I, Katharine Nemeth, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Communication.

It is entitled:
“Ruin Porn” or the Reality of Ruin?: A Rhetorical Analysis of Andrew Moore’s Detroit Disassembled

Student’s name: Katharine Nemeth

This work and its defense approved by:

Committee chair: Stephen Depoe, Ph.D.
Committee member: Teresa Sabourin, Ph.D.
Committee member: Shaunak Sastry, Ph.D.
“Ruin Porn” or the Reality of Ruin?
A Rhetorical Analysis of Andrew Moore’s *Detroit Disassembled*

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by

Katharine Nemeth

B.A. University of Cincinnati

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Committee Chair: Stephen Depoe, Ph.D.
Abstract

Ruin photography, widely called “ruin porn” by critics, is an artistic trend that has entered the conscience of artists and consumers alike. Andrew Moore’s Detroit Disassembled is one such exhibit that has received criticism despite its wide appeal to consumers. This essay attempts to explore the complex relationship between photograph and subject in the case of urban architectural artifacts. I will explore the intersection of documentary and art photography at which Moore’s photographs are located, suggesting his work serves as a generic hybrid. Through this project, I will attempt to unpack the visual and rhetorical elements present in Moore’s Detroit Disassembled. This project also seeks to analyze public reaction to Detroit Disassembled and to answer the question—what voices do these photographs privilege, and whose, if any, are ignored? This essay suggests that Detroit Disassembled, and further, Moore’s use of a generic hybrid of art and documentary photography, has opened the door for artistic demonstrations that serve to further the conversation about Detroit’s decline and the city’s future.
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A sincere thank you to Andrew Moore for allowing me to include a selection of his photographs in this project.

This thesis is dedicated to those that continue to invest in the city Detroit. “Blessed are those who see beautiful things in humble places where other people see nothing.” Camille Pissarro
Prologue

My interest in Moore’s Detroit Disassembled and “ruin porn” as an artistic trend began in a Visual Rhetoric class in my second year at University of Cincinnati. I was introduced to Moore’s work through the New York Times review of his show at the Queen’s Museum of Art. As my friends and family will attest, I spent the following months verbally sorting through my conflicted feelings about *Detroit Disassembled*. While the pieces are undeniably beautiful, I was haunted by the fact that they didn’t tell the story of the Detroit I know. Thus, with the help of my mentor, Dr. Steve Depoe, a thesis was born.

I grew up in Trenton, Mich., a small, blue-collar city 20 miles south of Detroit. My parents both grew up in the city. They met at Cooley High School in the 1960’s, and continued living Detroit after they married in 1975. In 1988, the year I was born, they moved “Downriver,” a nickname for the 18 suburban neighborhoods home to automotive workers and their families. My late grandfather, my uncle, my next-door neighbor, and my childhood friends’ parents worked for the “Big Three.”

Years later, I had the opportunity to move back to Trenton for a year following my undergraduate work. As a child, I visited Detroit a few times each year for a Tigers game, to visit family, or in passing on our way “Up North,” hearing tales of the city’s woes and problems with crime. When I returned, I discovered a Detroit that was vibrant, a Detroit that stood in contrast to the dangerous, economically collapsed city I was often encouraged to avoid.

The summer of 2012 was filled with promise, adventure, and nights spent on a friend’s porch in Midtown Detroit. I frequented the city’s many local restaurants, music venues, and coffee shops. I visited Eastern Market, Detroit’s six-block public market
filled with homegrown vegetables, fresh cut flowers, and local residents. I rode my bike to Tigers games. I listened to bands that had the talent to leave Detroit but hadn’t, because of the strange, hopeful magic that hangs above the city. My friends and I cheered on the young, inspiring, start up companies that dared to take a chance on Detroit and collectively booed those companies that left.

That was the summer I fell in love with Detroit.

That was also the summer that the window of my then 97’ Ford Taurus was smashed while parked on Woodward Ave. As I drove home in the middle of winter, cold wind seeping into my car on the 20-minute drive home, my heart ached for Detroit. That was the summer that, on more than one late evening bike ride to my friend’s apartment after a Tigers game, I was fearful.

Having lived in Ohio for years now, I’ve taken many friends on a tour of my favorite parts of Detroit—to Midtown, Slows-Bar-B-Q, Comerica Park, Detroit’s River Front, Mexicantown, Greektown, and my favorite destination, Detroit Institute of Art’s Rivera Courtyard.

As I walk friends past Rivera’s magnificent fresco murals, I tell them the story of Detroit’s past. I tell them about Ford Motor Company’s humble beginnings and about Ford’s River Rouge Plant, the inspiration for the two main panels in the Courtyard. I share with them the story of Detroit’s rise to prominence and second hand stories from my parents’ youth. Left out is the story of my car being looted on Woodward Ave. a year prior.

On July 18, 2013, a week before depositing my thesis, Detroit filed for bankruptcy. It is, in fact, the largest municipal bankruptcy in U.S. history. Many have
suggested that Detroit’s woes and financial hardships are the result of failed leadership and greedy unions. Many have even suggested that the city sell off its public parks and art collections. Amidst these conversations, I can’t help but picture of my beloved frescos in Rivera Courtyard, standing testament to the height of labor in Detroit, and further in the United States.

Detroit, for me, will always evoke conflicting feelings. I’ve experienced the Detroit that is so accurately captured in Moore’s photographs. There are places in Detroit that are war-torn, ravaged by the absence of industry and investment. I’ve also had the privilege to experience Detroit’s humanity. From conversations with local residents at Eastern Market to a Sunday drive past my parent’s “starter house,” Detroit is a place filled with memories, friends, and promise.

In my final month of editing, I contacted Andrew Moore, who graciously allowed me to include his photographs in my thesis. While our interactions were limited, I thanked him for his work and for his help in sparking conversation and alternative projects about Detroit.

While I feel very much conflicted about Detroit Disassembled as is reflected in my thesis, I take comfort in knowing that Moore and I share a marked sense of hope in a city that many have long given up on.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................... ii
Acknowledgements ................................................................................................... iv
Prologue ................................................................................................................... v
Introduction .............................................................................................................. 1

Chapter 1: Literature Review and Methods
Postindustrial Detroit .......................................................................................... 4
“Ruinenlust” and Ruin Photographs ....................................................................... 6
Photography and Representation ......................................................................... 8
Detachment in Photography ................................................................................. 9
Documentary and Art Photography ...................................................................... 10
Farm Security Administration (FSA)’s 1930 Images ......................................... 13
The New Topographics and Changes in Documentary Modality ......................... 15
Burtynsky’s Manufactured Landscapes and Toxic Sublime .................................. 18
Generic Hybrid ...................................................................................................... 20
Andrew Moore’s Detroit Disassembled ............................................................... 22
Research Questions ............................................................................................... 24
Organization of Thesis .......................................................................................... 24

Chapter 2: Visual Analysis
Stylistic Elements in Detroit Disassembled ....................................................... 26
Color ....................................................................................................................... 26
Angle ..................................................................................................................... 29
Framing .................................................................................................................. 31
Substantive Elements in Detroit Disassembled .................................................. 34
Visual References ................................................................................................. 34
Narrative ............................................................................................................... 36
Arrangement .......................................................................................................... 40
Accompanying Texts ............................................................................................ 42
Visual Tensions in Detroit Disassembled ............................................................ 45
Beauty and Ugliness ............................................................................................. 45
Magnitude and Insignificance ............................................................................ 47
Inhabitation and Desolation ............................................................................. 48
Art and Documentary: A Generic Hybrid ......................................................... 51

Chapter 3: Discussion and Conclusions
Praise for Moore’s Detroit Disassembled ............................................................ 54
Critical Response to Detroit Disassembled ........................................................ 56
Moore’s Detroit Disassembled as “Ruin Porn” .................................................. 59
Ruin Porn as Generic Hybrid .............................................................................. 63
Alternate Projects .................................................................................................. 66
Conclusions .......................................................................................................... 69
Limitations ............................................................................................................ 72

References ............................................................................................................. 74
Appendices

Appendix A: Fuel Oil Tank, River Rouge .................................................. 81
Appendix B: Packard Motor Car Company Plant ................................. 82
Appendix C: Façade, Michigan Central Station ..................................... 83
Appendix D: Rolling Hall, Ford Motor Company, River Rouge Complex, Dearborn ................................................................. 84
Appendix E: Librarian’s office, former Mark Twain Branch of the Detroit Public Library ................................................................. 85
Appendix F: Kinga in her doorway, East Side ........................................ 86
“Ruin Porn” or the Reality of Ruin?

A Rhetorical Analysis of Andrew Moore’s *Detroit Disassembled*

*Speramus Meliora; Resurget Cineribus*
*We Hope For Better Things; It Shall Rise From the Ashes*
-Detroit Motto-

Scattered debris litters the dirt floor of an abandoned Detroit schoolbook depository in Andrew Moore’s *Birches growing in decayed books, Detroit Public School Book Depository*. Long support columns span the height of the gutted building. The yellowing, peeling walls contain faded graffiti and water stains. In the center of the image emerge a dozen young birch trees, reaching through the empty, sepia colored building to a broken skylight above. The image contrastingly evokes a sense of the calm in nature and uncertainty. Moore, the photographer, is able capture a scene that is both strikingly beautiful and terrifying. Moore is one of a series of artists that seek to capture urban decay—photographing abandoned buildings, homes, and landmarks that have fallen into disrepair.

Urban ruins have become an increasingly popular and controversial subject matter in contemporary photography. Photographers have sought to capture abandoned buildings, homes, and landmarks that have fallen into disrepair in urban centers. Common subjects of ruin photography include failed businesses, abandoned factories and run down homes. Notably, few include people. Many argue that bathing an empty, abandoned space in color and brilliant light conflates the underlying social issues with the aesthetic material (Finoki, 2009; Leary, 2011; McGraw, 2007; Rosenberg, 2011; Steinmetz, 2009). Others suggest that ruin photography has the ability to invite the residents of urban areas and others to engage in dialogue about the future (Christopher,
2012; Millington, 2012). While Moore’s work seeks to draw attention to the issue of urban decay, his exhibit has been criticized for reducing impoverishment to an aesthetic.

Moore’s collection of Detroit images, while popular with consumers, has received sharp criticism from critics, bloggers, scholars, and alternative news journalists. The series, entitled *Detroit Disassembled*, is composed of 75 images that depict the buildings, landscapes, and artifacts from the derelict city. One of his images of Detroit was included in Time Magazine’s 2009 “The Year in Pictures.” Once America’s fastest growing city and a beacon of urban renaissance, economic hardship and urban sprawl forced Detroit into hardship. After the city’s economic and very visible collapse, many of its once grandiose cultural landmarks, including ballrooms, majestic theaters, and department stores, stand vacant. At face value, the images capture and expose the realities of the city’s economic and cultural decline. However, Moore’s work has been widely criticized for reducing impoverishment to an aesthetic.

Despite his artistic intent, Moore’s critics would argue that his work is void of any true activism (Leary, 2011). People often interpret an image contrary to how an artist intended for it to be interpreted by wider audiences (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001). As Sturken and Cartwright (2001) argue, one’s interpretation of art and photography is widely influenced by individual cultural and social experiences. In *Detroit Disassembled*, Moore has stated that he hopes to draw attention to the dilemma of Detroit and arguably the entire Rust Belt. Moore also explains that his images were meant to evoke and tell a story. Moore states, “Instead of making books out of trees, trees were growing out of rotting books. It’s beautiful and horrifying at the same time. To an artist, that kind of
contradiction is a very rich and emotional story” (as cited in Kaczmarczyk, 2012, p. 27).

This begs the question—whose stories are being told in Moore’s work?

Through this project, I will attempt to unpack the visual and rhetorical elements of Moore’s exhibit and explore the implications of ruin photography. I will explore the intersection of documentary and art photography at which Moore’s photographs are located. Ultimately, this project will seek to answer the question—what voices, or perspectives, do these photographs privilege, and whose, if any, are ignored? Before I begin to explore Moore’s photographs of Detroit ruins, I will first detail the context of the city’s economic and highly visual decline.
Chapter One:

Literature Review

Postindustrial Detroit

The steady deindustrialization and decline of Detroit occurred over the last 50 years. Many have argued that Detroit’s decline is rooted in three significant causes—discriminatory housing practices, racial tensions, and postindustrial stirrings that began in the 1950s (Sugrue, 2005). The closing of the city’s large Packard plant in 1956 is widely considered the catalyst of Detroit’s postindustrial age (McGraw, 2007). It is worth noting that in 1956, Detroit had over 280,000 manufacturing jobs. The city now has approximately 188,000 manufacturing jobs (Keshavan, 2012). In later years, the massive layoffs and closures of several General Motors and Ford plants also contributed to the city’s financial crisis.

Detroit has also experienced a series of social and cultural shifts. As Detroit Free Press reporter McGraw (2007) writes, Detroit “has gone from the symbol of American productive might to the symbol of urban despair; from a white, ethnic town to an African-American town; from a Catholic town to a Protestant town; from a town of two million people to a town of 850,000” (p. 291). In addition to the tensions that often come with economic peril in a city, Detroit is also rife with racial tensions. As McGraw (2007) explains, the city’s African American population increased from 16% in 1950 to over 45% in 1970, a population boom largely attributed to the post World War II migration of many black southerners. Following the war, many white Detroiter left the city for “suburbia.” McGraw (2007) explains, “no place has the contrast between city and suburbia become so great as in metro Detroit” (p. 298).
Many symbols of urban decline remain in downtown Detroit, reminding residents and visitors of the city’s devastated financial state. The most notable of these artifacts is the Michigan Central Depot, an abandoned train station with an attached office building. This hulk-like building is arguably Detroit’s most iconic and visual sign of urban decline. Few sites were spared in the rampant economic hardship that overcame Detroit. In addition to the Michigan Central Depot, historic homes, office buildings, libraries, dentist offices, swimming pools, and one notable ballpark are included in the city’s visual wreckage. As I will later explore in this project, these sites of urban decline have increasingly become the subject of photography, documentary films, art installations, and even fashion photo shoots.

