

# Still From Detroit: *Fifth Estate* reflection

## Cass Corridor to Pumpkin Hollow

Sunfrog (Andy “Sunfrog” Smith)

2005

Gritty and grimy to the core, inner-city Detroit was a daily regimen of gravel and glass.

Detroit defines the impossibility and the necessity of *Fifth Estate*. To advocate a complete break from autocratic technotopia yet tolerate the harsh topography required by the automobile; to desire a primitive, communal, eclectic new world while daily enduring the insults of the old world; to publish an intelligent and irreverent response to the inadequacies and inanities of modern life, even as a desperate plea pitched to a small audience—to do all these things despite the distractions of driving and wage work amid the vast exurban expanses of a postmodern megatropolis requires a testy combination of courage, vision, and recklessness.

At first, I found it difficult to distinguish the *Fifth Estate* crowd from the larger Cass Corridor counterculture that I consumed like water, wine, and weed. I explored the neighborhood as a suburban teen and then not much later as a 20-year-old resident. Near the campus of Wayne State University, I discovered art galleries and used book stores, homeless poets and poets who did benefits for the homeless, street festivals and surrealist street art, punk rock cooperatives and a food co-op frequented by Rosa Parks and the local rastafarians.

From the mid-to-late 1980s through the early-to-mid 1990s, this neighborhood was my stomping ground. In contrast to suburbia, the place possessed many qualities of an old-fashioned neighborhood. In the central city, south of the old General Motors building (where we once held a “Kill the Car” demo) and north of the Detroit river, I lived communally, worked creatively, and partied with dedication.

Some of my fondest memories of the period when I moved to the Cass Corridor and discovered the FE milieu include countless hours walking through the endless fields and forgotten homes of the urban war zone. As if I were lone survivor of a premature apocalypse, I discovered the lost ruins as I walked the street where the massive rebellion of 1967 began. Going to the public library, I researched the various accounts and reflections on the causes of this event, which extended into the present as the permanent riot of racist capitalism. Many sections of Detroit in the late 1980s resembled a battle-ravaged and bombed-out city after World War II, before reconstruction or gentrification. Gritty and grimy to the core, inner-city Detroit was a daily regimen of gravel and glass. The classic Wobbly dictum to create the new world in the shell of the old takes a new edge when the old world around you looks like a crumbling shell, literally.

In 1984, I first discovered the *Fifth Estate* at a protest—and then again at a punk show. I don’t remember if they were selling the newspapers or giving them away—only that I brought one home, to bury it in a box to find years later. When I first began reading and writing for the journal, I felt critically tested and pushed by the *Fifth Estate* collaborators like no other editors or professors had ever challenged me before. Over the course of a couple of years, I familiarized myself with some of the basics in anarchist history, Situationist theory, and the critique of civilization. I loved digging through the old issues, and it’s there that I first devoured the heated disputes, primitivist polemics, and absurd calls to abolish everything. For a time, I felt perpetually under-prepared for the debates and discussions that took place in the FE office and at our frequent potlucks and parties.

The phrase “a group of friends” has been used to describe us in the *Fifth Estate* staff box for decades; that was important: a group of friends, not a cadre of organizers or gang of proselytizers. So pernicious and pervasive is the spell cast by commodity relations on our culture that we do not even want to view our journal of theory, protest, and propaganda as some mere product. In fact, working on this magazine more resembles an eternal and tumultuous, long and torrid love affair than it does a job or even an unusual obsession and hobby—the latter being how some people must view it.

Unlike so many similar milieus past and present, the *Fifth Estate* never focused its work around a singular sub-culture identity. In fact, while collective members were individually aware of, and even occasionally passionate about, movements in music and art, these were not the focus of the journal or the collective. In part because the group itself attracted people with diverse backgrounds, the focus always remained the project itself. The multigenerational nature of the collective’s membership made it so unlike any “scene” I’ve ever seen.

To this day, our rigorous editorial process rivals peer-reviewed academic journals in adherence to high standards for quality and intelligence—only we are probably less stuffy. At one time, we would pass around hard-copy manuscripts and write comments in pencil or pen on a cover sheet and in the margins of the text itself. Today, much of this process occurs online. Our regular and now necessary use of computers is more than ironic, considering the classic *Fifth Estate* position to criticize, refuse, and even destroy the all-encompassing encroachment of technology on our everyday lives.

