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Isolation Nation: Representations of the United States in the photographs of Rémi Noël, Pascal Aimar, Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Mary Elizabeth Downing entitled "Isolation Nation: Representations of the United States in the photographs of Rémi Noël, Pascal Aimar, Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in French.

Sebastien Dubriel, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Les Essif, Paul Lee

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Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

Isolation Nation:

Representations of the United States in the photographs of Rémi Noël, Pascal Aimar,

Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre

A Thesis Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Mary Elizabeth Downing

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ABSTRACT

Visions of America vary greatly. There is an extensive variety found in foreign and domestic portrayals of the United States and these representations are affected by both pro and anti-American ideologies. Such juxtapositions can be found in contemporary French photography. In analyzing the works of photographers, Rémi Noël, Pascal Aimar, as well as the collaborative works of Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, I will argue that their vision of America is influenced by their own perceptions and their viewpoint as French artists. These photographers seek to picture their versions of Texas, Detroit, and New York in ways that reveal aspects of American culture. Their stance as foreigners gives them the opportunity to reveal tropes present in American culture from a more critical point of view, through subject matters ranging from images of consumerism to destruction. These images of American cities, complete with their cultures and subcultures, evoke, in various ways, a sense of isolation through the photographers' re-appropriation of cultural symbols such as batman, life magazine, and architecture, as well as their illustration of the passive nature of time. Isolation, here, in its various representations, contributes to an egocentric and individualist culture that has been cultivated in America. With these objects examined through a culturally French perspective, these photographers illustrate themes like history, economic downfall, interpersonal relations, and expansive landscapes. Occupying a central position in their photographs, these themes contribute to recreating the isolation so prevalent in American culture.

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INTRODUCTION

Photographs attempt to represent a vision of reality. They depict subjects and moments that a photographer chooses. Photos vary widely in meaning and purpose, but they are all images of things that existed, that *happened*. In examining the world around them, photographers aim to make a statement about what they see, or to use what they see to make a statement. Looking at images gives the viewer a sense of a group of people, a place, or a culture. These representations of the world, indeed, are altered by what the photographer chooses to show us, how he frames his subject matter. In explaining the “depictive level” of photographs, Stephen Shore states:

A photographer standing before houses and streets and people and trees and artifacts of a culture imposes an order on the scene – simplifies the jumble by giving it structure. He or she imposes this order by choosing a vantage point, choosing a frame, choosing a moment, and by selecting a plane of focus (Shore 37).

Following this line of thought and taking into account the choices that create any particular photograph, what we see is a particular version of reality that a photographer has chosen to show us. Additionally, this photographic representation is further subjected to the interpretation of the viewership. Thus, any person looking at a photograph can in turn see different things in the chosen representation. A photograph can be analyzed and interpreted based on the knowledge that there were infinite possibilities for any one particular shot. It is in this sense that “photography is inherently an analytic discipline” (37).

The photographs and the photographers discussed here illustrate their images and ideas of American culture from a foreign viewpoint. Their French perspective allows them to create different images of the United States. These representations are critical, romantic, and documentary in nature. There is a long history of theory that influences the photographic discourse. In *America* Jean Baudrillard explores the United States and documents the 'unculture' and 'hyperreality' that exist in various forms all of over the country. His illustrations of the American west as well as New York are visible in the photographs to be examined. Baudrillard's insights into America and its culture, or 'unculture', also contribute to the French perspective that will largely influence the interpretation of these photographs.

In focusing on four French photographers, whose images were constructed within the last thirty years, I will examine the various ways in which they represent American culture. I will argue that the themes present in these three series create a picture of the United States that is simultaneously influenced by the nationality of the photographer as well as the location they each chose to photograph, in an intersubjective relationship that is culturally, historically, and geographically situated. The series of Rémi Noël, Pascal Aimar, Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre offer multiple representations of America throughout. Although they express different themes, economic downfall, abandonment of history, pop culture, violence, consumerism and interpersonal relations, the images evoke a sense of isolation that is present in many aspects of American life and culture.

In the first series, Rémi Noël explores the American southwest (which he does once a year), taking photographs and experiencing the America of motels and open highways. This particular image of America, present in his photographs of Texas, express the banal objects of everyday life as well as a romanticized simplicity. By creating images of the wide-open spaces of the Texan deserts, absent of human figures, he has showcased the geographic isolation present in America. The quasi-ubiquitous presence of the cultural symbol of Batman as a tiny figurine only adds to the sense of isolation. Not only does the size of the figurine distort spatial relationships, but also the way in which Noël frames his shots leaves the toy isolated.

In contrast to the Texan open spaces, Pascal Aimar photographs the very busy city of New York. In this second series, the sense of isolation continues, represented in a slightly different way, in Aimar's photographs. His photographs of New York, taken between 1987 and 1990, portray people isolated in various ways throughout the city. Through means of analog manipulation, various apertures and shutter speeds, Aimar has augmented this sense of isolation. The people in the photographs are veiled, hidden, and obscure. Uncontrollable elements, weather and lighting, contribute to this effect but the ways in which Aimar focuses the camera also isolate his subjects.

Finally, Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre, in the third and last series I will examine, work together to create collaborative images of Detroit. In focusing on the ruins of this once rich and powerful city, they show a city in the process of dying. There is a cliché beauty in the ruins photographed, but there are also other themes

present. Marchand and Meffre have photographed buildings, once grand and important, that have been abandoned and their history has been abandoned with them: they are forgotten. They are isolated from the life that surrounds the city. In this way they are comparable to the people in Aimar's photos, isolated from their surroundings, alone. Throughout this series, the longest of the three, one can see what Susan Sontag believes to be one of many purposes of photography: "picture-taking serves a high purpose: uncovering a hidden truth, conserving a vanishing past" (52). In this sense Marchand and Meffre have not only created a sense of isolation, but also isolated these places in specific points of destruction.

These three series of photographs, taken from French perspectives, all evoke a sense of isolation. The other themes present contribute to this sense but also add to the various images of American life and culture. The egocentric and individualist ideologies cultivated in the United States are also representative of this isolation. While some instances of isolation are figurative and created by photographic tool, there are also instances of literal isolation throughout the photos.

Any photograph has multiple meanings; indeed, to see something in the form of a photograph is to encounter a potential object of fascination. The ultimate wisdom of the photographic image is to say: 'There is the surface. Now thing – or rather feel, intuit – what is beyond it, what the reality must be like if it looks this way' (Sontag 23).

That is what is being done here: what reality have these photographers attempted to depict? What is behind the surface of these images of Texas, New York, and Detroit? What is the message behind the reality the photographers have chosen to create?

Photography is a different kind of art, especially in this era of digital technology. These images are surely not the only ones the photographers took

throughout their trips to the U.S. These were chosen specifically to tell the story they wanted to tell. Our society, American society as well as the global society, seeks out images: “Needing to have reality confirmed and experience enhanced by photographs is an aesthetic consumerism to which everyone is now addicted” (24). Images are everywhere and they function in a variety of ways. These particular images function as art as well as a critique of American society and culture.

CHAPTER ONE

The Isolation of Cultural Artifacts

Once a year, for ten days at a time, Rémi Noël travels to the southwestern United States to photograph a landscape much different than that of France. He sets out in the deserts of Texas and California to capture images influenced by “the ‘America’ of Jack Kerouac, Edward Hopper and Robert Frank” (www.thisisnotamap.com). In an interview between Noël and Raphaëlle Stopin for Artligue Publishing, Noël notes that he prefers the United States because it enables him to escape the familiar landscapes of France and experience a sort of exoticism (www.reminoel.com/bio). These open landscapes serve as an exotic backdrop where he can set up his figurines and props to create images of America. He attributes his re-appropriation of cultural symbols, painting, batman, coca cola, and tiny cars, to his day job in the advertising industry. He has created a series of thirty-four images of Texas that incorporate these symbols in the critical representation of the United States by way of this particular state.

