

Le Détroit



Two-channel
16mm film installation
6 min. (Loop)



The decline of the city of Detroit—the once thriving center not only of the U.S. automobile industry but also of pop culture, the former “Paris of the Midwest”—is considered a paradigm of the fate of numerous postindustrial metropolises worldwide. The “shrinking” of Detroit began in the wake of World War II as industrial enterprises—and thus also large sections of the white residential areas—began to relocate to the outskirts of the city. While this economically upgraded the suburban districts, the downtown area became increasingly deserted, with a predominately black working-class population remaining. With what was effectively politics of segregation, economic drainage, and social isolation, the city center was abandoned and rapidly declined. Today, downtown Detroit only exists as a “ghost town,” an urbanistic, architectural farewell to industrial modernism.

Le Détroit starts out from this historical status quo, linking it with a series of fictional references that seem to anticipate the ghostly disappearance of Detroit. One of these intertexts is Marie Hamlin’s anthology *Legends*

of *Le Détroit* (1883). The thirty-one tales trace the history of Detroit from its French colonial emergence in the seventeenth century to the early nineteenth century, forging fresh links between historical and fictional aspects, elements of European fairy-tale tradition, and ghost stories of the native inhabitants. In the recurrent motif of the uncanny, these narratives seem to provide a translation of Detroit’s repressed colonial history sublimated into literature—a history of territorial occupations driven by civilizational delusion. This centuries-old specter seems to appear merely in a new guise in today’s ghost town.

These motifs link to another literary reference of more recent date: Shirley Jackson’s novel *The Haunting of Hill House* from 1959. The protagonist of this ghost story is Eleanor, who, as part of a paranormal research experiment, agrees to live in a house whose hauntings have already driven several people to violent deaths. During the course of her stay, the young woman becomes so captivated by the house that she refuses to

leave. When she is nevertheless forced to do so, Eleanor commits suicide in her car.

Stan Douglas’s *Eleanore* is a young black woman (a police officer?) inspecting a deserted house in Herman Gardens, a tumble-down former housing project in Detroit. She parks her car, gets out, and enters the building, where, in addition to things left behind by former occupants, she also discovers fresh footprints, which she carefully wipes away. A sheet of paper is lying on the floor. She picks it up and continues her tour. She opens a cupboard, gropes along a hollow wall, without revealing exactly what she is looking for. Hearing a noise, she hurriedly moves to leave the house. In the same movement, she slips the paper she had just picked up back onto the floor, and the cupboard door closes. She gets into her car, starts up the engine, and sits there motionless for a few seconds. With this shot, the loop starts from the beginning again.

It is neither clear what *Eleanore* was looking for in the house, nor do we learn whether or not she found it. The objects she finds and

picks up to inspect remain unspecified circumstantial evidence in an investigation for reasons unexplained. Her research seems to focus less on a concrete objective or possible crime than on the house itself; the act of touching, in turn, seems not to follow an epistemic logic as much as to be part of a magical, animistic ritual of appropriation. Even the seemingly coincidental restoration of the original state of the apartment (the wiping away and renewal of the footprints, dropping of the paper, closing of the cupboard door) suggests the possibility that the action may well have taken place once before, such that the footprints she finds are in fact her own. This structure of infinite, compulsive repetitions meets its technical equivalent in the film loop.

Le Détroit connects two black-and-white 16mm projections, simultaneously projected onto the front and back of a transparent screen suspended freely in the gallery space. Both loops show the same scenes—in one case, however, as a positive, in the other, as a negative image. They are mirrored toward

each other so that they nearly coincide on the screen. Complete congruence of the two projections, and thus the cancellation of all image contrast in a monochrome gray, is constantly delayed as the loops are projected asynchronously to each other by a few frames. Like an eerie doppelgänger, one picture follows the other.

In addition, the work is installed in the exhibition room such that the viewers can move around it freely. As soon as they enter the beam of one of the projectors, their silhouettes stand out on the screen as shadows. They partially obscure the picture, thus causing the projection on the back to appear all the more clearly. The viewer becomes part of the picture, not only in being his own shadowy double but also by recreating it with his presence. In this setup, the logic of the projection is inverted: it is the viewer’s shadow that generates an afterlife, a reanimation of the images.

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