

Detroit Fragments by Eirik Høyer Leivestad

Water

Janet at Source Booksellers explains why there have been people here for more than 300 years. It's because of the water. The river, she says, and the great lakes in the vicinity. Access to water: that most fundamental resource. I mention that I've heard about the city's water shutoffs targeting poor households that can't afford the bill. Janet shakes her head. Capitalism at its absolute worst, she says, and recommends another book from the store's selection: Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*.

Anarcho-Oligarchy

I've been pondering what could be an apposite term to characterise Detroit's current social-economic (dis)order, and eventually landed on the notion of anarcho-oligarchy. The anarchy is what you notice first. An apparent lawlessness combines with an abundant surplus of vacant buildings and all sorts of repurposable materials. You see both the positive and negative side of anarchy: the creative side, where everyone appears to be an installation artist, and the destructive side, where a desire to annihilate is expressed in arson and more or less random mischief. But the new frontier also attracts the interest of speculating billionaires, who thrive in cheap real estate under the guise of benevolent aid. They orchestrate the rehabilitation of designated areas and decide what the shrunk and densified former metropolis will wind up looking like – and ultimately what it will be. It's already a staggering sight: how the first world segues into the third.

A bleak vision of the future city: increased apartheid, with islands of commerce, culture, entertainment and tourism encapsulated in what Mike Davis calls prison architecture.

Rivera Court

Diego Rivera's iconic murals of the Ford Motor Company: a rather ambivalent homage to the industrial ensemble of human and machine. Rows of workers flank the assembly line, arrayed in precise intervals, carrying out their assigned tasks in dull repetition. For a couple of hours I just sit there. I jot down some notes in a small book sporting Michel Foucault on the cover (an inscription on Foucault's forehead reads: *Denken macht schön*), and I notice how the experience is susceptible to weather conditions. It's the way the room is lit. The light of day is beamed in through the skylight and reflected in the floor's tiles. A ray of sunshine and the room is bathed in brilliance. Dark clouds give it a gloomy tint, especially when accompanied by heavy rain battering on the windows above. Is the interpretation of the work supposed to take shifting weather into account? So that, on an average Michigan summer day, if you're patient, you get to experience the rise and fall and maybe even the revival of *Detroit Industry*? Or perhaps it's a gentle reminder that modern humankind and its hubris, regardless of palpable technological advancements, will never achieve the victory over the sun that the Russian futurists envisaged. It remains

inescapably imprisoned in the cycle of something much larger, the giant sphere that contains and conditions it.

Simulacra

“Soon the signs started appearing. THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED RUIN IN AMERICA. We counted five signs before we reached the site.... We walked along a road to the slightly elevated spot set aside for viewing and photographing. All the people had cameras; some had tripods, telephoto lenses, filter kits. A man in a booth sold postcards and slides – pictures of the ruin taken from the elevated spot. We watched the photographers. Ragnhild maintained a prolonged silence, occasionally scrawling some notes in a little book.

“No one sees the ruin,” she said finally.

A long silence followed.

“Once you’ve seen the signs about the ruin, it becomes impossible to see the ruin,”

She fell silent once more. People with cameras left the elevated site, replaced at once by others.

“We’re not here to capture an image. We’re here to maintain one. Can you feel it, Eirik? An accumulation of nameless energies.”

There was an extended silence. The man in the booth sold postcards and slides.

“Being here is a kind of spiritual surrender. We see only what the others see. The thousands who were here in the past, those who will come in the future. We’ve agreed to be part of a collective perception. This literally colors our vision. A religious experience in a way, like all tourism.”

Another silence ensued.

“They are taking pictures of taking pictures,” she said.”

(Excerpt from Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*, slightly modified.)