The desert is a location that fascinates Europeans. Artists and Intellectuals have spent countless hours pondering the desert and its emptiness. Jean Baudrillard expresses a similar desire to that of Rémi Noël:

I went in search of *astral* America, not social and cultural America, but the America of the empty, absolute freedom of the freeways, not the deep America of mores and mentalities, but the America of desert speed, of motels and mineral surfaces... The inhumanity of our ulterior, asocial, superficial world immediately finds its aesthetic form here, its ecstatic form. For the desert is simply that: an ecstatic form of disappearance (Baudrillard 5-6).

The interest in the desert could be initially inspired by something as simple as its exotic nature: there are no deserts in Europe. These photos span several Texan cities: Galveston, Temple, El Paso, Ozona, Junction, Midland, Houston, Marfa, New Braunfels, Uvalde, Del Rio, Flatonia, Dallas, and Waco. Noël also published his photos in an unconventional way. Instead of publishing a book with an introduction or an artist statement he created what looks like a map with a clear disclaimer on the front: "This is not a map but a photographic journey by Rémi Noël" (thisisnotamap.com). Once open, the folded up piece of paper reveals all thirty-four images at once, in various sizes and places; they are not represented equally in a grid format. This places more emphasis on the larger photographs but also creates a jumbled order offering a non-linear pathway to explore the series. On the side, a list of titles with numbers corresponds to certain photographs but does not necessarily draw the path of the eye across the massive sheet of paper. Above the titles there is a short paragraph, both in French and English, describing the 'map' and Noël's preoccupation with a certain 'timeless America'.

The fact that the titles and this paragraph are the only instances of text create more focus on the images and each viewers' interpretation of them. Aside from some of the titles, there is no context for these photos, no backstory to guide the viewer into seeing any one particular thing. The first thing that strikes the viewer upon unfolding the paper is the seemingly fragmented images. Once the whole 'map' opens and sprawls out it becomes visible that the folds in the paper break up certain images and contain certain images. The various sizes play into the folds of the paper until the whole picture becomes visible, or rather the collage of pictures. The most

important photographic element throughout the various images is composition. Almost in the very center is the largest image.

The largest image, *In the World of Hopper "Route 6"*, shows the view from a car window, the driver's window and the front window. The frame of the car divides the image, and parts of the steering wheel and the dashboard peek out of the bottom of the image. Outside the window the view is of a vast empty landscape and parts of a road. In the rearview mirror stand a couple of buildings, which appear to be a house. This house seems to be geographically isolated despite its location on the road. There is very little infrastructure, the road, a couple of telephone poles, and there aren't any other cars or visible people. The framing of this shots seems to place this house in the middle of nowhere.

The landscape outside the car also evokes a sense of 'nowhere'; it seems to continue forever. Without the frame of the car, which literally frames the image and "corrals the content of the photograph" the horizontal lines of the desert, would in fact, continue forever (Shore 56). Jean Baudrillard describes a similar sensation he found in the desert: "The silence of the desert is a visual thing, too. A product of the gaze that stares out and finds nothing to reflect it" (6). The vast open area depicted outside the car window is broken up here by several things that 'reflect' our gaze. In this instance the car frame is only temporary. It is in this picture, but it is not a permanent part of the vast, open, empty landscape. Unlike the car, the house is there, it is not passing through the landscape, it is part of it: isolated within it.

The reference to Edward Hopper, present in several of the images and their titles, shows Noël's interest in other art forms and cultural artifacts. Edward Hopper

is also noted as an artist whose subject matter is “a detached observation of life, a detachment that often expresses isolation and loneliness” (Geldzahler 115). In this way the two artists are thus linked insofar as their representations of a specific part of American culture evoke senses of isolation, both literal and figurative. Unlike Hopper, whose scenes were usually urban or nautical in nature, Noël “find[s] it hard to work in urban environments, in saturated places” (www.reminoel.com/bio). The fact that there is a vision of isolation in their various images, in a wide range of places, speaks to a sense of isolation that is present in many parts of American culture. Although Hopper portrayed the city and its lonely inhabitants and Noël depicts empty landscapes and motel rooms, their images represent isolation in similar ways: “The people in Hopper’s urban paintings are isolated individuals who appear out of place, detached from the city both socially and spatially as it changes around them” (Slater 141). Not only does the spatial isolation, present in both Hopper’s and Noël’s images, leave the subject in the midst of a figurative desert but it also isolates the viewers (142). Even though Hopper lived and worked in New York City for the majority of his life, he is noted for representing an anti-urbanism closely linked with sense of isolation in big cities, a theme to be examined in the works of Pascal Aimar.

Another image that references Hopper is *In the world of Hopper, “Gas”*. Much smaller than its counterpart “*Route 6*”, this image is framed and composed in almost the exact same way. Instead of seeing isolated buildings in the rearview mirror, we are shown an empty gas station. This photograph, like the last, has images originally composed by Hopper imbedded in the rearview mirror. Noël has taken

Hopper's work and incorporated it into empty desert-scape's to further exploit the isolation of these two images. The frame of the car, that both divides and frames the desert while making the mirror the central figure, have brought the two paintings into a more transient and modern America. *Gas* and *Route 6*, Hopper's works, were created over half a century ago, yet there is something contemporary about them as well as the isolation they depict. These images stand the test of time and could have been created much more recently. The isolation depicted in Hopper's images, particularly the two that were re-appropriated by Noël, is something that is continually visible throughout the geographic and cultural landscape of the United States. Being taken out of their original context further alienates the lonely gas attendant and the seemingly isolated home.

Noël centrally locates the image of a rearview mirror in three photographs. He has aligned himself in the same category of Edward Hopper, while using his images to exacerbate a sense of figurative isolation. Continuing the nod to art's history, Noël places Gustave Courbet's *L'Origine du Monde* in a photograph by the same name. The original painting shows a fragmented view of a woman's torso and genitals. Noël's modernized and Americanized representation shows the majority of the same fragmented body reflected in a rearview mirror placed on the nightstand of a motel room. Next to the mirror sit a set of car keys with a Ford key chain and an old telephone. Once again, the work of art has been removed from its context, transported over a century into a plain American motel room.

As the title of the original painting suggests, *l'Origine du Monde* blatantly emphasizes the monumental importance of the physical female body as a creator.

The original setting for the headless figure, lying on a surface covered with white sheets, is plain, placing the emphasis on the female form. In Noël's photograph, the emphasis lies in the objects surrounding the original painting. The rear view mirror is small; therefore the scale of the painting is much smaller in comparison to the telephone, adjacent to the mirror. The placement of the mirror tricks the viewer momentarily into thinking the woman could be lying on motel bed and the keys next to the mirror are a reminder to the transitory lifestyle Noël leads during his photographic trips to the United States.

The mirrors in these three images serve two important purposes: to further isolate the original images from their new scenery, and to create the illusion of looking into the past. In the first two images it is not immediately clear that the image in the mirror is another work of art. It serves as a reflection as well as a window into the "world of Edward Hopper." In the third image the eye seems to be more skeptical of the mirror's reflection of reality. The angle and the central location in the frame make it difficult to believe that a woman is lying in the bed next to the table. The mirrors reflect art's past as well as bring the works into a modern, isolated America.

These images are also representative of Rémi Noël's nationality: not only has he chosen images of America created by an American artist; he has also re-appropriated a famous French realist's image. This is indicative of an American culture that gathers influence from a variety of places and times to create the image of a 'melting pot.' The ways in which Noël has altered the context of the images is representational of the ways in which American culture alters the influence of other

cultures to create something *more specifically* American. Americans, especially in our ever increasingly patriotic time, seek to dominate and control the influences of other cultures rather than embrace a diversity that is necessary for the survival of individual cultures.