Despite continued financial crisis and political unsettledness, Detroit is considered by many to be the site of a cultural renaissance. From art projects to a vibrant music scene to the presence of many urban farms, Detroit has an increasing reputation as a “playground” for creative, young individuals (Leary, 2011). A notable art installation, Tyree Guyton’s Heidelberg Street Project, consists of a decorated block of abandoned home, once considered urban blight. T-shirts and bumper stickers with phrases including, “Made in Detroit” and “Imported from Detroit” can be found in the city and surrounding suburbs. Websites with titles including “Positive Detroit,” “Yes Detroit,” and “Detroit Lives” have emerged in an effort to capture these cultural and artistic projects and to counter the negative perception many have of the city. Given this counter narrative to the “urban decline” or “danger” narrative long associated with Detroit, it is important to explore the type of narratives that emerge from Moore’s Detroit Disassembled. Does his work effectively capture, or represent, those living and working and invested in the city,
or does it fail to break through the age old narratives so many are working to counter today? This question has been increasingly asked of photographers of urban ruins, a growing trend in contemporary photography.

“Ruinenlust” and Ruin Photography

I will now briefly detail the history of ruin photography to add context to my study of Moore’s *Detroit Disassembled*. The study of ruins suggests that decaying structures have been the sites of political social significance since the Renaissance. For a structure to be considered a “ruin” it must remain partially intact (Steinmetz, 2006). According to DeSilvey and Edensor (2012), the ruin was emblematic of “a sundered past” during the Renaissance, reflecting the “hope and hubris of the futures that never came to pass” (p. 4). The Baroque period viewed ruins from a lens of possibility, choosing to focus on the promise to come (Stead, 2003). The romanticized pairing of the past in the present taps into a concept widely referred to called “ruinenlust,” or the aesthetic pleasure of ruins (Steinmetz, 2006). Ruinenlust, a Germanic idea, emerged in the 1800’s. From the Romantic period came the notion of “ruin gazing.” Twentieth century ruins, however, brought a change in the discourse surrounding ruin. These “new ruins” bore witness to more than the wear of time and weather, but instead, included structures that stood as a wreckage of modern humanity (DeSilvey & Edensor, 2012).

Past studies of ruin have focused on ruins as the site of political contestation and, in some cases, reflection. Ruins can serve to further a dominant lens of reflecting on the past or as a site of resistance (DeSilvey & Edensor, 2012). In 2010, Pusca explored how Romanian and Czech ironworkers, many now unemployed, viewed their abandoned
industrial ruins as “industrial horizons, collapsed in a pool of dust, regrets, corruption, and more importantly, a sense of self-destruction and futility that directly challenged discourses of progress and positive change” (p. 241). Steinmetz (2008) compared the ruins of Detroit to the ruins of Namibia, arguing that in both cases, ruins are used to cite and remember colonial and “Fordist” rule. Stoler (2008) furthers this argument in suggesting that ruins are often the sites of both constructions—the loss of an empire and a marked sense of “imperial nostalgia.” Given the wide discourse and important cultural significance of ruins and their aesthetic appeal, many photographers have turned their lens towards ruins.

Ruins have long served as a subject in photography. Including the work of Piranesi, Sloane, and Benjamin, photographers have sought to capture images of ruins that fall into the public’s collective consciousness. Ruin photography is an artistic trend that has enjoyed wide appeal with artists and consumers alike. Photographs of factory floors, peeling walls, obscure relics and overgrown, mossy covered homes have become widely circulated in the form of exhibits, coffee table books, and Tumblr sites. The term “ruin porn” has been applied to this category of images to highlight the potentially exploitative nature of ruin photography (Morton, 2009).

Recent ruin photography differs from earlier ruin photographs in that the cause of the ruin is somewhat interpretive. The focus of recent ruin photography is widely thought to have begun with Camilo Jose Vergara’s 1970 documentation of the visual change of American neighborhoods including Harlem, Detroit, and Camden, New Jersey. Following Vergara’s work, modern ruin photography has focused on abandoned churches, factories, shopping malls, and theme parks across the world. In the 1990’s
French photographers Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre captured images of Detroit’s abandoned industrial complexes, churches, and residences.

Critics concerned with the political and social implications have largely questioned ruin photography. The term, “Ruin porn” while largely used by critics of ruin photographers, has also been widely adopted by art critics, journalists, and every day observers. Many, including local residents and critical scholars, have charged these photographers with creating an aestheticized, depopulated version of their reality. These critics have asserted that by focusing on the images as “art,” they fail to acknowledge the social context of the site’s historic decline (Finoki, 2009; Leary, 2011; McGraw, 2007; Rosenberg, 2011; Steinmetz, 2009).

Rather than serving as “emblematic sites at which to re-examine and recast our relationship with the past, and our understandings of temporality,” DeSilvey and Edensor (2012) suggest that ruin photography calls us to instead view sites as simply derelict, scattered remains. In the following sections, I will explore two limitations that apply to photography as a medium, what Tagg (1988) has called, “the burden of representation” and the issue of detachment.

**Photography and Representation**

Representation in photography involves an ethical exploration of an artist’s choice of subject. Representation is a significant issue because, as Demo and Deluca (2000) suggest, *images construct reality*. Issues of representation can range from the way one chooses to frame a photograph to the absence of individuals or an entire population from a scene. As Tagg (1988) writes, “Properly understood, the concept of representation
entails a rejection both of reductionist readings and the idea that class interests or forces exist fully formed but somehow unrealized prior to their representation” (p. 167). The “truth” of a photograph then, is a construction of various political, economic, and social influences. Embedded within photographs, within all art, are underlying ideologies that privilege some people while disserving others (Tagg, 1988). The idea of representation calls viewers to ask—from what ideological framework do a series of photographs emerge? In the following section, I will briefly detail an additional limitation of the medium, the detachment often associated with photography.

**Detachment in Photography**

Despite artistic intent, some argue that photographers cannot intervene with their subject matter and furthermore, symbolically support the status quo (Sontag, 1977). This idea, while not a universally held belief of scholars is widely explored by Sontag. Sontag (1977) writes, “The person who intervenes cannot record; the person who is recording cannot intervene” (pg. 8). Thus, while contemporary photographers may find need to intervene in the case of dangerous situations, extreme poverty, or war (i.e. photojournalists), they arguably cannot. Sontag also suggests that there is an inherent passivity in photographing a subject. She likens this to “sexual voyeurism” in that photographers accept and encourage the current state. Because a photographer chooses to capture a moment, he or she suggests it is a moment worth preserving. Others alternately suggest that an artist’s intent can shape a viewer’s experience with an image and further, the viewer’s interpretation of the subject matter. One such field that often prompts this debate is that of documentary photography. In the following section, I will examine the
Documentary and Art Photography

Documentary photography is a mode associated with capturing candid photographs of events, subjects, or people. Photography has served as a means of documenting or cataloguing a scene. Notable examples of early documentary photographers include Dorthea Lange, whose photographs during the Great Depression included the widely circulated “Migrant Mother,” and Lewis Hines, who captured the laboring youth in American at the turn of the century. In fact, the 1930s has been called the “documentary decade,” as Americans took an interest in capturing, catalogue, observing the “actual” (Finnegan, 2003). Documentary, as Edwards (2006) suggests, is an “elastic” term, including news photography, photojournalism, war photography, and other photography collections. The uniting criteria, Edwards (2006) suggests, are a tone of anti-subjectivism and a “gaze that looks outward to the world” (p. 27). The idea of anti-subjectism, or truth-value, is arguably the most defining feature of documentary photography.

The first facet of documentary, specifically photography, is that the artist seeks to provide its audience with an access to truth (Edwards, 2006). The means to this truth, many suggest, is related to the style of the photography. As Edwards (2006) suggests, “…this is an argument rooted in the idea of the mechanical arts and the related conception of a detached observer” (p. 27). Documentary photographs are often “untouched” or unedited, often lacking in color, and without cropping or retouching. These photographs are also typically unstaged, or without the aid of any outside objects,
lighting, or “special effects.” Documentary, then, seeks to focus on the content or subject of a frame rather than the style of a photograph. Finnegans (2003) writes “…it is important to note the paradox of documentary: It purports to offer ‘real’ and ‘natural’ views of the world but is able to do so only through the framing and construction of those views” (xv). While some recognize documentary photography as a distinct genre, others, including Finnegans (2003), have suggested that documentary photography, despite its often stripped-down, objective nature, is still framed, and thus, stylized.

Documentary photography, many argue, is simply an “aesthetic mode,” or an artistic way of capturing a scene (Edwards, 2006). Documentarians have historically argued that by capturing scenes in a candid fashion, their work does not fall into the mode of art photography. However, as Edwards (2006) suggests, documentary and art are closely related. He writes, “… the document and the art-photograph are locked together: these are mutually determining categories that draw a great deal of their meaning from their antithetical relation” (Edwards, 2006, p. 14). Thus, while attempting to avoid a style or aesthetic framing of a photograph, documentary photographers may in fact, be actively engaging in an artistic frame.

The second facet of documentary photography is that it often seeks to engage with the outside world. As Finnegans writes, “Documentary is not about an object, verifiable, neutral fact, but about the interpretation and arrangement of what is ‘out there’ in a way that best fits the documentarian’s purpose and sense of social responsibility” (Finnegan, 2003, p. xv). Historically, documentary photography has been used to capture substandard means of living or work to raise societal awareness towards an issue. As previously mentioned, Lewis Hine sought to capture the reality of working youth in the
early 1900s. He did this in an attempt to raise awareness about the intolerable working conditions the faced, and ultimately, to change child labor laws. Prior to this, Thomas Annan photographed the slum conditions in Glasgow in the 1960s (Finnegan, 2003). The problem became, at times, the construction of those being photographed. For instance, in Annan’s work, the working people, often referred to by audiences as “slum dwellers,” were constituted in the photographs by Annan as problems, not victims of the social structure (Finnegan, 2003).

While a popular field within contemporary and historical photography, documentary photography is criticized, at times, for the distance between the artist and subject. As Edwards writes, “There is a palpable distance here between ‘us’ and ‘them’” (p. 35). Documentary depicts its subjects as societal problems, or more often than not, powerless victims. In the case of photojournalism, the distance puts the subject on display, inviting viewers to wear a detached and scrutinizing lens. Documentary photographers are also criticized for attempting to show their humanity through their images. “At worst, the poor and destitute are photographed in order to put the humanity of the photographer on display” (Edwards, 2006, p. 36). This becomes an ethical question as projects labeled as documentary are framed and hung in living rooms and sold as limited-edition coffee table books. Given the pain and suffering often involved in documentary images, whose voices are being heard?

An exploration of what others have previously said about photographs of environmental and altered landscapes will provide further context to my analysis of Moore’s Detroit Disassembled. In the following section, I will detail three previous case studies of documentary photography collections—the Farm Security Administration’s
1930s images of rural poverty, William Jenkins’ 1975 exhibit entitled *The New Topographics*, and Burtnsky’s *Manufactured Landscapes*.

**Farm Security Administration (FSA)’s 1930 Images**

In *Picturing Poverty*, Finnegan (2003) explores a series of photographs commissioned by the Farm Security Administration (FSA) in the 1930s. At this point in the United States, these visual images helped to define the national construction of rural poverty and the Depression. Included in Finnegan’s study are those photographers that participated in the FSA project—Dorthea Lange, Walker Evans, and Arthur Ronstein. These images of the poor became widely circulated at the time, appearing in magazines and newspapers. Today, the images are used to construct the Depression Era poor and the harsh realities they faced in their day-to-day lives.

Finnegan’s (2003) study works to expand our understanding of documentary photography and further, rural poverty, in the 1930s and 1940s. Asserting that we may best understand the power of the FSA images by examining them in their context, Finnegan (2003) explores the different publications and magazines in which the FSA photographs appeared in at the time. “We do not encounter photographs in an isolated fashion; each encounter is framed by the context in which the photograph is experienced, whether that context be a museum gallery, a family photo album, or the pages of a magazine” (Finnegan, 2003, xxii). This is particularly significant as many of the photographs that emerged were decontextualized in distribution, including, but not limited to Dorthea Lange’s photograph captioned as “Destitute pea pickers in California. Mother of seven children. Age thirty-two. Nipomo, California.” Today, we know this
image as “Migrant Mother.” Finnegan’s (2003) research suggests that in order to fully understand how photographs rhetorically, is to take into account the temporal and social context from which the images are viewed.

Through this detailed analysis, she suggests that the use of these photographs in magazines, including *U.S. Camera* and *Life*, were not without political and sociological motive. Finnegan (2003) details how Roy Stryker, chief of the Historical Section of the FSA, had intentions to make sure the photos gained notoriety in the public sphere. The project was criticized for reportedly staging elements to gain wider political support. One such controversy, the “skull controversy” involved the placement of a skull that had died long ago in a series of shots. This focus on staging, or aestheticizing the images, resulted in wide praise of the FSA photographs. However, as Finnegan (2003) suggests, this prompted scholars to question the intersection of “art” and “documentary”.

One of the key tensions that emerge in Finnegan’s (2003) analysis of the FSA images is that between two modes of photography—art and documentary. Finnegan’s study compares the use of an image by photographer Setichen in *U.S. Camera* and *Look* magazine. As Finnegan (2003) writes, “A comparison of the two versions of Rothsetin’s photographs illustrates how choices in the darkroom and in the editing process can make an average, workaday picture more aesthetically compelling” (141). Despite this, many, including the FSA, suggested this a strong dichotomy between the two realms. Finnegan (2003) suggests that engaging viewers through a documentary lens was advantageous to the Depression Era agencies that were seeking to assert their relevance given the hard economic times. Those that suggested that art and documentary can exist in separate, distinct realms are criticized by Finnegan (2003) who asserts that in the end, “… the
Historical Section photographs do at times resist aestheticization, but in such a context they can never be wholly apart from art, regardless of what Setichen [the artist] himself proclaims” (p.163). This notion, the idea that art and documentary exist in a “both/and” sense rather than an “either/or” sense (Finnegan, 2003), will guide my analysis of Moore’s *Detroit Disassembled*.

