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From Fordism to Detroitism

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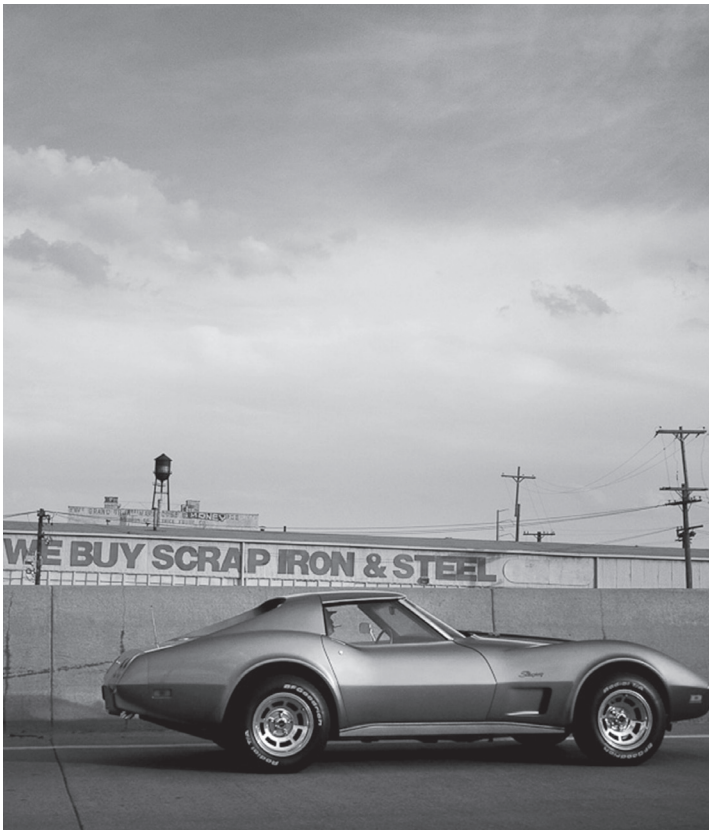


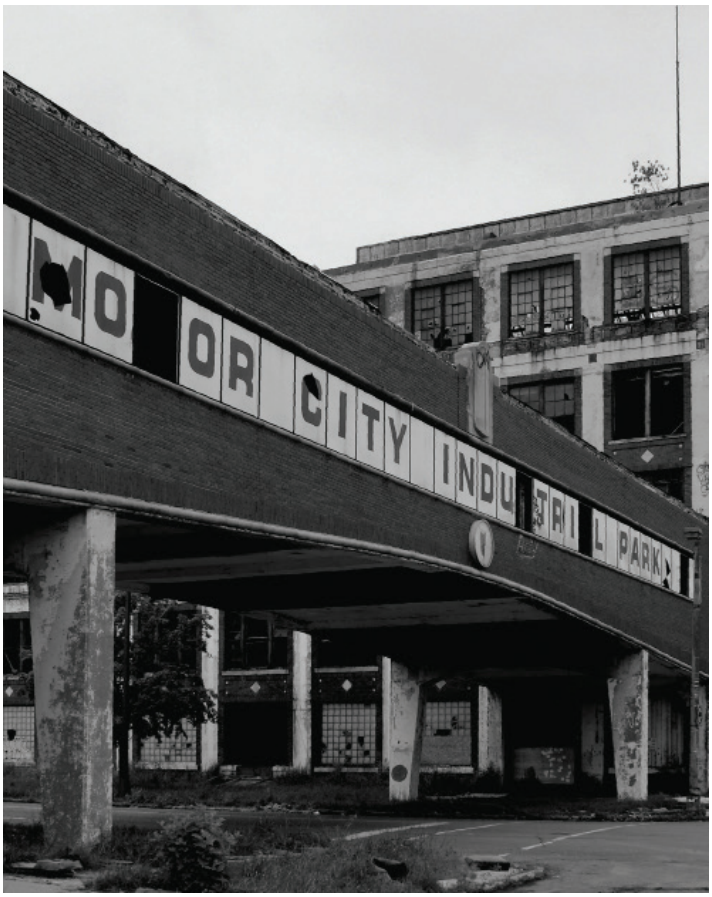
We Buy Scrap Iron and Steel

Before the failure and before the decay, it was success. The heydays of the auto industry certainly led to Detroit being recognized as the *Motor City*. At that point, a new term called *Fordism* took over the world, which eventually led to the most recent one, which may not yet be completely known and defined - *Detroitism*. Those terms, at this very moment, may appear to be antonyms. In the next paragraphs, I will try to analyze and compare them.

Fordism was introduced in 1914 when the five-dollar, eight-hour per day was proposed by Henry Ford himself in his factory in Dearborn, MI as a sort of addition to already well established trends. Today, we can consider his innovations, both technical and organizational, as a simple extension of something that had already started taking place. Before Fordism, Taylorism had already happened. "What was special about Ford (and what ultimately separates Fordism from Taylorism), was his vision, his explicit recognition that mass production meant mass consumption, a new system of the reproduction of labor power, a new politics of labor control and management, a new aesthetics and psychology, in short, a new kind of rationalized, modernist and populist democratic society."[1] By definition, Fordism meant a way of organizing the working process based on the concept of an assembly line within a single production unit. In a political and social manner that supported mass production and consumption, Fordism improved the efficiency of the labor force by providing benefits such as housing, health care and social protection. But not everyone could profit from Fordism. Some sectors of high risk production were still depending on low wages and weak job security and this resulted in strong social movements that were considering and addressing a lot of inequalities - race, gender and ethnicity seemed to decide who had privileges and who did not.