Art is not the only cultural symbol that Noël introduces into his images. Batman, Life magazine, paint chips, baked beans, Coca Cola, as well as tiny cars all make appearances throughout the series. These specific items are crucial to what Noël sees as typically American. The batman figurine is the most interesting from the perspective of isolated American culture. Superheroes play a large role in pop culture with new movies, comics, and TV shows appearing every day. Old versions are remade and reimagined to appeal to new, more easily bored, generations; this shows a continued desire for the 'super' and 'hyper' reality that is increasingly important:

America is neither dream nor reality. It is a hyperreality. It is a hyperreality because it is a utopia which has behaved from the very beginning as though it were already achieved. Everything here is real and pragmatic, and yet it is all the stuff of dreams too (Baudrillard 28).

The culture of superheroes and mega-corporations that control more than most Americans are ever willing to admit plays into this idea of hyperreality. Baudrillard also continues to explain that Europeans are the only ones who can discern the simulations of life because Americans cannot see that they themselves are part of the simulations (28-29).

Although there are undoubtedly hundreds of superheroes that Noël could have chosen, he depicts Batman. Batman, the most isolated superhero of them all,

has been chosen to be central in a third of the shots on the “least precise map of Texas in the history of Texas” (www.thisisnotamap.com). This superhero is isolated, nocturnal, and without a doubt one of the darkest superheroes. Instead of Captain America or Superman, much more typical ‘American’ heroes, Noël stages Batman throughout deserted and isolated American landscapes and motel rooms to exacerbate a sense of isolation. Batman also lives in Gotham City, which I would argue represents the excess of western urbanized society. The juxtaposition of Batman and the Texan desert serves as a contrast between urban and rural environments.

The photograph *Perched on a tree* shows the small Batman figurine literally perched on a tree. The tree is the only sign of life in the horizontal landscape, and I would argue that the tree looks more dead than alive. Batman is isolated on the low-lying branch of the tree in a sea of horizontal lines, adding to the endless sense of emptiness. The size of the figurine serves to isolate him as well. The tiny toy manipulates the spatial relationships and the landscape seems even emptier as a result. Batman is literally isolated in this shot in a way similar to the isolation of the United States. The North American continent is fairly isolated from the rest of the developed world. Not only is the United States more geographically isolated than other western countries, but also the egocentric and patriotic sentiments cultivated in America serve to further isolate the country. Through political, social, and cultural practices, Americans isolate themselves on a more figurative level as well. Similar to the cultural manipulation mentioned earlier, our isolation is something most Americans have chosen. Instead of participating in a global community, Americans

are obsessed with the idea of being the biggest and the best; Americans would rather dominate the world than take part in it. Batman's placement in this photograph, as well as his role as superhero and protector, place the figurine in a similar role as the United States in the culture of isolation. Batman's role as protector is arbitrary because he is placed in a deserted location and the only semblance of life, the tree, is arguably a symbol of life destroyed.

The primary role of the tiny figurine in this photograph is an analogy between fictional superhero and the real-life superpower of the United States. Batman is also a cultural symbol, surrounded by a capitalistic enterprise. The next image featuring Batman disembodies his cape, which is firmly placed around a Coca-Cola bottle. This image, *The Dark Knight*, shows an even more prominent American symbol: Coca-Cola. The image's title, a reference to the latest batch of Batman movies, is as eerie as it is comical. Darkness and mystery are central to Batman's identity but here the superhero is nowhere to be seen. Instead of his body we see an old-fashioned bottle of Coke. Coca-Cola is one of the largest multinational corporations in the world. Images of Coca-Cola - and its American influence - exist all over the world. One of the ways in which America exerts its influence is by exporting objects for consumption. The image of Coca-Cola represents both a consumerist and capitalist society. The combination of the all-American beverage and the dark superhero create a slightly contradictory message concerning American culture. The thing that they have in common is their status in global pop culture and the wealthy enterprises they represent. The isolated character of

Batman is combined with the globally disseminated image of Coke, a company that is available in every country in the world except two.

Another representation of the consumerism and capitalism that has run rampant in the United States is *Rainy day*. This image shows the dash of a car, which frames the bottom of the picture with a paint chip. On the paint chip is written “PANTONE13-5304 Rainy Day.” Outside the dash the rain collecting on the windshield blurs the street and other cars. Something so simple and ordinary has been turned into a commodity in America. Color, an essential feature of life, is commoditized and represented by numbers and seemingly arbitrary names. The artist Angelica Dass has taken the commodity of color one step further. She has taken it upon herself to find the Pantone color chip matching individual’s skin tone and to photograph the subjects, using the specific color as the background. Taking color, something characteristic to human existence, and creating an object to buy and sell is a very capitalistic enterprise. These colors are isolated, named, categorized, and priced. Both Noël and Angelica Dass have represented the consumption of color in their images.

The banal nature of daily life can be seen in several of Noël’s images but here, along side the boring rainy day, there is a comparison of the reality and the commodity behind the reality. Rain is not necessarily something people look forward to, but a paint manufacturer has decided to name a color after a rainy day so that they can market it and sell it to the masses as if it is something to be envied. This is another example of a “hyper” real culture: the color rainy day is most certainly preferred to an actual rainy day. The reality cannot be bought and sold, but

the color can and surely Pantone is not the only company to choose this name or many others like it.

Another cultural icon represented in this series is Life magazine. Three different shots are composed to look like the cover of this infamous magazine, with the logo held up by a visible hand in the upper corner of the scene. One of these shots in particular, *Special issue #8*, shows empty parking lots and a truck stop. There are empty signs that represent businesses that couldn't withstand their geographic isolation as well as the truck stop, emblematic of a transient, isolated lifestyle. This image, as well as the other two, is empty and the lifeless scenes bear the title "LIFE" in the corner. It begs an obvious question: What is life? There are so many lifestyles present in the United States, but Noël has represented the most transient of them all: truck drivers. Isolated from their families and their homes for days at a time, working at the mercy of various corporations, fueling the consumerist lifestyle.

Consumerism, a disease that everyone has fallen victim to, finds its strongest roots in American culture. It is something that every American has become accustomed to in the simplest forms. "What do you do when everything is available – sex, flowers, the stereotypes of life and death? This is America's problem and, through America, it has become the whole world's problem" (Baudrillard 30). The idea of sex as a commodity is yet another image of consumerism present in one of Noël's images. A giant sign stating "Nonstop beautiful ladies" states very clearly the objectification of women as well as the industry that thrives in most countries: women selling their bodies in one way or another.

These images, both their subject matter as well as their composition, create a sense of isolation prevalent in America. Rémi Noël does not embark on his photographic journeys without props; the figurines and ideas are things he has collected and thought about throughout the year, waiting for the moment to bring them to life. “When photographers take pictures, they hold mental models in their minds; models that are the result of the prodding of insight, conditioning, and comprehension of the world” (Shore 117). In this case Noël’s found objects and mental models recreate isolated scenes. Both the transient lifestyles depicted and the locations Noël chooses to photograph are forms of isolation. Batman and the famous works of art that are re-appropriated in these images contribute to the feeling of loneliness. Even the way in which Noël travels to create the images is isolated: he travels alone with various objects he wishes to photograph for ten days out of the year. In a totally different environment, New York City, Pascal Aimar creates similarly isolated images. Although the location is completely opposed to the literal desert found in Noël’s series, crowded and metropolitan as opposed to deserted and vast, his images of people evoke similar feelings to those of Noël’s Batman figurine. Rémi Noël’s photographs seem more like still life paintings, while Pascal Aimar’s evoke a sense of life captured in a single, solitary moment.