**The New Topographics and Changes in Documentary Modality**

*The New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* was a photography exhibit that called to question many Americans’ views on the intersection of documentary and art. The 1975 exhibit, consisting of 168 black and white images of everyday subjects like streets, suburban neighborhoods, and parking lots, was curated by William Jenkins at the International Museum of Photography? at George Eastman House in Rochester, NY. Photographers included Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Joe Deal, Frank Gohlke, Nicolas Nixon, John Schott, Stephen Shore, and Henry Wessel. Jenkins titled the exhibit “The New Topographics” “to reflect his belief that these photographers were doing nothing more than mapping the contemporary landscape. It was not that the photographs shown in the exhibition were without a style, but that these images represented a “minimum of inflection” (Rohrbach, 2013, p. xvii). While the exhibit did not draw wide attention at the time, shortly after, it drastically shaped the field of landscape photography.

The intent of the exhibit, according to Rohrbach (2013) was to explore a unique form of documentary. He suggests that the photographs gained wide attention because many of the exhibits photographers were willing to explore the “bland, repetitive
appearance” that emerged in the 1960’s shift to suburbia. “By attending to the mundane in so apparently straightforward a fashion, drained of emotion and judgment, the New Topographics images seemed to ridicule long-established definitions of what made photographs artful” (Rohrbach, 2013, p. xx). A defining feature of the exhibit was that, in commenting on recent social and economic shifts of the time, they did not condemn or praise (Sichel, 2013). Instead, the subtle photographs offered, “quiet comments on the imperfections they observed” (p. 89).

While the photographers chose to depict the mundane and commonplace, their photos arguably called viewers to start to develop a response, and further, a responsibility towards the new, processed landscape. As Dunaway (2013) suggests, the photographers invited audiences to engage in a conversation about citizenship, community, mass culture, and the environment.

One tool used by the New Topographic photographers was decontextualization. Depicting parking lots, track homes, and strip shopping centers, the images in Jenkins’ exhibit could have been situated in numerous suburbs across the country (Dunaway, 2013). The photographs were also largely depopulated. As Rohrbach (2013) explains, the New Topographic photographers “…were calling on people to stop, look, and think about the activity that was occurring on the land and, like other activists of the day, to engage with it rather than focus only on pristine landscapes as the sites to savor” (p. xxi). The exhibit was met by both praise and controversy by those that attended. As Rohrbach (2013) explains, while some that attended the New Topographics exhibit found the images to be an engaging commentary on the changing visual landscape, most left the exhibit critical of the “mundane” images.
Foster-Rice (2013) has suggested that The New Topographics may be viewed through a systems perspective of art. Adapted from the interdisciplinary systems theory, a systems theory of art suggests that art and social consciousness are not independent spheres, but rather are intrinsically linked. A systems theory of art supports the New Topographic photographers’ shift from the landscape art of the 19th century to a realistic representation of the landscape, complete with human alterations (Foster-Rice, 2013). This perspective charges artists and audiences alike to view landscapes through a biocentric, not anthropocentric, lens (Foster-Rice, 2013). A systems theory of art also raises significant questions about the intersection of aestheticized art and documentary. As I will later suggest, a systems perspective would further suggest that rather than separate modes, a piece can contain elements of both art and documentary.

Focusing on the commonplace, the New Topographics call to question the boundaries between “art” and “document.” As Foster-Rice (2013) suggests, Jenkins’s exhibit was situated at the intersection of the two styles. As previously mentioned “[Jenkins] called the result a new form of documentary, one based on pure description, of observation over judgment, where all subjects, even the most prosaic ones, are given equal treatment” (Rohrbach, 2013, xviii). The New Topographies exhibit sparked critical dialogue in both the landscape art sphere and society. In the following section, I will detail Peeples (2011) study of a photography exhibit that called to question the relationship between landscape photography, the sublime, and the emotional response of viewers.
**Burtynsky’s Manufactured Landscapes and Toxic Sublime**

Peeples (2011) study focuses on the large-scale landscape photography of Edward Burtynsky entitled *Manufactured Landscapes*. Burtynsky seeks to capture unnatural terrains and landscapes that have been extremely altered by people. A native Canadian, Burtynsky documented environmental degradation in countries including the United States, Europe, and India. As many, including Peeples (2011) have suggested, Burtynsky’s images engage viewers with the sites through a lens of beauty and awe. This can lead audiences to feel overwhelmed at the thought of the environmental challenge ahead. But, as Peeples (2011) ultimately suggests, Burtynsky’s *Manufactured Landscapes* begs audiences to begin contemplating their position in a world of increasing environmental concern.

Peeples (2011) employs the term “toxic sublime” to explore the tension that comes in depicting environmental contamination in photography. The “toxic sublime” refers to a series of photographs of some of the most toxic sites in the country and “the tensions that arise from recognizing the toxicity of a place, object, or situation, while simultaneously appreciating its mystery, magnificence, and ability to inspire awe” (Peeples, 2011, p. 375). By focusing on the sublime and beauty of the sites, photographers such as Burtynsky are often criticized for inadvertently eliding “the physical and environmental dangers of the toxins produced by those industries” (Peeples, 2011, p. 376). Peeples (2011) suggests that framing images of contamination through the lens of the sublime shapes how viewers respond to a changing and increasingly hazardous American landscape. In the following section, I will briefly review past studies regarding the use of the sublime in photography.
The Sublime

Evoking the sublime shifts the focus from the material to the experience of the audience (Oravec, 1981). It was Burke (1909) who described the sublime in terms of the magnitude or size of a subject. This definition has, over time, come to describe not just a response to the grand in size, but also to those images that strike a feeling of inferiority in an audience (Oravec, 1981). The term “technological sublime” was used to describe the emotional experience of humans when viewing major technological advancements (Nye, 1994). An example of this would be the response of those who first viewed Sputnik, the world’s first artificial satellite when it took flight in 1957. The concept of the sublime has been applied to various experiences. A shared feature of the sublime response, however, is that the sublime, in photography, often requires an absence of humans (DeLuca & Demo, 2000; Peeples, 2011).

The relationship between depopulation and the sublime dates back to the early images of the Yosemite National Park as captured by Carleton Watkins (DeLuca & Demo, 2000). In these photographs, according to DeLuca and Demo (2000), humans were removed from the scenes to preserve the sublime, or natural aesthetic of the shots. Instead, the focus of Moore’s photographs is one of two scenarios—industry in a natural setting or the natural in a failed, industrial setting. Peeples (2011) explores the tensions that arise in Burtynsky’s work through a series of five pairs of contrasting terms, or dialectics.

As a means to better understand the visual representations of environmental contamination, Peeples (2011) views Burtynsky’s Manufactured Landscapes through dialectics including: beauty and ugliness, magnitude and insignificance, the known and
the unknown, inhabitation and desolation, security and risk. These tensions initially emerged in critics’ response to the images, suggesting the photographs were both beautiful and ugly (Peeples, 2011). As an artist, Peeples (2011) found that Burtynsky sought to evoke conflicting responses from his audience. Peeples suggest that it is through these tensions that those viewing Burtynsky’s photography can begin contemplating their relationship with nature.

In the following section, I will explore a rhetorical theory that suggests that with a given situation, a speech, or collection of photography in this case, may serve multiple functions, Jameson and Campbell’s (1982) generic hybrid.

**Generic Hybrid**

The generic, or rhetorical, hybrid reflects the idea that in a rhetorical situation, there is, at times, a need to draw from multiple genres to create a “fusion” (Jameson & Campbell, 1982). Rhetorical hybrids, Jameson and Campbell (1982) assert, is “a metaphor intended to emphasize the productive but transitory character of combinations” (p. 147). The authors define genre as those stylistic and substantive elements that are employed by a rhetor in order to respond to a situation (Jameson and Campbell, 1982). Jameson and Campbell (1982) also suggest that in keeping with traditional views of genre, rhetorical hybrids are rule governed. In an attempt to prove the utility of their theory, Jameson and Campbell (1982) apply the rhetorical hybrid to Lyndon Johnson’s 1962 Thanksgiving Day address.

Johnson’s address, while primarily dominated by the eulogy genre, successfully serves three different, but related purposes—to eulogize, to legitimize and to advocate
(Jameson & Campbell, 1982). The speech’s foremost purpose was to eulogize the late president Robert F. Kennedy. However, in the speech, Johnson seeks to also legitimize his position as president. Last, Johnson seems to advocate on behalf of the late Kennedy. As Jameson and Campbell (1982) suggest, a third and significant function of Johnson’s speech was to endorse and, furthermore, to advocate for Kennedy’s civil rights bill. This not only suggested that Johnson was honoring Kennedy, but also worked to “reknit” the community through a shared purpose, or political object. Jameson and Campbell (1982) suggest that in the case of a complex rhetorical situation, a generic hybrid often results in a successful, well-received speech.

Carlson (1985) applied the rhetorical hybrid model to John Quincy Adams’ Supreme Court argument in the Amistad trial of 1841, suggesting that his speech served both forensic and deliberative purposes. Given that it was a trial, Adams’ was charged with both convincing the court to side with him as well as connecting rhetorically to Northern audiences. Thus, by borrowing from multiple rhetoric genres, Adams was able to masterfully argue his case and convince Northerners to be ware of slave related legislation. Carlson writes that Adams’ rhetoric was aided by the fact that he was also able to attend to the expectations and values of his various audiences. Carlson’s (1985) study suggests that the rhetorical hybrid has long been a successful strategy as it often invites both a fitting and eloquent response to the rhetorical situation. Additionally, the rhetorical hybrid serves as a useful tool in analyzing speeches given in complex situations (Jameson & Campbell, 1982).

A related term, generic transference, describes the process of rhetorically combining an unexpected form to respond to a particular rhetorical situation. In a study
of Richard Nixon’s ceremonial Irish wake that also sought to define the situation
surrounding then Vice President Agnew’s resignation, Jablonski (1979) suggests that the
speech served as a “generic mutant.” This strategy allowed him to attend to both
rhetorical exigencies through one speech. As Jablonski writes, (1979) “The mutant
ceremony allowed Nixon to reassert his prestige as President in a non-apologetic fashion.
Moreover, the ceremony afforded Nixon the opportunity to respond to the crisis
generated by Agnew’s resignation…” (p. 172). Thus, the use of generic transference can
benefit both the audience and the speaker, who is able to attend to multiple exigencies
through a hybrid form.

It is my intention to employ the generic hybrid, as I have termed it in my analysis,
to better understand the possibility that a photograph may serve both to document and to
emotionally engage audiences. The generic hybrid is a concept that borrows from both
Jameson and Campbell’s (1982) and Carleton’s (1985) conception of rhetorical hybrid
and Jablonski’s (1979) generic transference. The following section briefly details the
visual artifact I will explore through the lens of generic hybrid, Andrew Moore’s Detroit
Disassembled.

**Andrew Moore’s Detroit Disassembled**

Photographer Andrew Moore’s *Detroit Disassembled* series seeks to capture the highly
visible decline of a once vibrant city. His photographs depict not iconic, or widely-
photographed sites in Detroit, but rather those sites that are abandoned, crumbling, or off
the beaten path. His subjects include abandoned terminals, schools, residential homes,
executive offices, theaters, and even dentist offices. The New York Times describes his
photographs as “chilly” and “apocalyptic” and contrastingly “sumptuous and painterly” at times (Rubin, 2011). According to Kacmarczyk (2012), Moore photographed *Detroit Disassembled* over a span of three to four months in 2008 and 2009. Moore uses large cameras in photographing his subjects, which are displayed in his exhibits as large as 5 to 6 feet in height. Moore’s past works include other cities that are marked by turbulent histories including New York’s Governor Island and China. Worthy of note in Moore’s work is what Levine (2010) calls “found poems,” or walls, billboards, and other abandoned spaces with graffiti including phrases such as “God has left Detroit” (115).

Moore suggests that his work seeks to capture the visual history of Detroit. In an interview with M Live, a Detroit-based news service, Moore states, “Detroit has such a rich history, but it’s tempered by the buildings it’s lost,” he said. “You can have a nice house next to an abandoned building. It’s like broken teeth.” (as cited in Kacmarczyk, 2012). Moore has largely argued that he admires Detroit and its people. He suggests later in the M Live interview that he is sensitive to the sensitivity of Detroiter’s regarding the city.

Moore’s work has drawn a critical eye of many Detroit residents and scholars of urban decline and poverty, while simultaneously calling to question viewer’s assumptions about the intersection of art and documentary. While Moore has suggested he is not a photojournalist, reviews of Moore’s work have described *Detroit Disassembled* as documentary in nature. When asked about the tension between social responsibility and artistic freedom, Moore told the New York Times, “I don’t think those two goals are really reconcilable, but what I do think is that the tension between them, the place where they kind of meet, is a place of great creative traction. And I think Detroit actually is that
meeting point, the place where art confronts anxiety” (Rubin, 2011). Moore’s statement supports the concept of generic hybrid, the notion that his work is neither art nor documentary, but rather contains elements of both modes.

**Research Questions**

In order to gain insight into the rhetorical function of ruin photography, I will focus on one of photographer Andrew Moore’s several publications. The coffee table book, entitled *Detroit Disassembled*, is composed of 75 images that depict the buildings, landscapes, and artifacts from Detroit, a city in economic and cultural decline. I will also analyze the essays accompanying Moore’s photography, including poet Philip Levine’s “Nobody’s Detroit,” Moore’s “The Phoenix and the Pheasants,” and the book’s afterword. The following research questions will guide my thesis project:

- How do the visual elements of Moore’s work affect the audience’s “read” of the images?
- To what extent is ruin photography an example of generic hybrid?
- To what extent does Moore illustrate generic hybrid in his *Detroit Disassembled*?
- What are the social implications Moore’s *Detroit Disassembled*?

