“Detroit is a Shithole”: Matthew Barney and the City

In his most recent work, artist Matthew Barney cast Detroit as a major player. *River of Fundament*, a film clocking in at over five hours, is not just another of Barney’s epic productions. The film has received mixed-reactions amongst critics and viewers, ranging from Barney’s respect for Detroit’s architecture all the way to pure disgust (Barney is not afraid of an avant-garde gross out—there is a river of feces used for reincarnation purposes). As Andy Battaglia wrote in *The Paris Review*, the film “draws heavily on a series of site-specific performances and elaborate happenings.” Barney also utilizes landscapes familiar with Detroiters, as noted by Chloe Bass writing for *Hyperallergic*: “Even Barney captures this, showing the cultivated nature of Belle Isle Park, which calls to mind any number of American historical manors, or waterway images that make the Detroit River and Newtown Creek difficult to distinguish. This, not the ruin, is the incredible power of Detroit.” However, one of the major slights to Detroiters is *River*’s dialogue, including the clichéd line “Detroit is a shithole.” Any of us who spend time (or have spent time) in the city cringe a little when hearing this phrase…but at the same time somewhat agree with it. Part of Detroit’s charm is it being “a shithole.” This presentation will explore that contestation by looking at Barney’s representation of Detroit and the various artistic, historical, pop-cultural, and economic portrayals of the city within *River of Fundament* and his previous works. From a Digital Humanities perspective, this presentation will suggest that Barney’s work is a combination of all the ideals we – as a discipline – strive to keep in conversation with each other. Thus, by looking at Detroit via Barney, Digital Humanists are able to conceptualize the city both from an outsider’s perspective and yet become privy to a landscape that Detroiters know well.

Ok, full disclosure: I’ve never actually seen this film. (I know, credibility, out the window!) But the fact that Barney’s film is making its way around the globe, usually with one showing at each stop, (plus the day it aired at the DIA was my anniversary—trying saying you’d rather research a 5 hour movie than celebrate…) doesn’t make catching this film easy. However, and I think this is appropriate for a DH conference, I was able to effectively research, watch clips, read interviews, and scour the exhibit catalog. All of this is to say that I hope you learn something about the film from information gleaned from a variety of digital and analog sources.

Matthew Barney is no stranger to longitudinal preparation for performances. Before River of Fundament, Barney produced The Cremaster Cycle (five feature length films) symbolizing or referring to sexual experiences, climax, and other corporeal reactions to stimuli.

In fact, River of Fundament is somewhat connected to Cremaster, in which we see the Return of Entered Apprentice (Barney) and Entered Novitiate (Aimee Mullins); and the Chrysler Crown Imperial.

But let’s get to the main event: River of Fundament. Based on Norman Mailer’s Ancient Evenings, River of Fundament explores myths through three classic American automobile protagonists: 1967 Chrysler Crown Imperial, 1979 Pontiac Firebird Trans Am, 2001 Ford Crown Victoria**.** In the foreword to the exhibit catalog, **Curator** Okwui Enwenzor suggests that River of Fundament represents the “physical and biological systems as a portal to the psychic, symbolic, mythological, occult, and archetypal dimensions of human experience and consciousness.” By leaning on Harold Bloom’s review of Ancient Evenings, Homi Bhabha describes the two pieces: “Harold Bloom’s review of Ancient Evenings: “Mailer too wishes us to learn how to live, in an America where he sees our bodies and spirits becoming increasingly artificial, even “plastic” as he has often remarked. If our current realities, corporeal and psychic, manifest only lost connections, then Mailer’s swarming, sex-and-death-ridden ancient Egyptian evenings are intended at once to mirror our desperation, and to contrast our evasions with the Egyptian rehearsal of the part of death.” Further “Mailer raises large questions about the life span of civilizations and how everyday experiences are interpreted and understood in the shadow of the insurmountable forces of cultural transition.”

Considering all this, I want to show a short “trailer” of sorts.

Link: <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/kunst/video-kunstwerk-river-of-fundament-eure-wiedergeburt-geht-nach-hinten-los-12851174.html>

* Talk a little about the images throughout the trailer
* Talk a little about the celebrity cameos in trailer and throughout the film

Enwezor suggests that, “What emerges is a force field of the entropic and dystopic, fluid states and inert orders of organic matter mixed with jangling, screeching, whispering, hissing, crunching, gurgling, bubbling, spluttering, and rushing torrents and walls of sound that make the viewer either recoil with horror or sit up in attentive alertness. It makes for a singularly absorbing experience.”