Speaking of the present time, there is not much of the success left behind from Fordism in terms of Detroit-based industry. This past happened and stayed in the past while Formism evolved into Detroitism. For the moment though, we cannot consider Detroitism as an official term, but we can be aware of its presence as we witness all the metonyms and representations of the city. This term actually comes from an essay entitled *Detroitism* written by John Patrick Leary and published by Guernica magazine in January 2011. It seems that its author has borrowed the name from the song performed by Glenn Underground, published in 1995 and made in 1991, although there is no direct or open connection between these two

Heydays of Packard Plant



Abandoned Packard Plant © Katarina Dačić

links. From the understanding of the essay, Detroitism is a neologism defined as the fetish for crumbling urban landscapes mixed with eccentric utopian delusions. "It is either a nightmare image of the American Dream, where equal opportunity and abundance came to die, or as an updated version of it, where bohemians from expensive coastal cities can have the one-hundred-dollar house and community garden of their dreams."[2] But Detroitism cannot be just that; Detroitism was born from the metonyms of its root word, Detroit. Can we really agree then that Detroitism stands for a kind of fetishism? Is it a desire? Is it a need? Is it an obsession? When it comes to the representation of the city, and by this I mean the image that *outsiders* consume, then yes, it can be understood as a lust. A lust for ruins, for these crumbling landscapes. But for the natives, Detroit is not necessarily linked to utopia nor dystopia. Of course, the *comeback* narrative is present among the natives, but it is not romanticized. And if we stumble upon some interviews with the Detroiters on the internet, it is common to hear them saying things like *Detroit isn't some kind of abstract art project, it's for real people*. What if Detroitism reached beyond the lust for ruinscapes in order to touch on ideas that come from thinking about decay and its consequences? From the image that we, living far away from Detroit, get, Detroitism could describe a love for Detroit, a way of living in the aftermath of Modernism and Capitalism. It certainly comes with an emotional weight, strange beauty and even a fantastic disclosure, but it is never the same for the outsiders as it is for the insiders. "People now have ideas about Detroit as a mythology. So the journalists come and they need to write a story about how the auto industry has ruined Detroit. Well, if they come here and see that's not true...well yeah, but we have to write a story about that so we're going to figure out how to do it."[3]

Detroitism could be everything that Detroit now stands for; it could be used to describe everything that Detroit represents. But there seems to be a disconnect from the Detroit known, lived and experienced by the natives in relation to those observing from afar. Detroitism as a fetish presents a view of Detroit through a camera lens, capturing photographs of ruins and abandoned buildings. This information is being sent to the outsiders daily, causing the city to seem like an imaginary or fantastic place that has been in transition from the city of cars to a dead kingdom for decades. This shift between automobiles and cameras is interesting as both are perceived as totemic objects in Modernism. As Susan Sontag says, "Like guns and cars, cameras are fantasy-machines whose use is addictive."[4] It seems that since 1977, when this was quoted, nothing has changed. This idea has just developed more. Far beyond totems, far beyond compulsive needs, cameras evolved into something dangerous: they became predatory weapons, violent objects. They became the lens of Detroitism, the missiles of medias, the tools of misunderstanding. They speak through photography and all they say is: we had cars, now we have ruins of car industries; we used to produce cars, now we produce the photographs of ruins of left behind car industries.

Today, we have the impression that these two terms are in juxtaposition even though they have the same origin, not only geographically speaking, but in reality, one produced the other. Following the (hi)story, we can't help but ask - what wasn't influenced by auto industry? The answer may as well be: everything was influenced by auto industry. An investigation of a city built for it can begin with the way the highways are integrated into the city or the inability to visit a grocery store without walking less than 40 minutes. To observe that, at the moment, there might be more parking spaces than inhabitants and there may be more cars than inhabited residences, we couldn't say much more before agreeing that everything in Detroit was influenced by the rise and fall of the auto industry. Recalling a quote by Henry Ford: "Failure is simply the opportunity to begin again, this time more intelligently", many understand the fall of the auto industry to be the ultimate reason for the city's decay. As we are attracted now to these leftovers, in the form of ruins of many shapes and sizes, maybe it is there, that Detroit-based industry could find the opportunity to begin once again, more (or less) intelligently.

This essay is an excerpt from *MELANCHOLY OBJECTS: Aestheticization and Representation of Detroit's Ruins* written by Katarina Dačić, originally published as a Masters memoir by HEAD-Geneve in Switzerland in October 2015.

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1 Harvey, David. The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change. Cambridge. Blackwell, 1989. p. 126.

2 Leary, John Patrick. Detroitism. Op. cit. The example taken by Leary is to be qualified. Maybe it was like that in 2011, but this year it is a bit more expensive - $1000, as the city is trying to rise again and as the certain neighborhoods are in the process of gentrification.

3 From the interview with Scott Hocking

4 Sontag, Susan. On Photography. New York. Picador, 2001. p. 10.