**Organization of Thesis**

Chapter 1 sought to review previous literature regarding the photography of ruins, photography and representation, detachment and photography, and three notable case studies that have historically called to question the intersection of documentary and art
photograph. In this section, I have identified and briefly explored the key concept that will guide my analysis, including the Jamison and Campbell’s (1982) rhetorical hybrid and the stylistic and substantive elements I explore in the following chapter.

Chapter 2 will consist of a visual analysis of images from Moore’s exhibit. Guided by the work of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), I will explore the compositional choices Moore has made in his photographs and how these choices may influence an audience’s read of the images. Concepts employed in this analysis will include Moore’s use of color, angle, and framing. Additionally, I will explore his use of historical references, narrative, arrangement, and accompanying texts. This section will include discussion on whether these compositional choices invite the reader to employ a sensory modality, inviting the reader to view these images as art rather than documentary photography. Chapter 2 will conclude with an exploration of Moore’s work through a series of tensions adopted from Peeples’ (2011) analysis of Burtynsky’s images depicting the toxic sublime—beauty and ugliness, magnitude and insignificance, and inhabitation and desolation.

Chapter 3 will explore the cultural implications of Moore’s Detroit Disassembled. Again, guided by the work of Finnegan (2003), Peeples (2011) and Sontag (1977), I will explore the rhetorical function of these images. While Moore considers himself an advocate for the city, a “socially concerned” photographer (Sontag, 1977), I will explore the implications and consequences of his work in the modern artistic landscape. Artistic choices including a lack of context and further, a lack of people, serve a significant role in the way these images are interpreted. Ultimately, Chapter 3 will seek to identify whose voices are heard in Moore’s work and whose, if any, are not.
Chapter Two:
Visual Analysis

Moore’s series, *Detroit Disassembled*, visually captures urban decay in the form of vacant and decaying buildings, commercial businesses, and residential homes. The viewers’ evaluation of images is largely dependent on the type, or category of image. These lenses, or “modes” of viewing then supply the standards by which we view and critique images. With a sensory mode “the pleasure of principle is allowed to be the dominant” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 165). This orientation is often employed by those viewing art, advertising, and food photography. Moore’s images, when analyzed from a naturalistic mode, depict the realities of urban Detroit. In the following section, I will define the terms through which I will explore Moore’s work. These include stylistic elements (color, angle, framing) and substantive elements (narrative, references to historical work, and arrangement).

**Stylistic Elements in Detroit Disassembled**

*Color*

Color, in photography, often serves a semiotic function (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2002). From the historic use of white as a symbol of ‘purity’ to the more recent association between orange and ‘danger’ or ‘threat’, a photographer’s use of color often carries meaning. As Kress and van Leeuwen (2002) suggest, color can be used to represent a specific group of people or an idea. For example, the white coat has long been associated with doctors and medical professionals. Use of color can also denote power differentials (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2002), as in the historic association between purple and royalty.
Additionally, color is often used to convey mood. As Kress and van Leeuwen (2002) write, “people use colour to actually try to energize or calm people down, or, more broadly, to act on others, to send managerial messages to workers, for instance, or parental messages to children” (p. 349). Last, color can be used to alter the truth-value of an image. As I will later explore, the use of brightness in photography, or the difference between the lightest and dullest shades in an image, can make an image seem more or less “real” for an audience (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006).

While the semiotic nature of color denotes a shared meaning, the meaning of color is highly interpretive. Color meaning, simply put is not always obvious or shared by all viewers. As Kress and van Leeuwen (2002) write, color semiotics can be “natural nearly” or “idiosyncratic, unpredictable and anarchic” at times (p. 343). For instance, the authors point out that the color green can denote sickness or hope and rebirth, depending on the context (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2002). Overall, Kress and van Leeuwen (2002) suggest that color, while interpretive, is used to “make different parts more distinct” in photography, suggesting meaning for viewers (p. 350).

In Moore’s Detroit Disassembled, color is one of the compositional choices that cues my abstract read of the images. As Kress and Van Leeuwen (2002) wrote, color is often used to represent a specific group of people or idea. The color scheme of Detroit Disassembled is largely comprised of those colors occurring in nature, greys and faded browns. An additional color that appears in Moore’s work is that of rust. The choice to largely omit elements outside of this color scheme allows Moore to capture and comment on the literal “rust” and decline of Detroit.
It is often through bright bursts of color that Moore’s photographer captures my eye as a viewer. As Kress and van Leeuwen (2002) have suggested, the use of color has the ability to alter the modality, or truth-value, of an image. Moore uses color as a means of drawing attention to specific elements within a frame. Red and orange are the color of the most salient, or prominent, elements in many of Moore’s photographs. For instance, in an image of a fuel oil tank in River Rouge (See Appendix A), the most prominent object is the massive, circular, red tank. Though peeling and faded, the enormous red tanker “pops” from its natural surroundings. Above the tanker is a rolling white sky and below it, a patch of dark, dirt covered earth. The juxtaposition of the natural and the unnatural, rusted tank evoked in me a sense of discomfort, serving as a heavy handed visual example of Detroit’s industrial failures.

Moore also uses color in his work to highlight the contrast between elements in his photographs. The color most often prominent in Moore’s interior photographs is a natural, vibrant green. Green, a color that is often associated with growth and hope (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2002), is used to highlight the contrast between the decaying interiors and the natural world. In the aforementioned image of a textbook depository (*Birches growing in decayed books, Detroit Public School Book Depository*), the most salient image is that of the bright green tree growth crowned by sunlight streaming through the collapsed skylight. The growth stands in stark contrast to the surrounding browns and grays of concrete and the dirt-covered floor. In an image depicting Henry Ford’s office in a Model T plant (*Former Ford Motor Company headquarters, Highland Park*), the viewer’s eye is drawn to the floor, which is covered by moss and small plant growth. This green, again, stands in contrast to the wood paneled walls of the office.
The second stylistic element, angle, or camera height, is another tool used by photographers to convey meaning. High angles, as many suggest, can make a subject appear absent of power or insignificant. As a viewer, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) write that a high angle invites the viewer to take a position of power over the represented objects or participants. A low angle, alternatively, suggests power and superiority (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). If the object or person is depicted from a low angle, Kress & van Leeuwen (2006) suggest that the audience takes a less powerful, subjected position. Those images that depict a subject at eye level invite the viewer to enjoy a position of equal power and authority (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

Various subjects in photography often prompt the use of a specific angle. A naturalistic mode, for instance, is typically associated with a frontal, or eye level angle, or a top-down angle (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). The frontal angle communicates to viewers “‘this is how it works’… ‘This is how you do it’” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 145). A naturalistic lens is typically associated with forensic photography, medical photography, and documentary photography. The top-down angle, alternately, invites the viewer to take a “god-like” view, or objective view of a depicted subject (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). An example of this would include a blue print for a home or a road map of Ohio. An abstract lens in photography is typically associated with the high and frontal angle. The abstract lens is traditionally employed in fine art and landscape photography.

Moore makes use of angle in two distinct ways—first to highlight the magnitude of these structures and also to draw a sublime response from audiences. As Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) suggest, angle is often used to suggest a power difference. Low-angle
shots often place the viewer in a position of less power than the subject depicted (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). In Moore’s images of the sepia colored, abandoned waiting room of the Michigan Central Station (Waiting room with snowdrift, Michigan Central Station), the camera is positioned from a low angle perspective. The viewer gazes up a vast ceiling arch and the peeling ceiling of the waiting room. In the center of the photograph are two pillars whose size is also distorted by the camera angle, appearing small in comparison to the colossal archway. This is one of the many examples of low angle used in Detroit Disassembled. Here, angle is used to highlight the magnitude of the structure and the insignificance of human participation (Peeples, 2011). Moore additionally employs angle to draw an emotional response from viewers.

While Moore uses a low angle shot most often in his photographs, he also employs high angle shots that evoke feelings of pity, sympathy, or dominance in the reader (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). In Packard Motor Car Company Plant, Moore captures the collapse of a massive structure (See Appendix B). The photo is taken from a high angle, giving audiences a bird’s eye view of the structural decay. From the audience’s vantage point, one can see that the roof has entirely collapsed, exposing structural beams and supports. A mass of these structural elements hang off of the side of the building, appearing as though it may fall at any moment. Thus, this image takes ruin photography beyond broken windows and abandoned rooms to the absolute dissolution of structures. This use of angle serves to draw an emotional response from viewers, shifting the focus of the subject of the photo to the response of the audience.
**Framing**

Framing, the third stylistic element I explore, involves the omission and focus on the subject of an image. As Edwards (2006) writes, “Whereas paintings are built up, photographs are extracted from a visual field” (p. 105). While certain changes can be made in the photo editing process, what a photographer chooses to include in a frame comes down to the photographer’s initial artistic decision. A traditional definition of artistic framing is to what degree are a subject’s surroundings included in an image (Edwards, 2006). However, as Edwards (2006) explores, 20th century photography began to frame images in a less conventional manner. This included “deframing” or capturing a scene without a central subject, and including only part of a subject (i.e. the close-up) (Edwards, 2006). As Edwards (2006) and others suggest, this artistic choice often serves as a rhetorical means to emotionally connect with an audience.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) suggest that a photographer’s framing choice implies what elements are connected in a scene and how said elements are related. Where a subject is positioned in a shot can suggest their power and relationship to other subjects or their surroundings. One such relationship the authors explore is the “ideal and real” or a framing technique that offers a hopeful, idealized subject in the top of a shot, while filling the bottom of a frame with the real, or objective. This framing technique is often used in advertising, offering the “promise of a product” on top, while depicting the product itself in the lower half of a frame (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 187). Also, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) write that in positioning a subject, a photographer can affect its salience. Simply put, salience refers to “the most eye catching elements” in a
photograph (p. 176). For the purpose of this paper, I will explore include the arrangement of subjects in my exploration of the framing of Moore’s pictures.

In *Detroit Disassembled*, Moore uses a variety of framing techniques. In many of his photographs, Moore employs the “close up” shot, which serves to remove the context, or background of the subject and to blur the lines between the abstract and the real. For instance, in *Façade, Michigan Central Station*, Moore depicts the iconic building with an absence of any and all surrounding detail (See Appendix C). While the building is massive in size, the building fills the entire frame. It is through this tight shot that Moore is able to highlight the classic architecture of the building, which is modeled after an ancient Roman bathhouse. In this way, Moore uses framing as a means of focusing on detail.

Moore alternately uses the close up shot to blur the lines between the abstract and real objects found at the site of the photograph. One such example is *Moldering Books, Detroit Public School Book Depository*. In this photograph, Moore depicts a pile of decaying, pulp-like books. Without the caption, however, one would not assume the subject is a pile of books. While the close up shot allows him to depict texture and detail, it pulls the viewer from a realistic mode of viewing.

Framing, as detailed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), also refers to the level to which individual elements in an image are joined or disconnected. For instance, a photograph hanging in an exhibit is framed to draw the viewer’s attention to that photograph as an individual unit of analysis. In Moore’s photograph of the oil tank (See Appendix A), the natural frame of the tank (cloud covered sky and the natural, dirt floor) highlights the foreign, or otherness, of the artifact of industry.
Moore also employs framing to filter the image through an environmental lens in many of his photographs. The fact that many of his images are void of humans further helps the audience to cue in to the theme of nature. In Moore’s *Bellevue Street*, a broken tree absent of leaves in the foreground highlights an old home. The tree is surrounded by snow, broken branches, brush, and a sky void of color. The branches work to create a frame through which the audience views the home. Thus, a reader is invited to interpret the meaning of the home in its natural setting, an urban prairie.

Last, Moore uses framing as a means of contrasting the ideal and the real, a technique explored by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006). As Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) suggest, images that have a distinct top and bottom often carry with it the idea of an “ideal” (the top) and a “real” (the bottom). Moore uses this framing technique in his series to contrast the “ideal” or the ornate features of the buildings he photographs, with the “real” or the debris and trash covered floors. An example of this is *Church gym, East Side*, which depicts a 1950’s style gym featuring a stage and basketball court. Despite the dated colors and slight signs of wear, the top half of the shot could be seen in schools and churches across the country. However, the bottom half depicts a chaotic scene of trash and debris. The wooden stage supports are pried off and the floor is covered by pieces of straw-like material. Additionally, the walls sharply change from a calm yellow to fading, exposed brick. While one may gain insight into Moore’s photographs through a read of stylistic choices such as framing, one must also analyze the substantive elements of the exhibit to fully understand Moore’s construction of Detroit’s ruin.
Substantive Elements in *Detroit Disassembled*

Moore’s *Detroit Disassembled* primarily depicts the decaying commercial and residential buildings in Detroit’s urban center. The photographs are largely interior photographs filled with natural light. Common features of Moore’s interior shots are reminiscent of photographs of historical ruins. These include hulking arches, ornate pillars, and gilded and high ceilings. However, included in his interior shots are also exposed support beams, rust, decaying debris, and peeling paint. Moore’s photographs of interiors are typically shot from a low angle. He also depicts a number of residential homes, some of which are framed to include people. These homes are often marked by graffiti, shattered windows, broken fences, boarded up doors, overgrown lawns, and collapsed roofs. Most residential shots depict homes that while in disrepair, may or may not be inhabited. It is in his residential shots that Moore most often depicts human subjects. It is worth noting that the Moore rarely photographs iconic sites or structures, but instead buildings that can only be identified by their captions. The exception is Moore’s photograph of Michigan Central Station. In the following sections, I will analyze the visual references, narrative, and arrangement embedded in Moore’s work as well as the texts that accompany the photographs in *Detroit Disassembled*.