CHAPTER TWO

Alone in the Crowd

Although Pascal Aimar lived and worked in New York City for two years, most of the images from this series are from a twenty-day trip to the city in 1990. Through his use of aperture and his composition, Aimar represents a city that is unclear and blurry. In using a large aperture in combination with a fast shutter speed he can capture the subject of his images in detail, while obscuring the background. The shadows, the rain, and the contrast between black and white serve to isolate the people from their surroundings. Similar to Noël's series of photographs, it is not immediately apparent that these images are of New York City. There are a few key markers like images that appear to be taken in Central Park, but they are not immediately clear. Skyscrapers, parks, traffic – these are all common elements of most large [American] cities. In so doing, Aimar has used this as an opportunity to comment on city life in general in addition to a depiction of a particularly isolated American city.

In his book on French street photography, Clive Scott explains that Paris is the home of this particular genre, street photography. In citing other authors of similar books, Scott continues to explain both the influence of other art forms on street photography as well as street photography's influence on these art forms. In a reciprocal fashion, art's influences stretch across painting, literature, and photography. This book defines, in many ways, the difference between documentary photography and street photography. Although the boundaries are at times blurry,

Scott contends that there are clear differences while maintaining that they do not have to be mutually exclusive. Scott clearly states that, “There is too much emphasis, in French photography of the period, on elements of narrative, instantaneous, peripheral angles of vision, for the documentary style properly to have taken root” (Shore 5). The time period is incredibly different as the title of the book suggests: “Street Photography, From Atget to Cartier-Bresson”, but it is a tradition that continues. In the case of Pascal Aimar, his photographs situate themselves into this French discipline of street photography, without completely ignoring a documentary stance. The ways in which these two genres of photography interact will be further explored in relation to specific photographs.

Aimar is continuing a tradition of French photography that is both documentary and street photographic in nature. A similar project, described as “very French” is the collection of photos taken by Charles Marville in the 19th century (Kimmelman). Although Michael Kimmelman aligns Marville with the Google employees traveling around the world, systematically documenting cities, the project, financed by the French government captured a particular part of history. The Paris that the world knows today, the romantic visions of streets lined with cafés that tourists seek out, was being created. What Marville was tasked with capturing was all of the things that were being demolished and relocated as a result. His photographs do not always show people, but without blatantly documenting all of the people in these soon-to-be demolished areas, they do not generate the feeling of a ghost town:

“They extract all sorts of humanity from the chaos and cramped quarters, the nooks and crannies, the mismatched rooflines and

patched-up, stained masonry buildings plastered with peeling posters and fading advertisements that today seem so picturesque and full of life but that drove Haussmann nuts” (Kimmelman).

Marville’s photographs document the rapid modernization of a city, at the expense of the poorer residents. In similar and much smaller scales this process of gentrification is still happening everywhere. It may be occurring in specific neighborhoods or in entire cities where industry is changing and the lower classes are being forced to find homes and jobs elsewhere. Pascal Aimar’s images seem to evoke a similar sense of ‘pre-gentrification’. Whether or not his goal was a similar kind of documentation may be unclear, but New York City and the neighborhoods surrounding Manhattan are currently experiencing a massive type of gentrification.

There are many differences between the two series; the technological advances are immense but they are not the most obvious difference. The centrality of the people in Aimar’s photographs starkly contrast with the mostly empty streets that hold remnants of life in Marville’s. The photographers’ motives are fairly different as well: Marville was commissioned by the government to document the city in the midst of change and Aimar was photographing a neighborhood of New York of his own volition. Aimar’s images, taken almost 25 years ago, show twelve distinct views of the city, a city that occupies imaginations across the world: “The entire world continues to dream of New York, even as New York dominates and exploits it” (Baudrillard 24). This city holds many representations of the United States, and some of these views are represented in this series. The violence, multiculturalism, separation - and in turn isolation - of different social classes, as well as the relaxed beauty of Central Park, find a home in these photographs.

The first photograph plays out a visual disorientation. Similar to the Noël's images where small toys manipulate the scale of the photographs, here a woman stands in front of a window, next to a tree. The window appears so massive that at first glance, it is difficult to decide the scale of the woman and the window. The parallel horizontal lines of the shades, which serve to veil the outside world, also contribute to the symmetry of the building outside. It is only after careful and somewhat extensive examining that one realizes that the woman is in fact, a doll, staring out at the world below. There is a stark contrast between the inside and outside worlds depicted in this photo. The bright light streaming in from outside creates shadows out of everything inside, to the point where all that is decipherable is the shape of some houseplants, vague figures, and the silhouette of the doll. The darkness of the inside space isolates it from the brightness of the outside world.

This distance between the outside world and inside space is present in many Americans' lives, whether or not they are aware of it. The American public spends a large amount of time inside, in the man-made, carefully controlled, air-conditioned or heated environment, away from the unmediated temperature and space outside. This is a stereotype that holds true for a large part of the population. There is no shortage of children who play videogames all day long in the summer, controlled by the crafted environments. This scenario reinforces Baudrillard's notions of hyperreality: videogames are representations of reality that can be manipulated, leading the players to believe that they are in control of the environment that consumes them. Luckily, these images also portray the part of the population that spends their leisure time outdoors, but it seems much more segregated.

For example, the next image shows three people, a woman and two men, standing next to a chain-link fence that separates them from the river, which in turn separates them from the city. All three people are facing different directions, and one is running, blurry as a result of the shutter speed, too slow to catch him in more detail. This photograph continues with the same sort of lines that separate the spaces. Although in the first photo, the lines of the blinds separate inside from outside, the perpendicular lines of the chain-link fence separate two outdoors spaces. This division of outdoor spaces represents the economic division of the neighborhoods, a division that is disappearing. These people are isolated from the prosperous city center, where skyscrapers loom over the city. A further isolation continues today as the poorer inhabitants of Brooklyn and Harlem are pushed even farther away from the economic center of the city.

Skyscrapers, buildings that represent globalized commerce, are now a symbol of much more after the destruction of the World Trade Center. This picture takes on a whole new meaning in a post 9/11 world where Americans are hyper-vigilant and quick to react to criticisms and possible threats. Skyscrapers haunt the American present with the previously conceived invincibility of the past. For Americans who are old enough to remember exactly where they were during this life-changing event, these towers are immediately recognizable, and other similar skyscrapers, especially in New York are constant reminders of that life-changing day. What the Twin Towers specifically represent now, an attack on American ideology is very different from what they represented when Aimar captured this

image, reminiscent of the Twin Towers themselves. In contrast to this image, the remaining images represent visions of New York that have remained fairly constant.

The next two photographs portray an interaction with the outside world, a family at the beach, and people lying in a shady park. These images briefly intersect the depictions of a more solitary existence in the city, as if they are the exception to urban life, and not the rule. Quickly the viewer's attention is redirected to a more violent image, that of a young African American man in a fighting stance, holding his fists up to the camera. It becomes obvious that the man is standing in front of a boxing studio. There is an image of two people boxing on the glass door that the man is holding open. Although he appears to be outside, propping open the door, he is enveloped in shadows. The details of his left side are hidden in the darkness that is creeping up from behind him. The violence depicted in this photograph is alarming, because the subject is staring right into the camera, posing for the photographer, documentary-style:

The person who poses is adopting the behaviour known as 'being photographed'. This is an unstable behaviour made up of submission and self-declaration, in varying mixes. Many sitters try to please the lens, to produce an 'expected' photograph, to create the photogenic (Scott 136).

Is this person posing in this particular way because of his position, or a perceived persona? This image could be representative of the way he perceives the world: he must be on the defensive. It is not entirely clear, and the lack of any precise title leaves much to the imagination of the viewer. Without captions or titles to guide the viewers mind, there is room for the imagination to run wild, only affected by previously conceived notions. What is clear is the aggressive stance of the subject.

