

VOLUME XVII, NUMBER 4, FALL 2017

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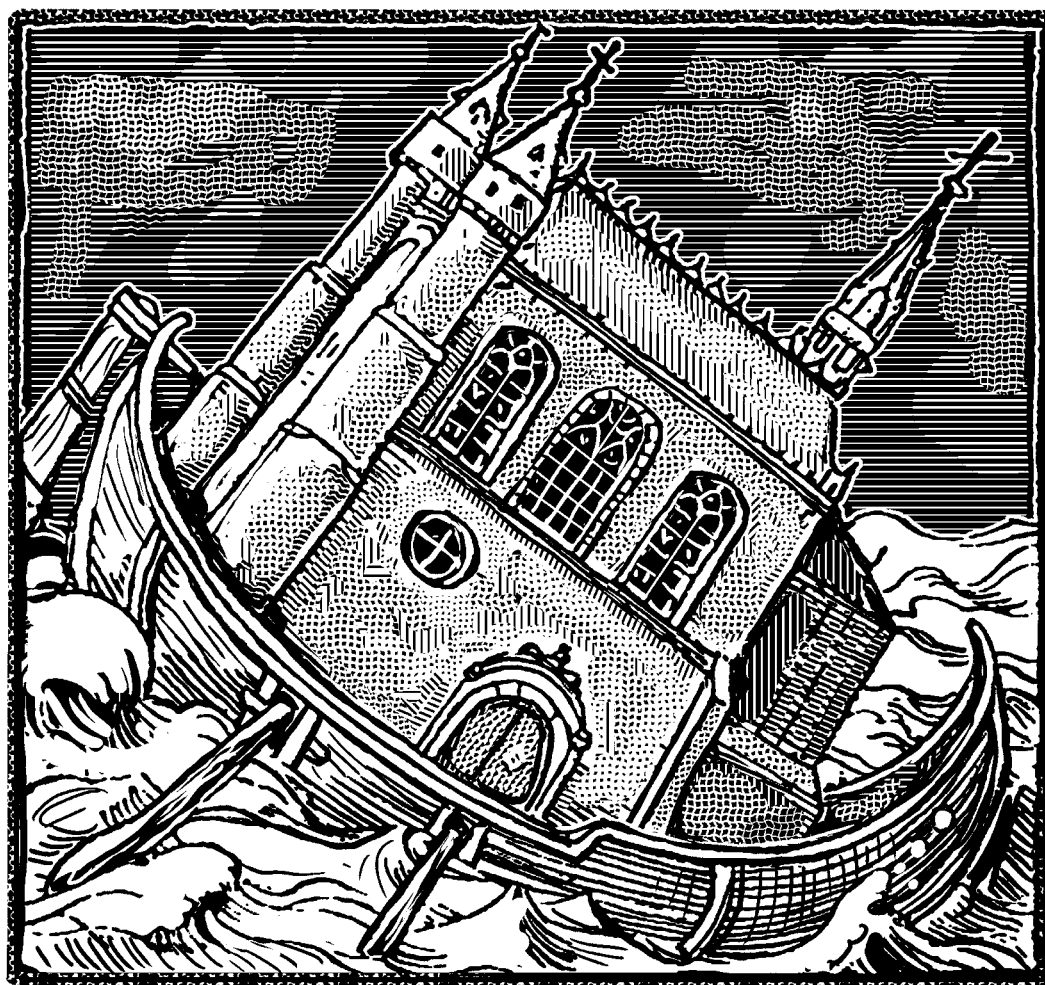
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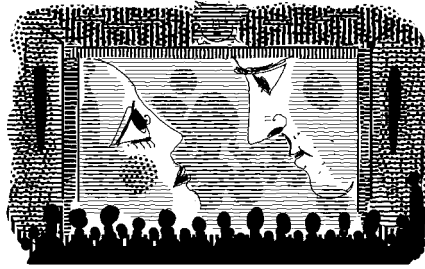
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## SHADOW PLAY

by Martha Bayles



# Angle of Descent

ONE OF AMERICA'S FINEST POETS, Robert Hayden, was born in Detroit in 1913. Before his second birthday his parents' marriage broke up, and he was raised by a neighbor couple in Black Bottom, an impoverished district near the Detroit River. Named in colonial times for its dark fertile soil, Black Bottom was ethnically mixed at the time, with black and white migrants from the Deep South crowded into rickety wooden houses alongside immigrants from Italy, Poland, Russia, and Germany.