**Visual References**

The first substantive element I will explore is Moore’s use of artistic reference to past works. For the purpose of this analysis, I have defined a historic artistic reference as the visual reference to an iconic artist or work of art. This reference may be in the form of a specific element in the photograph or the arrangement and framing of the image.
Referencing past works is certainly not a unique feature of contemporary photography. Historically, artists have paid homage to those who have come before them. A recent example of this is street artist Banksy’s homage to Andy Warhol (Rabinovitch, 2007).

Moore borrows from past historical works in his series, *Detroit Disassembled*. First, Moore’s work may be compared to that of the New Topographics, a series of photographs that epitomized a new style of landscape photograph. This style, as detailed by Rohrbach (2013) was that of blandness, repetition, and the mundane. Moore’s, at times, detached approach to his photography and his attempt to capture the decline of Detroit’s urban center is in keeping with the New Topographics’ style and social conscience.

An example of Moore’s reference to past artwork is exemplified in his close up photograph of a time clock in an abandoned Detroit high school (*National Time clock, former Cass Technical High School building*). The image shows a clock with a faded, yellowing background folding into itself in the glass casing. The numbers 5, 6, 7, and 8 remain, but the rest are seemingly melting into the center of the clock. The clock is framed by peeling, rust colored wall. This image brought to mind Salvador Dali’s work, *The Persistence of Time*, which depicts a clock folded over a tree branch in a barren, desert landscape. By referencing this widely acclaimed work, Moore aligns his images with that of the artistic, abstract sphere.

The third instance of artistic homage involves Moore’s close up shots in factories. These images, including *Former Ford Motor Company blast furnace now owned by a Russian steel company, River Rouge Complex, Dearborn*, are reminiscent of the Detroit Industry murals housed in the Detroit Institute of Arts. These fresco-style murals depict
the city’s manufacturing structures and labor forces in the 1930s. Moore’s work, depicting the close up intricacies of a blast furnace, resembles Rivera’s iconic work.

**Narrative**

Narrative is a substantive element that often serves to connect an audience to a photograph. Scholars of photography have argued that while images can convey meaning, they are most often accompanied by headlines, captions, or discourse that serves to interpret an image. Edwards (2006) writes that viewers often attempt to fit photographs into narrative contexts. A main difference between documentary photography and art photography is that art photography is notably absent of accompanying texts, prompting viewers to interpret the image on their own.

An additional aspect narrative is the story, or action, depicted in a frame. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) suggest vectors, or the depicted or implied “lines” between subjects signify narrative processes in art. In the case of an informational chart, the line between A and B would be considered a vector. In photographs, this line “may be in the form of bodies or limbs or tools ‘in action’” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 59). Vectors are most often tied to an actor in a frame. With this, the most notable way that a photographer can depict a story is through the inclusion of people (Edwards, 2006).

I have chosen to explore narrative in Moore’s *Detroit Disassembled* on two levels—the narrative surrounding the piece in accompanying texts and the narrative embedded within the photographs. Within Moore’s work, there are two subjects that serve a narrative function, the hidden messages or graffiti and the presence, or absence,
of people. For the purpose of this research, I suggest that human subjects, when present, often stand in contrast to the crumbling architectural features in Moore’s photos.

Text in Photographs. The texts embedded in Moore’s Detroit Disassembled range from ornate, splashy graffiti to more subtle, or hidden messages. Both function to transform Detroiters from simply bystanders to Detroit’s decay to ever-present, vulnerable human beings. Text, specifically graffiti, may also be used as a means to situate these ruins in an urban center, as graffiti has long been associated with “the city.” The presence of graffiti ranges from small images, words and letters, to ornate works of art. Moore’s Arcade and ticket windows, Michigan Central Station depicts a long corridor with massive archways hanging above a snow-covered ground. While each wall has faded words and drawings such as “CRR” and “313” (the most common area code in Detroit), the focal point of the photo is a large scale, colorful display of graffiti. Without the presence of this “street art” the scene may have been of the ancient Roman ruins after which the building was modeled. The presence of graffiti suggests that these ruins are not historic, but rather, modern, perhaps adding to the emotional affect Moore draws from his audiences.

In addition to graffiti, there are various other texts embedded in Moore’s photographs. The additional “found poems” at times serve to represent Detroiters and their attachment to the city’s decay. Found poems, as I will explore, are those words and phrases present as graffiti, on t-shirts of subjects, or signs hanging within the frame. In Façade, Michigan Central Station, Moore’s framing of the photograph allows him to capture the message “Save The Depot” spelled on individual white panels on at least 10
stories high in the building (See Appendix C). Other found texts include the Detroit and Detroit Tigers t-shirts worn by the individuals in *Roof party, Broderick Tower, Foxtown neighborhood*. However, other messages serve as post-apocalyptic, epitaph for the city.

In *Peacock Alley, Lee Plaza Hotel*, Moore depicts a grand hallway filled with natural light, gold façade, and white walls. The light allows viewers to delight in the splendor of the once popular hotel. On the left side of the photo, however, is a broken mirror with the words “My heart is missing” in black spray paint. The following photograph in *Detroit Disassembled* depicts the balcony of an abandoned church. Peeling white walls and archways frame a wooden balcony with the words “And You Shall Say God Did It” (*Sanctuary, East Grand Boulevard Methodist Church, East Side*). These images, as well as many others in Moore’s *Detroit Disassembled* serve to invite audiences to contemplate the city’s fall, rather than those people affected by it.

*People.* In his images, Moore also makes the aesthetic choice to largely omit people. As Sturken and Cartwright (2001) write, an additional composition choice that can add salience is the presence or absence of humans. Significant, in Moore’s series of Detroit images, is the absence of human subjects. He allows viewers to remove our interpretation of humans from this scene and the larger situation of urban decay. Those humans that are depicted in Moore’s work are individuals in a work setting or individuals or groups standing near the site of decaying homes or buildings. Typically, Moore’s photos of people are not demand images, or images of people looking directly at the camera. Instead, as in *Scrapper, Packard Motor Car Company Plant*, humans become simply another element of the photo. In this photograph, a man stands on a flatbed truck in a warehouse of exposed and graffiti covered cinderblocks. The floor is wet and
covered in broken cinderblocks and garbage. Holding a metal cylinder, the gaze of the
“scrapper” avoids the camera. He is not the most salient subject of the photograph, and in
fact, his blue jumpsuit allows him to blend in to his industrial, grey surroundings. In *Gray
Street, East Side*, an individual in black is photographed next to a large, grey home next
to an abandoned lot. The house itself is in disrepair, but the subject looks, not at the
home, or at the camera, but in the opposite direction. There is no presence of other
individuals or action within the scene.

The only demand photos present in Moore’s work are those pictured on their
porches including the photograph of an older man and his dog standing on the porch of a
severely decaying house. The wooden façade is chipping and broken. The windows are
barred and the grass is overgrown. The subject, Algernon, is depicted looking straight at
the camera (*Algernon on his porch with Babe, East Side*).

*Captions.* Accompanying the texts were also brief, location-based captions.

Captions, as Sontag (1977) writes, help to posit and explain photography in context. This
may arguably lessen the ethical impact of capturing photographs of ruins because they
allow viewers to orient and emotionally involve themselves with the building or subject
of the photo. Captions allow an artist to share the import and significance of an image
with his or her audience. However, Moore’s photographs typically include only the
building captured in the image and the neighborhood in which the photograph was taken.
Examples include, *Metropolitan Building and skyline, Downtown, Former Mark Twain
Branch of the Detroit Public Library, East Side, Alleyway, East Side, and Former Ford
Motor Company Headquarters, Highland Park*. Some captions do include the street on
which the structure sits, including *Arnold Nursing Home, 7 Mile Road, Ernie D’s*
Campus Ballroom, 7 Mile Road, West Side, Gray Street, East Side, James Scott Mansion, Park Avenue, Midtown, and Former University Club, East Jefferson Avenue.

Last, the few photographs that depict people in Detroit Disassembled do include their names. For instance, Moore’s previously mentioned photograph of the older man and his dog on the porch of a decaying home is titled Algernon on his porch with Babe, East Side. The next photograph in the series depicts a windowless, large stone home covered by ivy. The photo is taken in the fall as the icy and surrounding foliage has started take on a red hue. While the home is arguably the focus of the photograph, there are two people walking hand in hand to the right of the home. Moore does not acknowledge these subjects, titling this piece, James Scott Mansion, Park Avenue, Midtown. Again, while Moore’s caption may allow people to mentally posit the scenes in Detroit Disassembled, they do little to suggest a story line within the pieces. In choosing to omit captions beyond the basic location and Detroit neighborhood, Moore, invites the reader to contemplate the photos without significant context or artistic editorializing.

Arrangement

Arrangement, a term closely related to framing, will refer to the ordering and placement of photographs in a larger context. For the purpose of this essay, I will analyze the order and arrangement of photographs in Moore’s coffee table book. Arrangement, however, may also be expanded to include the placement of art in an exhibit, or the position of a photograph in a magazine. As Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) write, “The stronger the framing of an element, the more it is presented as a separate unit of information” (p. 203). Thus, as Moore’s work is presented as a series in Detroit Disassembled, it becomes
increasingly important to view these images not as separate photographs, but as a collection.

The order of photographs in Moore’s *Detroit Disassembled* appears to be largely determined by subject matter. The book begins with images that speak to industrial decay. Images of exposed support beams, iron, steel and rust fill the early pages, mirroring much of the past photography of ruins. The middle section of the book primarily consists of images of public and commercial buildings in Detroit, including abandoned hotels, schools, libraries, theaters, and stadiums. The last third of the book consists of images of residential homes. While few people are portrayed in the early pages of the Moore’s book, he does, on occasion, depict human subjects in his photographs of decaying homes.

Within the pages of Moore’s *Detroit Disassembled*, the orientation of the photographs primarily determines their page placement. A white border commonly frames those photographs that are taken vertically, while those taken horizontally often bleed off the page. The white border frames some images regardless of their orientation, including *Moore’s Façade, Michigan Central Station*. There are two images that span across both pages of the book. One image depicts a large office with yellowing walls. Books, water bottles, and various debris covers the floor. Included in Moore’s *Librarian’s office, former Mark Twain Branch of the Detroit Public Library, East Side* are two desks and an orange, midcentury designed chair (See Appendix E). The second image that spans two pages, *Couch in the trees, Highland Park*, alternately depicts a growth of trees where a collapsed home once stood. The rubble from the home includes structural supports, tires, and furniture, including couches. On either side of the debris are
homes standing. One house being marked by a sign reading “Ca$h for your house: 248-762-0800.”

Moore also arranges his photographs in a way that suggests that the images on opposite pages are “speaking” to one another. First, images on opposite pages, at times, are similar in nature. An example of this includes his pairing of *Abandoned videoconferencing room, Chase Tower, Financial District*, a photo depicting a large conference room with three rows of empty, vibrant red seats, and *Upper Deck, former Tiger Stadium, Corktown*. Both photos evoke a sense of abandonment more than decay. Second, Moore’s adjacent photographs stand in contrast. This is the case for photograph entitled, *Former Ford Motor Company blast furnace now owned by a Russian steel company, River Rouge Complex, Dearborn* and the following image, *Subbasement after being submerged for twenty years, Book-Cadillac Hotel*. While the first image depicts an aging, but seemingly intact shot of an industrial factory, the image on the right depicts a long abandoned series of pipes that are rusted and rotting. The scenes are framed in a similar, semi close-up manner, but stand in stark contrast as *Former Ford Motor Company blast furnace now owned by a Russian steel company, River Rouge Complex, Dearborn* is primarily grey and blue-steel in color, while the opposite image is shades of brown and rust.

*Accompanying Texts*

Included in the book are essays by Philip Levine, a Detroit native and poet and Andrew Moore, as well as an afterward by Barbara Tannenbaum and Mitchell Kahan, Directors of the Akron Art Museum, where Moore’s work was first exhibited. Embedded in these texts are a host of interpretations and analysis of *Detroit Disassembled*. 
Levine’s essay, entitled “Nobody’s Detroit” focuses on the personal history and humanity in Moore’s work. Levine, a poet, explains that he left Detroit in his youth, returning 30 years later to see “a field of nettles and weeds and three abandoned cars, their wheels gone” (p. 111) where his old workplace had once stood. He takes his readers through a series of visual changes he encountered on his trip back, including eloquent and intimate details. Levine, on the absence of once familiar homes:

The home of Dolly Basil, who I truly loved for two months, has given way to a six-lane highway. For certain I won’t find the little scenes of childhood I’ve carried in amber all those years like amulets against the inevitable, the images that once told me who I was and now belong in someone else’s biography or no one’s (p. 114)

His essay also focuses on the growth and rebirth that Moore’s work captures. He suggests that *Detroit Disassembled* includes colors and textures beyond the traditional toolbox of ruin photographers. On Moore’s use of natural lighting in his photographs of two GM plants he once worked at, Levine explains “This sudden revelation of sublimity in a place I can only think of as a hellhole simply stops me” (p. 115). Last, Levine defends the absence of people in Moore’s photography, by suggesting that “little found poems” represent the work and spirit of Detroiters. These little found poems are in the form of scrawled messages in spray-paint, carvings, and notes on desks. Levine, ultimately argues that these photographs, in the beauty, still depict a proud Detroit. “These photographs are among the most beautiful I’ve ever seen: their calm in the face of the ravages of man and nature confer an unexpected dignity upon the subjects of his camera, the very dignity I had assumed daily life had robbed them of” (p. 117)
Moore’s essay, “The Phoenix and the Pheasants” suggests that the transformation of Detroit, orchestrated by nature, has opened a rhetorical space for viewers to reflect on the changing times. He writes that in Detroit, one-third of the land has become vacant lots.

