Residential Security Map Greater Detroit 1837 (sourced online)
superimposed with
Ethnic Distribution Graphic, Eric Fischer 2011
Grey is White, Hispanic, Asian & Other, White is Black, and each dot is 25 residents.
Data from Census 2010

Hurd-Martin & Co Factory Illustrations & Birds Eye Views, Detroit 1909
Clark Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI
2. How did Machine Space come into being?

I enjoyed travelling to screen my work. I first attended Ann Arbor Film Festival in 2008 and took a trip to Detroit. Each subsequent time I went to the Festival, I’d visit Detroit with a different, knowledgeable local person. These informed visits to the city many times were made at a point when I also had a deep interest in exploring the connections between power and landscape in my film.

**Machine Space** is an exploration of how landscapes privilege some activ- ities, systems and events that are off screen.

The film looks at how a built environment is enacted by people, rather than reporting on what a place looks or sounds like. The camera takes an ac-
sive role in shaping this enactment, and takes the audience for a ride. The city is imagined as a spatial machine for movement and circulation.

Q. Detroit is a very particular city...

The city has a contested history and a difficult present. In Detroit, to pass from one street to the next is to witness the structural violence of a system of political economy that is global, and very visible and present in this city. **Machine Space** takes this into account and suggests how an understanding of landscape can be included in filmed form.

In the film, we follow the red cars of the downtown transit – the Detroit People Mover. This route of this transit closely follows the historical and hidden boundary of redlining – the division of a city into areas where mortage finance will only be offered at very unfavorable terms, if at all. African American residents of red-
lined areas found it very difficult to buy homes; leading to significant ban-
ners to accruing wealth. The map on the reverse is a 1937 HOLC financial security – or isas – map for Detroit, with a contemporary population distrib-
ution graphic laid over it.

The landing decisions were taken in the downtown and have significantly shaped the landscape and the lives of people in the city. In the film, the audience are taken on a journey along this boundary.

Q. How do you position your work in relation to documentary film? Your work often draws on fictional and/or factual elements of history

I tried to avoid giving ‘my impressions’ of the city and instead I templated the way in which most people can experi-
ence it – by car. Instead of choosing sites or events that may, or may not, be important, the film sees motion as an expression of the character and fluidity of Detroit.

History in Detroit weighs heavily. In response, **Machine Space** looks to a history in people’s memories of everyday activities and experience in relation to movement. The events and stages of history – the Fondland city of industrial production that Detroit was for instance – are off screen.

We see the city as it is now, and Julia and Marsha talk to us how they experi-
ence it. This approach owes much to the French thinker Henri Lefebvre, who suggested space is a socially constructed domain. In the early 1970s he predicted the production of spaces would displace the production of material things; arguably this has taken place in Detroit.

But I hope the film also reminds us this freedom of movement has been achieved at costs to specific commu-
nities, and to a sense of community. There is a degree of remoteness to the intimate and restricted space of the car as it moves through the city. This remoteness plays a big part in the visual language of the film – from the enclosed space of the car to the remote sensing of the aerial images. As I have framed the film as a por-
trait of **Machine Space** – a place of material and production first, then people – I hope this is apparent.

Q. Tell us about the family in the film.

They are my family – and they are playing the board game of **Life** as an allegory for the good life in the suburbs. I placed this strand in the film as a way of thinking about how many of the choices we make have simple relationships to other places – far away from us, but also at a local level. And to include my situation, as a filmmaker, in the construction of these relationships. In raising our children, for instance, my view is that we are all implicated in the different worlds we live in – including Detroit.

The game was revisited during a recent residency at the Wexner Centre and this process has given a slightly more narrative quality to these scenes. I am grateful to the staff at the Wexner Film and Video Studio for helping achieve this.

Q. Detroit has been the focus of much artist work. Can you comment?

The playwright Bertolt Brecht is held to have said about making artwork, “Don’t start from the good old things, but the bad new ones.” In my opinion, a bad new thing is nostalgia. A vision of the past as all good is a pervasive form of this feeling.

Consequently, the film avoids showing ruins. Instead, the past as motion and experience is a theme explicitly addressed by Marsha in **Machine Space**. She challenges the idea that the old days of this city were good for everyone. In mourning the departure of her white childhood friends from the city, Marsha also turns the usual object of mourning, of a lost Detroit, upside down.

Finally, although I have framed the film as a portrait of **Machine Space**, we can feel that people can overcome the machine. As Marsha says, a way of representing the state of affairs in Detroit has not been arrived at yet. I trust the film is a step on a path to achieving this.

Stephen Connolly
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