Green Utopia

Ragnhild and I attend the annual bus tour of the Greening of Detroit, which showcases assorted community projects dedicated to urban gardening and farming. Among the images competing with that of a post-industrial wasteland, Detroit’s green movement is probably the most hyped and overexposed. The attention has certainly encouraged the people involved, who really are visionaries. Inspired by the ideas of the relentless activist-philosopher Grace Lee Boggs, they declare that vacant lots and cleared land must be regarded as Detroit’s biggest asset: the city’s increased detachment from the capitalist economy (industry, corporations, finance) provides an opportunity to start afresh, and explore alternatives of self-reliance and self-sufficiency. When seeing this admirable Do It Yourself élan at work, some have conjured up the future Detroit as a cluster of interconnected subsistence farming communities. It’s a new urban laboratory that questions the irreversible arrow of time we use to represent the linear narrative of modernity: the post-industrial Detroit reverting to pre-industrial forms of production and organisation.

This is all very remarkable and exciting. And it’s slightly unfair to say it, but I feel a hint of past megalomania in the way this green revolution is presented – a

distant echo of the Henry Ford complex, projecting the city as the model for everyone else. Can't Detroit simply grow small without big words?

Travster

The first two weeks of the INCA residency we share the house with José, an artist doing an exhibition at MOCAD, and his crew: Illo, José's girlfriend-cum-manager, and Helmuth and Travis, his assistants. For two weeks I walk around with a steadily intensifying itch to call Travis "Travster". I have no idea why, I can't explain it. Is it a common nickname? It sounds like the brand of a small vehicle, a quad bike or something. The urge becomes so severe I have to summon all my self-control not to blurt it out. As I get more accustomed to having them around, I start to wait for the right moment, a casual situation where me addressing Travis as Travster won't come across as inappropriate or awkward or bizarre, but maybe somewhat natural. It never comes. Once I call him Trav. But never Travster.

Antonio Gramsci vs Simone Weil & Louis Ferdinand Celine

Antonio Gramsci might have been the first to flesh out the historical significance of Fordism as a novel phase of capitalism. While Europe still found itself hampered by feudal residues, Fordism inaugurated a new industrial paradigm far exceeding its predecessors with regard to both efficiency and scale. Gramsci identified a crucial difference in the American "national demographic composition", devoid of the parasitic class that extracted its sustenance from ancestral patrimony underpinned by the traditional labour of peasants. The entrepreneurial ethos of Fordism enabled a thorough rationalisation that included molding a new type of human suited for a new type of productive process. State of the art manufacturing required that a new worker be manufactured as well. Hence the exertion of discipline under Fordism wasn't confined to the plant: it extended to form an intrusive puritanical offensive, notably in the prohibition and in the regulation of sexual affairs. Ford's inspectors paid the employees recurring house visits to assure that they lead an impeccable life of matrimony and rational expenditure. The correlate of the five dollar a day was a stable mortgage and steady aspirations lest the workers went adrift on the ocean of impulses. Was the upshot of these efforts a pure robot? No! Precisely because mechanisation reduced human labour exclusively to physical, gestural and muscular operations, the vital part was left unencumbered, Gramsci claims. The worker remained free to think, and often did so along non-conformist lines.

Q: Does the argument above rely on an overly strict separation between mind and body?

(Not really an) A: About the same time as Gramsci wrote his essay on "Americanism and Fordism", Simone Weil allegedly renounced her affiliations with the organised workers' movement after a year of self-proletarianisation in a Renault factory, where she gained firsthand experience with a regime of production "grinding down souls and bodies under oppression".

(Also not an) A: Louis Ferdinand Celine's encounter with Detroit in 1926 made a lasting impression that was later accounted in his bleak portrayal of America in *Journey to the End of the Night*, in which a massive industrial machinery regards the workers as chimpanzees and is hell-bent on draining them of all capacity for thought.

Ruins

Supposedly Northern Europeans are particularly prone to be astonished by Detroit's ruins. I believe this attraction deviates from that of Athens or Rome, which display remnants of ancient civilisations, something that used to be. The new ruin tourism is not a museum activity commemorating a bygone era. We should rather understand it against the backdrop of dystopian imagery spreading in today's popular culture. The ruins don't show us the past; they show us what the future will look like. Deep down the Northern Europeans know that even *their* cityscapes will end up like this.