Bullied by other children for his slight stature and coke-bottle glasses, Hayden might not have survived had it not been for his foster parents—who did their duty by him, despite the bitterness of their lives and what he later called “the chronic angers of that house.” We know this from his most famous poem, “Those Winter Sundays”:

Sundays too my father got up early  
And put his clothes on in the blueblack  
cold,  
then with cracked hands that ached  
from labor in the weekday weather made  
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked  
him.

Hayden's struggles began early and lasted long. In 1966, when his poetry was just beginning to attract notice, he said to a gathering of black writers at Fisk University, “Let's quit saying we're black writers writing to black folks—it has been given importance it should not have.” This was the heyday of the Black Arts Movement, an offshoot of Black Power, so Hayden was swiftly denounced as an Uncle Tom. Stoic as ever in the face of bullying, he replied, “Baby, that's your problem, not mine.”

Hayden published his fourth book of poems, *Angle of Ascent*, in 1975. By the time of

his death in 1980, he had traveled far from Black Bottom, which became a racial ghetto in the 1930s and '40s, at the peak of the Great Migration, which brought 6 million African Americans out of the Jim Crow South. In 1943 Detroit exploded in black-white violence. In the 1950s the city's industries began to relocate to the suburbs and rural areas (a change that, together with automation, hurt

### Discussed in this essay:

*Detroit*, directed by Kathryn Bigelow.  
Screenplay by Mark Boal.  
Annapurna Pictures

black workers the most), and its oldest black neighborhoods were leveled for highway construction. In 1967, 50 years ago this summer, the city exploded again. If Hayden had written an account of this history, he might well have titled it *Angle of Descent*.

### Seeking (But Not Finding) a Better Life

TOLSTOY WROTE THAT ALL HAPPY families are the same, but every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. The same is true of America's great cities. Among the most racially troubled of our cities, every one is racially troubled in its own way. In the case of Detroit, the troubles are rooted in its meteoric growth as an industrial powerhouse, beginning with the automobile in the 1910s and peaking during World War II, when its mighty factories were repurposed to build warplanes, tanks, armored cars, engines of all kinds. At that time, Detroit was dubbed “the arsenal of democracy.” And so it was—for millions of people in countries being ravaged

by Hitler, Mussolini, and Hirohito. But for African Americans seeking a better life, not so much.

By the 1940s, huge numbers of recent arrivals—black, white, and immigrant—were competing for good jobs and decent housing in a metropolis that, despite its boomtown reputation, did not have an unlimited supply of either. These newcomers were not saints. They were human beings, with the usual tendencies toward idleness, vice, and crime. What happened is easy to see, if you look at it with two eyes instead of one. White Detroiters managed to curb those tendencies more successfully than their black counterparts, because the latter's aspirations ran into a maddening array of obstacles that made Jim Crow look simple by comparison.

In his prize-winning book, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis* (1996), native Detroiters Thomas J. Sugrue describes in painstaking detail how the barriers to black social mobility were erected and sustained by Detroit's corporate executives, factory managers, employment services, union leaders, real estate brokers, lending institutions, and government officials at every level, including the federal. The few plants that sought to hire and promote blacks were immediately subject to wildcat strikes by angry whites. One of these occurred in June 1943, followed by sporadic street fighting between blacks and whites. On Sunday, June 20, the city park Belle Isle exploded in what can only be described as a race war. Three days later, when federal troops finally restored order, 34 people had been killed, including 17 blacks shot by police, and 675 had been seriously injured.

As for the barriers, they remained. And over the next decade their human cost became more and more evident. In 1963, writes Sugrue, “crime rates rose precipitously,” and

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social workers “in the oldest [black] neighborhoods...found alarmingly high rates of juvenile delinquency.”

