wacquant and Detroit artist Tyree Guyton while driving through Detroit's streets. *Detroit Ruin of a City* is an exemplar for those seeking to develop these new crafts of sociological enquiry and communication.

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Trailer Detroit Ruin of a City

References

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Urry, J. (2013) *Societies Beyond Oil*. London, Zed

¹ <http://www.detroitruinofacity.com/>

² <https://en.forumviesmobiles.org/publication/2013/03/11/book-review-517>

³ <http://vimeo.com/15665073>