

The Drive-In Cinema of the Anthropocene
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If the drive-in emerged from a decentralized, automobile-dependent, television-owning Cold War society, *Empire Drive-In* emerges from this society's junkyard. A project by Todd Chandler and Jeff Stark, *Empire Drive-In* is an itinerant, site-specific temporary outdoor cinema made from salvaged materials and junked cars that has been staged in San Jose, California, Manchester, UK, and New York City, showing experimental and artists' films, offering live soundtracks, and digging up unseen gems from the fringes of genre cinema.

No one is expected to drive to this drive-in; it includes about 60 junked cars, which form the cinema seats on site. The cars are rescued from nearby salvage yards; they've been stripped of any resellable components and are on the verge of being crushed into cubes and sold for scrap. Materials for the screen and marquee are made from recycled wood, which is donated to organizations that will reuse it further when the drive-in is disbanded. This process is repeated for each staging of *Empire Drive-In*, using whatever waste can be found nearby.

Empire Drive-In seems to be both fact and fiction, both a materialist critique of cinema and its apparatus and a rich narrative world unto itself. The project can be understood, on one level, as an intervention into consumer-industrial flows: Its organizers recoup use value from societal waste. But I prefer to think of *Empire Drive-In* as a different kind of intervention, an intervention into the collective imagination of a society that can't seem to imagine its own future with a changing climate.

"Watching the previews for the summer movies," McKenzie Wark wrote last summer, "they all seem to me to belong to the genre of the Anthropocene. They all seem to be narratives about a civilization confronting limits of its own making." The films Wark cited generally responded to the Anthropocene -- the era defined by human transformation of the Earth's climate and geology -- in one of two ways. On the one hand, by celebrating the excesses of consumer culture: "fast cars, fast planes, fast women." In other cases, by playing out end-of-the-world scenarios brought about by anything other than climate change (aliens, etc). Cinema of the Anthropocene is, for Wark, characterized by disavowal.

Even at its darkest, Anthropocene fiction fails to grasp the true political promise inherent in dystopian thinking, which is that it can offer (in the words of art historian Eva Díaz, after Fredric Jameson) "a powerful way to think historically about the possible shape and texture of the future by considering the consequences of changes that can be made in the present." Dystopia is perhaps the inverse of disavowal, and that is the kernel of its promise.

In the context of the Anthropocene, though, dystopian fiction offers its own potential for disavowal, even when it acknowledges that climate change is real. By focusing our attention on the prospect of future catastrophe, work like Bruno Latour's play *Gaïa Global Circus* allow us to look past the present-day suffering by populations who are already vulnerable to climate change. We need fictions that prompt us to feel connected with the vulnerable, to imagine future outcomes, to feel some sense of the graveness of our collective situation, but also to grasp its promise.

Perhaps this kind of story will never be found in the multiplex cinema. A sexless, blandly upholstered box with a screen that fills your field of vision, the multiplex cinema of today is architected for rapt concentration. This premise runs counter to the old Surrealist idea that the slippage between the screen and its habitat is one of cinema's defining characteristics, and it runs counter to Walter Benjamin's hope that the age of mechanical reproduction would be characterized by distracted audiences. Multiplex architecture discourages the wandering mind and the sidelong glance, and therefore limits imagination and social fluidity -- two things necessary to re-imagining a collective future.

Thus, if a productive, dystopian cinematic imagination for the Anthropocene can ever take shape, it will be in a context like *Empire Drive-In*, full of distraction and social possibility. Here, the sense of a society's decline is palpable, immediate, and full of affect. Cars arrive at the junkyard full of stuff: They have been impounded, towed away after an accident, abandoned, or sold for the price of scrap; they are seldom clean. The cars are also filled with stories: photo albums, shopping lists, letters, shoes, mix tapes, and prom pictures -- but they're also filled with their previous owners' grime, fast food containers, clothing, and coffee stains. Each car contains its own narrative, commingling with the ones onscreen. These narratives represent a loss, and they sit within the very vehicles that consumed the same fossil fuels that produced the Anthropocene. If these vehicles are now at the end of their lives, under prevailing definitions, then *Empire Drive-In* contests what we mean by "the end."

Cinema spaces have always had a certain air of possibility, a slackening of social codes, an erotic charge -- not only because they are dark, but also because of their semi-fictional aspect, their slight air of unreality. The drive-in was particularly charged in this respect, and its archetypal location on the edge of town gave it a place at a remove from the dominant social order.

But *Empire Drive-In* is not about an escape or detachment. Instead, it positions itself in a marginal space in order to reflect on the decline of that prevailing order, and to allow social forms that challenge and destabilize it. *Empire Drive-In* hints at the kind of communities that might be possible as suburbs hollow out, and as the human transformation of our world continues apace.