The boxing studio, although ambiguous and enveloped in shadows, represents not only a violent element prevalent in American culture, but also shows a capitalist version of this violence. The goal of the boxing studio may not be primarily to make money, but in *selling* the lessons they are making money off of violence. A necessity of a boxing studio, or a studio of martial arts, is the profit from violence; it is imperative that the owners can make money in order to remain operational. The prevalence of these kinds of establishments has appeared to skyrocket in recent decades. This could be the result of a growing sense of female independence, since many of the classes are marketed for their cultivation of self-defense skills. Similar to the commodification of color in Noël's *Rainy day*, this photograph creates an object out of violence; it has become a commodity that people can buy and sell. The boxers are isolated in their sport; each fighter is solitary in the pursuit of his goal.

In sharp contrast to the aggressive tone of this photograph, several images later, he uses a similar composition. The photograph shows a man, slightly older, on a sidewalk in front of the moving cars in an intersection. He appears calm in foreground of this image while the busy street behind continues in its routine. His stance evokes the other side of 'being photographed': "Others look at the lens with a look that is disarmed, because there is nothing to *respond to* only to *look at*. This is what may indeed give the lens access to a truth" (Scott 136 original emphasis). He appears calm and comfortable in front of Aimar and his camera. He extends his arm, holding out a cup, almost as if he is saying "cheers" behind his slight grin. Although the contrast between light and dark is not nearly as striking as the other images, the

white semi-truck passing behind him through the intersection creates a sharp contrast between the man and his surroundings. His central location in the frame adds to the sense that he is the subject of this photograph and is clearly in sharper focus than the background.

The previous photographs, although different in tone, reflect more of a documentarian approach to photography where the

[c]ontinuing allegiance to the idea of the synthetic portrait – the soliloquy of the face – relates to the minimization of perspectivism, of multiplied point of view. Documentary photography, like naturalism, is prepared to live with a potential contradiction: it affirms that the relativity of conditions ('race, milieu, moment') acts deterministically on mankind, but does not allow a relativity of point of view which might release mankind from that determinism (Scott 136).

These men, both African American, appear to be inscribed into their surroundings. The viewer is left with the impression that they are constants in the backgrounds with which they are photographed. They are not visibly uncomfortable with this, but there is no sense that they stray far from their photographed realities. In this way, they are isolated in these particular places. The apparent permanence serves to isolate them from other – moving – parts of the city and their solitary existence within the frame adds to a more personal isolation. Scott argues that, "isolation transfixes the character in the space of his own condition" (93). This theory runs in tandem with his distinctions between documentary and street photography. He continues to argue that the "isolation removes the subject from the possibility of narrative, where narrative has the power to restore a life, a mobility" (93-94). This theory seems to imply that the viewer is incapable of creating a narrative with what appear to be sparse visual clues. Even without a larger narrative, isolation still

creates questions that a viewer could seek to ask: Why are they isolated? What are they isolated from? Claiming that the isolated subjects of these photographs can never be connected to a narrative is reductionist and presents too static a view of Aimar's photographs. Indeed, any particular viewer will seek to find a story outside the isolated context portrayed, to reconcile themselves with their own feelings of isolation. This series, I would argue, does present a cultural narrative in which individuals, through gentrification and consumerism, are increasingly isolated from each other. Instead of being constitute of the social fabric, these individual narratives are presented as fragmented, and they undermine the notion of community.

Just before the photograph of the man making a communal gesture, a "cheers" motion to an unknown other, presumably Aimar, there is a photograph of people exiting a park. The top half of a stage stands behind them, as well as a makeshift gate closing the entrance off from other possible points of entry. There are two children and a man, possibly their father (?), facing the camera. Only the youngest child, a little boy, makes eye contact with the lens. The young girl, although centrally located in the frame, seems unaware of the camera's presence or Aimar's intention to photograph her; she looks towards the ground, with a solemn gaze, uncharacteristic for a child her age. The man looks up and past the camera with a concerned gaze. He does not take ownership of the children in the sense that he is not holding their hands and the little girl is walking in front, but the little boy seems to hide slightly behind the man, as if he senses some kind of intrusion or the concern of the man. The little girl's shirt reads "its cool being black" over a cartoon

reminiscent of the Simpsons. This speaks to the pride of a people that make up a large part of the population of New York, but that are plagued with a history of discrimination and now, gentrification.

Towards the end of the short series there is a photograph of an older woman, walking alone in the rain. This photograph carries, within its subject, a heavy sense of despair. Not only is the woman physically isolated from the other pedestrians disappearing in their sea of umbrellas, she is also hidden by her plastic cap. In protecting herself from the rain she has taken another step towards isolation: she is hidden, separated from the world around her by the barrier of plastic that slightly distorts the upper half of her face. She clutches her purse tightly, as if to put her guard up against the city as well as the elements, both of which are harsh in their own right. In addition to her own efforts to separate herself, the photograph is blurry. The woman is the only possible subject, the only person in focus. Although most of her torso and head are in focus there are portions, her left arm in particular, that are blurred by her rushed pace. The woman appears to be Chinese, thus adding to the possible representation of a cultural melting pot. The fact that she is seen alone, head slightly down, potentially uncomfortable, suggests another idea, a more accurate image: the isolated nature of ethnic groups, both of their own creation and that of outside pressures. The 'Chinatowns' and 'Little Italies' of larger cities are a testament to this fact: immigrants, especially first-generation immigrants, frequent particular areas to live, work, and socialize. These areas are also affected by the process of gentrification.

Gentrification, government stimulated or generated by groups of poor non-minorities, happens all over the world. In the case of New York, areas like Harlem and Brooklyn are changing rapidly. The cost of living in Manhattan has risen too high for most and people are moving just outside of this highly desirable area, where costs are rising, but more slowly. The people who have historically inhabited these parts of the city are being pushed farther and farther away because most can no longer afford to stay. The trendy artistic centers of the city are shifting and the poor, mostly minority, residents are no longer welcome.

The last photograph of the series reflects a much more violent New York than the others: a woman is being taken forcefully by the police. In the jumbled mix of bodies the viewer can decipher at least two other civilians trying to pull her out. Her head is tilted backwards and she is screaming. The only face that is clearly visible is that of a middle-aged man: he looks sad, concerned. The heads of the police officers are cut off, adding more emphasis to the violent manner in which these people are being treated. This speaks to the faceless nature of the government that hides behind the police force. In cutting their heads out of the frame, Aimar has dehumanized the officers that are so violently detaining the woman. From what little is shown, the officers appear to be wearing riot gear. This photograph hangs between the boundaries of street photographic and documentary traditions. Although this photograph almost immediately appears to fall into the latter, there is no title. There is no expressed message other than police brutality. This photograph has no background information, and as a result the viewer is left questioning why this woman is being taken away, where is she, who she is. Her anonymity suggests

that this brutality could be inflicted upon anyone who does not blindly obey the powers that be.

This questioning and uncertainty is based on a lack of possible information to ground the viewer in a particular time and place. For this reason, it appears less and less to have documentary-like motives: “The documentarist pursues a rhetoric of completeness, so that evidence can become proof” (Scott 72). Within this photograph, the viewer is “invite[d] to think *out of* the photo, in a way which would be irresponsible for the documentarist” (Scott 74 original emphasis).

The central theme of this photograph, violence - and more specifically police brutality - is often referenced throughout French theory and criticisms of America. Baudrillard opens his section on New York with images of the extreme and violence with words like aggressive, intense, unbelievable, terrifying, and strangeness (Baudrillard 14). This is not to say that his images of New York are all negative. Although he speaks of “a certain solitude like no other”, he continues by saying that “there is no human reason to be here, except for the sheer ecstasy of being crowded together” (15). The word ‘ecstasy’ implies that there is a positive quality to the masses of people and buildings that constitute New York. Baudrillard consistently creates contrasting statements about New York. For example, he calls attention to “the sparkle and violence of American cities” (America 16). Violence, being the operative element in the last photograph, plays a crucial role in many of the comments Baudrillard makes as well as the international discourse that surrounds the United States: “New York’s violence is not a violence of social relations, but of *all relations*, and it is exponential” (23).