Formerly manicured courtyards have become impassable forests, trees sprout from cornices of office buildings, and former living rooms lie suspended in the rising undergrowth. Perhaps this re-ruralization is a sign of hope. Detroit has become an open city repopulated by trees, grasses, flowers, moss, and pheasants. Its emptiness is an invitation to wander and reflect upon new and radical solutions for the Detroit of the future (p. 119)

With this, Moore also suggests that Detroit is a resilient city. He writes that despite the city’s reputation, Detroiter are proud, friendly and resourceful. He cites the Detroit city motto, which reads Spearamus Meliora; Resurget Cineribus, or “We hope for better things; it will arise from the ashes” Ultimately, Moore suggests that despite the decay of time and natural elements, it is the people and a fresh landscape that will bring renewal to Detroit.

Last, Tannenbaum and Kahan’s Afterword suggests that Moore’s work is, above all, a visual splendor. They cite his curiosity and interest in capturing the “human struggle to control nature by dominating the land” (p. 123) as his motivation behind Detroit Disassembled. Tannenbaum and Kahan also explore past depictions of ruin, comparing Moore’s work to that of Piranesi’s depictions of 18th century Romans and Walker Evan’s photography during the Great Depression. These works, they suggest, capture people amidst the ruins built by prior generations. With this, Tannenbaum and Kahan write that Moore’s work has the ability to “… incite emotions ranging from wonder to horror to
empathy” (p. 123). Ultimately, the authors suggest that Moore has captured the beauty, despite the “destruction and decay” of Detroit (p. 123).

In the following section, I will explore a series of tensions adopted from Peeples’ (2011) analysis of Burtynsky’s images depicting the toxic sublime—beauty and ugliness, magnitude and insignificance, and inhabitation and desolation. It is through these dialectics that I will unearth some of the tensions that exist within Moore’s *Detroit Disassembled*. The focus of this analysis will be those tensions visible apparent in Moore’s series.

**Visual Tensions in *Detroit Disassembled***

*Beauty and Ugliness*

In *Detroit Disassembled*, Moore employs visual elements of art photography. For instance, he is able to capture patterns and close up images to display texture and movement. However, the tension lies in his choice of subject matter. As previously mentioned, *Moldering Books, Detroit Public School Book Depository* is a close-up photograph included in the series. Moore’s compositional choice to focus on the patterns and texture of the decaying books, serves to aesthetically please viewers. The technical skill and composition choices that borrow from art photography stand in stark contrast to the nature of the subject matter, in this case, physical decay.

Additionally Moore often juxtaposes the ornate elements of Detroit’s industrial and commercial buildings with elements of decay. Moore’s work includes elements shared with classic ruins, including massive pillars, decorated ceilings, chandeliers, grand archways, and ornate architecture. These elements, the subject of historic ruin gazing and
photography, draw the eye of viewers. Through the detailed architectural elements or ornate decorations, Moore attempts to capture the historic grandness once enjoyed by Detroit. However, Moore includes in these frames elements of decay and debris. This visual tension is striking, with ornate, grand features filling the top half of a photograph, while the bottom half depicts graffiti, structural debris, and decaying, scattered trash. Moore also juxtaposes the ornate with the everyday in Detroit Disassembled.

Perhaps the photographs that most clearly depict the tension between beauty and ugliness are those in which Moore juxtaposes the natural and the industrial. In many of his images, industrial, grey elements are lit and exposed by natural sunlight. Additional, Moore includes bright green, natural growth in many images. As Peeples (2011) suggests, these natural elements are considered beautiful and appealing to audiences. In Moore’s work, these natural elements are often placed in the frame with broken glass, garbage, and abandoned chairs.

Without coercion and at times with great effort, people, especially Americans, seek out natural places. In contrast, the unadorned and material substance of the altered landscapes may repel viewers. For those of privilege, waste and destruction are hidden from sight, whether under the sink, on the edge of town or shipped out of the country (p. 381)

Thus this contrast evokes contrasting emotions, causing audiences to contemplate the human impact on our natural world (Peeples, 2011). Moore’s work of this nature prompted me, as a viewer, to question how the “urban” landscape in Detroit has changed.

An image that encapsulates this tension is Fuel Oil Tank, River Rouge (See Appendix A). The photo depicts a massive fuel oil tank that is centered in the frame. The oil tank is a faded, rusted red and with the words “Fuel Oil Corp.” painted in larger letters. The space above and beneath the oil tank is a serene, natural setting. The forefront
of the image is a patch of gravel and dirt and above it, a vertical line of bright, green natural growth. Above the oil tank are rolling clouds with emerging patches of blue sky. This image serves to both draw my eye through the natural, alluring elements and repel me with the giant, rusting oil tanker.

Magnitude and Insignificance

The second tension that arises from Moore’s *Detroit Disassembled* is that between magnitude and insignificance. Through his use of angle, Moore is able to capture the immensity of Detroit’s decaying interiors. He positions viewers from a low-angle vantage point. This technique highlights the size of the ornate, classical pillars and archways, allowing me and other viewers to take delight in the “ruins.” However, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) suggest that this position posits viewers in a position of lesser authority, or power. Viewers, then, are asked to contemplate the historic sites from a lens of subordinance. Alternately, Moore also employs a “god’s eye” angle, inviting viewers to feel omniscient. An example of this is the previously mentioned photograph entitled *Packard Motor Car Company Plant* (See Appendix B). This disorienting technique evokes feelings of trepidation and terror as the large building is structurally unstable, but allows me, as a viewer, to take in the scene as a slightly detached observer. My experience in viewing these images would differ from others as I have frequently seen these sights in the city. However, the vantage point from which Moore shoots provides a view that I had not yet seen.

Moore also uses framing to highlight the magnitude of the structures he photographs. Many of his images in *Detroit Disassembled* extend off the edges of the page, filling the page. The book itself is oversized to include large, full-page images of
his subjects. However, in the process of framing, the edges of shots are cropped out, making it difficult for viewers to contextualize and “orient themselves” (Peeples, 2011). This is due to the fact that Moore often fails to include both the whole image and its parts in the same frame.

Moore often uses people as a means of inviting viewers to become oriented to the massive structures depicted in *Detroit Disassembled*. While the series does not often include human subjects, those that are depicted are often juxtaposed with massive structures or homes. This both highlights the size of the “ruins” and visually demonstrates the insignificance of humans. As Peeples (2011) suggests, this can leave the viewer feeling bewildered or, as Kant (2007) suggests, it may evoke feelings of sublime.

Moore’s *Façade, Michigan Central Station* highlights the tension between the massive, ornate structure and the insignificance of viewers (See Appendix C). The photograph, again, depicts a building long associated with Detroit’s economic collapse. As a native Detroit resident, Michigan Central Station is a massive ghost of a building that can be seen from many parts of the city. Moore has tightly cropped the image to include no surrounding natural or geographic features. Moore counters this by including the presence of one human subject, depicted in a bright orange t-shirt at the bottom of the frame. This artistic choice to include a human subject allows viewers to contemplate the suggested size of the structure and their relationship to it.

**Inhabitation vs. Desolation**

One of the most notable compositional choices Moore has made in *Detroit Disassembled* is the absence of people. Like the photographs of contemporary landscape artists as once
led by the New Topographics, humans are absent from a majority of Moore’s photographs. Many of his interior photographs felt cold and detached as they often depict large spaces. An example of this is *Rolling Hall, Ford Motor Company, River Rouge Complex, Dearborn*, one of Moore’s most widely cited photographs and the cover photo of the coffee table book (See Appendix D). Through Moore’s use of perspective and natural light, the photo presents a long hallway of an abandoned automotive plant. Broken windows, iron and steel supports, and various debris serve as a frame in the image. There is, however, no true focal point in the image, prompting me, as a viewer, to take in the scene through detached lens. It is this omission of individuals that, as Peeples (2011) suggests, may also serve to evoke a stronger, “more compelling sublime response” (p. 285).

While humans are largely absent in *Detroit Disassembled*, human artifacts are present in Moore’s work. These range from graffiti scrawled on the Roman columns in an entryway to the library books left behind in *Librarian’s office, former Mark Twain Branch of the Detroit Public Library* (See Appendix E). In some photographs, it appears as though humans have just stepped out of the frame. This includes Chemistry lab, former Cass Technical High School building, a photograph split between shelves of beakers, trays of test tubes, boxes, and funnels. The lower half of the shot depicts wooden drawers that have been pulled out and rummaged through. While there is a marked feeling of disarray and in the photograph, the vivid color palate and brightly lit image suggests that students, may, in the future, return to the scene. This physical evidence of human presence in the shots, then, creates a tension between the marked feeling of desolation and emptiness, and that of inhabitation. My experience with this aspect of Moore’s work
is that of discomfort. As Levine writes in his essay, it is in these “found poems” that Moore depicts the work and words of Detroiter.

Those frames that do highlight inhabitation are most often an individual human juxtaposed with a decaying home or structure. Few of the photographs are demand photographs, again, causing me to view them through a detached lens. This serves to strip feelings of connectedness to the scene that viewers may otherwise have felt if demand images were included. Individuals, such as Algernon on his porch with Babe, East Side and Kinga in her doorway, East Side contrast the humanity and arguably, hope that still exists in Detroit with the decaying boarded homes (See Appendix F).

The tension between inhabitation and desolation is present in Moore’s aforementioned Kinga in her doorway, East Side (See Appendix F). The photograph depicts a young woman at the back door of her house. The siding of the home facing the viewer has decayed and is replaced by splotches, or streaks of vibrant red, yellow, blue, and orange. There is debris and some belongings included in the shot, such as an overturned, bright red tub and a bike attachment with the word “carsick” embroidered on it. The frame also includes a small plot of land with some plant growth and a shovel lying in the dirt. Moore is commonly praised for his photos as many suggest that his use of color sets him apart from other, perhaps less hopeful ruin photographers. However, I offer an alternative read, suggesting that Moore’s bold use of color and human subject serves to highlight the extreme disrepair of her home and further, her city. The focus on the color allowed me to view the scene through an aesthetic mode, which ultimately depicts a woman standing in the back door of her structurally decaying home.
Art and Documentary: A Generic Hybrid

Moore’s *Detroit Disassembled*, when analyzed through the lens of the dichotomies of beauty and ugliness, magnitude and insignificance, and inhabitation and desolation, functions rhetorically to “set the scene” for viewers. Simply put, Moore’s work attempts to conceptualize the decay of Detroit, and further, America’s “Rust Belt”. Arguably, while *Detroit Disassembled* depicts the derelict ruins of a city facing great economic hardship, Moore’s controversial images engaged me not with the artifacts of this movement, but often through the affect they evoke. Moore’s images depict urban decay not as documentary, and not solely art, but rather a generic hybrid of the two.

As I have explored in this analysis, the primary subject matter of Moore’s work is Detroit’s decaying commercial and residential buildings. The images appear to tell a story about the ruins and decay of a city that was once the paramount of modernity and industrialization. As previous ruin photographers and landscape photographers before him, Moore’s photographs also depict the everyday, or mundane in Detroit. His photographs of schools include those of stacked tables and chairs and an empty gym with a hanging, white basketball hoop. These images, in large part, celebrate the everyday. He includes in *Detroit Disassembled*, some photographs of two businesses that are still in operation. These include the Detroit Athletic Club and the Ivanhoe Café in Hamtramck. Given Moore’s subject matter and at times, detached lens, one may read *Detroit Disassembled* as a collection of documentary photography. As a native Detroiter, I had a privileged, unique perspective that was driven by my past experiences in the city.

Additionally, Moore has suggested that his work seeks to exposes viewers to the reality of urban decline. Of Moore’s work, Levine writes:
their calm in the face of the ravages of man and nature confer an unexpected dignity upon the subjects of [Moore’s] camera, the very dignity I had assumed daily life had robbed them of… Moore’s photographs honor what is most ignored and despised among us” (p. 117)

Levine (2010) suggests that Moore’s photography, in highlighting the sublime in the ruins, also draws attention to the hope and the gumption of a city that has long faced public criticism. Many Detroiters have praised Moore for sharing those harsh realities depicted in his photos. This social activism aspect of Moore’s work aligns him with photographers such as the New Topographics.

Alternately, I experienced a highly aesthetic read of his images because of Moore’s compositional choices. First, Moore’s *Detroit Disassembled* began as a gallery exhibit, now circulated as a coffee table book, reinforcing the notion that these photographs are, by nature, art. In keeping with the ruin photographers that came before him, I have suggested that Moore’s work uses composition, color, and a lack of humans and context to cue the readers to adopt an abstract, sensory mode of viewing. This mode of looking allowed me, as a viewer, to detach myself momentarily from Moore’s work and, in a broader sense, Detroit’s decay. Moore’s work is also largely absent of narratives, specifically people. These compositional choices, taken as a whole, drew from me a range of emotional responses, including fear, nostalgia, joy, compassion, and most notably, a sublime response.

This analysis reveals that while there are marked tensions embedded in Moore’s *Detroit Disassembled*, the work as a whole, serves as both documentary and art photography. As Jameson and Campbell (1982) explored in their analysis of speeches,
there are, at times, a need to draw from multiple genres to attend to a rhetorical situation. In the case of Moore, the exigency was Moore’s interest in the decline of Detroit’s urban center. The genres from which he borrowed were that of art and documentary photography.

Moore’s use of a generic hybrid allows his audience to both explore and emotionally engage with his photographs. As Moore suggested in his interview with Rubin (2011), he sees himself neither as a photojournalist nor a social activist. His focus, instead, is on capturing the beauty of the remains. While his images depict the natural and the mundane, often evoking an eerie quiet feeling, the pieces are composed in a matter to invite the reader to pick them apart as they would a painting. His use of technique is striking and meant to capture the viewer’s eye. There is a post-apocalyptic beauty in the art that also begs an emotional response from readers. Beauty, as some would argue, is an unavoidable cost of capturing an image. Sontag (1977) writes that while some photographers suggest that their work sets out to expose “what their unseeing eyes have missed” (p. 74), perhaps a more apt reason behind the beautification of ruins is our preference for the chaotic.
Chapter Three: Discussion and Conclusions

In this chapter, I will examine the discourse surrounding Moore’s work. Moore’s collection of Detroit images has enjoyed popularity with consumers and art critics alike. One of his images of Detroit was included in Time Magazine’s 2009 “The Year in Pictures” and the 2011 Michigan Notable Book Award from the Library of Michigan. However, Moore’s work has received sharp criticism from critics, bloggers, scholars, and alternative news journalists. Critics of Moore’s work suggest that despite Moore’s subject matter, Moore attempts to elide the structural causes of Detroit’s decline by engaging his audience in a highly emotive, abstract viewing experience.