Alarmed by these changes, Detroiters in “better-off” areas organized “property owners associations” and “neighborhood improvement associations” to (in the words of one such group) “protect their investments, to control their community,...and to prevent the spread of blight.” Sugrue quotes a 1957 study in which a number of affected families explain why they abandoned their old neighborhoods—because those areas were “starting ‘to go down hill’” with delinquency, crime, and the general “rowdiness” of “loud, vulgar people...who had wild parties and used vulgar language.”

To the “woke” anti-racists of 2017, words like “blight,” “rowdiness,” “loud,” and “vulgar” are “code” (or, if you prefer, “dog-whistles”) for entrenched attitudes of racism and white supremacy. Such attitudes were definitely at work in mid-20th-century Detroit. But so were other factors, including the emergence, in the ghettos of Detroit and other cities, of what is now called “the underclass.” If you think that wanting to move away from the underclass is pure racism, then consider: the “better-off” Detroiters cited in the previous paragraph were not white. They were black. But they, too, feared the blight.

### The Blight

**T**ODAY THE BLIGHT HAS NO COLOR. IT IS found in countless cities, suburbs, and small towns where Americans of every race and ethnicity are tempted by what another Detroit writer, Charlie LeDuff, calls “Work versus the Hustle.” Describing his coming of age in the 1970s in the white working-class enclave of Westland, just 12 miles west of Detroit, LeDuff writes:

Nobody bothered to get educated. My sister and brothers...and too many others dropped out of high school, yet nobody went to work in the automobile plants.... What our generation failed to learn was the nobility of work.... The worthiness of the man in the white socks who would pull out a picture of his grandkids.... And turning away from our birthright—our grandfather in the white socks—is the thing that ruined us.

To the ruination that followed—idleness, family breakdown, drug dealing, addiction, prostitution, child neglect, crime—LeDuff lost a sister, a niece, and several friends. And

that was before overdoses from fentanyl, heroin, prescription opioids, cocaine, and methamphetamine became the leading cause of death for Americans under the age of 50.

This generalized blight forms the backdrop to this summer’s commemoration of Detroit’s 1967 riot/rebellion. (I use both words because to use just one is to whistle to one or the other side in the dogfight now passing for political debate in America.)

In Detroit itself, major media outlets and cultural institutions made a point of reaching out to all citizens, especially those who remember 1967. While not exactly a “truth and reconciliation” process, these efforts reflected the humility and common sense of a city that has been through the wars. The white mayor, Mike Duggan, was just re-elected by a population that is 83% black; the African-American police chief, James Craig, is respected throughout the city; a recent poll finds more optimism about race in Detroit than national polls find in the country at large.

At the heart of Detroit’s commemoration was the Historical Society’s Oral History project, which interviewed hundreds of citizens about those five days in 1967 when 43 people were killed; 1,189 were injured; 7,200 arrested; 388 lost their homes; and 2,509 lost their businesses and livelihoods. Also interviewed were several of the (uncounted) firefighters, police officers, National Guardsmen, U.S. army soldiers, and ordinary citizens who risked their lives to contain the destruction, not add to it.

Similarly, the Detroit Institute of Arts’s Home Movies project uncovered 45 hours of footage taken by Detroit residents throughout 1967. Most of these home movies are not about the riot/rebellion, needless to say. But the project also acquired rare news footage from the local ABC affiliate (the only TV station to cover the events). When these unedited films were screened for the public, their raw, unfiltered record of daily life made a strong impression. As Larry Baranski, director of public programs at the Detroit Institute of Arts, said to me, “You could feel it. The story lost some of its abstraction. *This happened to real people.*”

### The New Blaxploitation

**H**ERE’S WHAT THE CITY OF DETROIT did *not* do. It did *not* rip open old wounds just to watch them bleed afresh. For that, we have Hollywood. In particular, we have Kathryn Bigelow, a former conceptual artist, and Mark Boal, a former journalist, whose 2008 movie *The Hurt Lock-*

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er, about a thrill-seeking U.S. soldier disposing of bombs in Iraq, won the Oscar for Best Director. In 2012 Bigelow and Boal collaborated again on *Zero Dark Thirty*, about the U.S. Special Forces' operation to assassinate Osama bin Laden. On matters of urgency to the military, such as the proper disposal of explosive ordnance and the limited utility of torture, these films were much criticized. But on matters of urgency to Hollywood, such as box-office receipts and post-theatrical revenue, they were much praised.