Violence is a theme that runs throughout the three series in different forms. The batman figurine, a central element in the Noël's representations of American isolation, can also be described as a violent presence. The need, imagined or realistic, for a superhero implies that there is a danger and a violent presence that must be eradicated. The fact that these hero and victim scenarios still exist in an overwhelming number today only magnifies the violence Americans perceive. The ironic end to the superhero dynamic is that, often, in order to destroy the 'evil' and 'violent' enemy, more violence and destruction ensues. There is a battle to the end, or multiple battles for control between the 'good' and 'evil' entities before any resolution can exist. Violence has an isolating power for both victims and their aggressors. There is an American obsession with victims that places them in an isolated position. This obsession with victimization is not limited to human beings. The continuation of a preoccupation with ruins, said to have started in the 18th century, is also linked to this phenomenon.

CHAPTER THREE

The Leftovers of Capitalism

A new form of violence and isolation is depicted in the third and final series: The Ruins of Detroit. Although some would argue that ruination is not inherently violent, some of the following images suggest otherwise. The buildings of Detroit were isolated by a fleeing population and a collapsing economy. Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre set out on a five-year mission to photograph “the state of ruin” in Detroit (The Ruins of Detroit 16). They believe that Detroit epitomizes this state more so than any other city in part because “ruins are no longer an isolated and anecdotal element, but become a logical part, a natural component of the landscape” (Ruins of Detroit 16). Their collaborative effort highlights themes of isolation brought on by capitalism, a slightly different form of gentrification, and most significantly an isolation from history.

The massive collection of photographs is organized mostly according to the type of building or establishment that has been left to deteriorate. With historical and cultural introductions to each section, this book becomes much more than a collection of images. The photographs of Aïmar float in-between the lines of street and documentary photograph, but with Marchand and Meffre, the images find a more permanent place in the documentary tradition. These images speak of a process and condition that is specifically situated in Detroit. Although there are ruins and devastation throughout the entire world, these are firmly grounded, by their introductions and captions, to a particular location and history.

Marchand and Meffre are correct in saying that ruined buildings are not an isolated sight in Detroit, the home of a plethora of abandoned institutions. To say that ruination is not an isolated state of being does not, however, mean that these structures are free of a growing sense of isolation. Ruin and decay irreversibly changes an environment:

Decay can be found in many forms, including economic, social, and physical decay. As people moved out of Detroit through the latter half of the twentieth century, the buildings they left behind gradually became vacant and started to decay. Once decay sets in, it begins to unravel the physical and social fabric of a neighborhood (detroiturbex.com).

As previously stated, the images are grouped, in large, according to type. Factories, train stations, city-scapes, hotels, theaters, schools, residential neighborhoods, housing developments, churches and government buildings all find their place in the spotlight throughout this anthology of Detroit. In addition to these more clearly outlined categories, I have further separated these images into thematic groups as well as grouped several according to the dominant compositional elements.

There are several distinct compositional elements that take center stage in this series. Where the composition of Noël's scenes evoked a sense of endless horizontality in a literal desert, Marchand and Meffre make use of strong vertical lines and symmetrical architecture throughout their images. Lighting, which was also a key element throughout Pascal Aimar's photographs, finds itself central in a portion of Detroit images as well. This series of color images makes use of the lighting in different ways, to accentuate the varied colors and the buildings or to add to a monochromatic color scheme. Another component of these images is the view through windows that is often used. The various windows used are found in

different states of degradation, which serves to obscure the view of the outside world. There are also instances where the windows are completely destroyed, leaving a much clearer view of what lies on the other side. These elements can be found in all of the photographs to be discussed, but there are several images that represent these elements in magnificent detail.

One of the first images, opposite a page of text describing Marchand and Meffre's goal with this project, is that of a window (The Ruins of Detroit 17). The window is cracked and parts of the glass are missing, but the abandoned and dilapidated building facing the window is visible as well as a portion of the skyline behind it. The dark frame of the window accentuates the frame of the image and the strong vertical line, dissecting the image in two, is perfectly aligned with the center of the image. The cracks that run through these two windowpanes are curved and fluid, in stark contrast to the rigid horizontal and vertical lines of the building outside and the frame of the window. The cracks are dark, and radiating out from the central dark lines there is a rust colored tint that obscures, ever so slightly, the view of the outside world. The same rust colored tint is also found along the frame of the windowpanes. The window represents an isolated interior existence, but in this instance neither the elements nor the ruin are kept from passing through this barrier. Several images later, there is another example of a window as the main compositional element. Although the first image does not offer the viewer any background information concerning where this window is located, the caption of the next image firmly plants the image in an industrial setting, Packard Motors Plant.

The window in this second image is much larger, and rather than focusing on a close-up of two panes, Marchand and Meffre took several steps back, photographing not only all of the panes of the large window, but also what lies beneath the window on the floor of the room, parts of the ceiling, as well as an even portion of the walls surrounding either side of the window (The Ruins of Detroit 26). The majority of the individual panes of this window are broken out, leaving a mostly unobstructed view of the surrounding buildings. The pieces of glass that remain are opaque, interrupting the continuous vision of the buildings on either side of the opening. This window is situated in such a way as to lend a straightforward view of the sky. There are two buildings on either side of the window, creating a deep perspective, ending with a portion of the horizon. The buildings, obviously ruined and abandoned, have a sense of vertical order that the inside scene does not. In this way, there is a different type of clutter that is isolated from the neater, outside version of devastation. Cinderblocks, a tire, and even a portion of police tape are strewn about in front of the window, creating a sense of disorder as well as a potentially violent event that lead to this scene.

Windows are a necessity in any structure, utilitarian in the event of a fire, and visual pleasing in most circumstances. Behind windows that project a view of the outside world, people, and Americans in particular, are safe from the elements of the natural world. They can create the illusion of participating in the outside world while they are comfortably situated in their climate-controlled surroundings. This state of being is not endemic to the American population, but it is true that air-conditioning and central heat are more common in the United States than many

other countries. Often times the difference in temperature between the natural outside world and the mechanically controlled inside world is extreme. By dropping the temperature some forty degrees in the summer, and heating buildings to the extreme in the winter, Americans have found a comfortable way to avoid the uncomfortable side effects of nature. This isolation from nature occurs in even the most moderate climates, where central heat and air would not seem like such a necessity.

These windows, in addition to the destroyed boundary between inside and outside space, represent a geometrical design created by the intersecting lines that frame the panes of glass. Intersecting lines similar to these, as well as other symmetrical elements, are apparent in almost every image in this series. Romain Meffre, the partner almost exclusively charged with framing the images, lines up the shots with an immense amount of precision and balance. The perspective of these symmetrical images is also greatly affected by his attention to detail. Of the various photographs of Michigan Central Station, one image in particular stands out as a result of this symmetry (The Ruins of Detroit 40). This particular image of the passenger tunnel makes use of very strong horizontal lines and the ornate moldings of the ceiling to draw the eye to the center of the photograph, where the back wall opens to make way for stairs leading up to a higher floor of this once grand train station. The area appears free of clutter, in contrast to the previous image, and without the aid of the caption it would be difficult to imagine this space as a bustling center of transportation. The architectural symmetry is immediately striking and seems characteristic of most of the buildings in this series. Whereas in the desert

scenes of Noël the focal point is often the vast horizontality, the addition of diagonal and vertical lines in this image, and others, the focal point is often a seemingly endless perspective that sucks the viewer's eye into the depths of the photograph. In both cases there is a sense of continuing emptiness, which leaves the viewer isolated within a vast visually manipulated landscape.

