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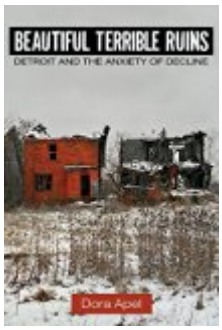
Dora Apel. *Beautiful Terrible Ruins: Detroit and the Anxiety of Decline.* New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2015. 184 S., 36 Abb. $27.95, paperback, ISBN 978-0-8135-7406-6.



Reviewed by Verena Laschinger

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Detroit has long become the symbol of American urban crisis and Dora Apel's "Beautiful Terrible Ruins" is certainly not the first study to engage with the city's industrial history and the racialized poverty that is coterminous with it. See for example: David Maraniss, Once in a Great City. A Detroit Story, New York 2015; Mark Binelli, The Last Days of Detroit. Motor Cars, Motown, and the Collapse of an Industrial Giant, New York 2013; Charley LeDuff, Detroit: An American Autopsy, New York 2013; David Harvey, Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to Urban Revolution, London 2012; Dan Georgakas, Detroit: I Do Mind Dying: A Study in Urban Revolution, Cambridge, MA 2012; Mark Binelli, Detroit City is the Place to Be: The Afterlife of an American Metropolis, New York 2012; Bill Vlasic, Once Upon a Car: The Rise and Fall of America's Big Three Automakers – GM, Ford and Chrysler, New York 2011; Micheline Maynard, The End of Detroit, New York 2003; Thomas J. Sugrue, The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit, Princeton 2003. But the Detroit-based art historian is among the first to critically explore the larger political and cultural meaning of the prolific image production of Detroit's ruined cityscape. Not only do such images visually construct the city's architectural, economic, and social ruination in the arts, the media, and in popular culture, but they continue to lure more photographers, artists, tourists, and urban explorers into town. After an introductory chapter on the Western history of "ruin lust" (p. 16), which sees contemporary images in dialogue with earlier aesthetic strategies and viewing conventions such as romanticization and dehistoricization, Apel engages briefly with the more recent concept of "ruin porn" (p. 20). While understanding it as an expression of Detroiters' claim on the city, who feel annoyed by outsiders gawking, consuming and maybe profiting from photographing Detroit without bearing the experience of living in the bankrupt city, the author dismisses it as a moralist category, which does very little to help understand the cultural and political effects of such ruin imagery. Tying in with Jill Bennett's notion of "practical aesthetics" which sees the arts and their effects in dialogic connection with actual events (p. 20), Apel considers ruin imagery, regardless of whether produced by locals or visitors to the place, as an aesthetic strate-

gy of managing a pervasive "anxiety of decline" (p. 9).

Over the course of the book she critically interprets a wide variety of Detroit ruin images, among them works by Andrew Moore, Camilo José Vergara, Julia Reyes Taubman as well as Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, whose 2010 collection "The Ruins of Detroit" has already reached iconic status, hence popularizing ruin imagery worldwide. Apel not only compares and assesses aesthetic strategies, but also adds relevant contextual information to each picture discussed, hence rigorously historicizing and humanizing her interpretations. She further complements her discussion of famous Detroit photographs by introducing to the reader some less well-known creative interventions and street art projects and by commenting on Detroit documentaries, exhibitions, films, and TV series. While clearly appreciating the multifarious attempts to revitalize the city by way of creativity, Apel is cautious not to overestimate the impact the flourishing art scene might have on the city's future.

Time and again, Apel employs individual art works and visual materials as a starting point for a corrective narrative. Debunking the complacent myth of Detroit's ruination as inevitable and caused by its own victims, she argues that the city's deplorable state is the result of persistent race and class inequalities which were further exacerbated by the marauding practices of a neoliberal capitalist elite. She not only identifies the "real agents of decline" (p. 28). By providing rich, concrete and detailed historical evidence for how abstract processes such as the privatization of government services, the deregulation of corporate industries, and the cutting of social services have been put in effect, and how exactly they continue to affect the citizens of Detroit, Apel presents an argument that is as convincing as it is distressing. The fervor and academic rigor with which she conveys how ruin imagery visually accounts for an increasingly accepted truth that "[t]he American dream – the idea of individual upward mobility based on merit instead of class, available to all if only they work hard enough – has become an empty phrase that ignores the downward pressures on the middle and working classes" (p. 8), compels the reader to realize that Detroit is not only the most "emblematic of failing cities everywhere" (p. 10), but in fact the harbinger of apocalypse for a nation (and a world) under neoliberal reign.

Apel's study is both elucidating and passionate in warning against the machinations of an elite, who "will continue to shape the city according to its own needs and desires, protecting its assets while subjecting the collective to the ongoing urban processes of displacement, decline, and dispossession" (p. 57). By interpreting the current desire for ever more prolific ruin imagery with regard to US American political economy, the reader is reminded that "the aestheticization of decay must be understood as a constituent element of the deindustrial sublime that can easily lull us into complacency" (p. 73). The common connoisseur of ruin chic might also be alerted to the fact that alternatively, depending on her awareness, ruin imagery might remind her of "the possibility of collective agency" (p. 73). Yet Apel's unabashed reduction of artistic practice and production to serve as a backdrop for political analysis could also be considered the study's conceptual weakness, since it fails to acknowledge the non-utilitarian qualities of both art and individual art works which might provide a last resort for resistance against neoliberal capitalist culture. That being said, I admit being impressed by Apel's passionate tone of voice, which seems informed by a strong commitment to the city (where she teaches art history at Wayne State University) and empathy for the poor, mostly black, disenfranchised citizens of Detroit, the motor city's un- or underemployed industrial workers, the victims and the marginal people, who are in fact a majority in numbers, all of whom stand betrayed by ruthless and elitist neoliberal policies, and who are absent

in too many of the beautiful terrible ruin photographs we all enjoy.

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