Buoyed by these successes, Bigelow and Boal announced in 2016 that they were making their own commemoration of the Detroit riot/rebellion. The response of many a pundit was a variation on the old question of whether white men can jump: can two white filmmakers do justice to the situation of black Detroiters during the "long hot summer" of 1967? In an interview with *Variety* coinciding with the release of *Detroit* this August, Bigelow admitted that she might not be "the perfect person to tell this story," but added, "I'm able to tell this story, and it's been 50 years since it's been told."

Bigelow was "able to tell this story" in large part because the production was bankrolled by Annapurna Pictures, a company belonging to Megan Ellison, the daughter of Larry Ellison, the founder of the Oracle Corporation. According to the *Hollywood Reporter*, Annapurna was launched in 2011 with a \$2 billion check from Megan's dad, the fifth-richest person in America. So the fact that *Detroit* has earned back only half of its \$40 million production budget "will neither make nor break Megan." Be that as it may, *Detroit* has broken Bigelow's winning streak.

In August 1967 the American author John Hersey went to Detroit to research a book about the riot/rebellion. He ended up focusing on a particular incident that occurred on the third night: a dozen young people, ten black men and two white women, were held captive for several hours in a seedy motel called the Algiers by a trio of Detroit police, all of whom had a history of excessive force against blacks. (The ringleader, David Senak, was a 24-year-old vice officer who reportedly stripped and humiliated the white women for consorting with blacks.) Also present were several state troopers and National Guardsmen who did nothing to stop the abuse. Many facts about that night remain unclear, but not the outcome: all twelve captives were traumatized and beaten; and three of the men were shot to death.

### Spectacle, Not Art

TECHNICALLY, BIGELOW'S FILM IS NOT based on Hersey's book, *The Algiers Motel Incident*, because the author's estate refused to sell the rights. This might have been a good reason to choose another story (there are plenty). But here we see the real reason why Bigelow is "not the perfect person to tell this story." It is not because she is white. It is because she is a creature of Hollywood.

First of all, Bigelow is a truly rare specimen: a female director who is not just successful but successful in the "action" genre, with its essential ingredients of taut suspense, thrilling fight scenes, intense violence, and vivid gore. Having mastered these ingredients, she was likely drawn to the Algiers Motel incident for its potential as a claustrophobic spectacle of brutal men toying with terrified, sweating, screaming, bleeding victims.

Unfortunately, *Detroit* prolongs this spectacle to the point where terror gives way to tedium. A more compressed version would have packed more punch while also allowing the characters to develop to the point where the audience thinks, "*This happened to real people.*" But *Detroit* is not a film about real people living in a particular place and time. It is a ritual reminder of the eternal and unchanging nature of white racism—and as such, it could just as well be set in 1867, 1767, 1667, or 1567. As the woke folk like to say, "Nothing has changed."

Bigelow and Boal claim to have done extensive research into the history of Detroit. But if they had really done their homework, they would have discovered what the people of Detroit already know: many things *have* changed, some for the worse and some for the better. Instead of letting Detroit's unique history enrich their film, the filmmakers reduce the past to a brief opening montage of selected paintings from "The Migration Series" by Jacob Lawrence. This is a nice arty touch, as far as it goes. But it doesn't go very far. For one thing, the images slip by so fast you will miss them if you blink. For another, Lawrence completed the series in 1941, a quarter of a century before the events depicted in *Detroit*.

In researching this review, I came across a blog post by a young African-American poet named Reginald Dwayne Betts, who had this to say about Robert Hayden: "Hayden sought less to grant historic black figures anything (be it humanity or heroism) and more to carve a truth out of words that didn't exist, exactly that way, before they were written." Another word for such truth-carving is *art*. It still survives in Hollywood, but you have to hunt for it.



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