The last two elements, a monochromatic color scheme and lighting, are also used throughout the series in varying degrees of importance. The importance of lighting continues from Aimar's series, but where it is essential in the creation of contrast in the photos of New York, here it adds to accentuate certain colors or portions of the picture-scape. For the majority of the images in this series, the natural light comes from a hole in the structure or a window. There are instances of non-natural lighting, but it is usually due to a street lamp, cars, or another element within the landscape. None of these images appear to be lit directly by Marchand or Meffre. The image of the Fisher Body 21 Plant is a striking example of the monochromatic force of some of Detroit's ruins (The Ruins of Detroit 21). The abandoned plant is emblematic of the newly innovated industrial architecture developed by Albert Kahn, the designer of most of the factories in Detroit. The muted blue-green tone dominates the scene of this empty building: everything, the pillars, the uprooted bricks in the floor, and the ceiling are all washed over in this calm color accentuated by the windows that line the left and right portions of the room. The horizontal and vertical lines in addition to the window panes create a type of grid that influences the viewer's eye to once again travel to the depths of the photograph where a rectangular opening stands, completely white from the sharp

invasion of light. The effects of perspective are similar to the previous image, a sense of loneliness in a vast empty space. The monochromatic element creates a surreal image of this building. Life is not monochromatic, and the overwhelming presence of one color in particular is striking, unreal. A similar effect can be seen in later photographs of the Donovan Building and the Fort Shelby Hotel.

Lighting, a secondary element in the previous photographs, becomes significantly more important in an image of the façade of the Eddystone Hotel (The Ruins of Detroit 205). At first glance, this building is not obviously in disrepair. It is only after more careful examination that the broken windows and boarded up doors become noticeable. This image is similarly surreal to the monochromatic images that precede it and the composition of the image accentuates the perfect symmetry of the building. The angle of the camera influences this symmetry immensely, as the lines of the windows are not at all distorted by a high or low angle perspective. The lighting, seemingly created by a street lamp outside the right side of the frame, creates a shift in both color and contrast that moves across the building. The gradual change in the amount of light is similar to the gradual nature of time and decay that affects the buildings of Detroit. The history of these buildings, explained in varying amounts of detail, is also indicative of the nature of time. Their trajectory is representative of a changing culture as well as the inability to re-appropriate certain spaces.

The National Theater is representative of the attempts of various buildings and building owners to change with the times and adapt to the new pass-times of

Detroit residents (The Ruins of Detroit 61). The caption below the image maps its path into ruin:

Built in 1911 by Albert Kahn, the theater was originally a music hall. Briefly used as a cinema but unable to compete with the new movie palaces, it was converted into a burlesque theater. Finally, it became an adult cinema before closing down in 1975 (The Ruins of Detroit 61).

The perspective of the image leads the viewer's eyes directly to the stage. What is left of the architecture of this interior makes it difficult to believe that its final identity was an 'adult cinema'. There is a high contrast between what is left of the plaster and the darkness of the decayed portions. This is symbolic of the once reputable theater turned adult cinema, an enterprise that is not socially acceptable. The transition from traditional theater of plays to a movie theater is quite typical. As technological advances made moving pictures more and more common, they became the new popular medium of the masses. The fact that most theaters could not compete is also usually the case. With every new innovation comes new costs at the hands of theater owners and it becomes quite expensive to keep up with technology. The music hall, the buildings original identity, is representative of the time the building was built. In the early 20th century music was a main source of entertainment. The movie industry had not yet taken hold of the masses, and was still taking hold in France. After its development, film quickly spread across national borders, and it became widely popular in the United States. In order to keep up with cultural changes, this theater naturally shifted to a movie theater. Unfortunately, it is imperative to keep up with changes and in film this amounts to a massive amount of money, and the money does not always guarantee success.

Gradually most old theaters, too numerous and in outdated neighborhoods, were converted into concert halls, night clubs, churches or adult cinemas before lying abandoned. Some of them... came back to life while others resigned to their inevitable fate (The Ruins of Detroit 76).

Unsuccessful as a burlesque theater, this once reputable *National* Theater attempted one final grasp at economic stability. This trajectory represents a continued effort to adapt, but this persistent effort failed and the building was left to decay. The Michigan Theater, similarly unsuccessful as a movie theater, experienced a very different fate.

Although this building was saved from a slow death of decay, the current state of the building is a horrible degradation of what it used to be: "Like many other movie palaces, the Michigan Theater started its decline in the 1960s... At the end of the 1970s, the theater was eventually converted into a three-story parking lot, thereby cutting right through the stucco of its flamboyant decor" (The Ruins of Detroit 78). The three images that follow this description showcase the building's current state. The structural integrity of this building has been maintained, but most of the ornate decor is not intact. What could be classified as a nationally historic building now houses cars and there is little use for the beautiful decorations that were imported from Europe when the building was constructed in 1926 (The Ruins of Detroit 78). From an interior balcony of the building, the symmetrical ceiling decorations are shown as well as two parked cars. This image is a particularly haunting representation of how cheap real estate in Detroit has become. What was once the center of lavish entertainment is now a parking garage, and one that appears to be mostly vacant.

Theaters are, of course, not the only types of buildings that stand as ruins now. More haunting than these images of decaying decadence are the images of schools and libraries that have been abandoned. Cass Technical High School, the subject of several photographs, represents the both Detroit's inability to maintain its schools after the staggering loss of population as well as the devaluation of education in America. Les Essif discusses, in detail, what he sees as a culture, or unculture, of anti-intellectualism in the United States: "... national egocentricism is a prime motor of unculture, which is in turn responsible for such anti-intellectual traits" (Essif 20). This is surely linked to the mass abandonment of institutions of learning represented in this series.

One image in particular, shows a haunting view of this once renowned school, "synonymous with excellence" (The Ruins of Detroit 94). This image captures the reality of isolated classrooms. Each window shows a particular room, all of which appear disconnected from the neighboring spaces. The disorder in each room is reminiscent of a disaster area and some of the rooms no longer resemble a classroom whatsoever. The way the image is cropped also isolates this collection of rooms from its greater context (The Ruins of Detroit 94). Another image by an American photographer, Andrew Moore, shows a slightly different view of this same scene. His image, taken as part of his project *Detroit Disassembled*, shows the other side of the building (on the left side of the image) connecting this disambiguated façade within a larger courtyard. Marchand and Meffre have purposefully cropped this image to accentuate the surreal nature of decay present in this Detroit school. In addition to Cass Tech, there are several other schools featured throughout the book,

emphasizing that this abandonment of learning was not isolated to one particular school. Due to citywide budget cuts and a rapidly shrinking population, many schools were left to decay. Recently some of these buildings have been brought back to life, but many of them still stand isolated from Detroit's population. They remain boarded up or exposed to the elements, completely isolated from the human beings that once benefited from their existence.

Another series of images depicts not only the decay of an elementary school, but the time in which the decay occurs. Six photographs of three different locations within the Jane Cooper Elementary School represent the devastation that occurred within one year. These images, carefully composed to represent the same vantage point, are an eerie view of how these three spaces changed over the course of time. Although some of these buildings have been left vacant for decades, these images represent how rapidly ruination can occur. The first images, all taken in the spring of 2008, show a school that looks somewhat intact. The auditorium looks fairly normal and the next two rooms are more obviously destroyed, but none of these images represent the massive amount of destruction that they other buildings have endured. The second series of images, taken one year later, depicts a very different scenario. One image shows immense fire damage, most likely caused by vandalism, while the other two spaces have been completely emptied. There is not a single institution that has been safe from this decay and vandalism. Ruins of schools can be found throughout Detroit. Some of the schools were publicly funded by the city while others were run by churches. Even the religiously affiliated buildings were not safe from decay. After the process of 'white flight' that caused most of the

destruction of Detroit, many churches closed down and their schools closed down with them. Along with the symbolic abandonment of education, the empty ruined churches represent an abandonment of religion on a more individualistic level. Although religion remains closely linked to political practices and national identity, the churches in Detroit could not withstand being isolated from their followers.