* Singularly absorbing experience: is an interesting way of describing River of Fundament, especially because of its length, limited run, and accompanying exhibit almost make it impossible to have a singular experience (doesn’t make me feel bad about missing it…)
* River of Fundament represents the “fundamental” processes of the body

As Enwezor says, “In the book and the film, the narrative moves across lipid canals of bodily waste, mapping openings (spasming orifices, ejaculating genitals, and diseased organs) along the journey as it goes. At the same time, it moves vertically, evoking the journeys of descent and ascent, exits and entries, penetration and disembowelment.”

Filmed in Brooklyn, Los Angeles, and Detroit, River of Fundament relies of the image of the city (specifically the decaying city). As mentioned previously, the use of the automobile also figures prominently. It’s not difficulty to see the symbolism – especially in Detroit – that the classic car: “ancient” symbolism, representation of Detroit’s past. Further, Enzewor refers to Barney’s decision to film in Detroit as “The current embodiment of urban deterioration and economic desperation in America, is an apt setting for the reimagining of the physical, psychic, spiritual, and cultural collapse of a once-mighty industrial complex, now the scene of ecological violence wrought by industrial modernity.”

* I’m conflicted about what to think in terms of Barney’s use of Detroit (although he frequently visits the city and has used the city as inspiration for previous pieces). It’s shown in a dirty, gross, shitty way—the bowel movement of America (that’s a tweetable conference line if I’ve ever hear one).
* I’m not sure if it’s a love letter or a dear john letter to the city.

However, I think Enzewor says it best in the following, lengthy quote: “In River of Fundament, references to the city’s preindustrial, industrial, and postindustrial states are drawn through allusions to the vast caverns of salt deposits running beneath the city, and the navigation of the the polluted Rouge and Detroit rivers that once were waterways of industrial progress. Choked by chemical and smelting pollutants, the river is a metaphor for the journey of the departed American industrial soul on its way to the afterlife and its imagined regeneration in service industries in the digital age. Strings, horns, bugles, and voices [...] lend soaring dirge-like recitals to this funerary procession of the once-great city that gave life to Fordist theories of production. Barney’s specific take on Mailer’s sprawling book on death spills the guts of the city and empties it into a murky, slow-moving river of feces that is the “fundament,” a thick syphilitic substance that coalesces into Matthew Barney: River of Fundament.”

* I love that quote so much because it recognizes that push-and-pull (or the relationship) between the beautiful and the repulsive, not suggesting these are mutually exclusive, as demonstrated by River of Fundament in general and the Detroit scenes more specifically.

Ok, but this is a Digital Humanities conference, so how does Barney’s work? Early in his essay, Enzewor describes Barney’s work as “plastic,” an idea that lends itself nicely to DH--the suggestion that scholarship and/or the arts can be malleable and fit into different categories (or dismiss these categories altogether and form new bonds). And that’s what Barney’s work does—even in all its focus on hard materials, its plasticity or unknowing flexibility is important. Barney’s work has been described as “gesamtkunstwerk”: the epic attempt to formulate and create a total work of art again, this idea connects well with DH because of the suggestion of a “totality”--using multiple perspectives/disciplines to connect scholarship. And sure, maybe it’s all a stretch to relate DH to Barney’s work, but I don’t think so. Specifically, Barney doesn’t shy away from interplay of forms, mediums, and perspectives. While some of Barney’s artwork might dismiss form altogether, others generate wholly new forms of art work and collaborations (hybrid art).

Why “totality” is a question worthy of the DH--is it ever possible to achieve totality? Recreate it?

Barney’s work is focused on the borders (or borderlessness) of artistic stuff: “plastic possibilities of unconventional sculptural materials”

In other places, Barney’s work has been described as the tension between physical and the indexical. Barney’s work serves as catalysts for one another: sculpture inspires film, vice versa

profusion of forms, another indicator of DH scholarship. The idea that I couldn't’ experience the actual exhibit (film or art show), but only through the “exhibit catalog” and critical essays included within. It’s something like DH--many ways of experiencing, temporal shifts in experience, the question of totality, etc.

* “Barney is particularly interested in turning time--be it the temporality of history or the durational experience of a performance--into a sculptural object.”
* Barney’s commitment to confronting and exploring the coexistence of relationships or even the borders between those relationships.
* Barney’s transformations and the ways he takes on different/changing roles.
* Sublimating Vessel: skipping a state
* Barney has an ongoing dialogue with materials (he doesn’t “use” them)

To close, I want to return to Bhabha’s description of “material memory”: “it’s located in a particular event or experience; when aroused in the present, however, it draws on its transformative powers.” And that’s how I think we can discuss DH—it belongs in the present. It’s a changing experience, a different experience according to the time of exposure. Thank you!