Praise for Moore’s Detroit Disassembled

Moore has received critical acclaim for his Detroit Disassembled series. His work was widely praised by publications including New York Times, Time, and various art critics. As previously mentioned, Moore’s Detroit Disassembled was even honored as a 2011 Michigan Notable Book from the Library of Michigan. Much of the praise focuses on Moore’s technical skill, highlighting his ability to capture the decay and vibrancy of Detroit.

Others have suggested that Moore’s Detroit Disassembled has opened the city and its visitors to engage in dialogue about the future (Christopher, 2012; Millington, 2012). In addition to creating an internal dialogue, Millington (2012) argues that Moore’s work has draw awareness to the current state of Detroit. While he, at times depicts the city in
an aesthetically pleasing way, Moore is still able to call to question those issues of poverty depicted in his pictures.

Moore’s work has also received acclaim for focusing on the connectedness of Detroit (Millington, 2012), both as a community of individuals and as a city connected to the mainstream. Millington (2012) argues that recently, the American ghetto has been “eroticized.” This, the author argues, is not present in Moore’s work. Instead, Millington (2012) suggests that *Detroit Disassembled* invites audiences to view the images without many specific visual references to Detroit, allowing them to relate to the scenes of decay. This lack of context serves to connect non-Detroiter to those living in the city through a shared concern about the economic future and vitality of urban centers across the Rust Belt.

Moore is also praised for his inclusion of people in some of his photographs in *Detroit Disassembled*. Millington (2012) writes that Moore’s inclusion of people stands in contrast to the very ruin photography that inspired him, the photography of Marchand and Meffre. The few human figures depicted in previous ruin photography are ghostly, hidden figures that often fade into the “muted gray” scenes. Millington (2012) suggests In contrast to this writing out of Detroit citizens, Andrew Moore’s images include residents in many of his shots, and he documents kids walking to school or hanging out in public. These give a sense of the banal and everyday that is often missing in images made of the city, and gesture at the inarticulate rich thereeness of place (Millington, p. 290)

While critics suggest that his work fails to focus on the people of Detroit, it is praised by some for prominently featuring them in a few photographs included in *Detroit Disassembled*. 
Critical Response to Moore’s Detroit Disassembled

Moore’s Detroit Disassembled series has also received much criticism from journalists, scholars, bloggers, and various advocates of Detroit. Contributing to the decontextualized nature of Detroit Disassembled, the absence of people in the work of ruin photographers is the leading critique of Moore’s work. An outspoken opponent to Moore’s photography and the ruin photography of Detroit that came before it, Wayne State University professor Leary (2011) cites the case of a British filmmaker who visited Detroit to capture footage for his film “Requiem for Detroit?” Amidst his coverage of tree growth in buildings and the general blight in Detroit, the filmmaker wrote of “street zombies” that appeared in front of his car (Leary, 2011). Leary asks the question: are those few residents of Detroit “Street zombies” or simply the victims of exploitation? Moore’s argued focus on the aesthetic rather than the story comes with powerful, perhaps unintended consequences for those individuals.

Moore’s critics suggest that viewing industrial decline and urban decay as art is problematic because it allows viewers to accept, and furthermore, grow detached from destruction. This is because despite the intentions of a photographer, the aesthetic nature of a photo often trumps its social message. As Sontag (1977) writes, “Despite the illusion of giving understanding, what seeing through photographs really invites is an acquisitive relation to the world that nourishes aesthetic awareness and promotes emotional detachment” (pg. 87). The viewer is invited to interact simply with the sublime in the ruins, arguably an enjoyable viewing experience, while not having to engage with the images on a deeper emotional level. As I have detailed in Chapter 2, the absence of
people, context, and furthermore, narrative, are the primary reasons Moore’s audiences are able to disengage and delight in the photographs.

Critics of *Detroit Disassembled* have also suggested that it pulls attention away from the structural reasons behind the city’s economic (and visible) decay. *Disassembled* fails to adequately achieve social change because it masks the underlying structural causes of the city’s decline. As suggested by Leary (2011) and Herron (2007) and others, it was “white flight,” racial tensions, and the beginning of a shift from the industrial in the 1950’s that caused Detroit’s decline. While Moore’s images portray the material implications of this decline, it does not provide this historical background for viewers. The historical context is absent both in the images and the accompanying narratives. By failing to tell the story of the city’s past, Moore’s images almost suggest the decline was the result of a catastrophic apocalypse rather than a social cycle that has left many Detroit residents without materials or money to improve their neighborhoods (Leary, 2011).

Like Watkins’s images, Moore’s photographs of Detroit focus on the aesthetic, rather than the causes of the city’s post-industrial decline. Because Moore’s work focuses on the beauty of the decontextualized ruins as many critics argue, I was able to avoid the underlying narrative that may otherwise make for an uncomfortable viewing experience (Leary, 2011). Again, as DeLuca and Demo (2000) suggest in their piece regarding Watkins’s early images of Yosemite, a focus on the sublime or the aesthetic in photograph masks or effectively evades the social implications that lay beneath the natural park, such as the forced removal of Native Americans and workers living on the land at the time.
Moore’s critics have also suggested that his work invites audiences to passively accept the decline of modernism and the modern city. Widely cited as post-apocalyptic images, Moore’s *Detroit Disassembled* allows audiences to take joy in the ruins of the city. The focus, thus, is either on the decay itself, or the quaint perseverance of a city that has faced adversity. What are not explored are the new and innovated projects that have emerged in the city. These include urban art projects, new businesses, and the emergence of new and innovative movements such as urban farming. This is in keeping with the narrative of “Detroit as a warning sign” for many post-industrials, once thriving cities in the United States.

Last, Moore’s *Detroit Disassembled* has been criticized for his use of nature in photography, particularly for suggesting an adverse relationship between nature and people. As Millington (2012) suggests, Moore uses “…the concept of naturalness as a way of explaining Detroit’s decline pulls on a particular construction of nature — as either destructive or redemptive, but always separate” (p. 287). Millington (2012) argues that treating nature as a separate sphere from “the city” leaves people with an oppositional view of nature.

The result is that finding nature in Detroit is often a way to further ourselves from the natural systems we are invoking, as nature comes to function as a partner to popular dystopian imaginations. Anxieties about climate change and overpopulation seem to animate many of these ideas, which are subsequently integrated into classical tropes about the immorality of cities (Millington, 2012, p. 291). Not only does Moore’s use of nature in *Detroit Disassembled* invite a “nature as a place apart” read, but, as Millington (2012) argues, it also neutralizes the forces that led to Detroit’s decline.
Moore’s *Detroit Disassembled* as “Ruin Porn”

Moore’s *Detroit Disassembled*, despite the photographer’s stated intentions, has sparked much controversy. Moore’s work appears to tell a story about the ruins and decay of a city that was once the paramount of modernity and industrialization. By capturing the beauty in a site that is otherwise blighted suggests detracts from the root cause of the decay. While “urban porn” has brought much needed attention to Detroit, the fact that these images lack a narrative or explanation proves problematic.

“Ruin porn” is a term that seeks to tie ruin photography to pornography. The two terms were initially linked because some suggested that similar principles applied to ruin photography and porn, including exploitation and detachment (Morton, 2009). “Ruin porn” suggests that photographers are seeking to arouse viewers through highlighting or sensationalizing certain aspects of a subject while hiding others. “Ruin porn” while largely used by critics of ruin photographers, has also been widely adopted by art critics, journalists, and every day observers. As Woodward (2013) suggests, the use of “ruin porn” as a term speaks to our increasingly visual culture. “…By linking a subject to an erotic genre calculated to excite us with a stock set of provocative fantasies, inventors or adopters of these compound nouns can also claim to be doctors of the postmodern soul, identifying unnoticed and insidious tropes in our glutinous diet of images” (Woodward, 2013, n.p.). Notable photographers that have been critically associated with “ruin porn” include Robert Polidori, Mitch Epstein, Simon Norfolk, Luc Delahaye, Joel Meyerowitz, Diana Thater, Pieter Hugo, and the photographers that inspired Moore, Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre.
An additional notable aspect of “ruin porn” is the voyeuristic nature often associated with it. Ruin photographers often capture scenes that are hidden, or considered off the grid by wider society. The images share with audiences an underworld of sorts, a land unexplored and largely unavailable to the masses. This is perhaps one of the main appeals of ruin photography. In order to capture these images, ruin photographers often have to endure risk and break laws to shoot the abandoned, decaying structures. Photographers, as Morton (2009) explains, often have to break in through unlocked doors and broken windows. Thus, “ruin porn” invites audiences to travel with the artist as a voyeur, to view urban decline from inside out.

Ruin photography is not the only trend associated with “porn” or a voyeuristic way of viewing a subject. Related terms include “food porn,” or the hyper realistic, sensationalized photographs of food, “disaster porn,” or the strange allure of viewing man made or weather related wreckage, and “climate porn,” the mediated, doom-laden photographs of global warming impacts. For instance, “climate porn” may be associated with an image of a polar bear in the Arctic, threatened by melting ice. Attaching “porn” to a subject has become a means for journalists and scholars to criticize a type of photography. “Blank porn,” in essence, suggests that photograph serves to draw an perverse or an extreme emotional response from those who view it. Calling a style of photography “porn” may also serve as a way for viewers to admit the pleasure they get from viewing an otherwise taboo subject.

While “ruin porn” has been tacked on to the work of many ruin photographers, the term is also closely associated with Detroit. In fact, the term “ruin porn” is widely attributed to James Griffioen, Detroit resident and blogger. Griffioen first used the term
in an interview with Vice magazine in 2009 (Morton, 2009). Griffioen explains in the Vice article:

The few photographers and reporters I met weren’t interested at all in telling the story of Detroit, but instead gravitated to the most obvious (and over-photographed) ‘ruins,’ and then used them to illustrate stories about problems that had nothing to do with the city (which has looked like this for decades). I take pictures of ruins, too, but I put them in the context of living in the city. These photographers were showing up with $40,000 cameras to take pictures of houses worth less than their hotel bills (Morton, 2009)

Thus, while widely used to describe ruin photography, “ruin porn” is a term closely linked to Detroit.

The photography trend, as Woodward (2013) suggests, has brought countless journalists, artists, photographers, and filmmakers to the city, all hoping to capture the decline. While their work shares the typical features of the ruin photography (muted grays, lack of context, lack of people), the two most prominent subjects are abandoned, structurally compromised automotive plants and houses overtaken by nature (Millington, 2013). The trend has continuously grown since 2011, after Detroit Disassembled was published (Piiparinen, 2012). Additional ruin photography projects of Detroit include Vergara and Boileau’s early photographs of the urban ruins including Boileau’s The Fabulous Ruins of Detroit in 1997. Marchand and Meffre, as previously mention, have published photographs of the city on blogs, photojournalism essays, and a coffee table book. Ruin photography of Detroit has also been featured in photo essays in Time Magazine, Life.com, The Guardian, Vice Magazine, and The New York Times (Millington, 2013).
Critics suggest that these ruin photographers have little grasp of the context of their subjects. Scholars and journalists suggest that Moore and “ruin porn” photographers consist of “lazy, out-of-town journalists who use Detroit’s ruins as a convenient recession-year symbol for the end of the American Dream” (Binelli, 2012, p. 59). As Walker (2010) writes, many of these photographers objectify Detroit rather than capturing the complexities and calling to question the origin of the decay. “The idea that artists can treat a city like a canvas ends up suggesting that it is a lost cause, an entire metropolitan area written off as raw material for upcycling. The net effect is a part of America depicted as if it exists in some distant reality—somebody else’s problem, nothing to do with us” (Walker, 2010, n.p.). For Walker (2010) and other critics, this is problematic.

The use of “ruin porn” also highlights the very similar techniques and heavy-handed juxtapositions used by some ruin photographers. While praised for their technical ability by some, others, including Millington (2013), suggest that ruin photographers rely on the same, at times, cheesy techniques as their fellow ruin photographers. “Through a set of similar aesthetic tropes — as well as specific architectural sites — photographers construct imaginative geographies of the city that focus on picturesque decay and a mournful longing for a Fordist past” (Millington, 2013, 279). These aesthetic tropes, including the juxtaposition of nature and death, the absence of people, and the presence of highly post-apocalyptic graffiti and “hidden messages” (God has Left Detroit, for example), are again, overused and elide the social forces at play in cities like Detroit.

While “ruin porn” can be a useful lens in exploring ruin photography and Moore’s work, one must also consider the limitations of the term, the first, being that “ruin
“gazing” is an age-old practice. Woodward (2013) suggests that to criticize “ruin porn” as a mode of cultural analysis would call to question a wealth of widely treasured texts and art. As humans, Woodward (2013) writes, we are drawn to the contemplation and further, enjoyment in viewing ruins. The problem, he suggests, lies not on the intentions of the artist, but the limitations of photography. “Many of the shortcomings people find in their work can be traced to faults in the medium itself. Photography is superbly equipped to describe the results of events but is inarticulate or misleading when it comes to explaining their causes” (Woodward, 2013). Thus, perhaps “ruin porn” unnecessarily reduces the public’s enjoyment of Moore’s work as a guilty pleasure.

Additionally, “ruin porn” as a term suggests that artists seek a particular emotional response from viewers. What the term does not capture, however, is the tendency for viewers to contemplate the future, or past, of the site. Some suggest that ruin photography sparks a contemplation of the future. As Woodward (2013) suggests, the medium, at one point, was used to capture scenes in an attempt draw the eye of the public. He shares the example: “The French government in the 1840s, for example, launched one of the first photographic projects in the world—a catalogue of the nation’s deteriorating medieval architecture—with the intention of rousing the public to support preservation” (Woodward, 2013, n.p.). Others, however, argue that ruin photography suggests what the future holds in a near prophetic way (Dyer, 2003).