The isolation from people who live in, work in, and maintain these buildings is the cause of this devastation. With the rapidly shrinking population, the neighborhoods that once enabled the expanding growth of the city were left vacant. What was once a street of lavish luxury apartments quickly became a string of decaying abandoned buildings. This building, the Lois Apartments, is one of the remaining buildings from a group of diverse apartment buildings (The Ruins of Detroit 134). All of the buildings represent different kinds of architecture that were popular at the time: “Victorian, Moorish, Tudor, Classical, Art Deco, Modern, Gothic and Medieval” (The Ruins of Detroit 124). This building, with its symmetrical architecture and view of the sky, is another example of how surreal the devastation of Detroit can be. In a way, the natural elements appear to be taking over the ruins. With the ivy and the tree in front of the door, the natural world is combatting the man-made building. The sign on the door reads “Danger Keep Out” as if to deter urban explorers and possible vandals. This building no longer welcomes people in the way it previously had. Most of these apartment buildings are condemned and awaiting demolition, a final blow to their abandonment.

The last set of ruins, factories and industrial buildings, are the reason for the rapid expansion and decline of Detroit’s population. All of the previous ruins were a

result of this economic growth that allowed the people of Detroit to enjoy prosperous lifestyles. The theaters are representative of this lucrative economy and the many mansions and luxury apartments reflect how people were able to live comfortably as a result of the industries that thrived in this rust belt town. Now all of these buildings, including the factories, are in a state of decay, some of which will never be saved. After the dispersal of the automobile industry, a large portion of Detroit's population found themselves without jobs. Not only were these people isolated from the workforce, but also their former workplaces were closing, and the buildings became isolated as well. This loss of economic opportunity, in addition to the growing racial tensions, led to a mass exodus to the suburbs. This in turn led to even more economic loss, as many businesses became more and more isolated from their customer base. Capitalism, an inherently individualist force, became the downfall of this industrial city. There are several images of the abandoned factories that brought the promise of jobs and also extinguished all hope of employment upon their closing.

The previous images of factories specifically figures 17 and 19, did not depict the interaction between these industrial ruins and nature. A photo of the Global American Steel Company shows how nature has started to overcome the abandoned manmade structures. This image, with its rays of sunlight pushing through holes in the dilapidated structure, is a reminder of the force of nature (The Ruins of Detroit 28). On the left side of the image, there are plants growing into the ruins of this building and in the center of the image there are weeds growing through the

destroyed floor. This particular building may never be revived by human forces, but natural elements are thriving in what remains of this industrial site.

Although the majority of the buildings featured in this book continue to decay and deteriorate, there has been increasing interest in Detroit and its incredibly cheap real estate. Parallel to the amount of interest in the ruins themselves, there has been a recent revival of some abandoned buildings, including schools, apartments, and the re-appropriation of some factories. The fact that these ruins have been the subject of many documentary photo collections, as well as a continued fascination with ruins, has drawn the attention of many artists, businessmen, and urban explorers. Detroiturbex.com is of particular interest due to their extensive catalogs of Detroit's ruins as well as the wealth of the cultural and historical information concerning these buildings. A recent project, "Detroit: Now and Then" maps out the dramatic changes the city has endured with interactive images. The authors of this site describe their endeavor as "an interactive look at the growth, decline, and revival of the city of Detroit through historic and present-day images" (detroiturbex.com). By overlapping historic images with more current photographs, it is possible to see exactly how much the landscape of Detroit has changed and what, if anything, has stayed the same.

The last section of this project involves the revival of certain areas of the city. This final slideshow explains how certain buildings have been given a second chance:

Revival, like decay, comes in many forms. Despite bankruptcy and a declining population, some parts of Detroit are bouncing back. It's a slow process, with false starts and setbacks, but there is hope that

over time the city will reclaim some of its former glory
(detroiturbex.com).

This revival, only briefly mentioned in *The Ruins of Detroit* suggest that the isolation of this historical city could be dissipating, although the fact that this glimmer of hope is only slightly referenced by Marchand and Meffre places more emphasis on the buildings' isolation from preservation. Detroit, an influential city in the history of the United States, has been isolated and forgotten. Its historical importance has not saved it from decay and it was not until fairly recently that some places have experienced a revival.

These images can be considered a 'post-people' version of Pascal Aimar's portrait of New York City. Aimar's photographs show a city in the process of economic boom and gentrification whereas Marchand and Meffre's series explores what happens when the economic boom is over and the industry along with the population abandons the city. Although this process is unlikely to occur in New York City, there are dozens of other cities that are not immune to these effects. The common thread of isolation runs throughout both of these series in a way that suggests the presence or absence of industry has little power over the isolation in American culture. This sensation is created by a myriad of causes and various representations of this isolation can be seen in each of the three series.

CONCLUSION

These four French photographers have represented the reality of three very different American spaces. Their images evoke a sense of isolation that has become a part of everyday life in the United States. Capitalism, egocentrism, patriotism, and individualism are all causes of this growing separation from a global community. Although the various representations float between a literal and figurative isolation, their existence is clearly marked throughout the images. Rémi Noël, Pascal Aimar, Yves Marchand, and Romain Meffre have all ingrained their specifically French perspective into each of their series.

All three of these series challenge conventional notions of beauty by adhering to a specifically post-modern aesthetic. In photographing banal parts of daily life, Rémi Noël and Pascal Aimar have succeeded in creating beautiful, quirky images of the United States. By spending time composing and framing these scenes, the photographers have placed value on the less extraordinary sides of life. The ruins photographed by Marchand and Meffre adhere to this aesthetic as well. Although the images and their subject matter are jarring and unsettling, the lighting and the composition of these images reinvents these dilapidated buildings into something beautiful. This aesthetic beauty aids in the consumption of images.

These three series of images follow a path and I have placed them in this particular order to convey this trajectory and how the relationship between people and place is depicted by the photographers. The desert images by Rémi Noël as depicted here can be seen as a sort of pre-people representation of the United States. The places represented in this first series are mostly deserted locations with

little to no man-made structures. The second series by Pascal Aimar represents New York, a highly populated and prosperous city, one that is currently being gentrified, isolating the poorer populations. The final series, *The Ruins of Detroit*, represents what happens when the once incredibly prosperous economy and population abandons the city, creating an almost post-apocalyptic landscape, devoid of people. The fact that the locations are so varied hints at the notion that isolation, literal or figurative, is not an isolated phenomenon in the United States.

Another important quality of each of these three locations is the iconic place they hold in the international imagination. The desert, with its stereotypical cowboys and Indians, is a representation often seen throughout cinema and this aspect of American culture has a definite influence of the French view of the United States. New York city is also a location that has a certain significance for a large part of the world as an internationally recognized economic and cultural hub. Lastly, Detroit has been gaining more and more attention due to the incredible number of ruins, but also as a result of its historical importance as the birth-place of the automobile. These four French photographers have showcased the American isolation that is present all over the country, and they have illustrated this notion in various ways.

French society consistently places more value on the society than the individual. This is almost entirely opposed to the notion of the “American Dream” and the social, economic, and political culture of the United States. Les Essif, in his discussion of Jean Baudrillard, explains that:

Unculture is reflected in those American values and practices that the French find fascinating as well as culturally and historically

regressive, and consequently and paradoxically problematic: individualism, hyper-patriotism, provincialism-puritanism, religious fundamentalism, materialism-commercialism, a pioneer-cowboy-lawman mentality, militarism, gangsterism, violence, a cultural obsession with spectacle and entertainment (Hollywood), and with all this, a *refusal of social community* (Essif 5 my emphasis).

This “refusal of social community” is linked to each of the values named above, and is an explicit reference to a culture of isolation. From their French perspective, these photographers have developed an artistic representation of this isolation with the use of different elements. Batman, capitalist icons, ruins, historically famous paintings, violence, and Aimar’s portraits are all instrumental in conveying what these Frenchmen see as an accurate anthology of American culture. Through props, re-appropriation, lighting, composition, and documentary style narration, these images can testify to an America that is truly, an isolated nation.

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