**Ruin Porn as Generic Hybrid**

As I have suggested in previous sections, Moore’s *Detroit Disassembled* is a widely circulated, effective example of generic hybrid. Through his images of Detroit’s bleak
industrial remains and residential homes, Moore is able to masterfully blend elements of
documentary and artistic photography. To borrow from visual rhetoric, Moore invites his
audience to view his work through both an documentary and artistic lens. Generic hybrid,
allows us to begin exploring these contrasting reads of Moore’s *Detroit Disassembled*
and other ruin photography, not as oppositional and as dialectic, but instead, as views
their marriage as an intentional rhetorical device.

I argue that the use of the generic hybrid by ruin photographers is problematic in
that it can allow photographers to mask a detached fascination with ruins with a reported
interest in documenting urban decline. This use of generic hybrid takes the form of
images that unequally balance elements of the artistic and the documentary. In employing
the generic hybrid as a rhetorical tool, photographers, including Moore, have the
opportunity to entice viewers with their highly aestheticized work while escaping social
criticism by framing the work as “documentary.” The use of a generic hybrid can result in
a focus that is too highly aesthetic (“ruin porn”) or work that perhaps relies too heavily on
elements of documentary photography. These works may not have the same reach as the
at times, highly aestheticized *Detroit Disassembled*.

Ruin photography as a generic hybrid also calls into question the ethics of
photographs. Because ruin photography has become such a growing trend, many have
flocked to the cities to take in the sights in person. As Morton (2009) explains in his
Vice magazine article, “There’s a total gold-rush mentality about the D right now, and all
the excitement has led to some real lapses in basic journalistic ethics and judgment” (n.p.)
Morton (2009) goes on to tell the story of a French filmmaker who travelled to Detroit
after learning of the increased presence of wildlife. After spending a few days in the city
and not encountering a single fox or pheasant, he was reportedly talked out of renting a trained fox to place in the streets of Detroit for his photographs.

Generic hybridity, however, opens a number of possibilities for ruin photographers. Given, again, the popularity and mass appeal for ruin photography, the stakes are quite high and quite real. Morton (2009) explains that when Vice UK ran a series of photographs of an abandoned Detroit high school, the news website’s traffic effectively tripled in a day. Ruin photography, thus, allows for the circulation of images of Detroit. Like Finnegan’s 1930’s photographs commissioned by the FSA, ruin photography as a trend has exposed many people to selected aspects of Detroit’s urban decline that otherwise, may not have encountered it. While artistic photography as a genre typically focuses on the abstract and the visually pleasing, ruin photography captures the sights of otherwise forgotten neighborhoods, and in rare cases, forgotten people.

Additionally, ruin photography as a generic hybrid invites people to contemplate and discuss the future of American’s decaying urban centers. While the work of Moore and other ruin photographers has certainly invited heavy criticism from journalists, scholars, and Detroiter’s alike, it has sparked a conversation about where to go from here. Embedded in the critical responses to Detroit Disassembled and other pieces condemning “ruin porn” is genuine dialogue about the physical, economic, and political risks at play in present-day Detroit. It is through this dialogue, I argue, that photographers are able to inspire real change in the cities they depict.
Alternate Projects

The generic hybrid of ruin photography, with the presence of both artistic and documentary elements, open the door for multiple opportunities beyond photography. Sparked by the trend of ruin photography and the growing perception of Detroit as a dangerous, post apocalyptic city, artists and filmmakers have launched projects that attempt to both capture, and document Detroit and its people through artistic means. The result, I suggest, is a generic hybrid. In the following section, I will explore two notable examples of generic hybrid in Detroit, a photography blog and a short film project.

The People of Detroit is photography project that actively seeks to counter negative perceptions of the city and the ruin photography movement so widely associated with Detroit. Photographer Noah Stevens started the project in 2004. The tagline of the program is “Because not everyone in Detroit is an abandoned building” (The People of Detroit, 2010). Stevens started the project, according to the website, as an effort to share “vivid portraiture accompanied by earnest, engaging essays to reform the popular notion of what it means to live in Detroit” (The People of Detroit, 2010). In doing so, Stevens suggests that his work can help to counter the negative reputation that’s been built of Detroit and the city’s association with disrepair. The project has received local and national attention (The People of Detroit, 2010).

The project’s website suggests that The People was Detroit was sparked after Stevens saw a report on national news of a man that killed and served raccoon in Detroit as a means of income. Having grown up in the city, Stevens had never had raccoon meat, nor did he know of others who had eaten raccoon meat. Thus, The People of Detroit was born to chronicle the intelligent, attractive, industrious, talented people who enliven the
city and make it a place he is happy to call home (The People of Detroit, 2010). The project seeks to capture the faces and stories of college students, of single moms, of actual Detroiters as a means to refocus and shift the national perception of Detroit.

The People of Detroit is, in essence, a photojournalism project. Hosted on a website, viewers are invited to take in the beautifully shot, colorful photographs of Detroit residents. Each photograph is accompanied with the subject’s name. The name is then linked to their story as told through the photographer. Stevens tells the stories of bike enthusiasts, of mothers, teenagers, and of Detroit businessmen. The narrative that accompanies each essay is a conversational, at times lengthy essay by Stevens, explaining who the subject is and about their first interaction.

Stevens’ photojournalism project serves as a great example of generic hybrid because it ties the artful, technically masterful portraits of Detroiters with their stories. Stevens seeks significant social change with his project, by documenting the “real” Detroit so often ignored by popular media, news organizations, and artists. However, he does so in a way that aestheticizes the “everyday” people. The People of Detroit is also, perhaps, more evenly a marriage between art and documentary because of Stevens’ distinct use of narrative. Where as Moore is often criticized for leaving out the people of Detroit, the bystanders to the economic crisis, Stevens alternately highlights these people, literally and figuratively telling their story.

Lemonade Detroit, a 7-minute film by director Erik Proulx, seeks to draw attention to the stories of Detroiters who have thrived in the city, despite the visible and economic hardships that have fallen on the city. Inspired by the adage “When life hands you lemons, make lemonade,” Proulx has suggested that “Instead of sensationalizing
blight, “Lemonade, Detroit” will sensationalize hope, told through the intensely personal stories of those who are turning the city into what it will become” (Lemonade Detroit, 2013). Proulx was an advertising professional that turned to filmmaking as a means of storytelling. In Lemonade Detroit, he shares the stories of individuals that, in the face of the economic recession, have turned to new careers.

Proulx focuses on individuals who are actively seeking to change Detroit. He tells the story of fashion designer Joe Faris, who repurposed skilled automotive workers to produce garments for his company, Motor City Denim. He also tells the story of Chazz Miller, a local artist that paints murals in the city, also operating a makeshift community center that provides kids with an opportunity to explore music, art, and even chess. Moore also includes the story of a minister, who reinvented his failing church to better address the needs of community. He includes lively music, eccentric storytelling, and calls to question the realities for those still living in Detroit. These stories are masterfully told through talking head shots in the film. The close angle allows the audience to see the conflicting emotions, stress, and joy in these individuals’ faces. The most notable moment being a shot in which Chazz Miller recalls being hijacked in the city. Faced with the realities of a city he so clearly loves, the camera catches a tearful moment as Miller says he knew he had to stay and make things better.

Lemonade Detroit is a generic hybrid that masterfully weaves the stories of individuals, shots of Detroit’s blight, and a spoken word performance by poet, D. Blair. The video opens with a shot of D. Blair standing in a field, speaking opening verses of his poem, Detroit (While I Was Away). The film does make use of images of Detroit, the abandoned buildings, but it includes the voices of shop owners, automotive workers,
artists, and ministers. Ultimately, these narratives suggest that with the decay and destruction in the city comes room for opportunity. One interviewee in the film states, “Too many times we focus on the negative things. And we don’t see the positive things that are already there” (Lemonade Detroit, 2013). Simply put, Lemonade Detroit captures the story and artistically pays tribute to those who have overcome a fatalist attitude and are attempting to change Detroit, “One building. One block at a time. One person at a time” (Lemonade Detroit, 2013).

Conclusions

Urban ruins have become an increasingly popular and controversial subject matter in contemporary photography. Moore’s *Detroit Disassembled* is photography collection that provides a key opportunity to explore the relationship between art and documentary. For some, Moore’s *Detroit Disassembled* serves as a highly visual allegory for what the future may hold for other Midwest towns. For others, the viewing of Moore’s images is a purely aesthetic experience. As Detroit advocate Leary (2011) writes, “Taken together, all the images of the ruined city become fragments of stories told so often about Detroit that they are at the same time instantly familiar and utterly vague, like a dimly remembered episode from childhood or a vivid dream whose storyline we can’t quite remember in the morning….” (n.p.). Is *Disassembled Detroit* a testament to Detroit’s failed industrial past, or simply an emotion-laden, highly aestheticized collection of work? As I have suggested, Moore’s work serves as a generic hybrid of art and documentary photography. Through this project, I sought to unpack the visual and rhetorical elements of Moore’s exhibit and to explore the implications and discussion
regarding ruin photography. In the following section, I will apply my findings to my previously stated research questions.

Chapter 2, my visual analysis of Moore’s *Detroit Disassembled*, sought to answer the following research question: How do the visual elements of Moore’s work affect the audience’s “read” of the images? In effort to thoroughly explore Moore’s work, I first explored the stylistic elements at play in *Detroit Disassembled*. Moore’s use of color, angle, and framing invited me to view the photos from an abstract lens. Additionally, the substantive elements in Moore’s work—visual references, narrative, arrangement, and accompanying texts—engaged me, a Detroit native, not with icons, humans, or narratives but instead, through my emotional responses. His compositional choices in *Detroit Disassembled* depict urban decay not as documentary or solely art, but rather both. Ultimately, Moore’s photographs cue the reader to view the items through both an abstract and naturalistic lens.

Chapter 2 also seeks to answer the following research question: To what extent is ruin photography an example of generic hybrid? Through a study of the stylistic and substantive elements in Moore’s work, I have determined that ruin photography serves as a generic hybrid of art and documentary photography. Common subjects of ruin photography include failed businesses, abandoned factories, run down homes. However, also associated with the ruin photography trend are a number of stylistic choices that aestheticize and decontextualize the subjects. As Jameson and Campbell (1982) explored in their analysis of speeches, there are, at times, a need to draw from multiple genres to attend to a rhetorical situation. Ruin photographers, I have argued, borrow from both art
and documentary photography to visually communicate the phenomenon of post
industrial, urban decline.

Chapters 2 and 3 also explore the following research question: To what extent
does Moore illustrate generic hybrid in his *Detroit Disassembled*? This analysis reveals
that while there are marked tensions embedded in Moore’s *Detroit Disassembled*, the
work as a whole, serves as a generic hybrid of documentary and art photography.
Embedded in Moore’s work were also a series of tensions that served to highlight the
similarities and differences between *Detroit Disassembled* and the collections of ruin
photography widely cited as “ruin porn.” An application of a series of tensions adopted
from Peeples’ (2011)—beauty and ugliness, magnitude and insignificance, and
inhabitation and desolation—revealed that the inherent tensions in Moore’s *Detroit
Disassembled* Moore’s work ultimately help to conceptualize the decay of Detroit. The
most prominent tensions, however, is that his images depict urban decay not as strictly
documentary, and not art, but rather a generic hybrid of the two lenses.

Given the controversial nature of Moore’s work, Chapter 3 addresses the
following research question: What are the social implications Moore’s *Detroit
Disassembled*? While some argue that Moore’s images serve to better the lives of those
he captured through spreading awareness, his photography, others suggest that the work
aestheticizes and thus, objectifies, the very subjects he captures in his photography. This
critique is largely in response to the lack both context and people in *Detroit
Disassembled*. With the exception of vague captions, there is little narrative involved in
Moore’s work. Further, by focusing on the sublime or abstract nature of urban decay,
Moore’s critics argue that he hides the underlying structural causes of Detroit’s decline.
Ultimately, I suggest that Moore’s *Detroit Disassembled*, and further, his use of a generic hybrid of art and documentary photography, has opened the door for artistic demonstrations that serve to further the conversation about Detroit’s decline and the city’s future.

**Limitations**

While this analysis seeks to contribute to the study of photography of altered landscapes, specifically ruin photography; my research was limited by several constraints. First, my analysis includes only the work of Andrew Moore. Ruin photography as an artistic movement has been adopted and explored by numerous photographers, filmmakers, and artists. In addition to exploring only one artist’s work, I have also chosen to focus on his photographs of Detroit. Moore’s *Detroit Disassembled* project consisted a widely circulated collection that debuted in New York City and later toured to Cleveland and Grand Rapids, Mich. I chose to focus on only the 75 images included in the accompanying book, *Detroit Disassembled*. I have included in my analysis a representational sample of images from Moore’s work rather than all 75 images. Thus, while providing insight into the work of Moore and his exhibit, the findings of my analysis are limited in scope and generalizability.

While this thesis contributes to the field of visual communication, further research is needed to fully understand the artistic trend of “ruin porn.” A particular area in need of focus is the relationship, or tension, between ruin photography and nature photography. Future research should seek to unearth the rhetoric of “blank porn” as it is applied to various other social and cultural movements and the consequences of its usage. Last,
further research must seek to expand the application of generic hybrid as it applies to additional artistic and rhetorical situations.
References


Appendix A:

*Fuel Oil Tank, River Rouge*
Appendix B:

Packard Motor Car Company Plant
Appendix C:

Façade, Michigan Central Station
Appendix D:

Rolling Hall, Ford Motor Company, River Rouge Complex, Dearborn
Appendix E:

Librarian’s office, former Mark Twain Branch of the Detroit Public Library
Appendix F:

Kinga in her doorway, East Side