While *Fifth Estate* never maintained a meticulous adherence either to a consistent editorial process or to a perfectly egalitarian consensus etiquette, the project functions with a fundamentally collective process. As comradely as it is fiercely contentious, the brutal suggestions and blunt criticism that might decorate a first draft often characterize the constantly collaborative and rough-and-tumble technique used to produce the paper.

Being too emotionally attached to most of my own prose, I’m still shaken by this process every time I contribute an article—even after 15 years. Guiding it all, though, is our shared desire to create the most exemplary and radical journal possible. It’s no wonder that most journals—even radical ones—rely on a clearly defined and patently hierarchical “chain of command” to meet deadlines. While so often emotionally trying and intellectually exasperating, the steady exchanges expressing staunch opinions reflect the passionate commitment we have for radical ideas, extending far beyond the margins of our magazine.

Although the individuals who have comprised the various FE Collectives have unique and unforgettable personalities, the project itself has managed to avoid the cults of personality that often contaminate otherwise memorable acts of creativity in this culture of celebrity. While many of us have incredible drive and dedication, this passion has been for the cause of human liberation, not for personal gain or self-promotion. From time to time, any one of us might exercise leadership, seizing on an idea and insisting that it evolve into an article or theme. Different voices and talents all take a turn to keep the daily business of the magazine organized. Even as a regularly appearing quarterly magazine with a circulation in the thousands, we employ no one and operate with an organic infrastructure that may suffer from interpersonal problems and stubborn squabbles yet still remain rigorously anti-bureaucratic.

Over the years, authors have signed their given names or pseudonyms. Pseudonyms are certainly one way to playfully and intentionally undermine the power of personality. On the other hand, there’s a certain sense of continuity and responsibility when writers regularly use the same name, often their real name or a familiar moniker that might as well be. In some circles, anonymity and invisibility are tactics of necessity, and for others, signing an article at all is a form of vanity. Finally, using a pseudonym can be part of publishing’s fun and a way to deflect attention from oneself.

Using a copyright for our prose or the project, on the other hand, has always been viewed with disdain. That a person could “own” an image or idea (or song!) and expect the state to protect it as some kind of precious commodity still seems like the ultimate conceit. Of course, in our milieu, when we reprint a comrade’s work, there’s an ethic that says give credit if credit is desired. I must confess how flattering it is to meet people who have read and appreciated this magazine. Short of the total revolution that would make this magazine unnecessary, this is the only form of “payment” I will ever need.

I joined the *Fifth Estate* collective around the time it was becoming known in radical circles around the world for advocating the primitivist and anti-civilization perspective. As a short-hand notion of an entrenched editorial perspective, however, that label was in fact assigned by our friends and critics at other magazines more than any-

thing else. There never was an editorial meeting at the paper's Second Avenue office where "the group of friends" responsible for FE finally decided to box itself into someone else's ideological branding.

Thus, the deeply radical ecology of David Watson's work, the provocations about symbols and reality by John Zerzan, and the carefully-crafted counter-myths contained in Fredy Perlman's *Against His-story, Against Leviathan* all inspired me and attracted me to this project. However, I have always seen the primitivist critique as knitted together with a larger vision, wedded to pranksters and saboteurs with counterculture savvy, indebted to classical anarchism, driven by popular anti-imperialism, and intoxicated by romantic utopianism.

## **A much larger and wider critique**

When the southern collective assumed a primary role in 2002, some of our readers detected a fundamental shift in editorial perspective, perhaps even formally abandoning the primitivist purity that had been attributed to us by others. However, the changes we made in 2002 were primarily logistical, and my decision to commit my life to this collective and these comrades came for a variety of reasons, including especially the fluid and dynamic nature of the project. Even as some of us remain very sympathetic to the green anarchist or anti-civilization idea, this is part of a much larger and wider critique that has always also been explicitly anti-war, anti-imperial, and anti-authoritarian. That final adjective—anti-authoritarian—describes our vision of the world. Along with our history of working together as a group, anti-authoritarian ideals are a large part of the glue that holds us together.

I've always wanted to explore in my own life and work the intersection of revolutionary politics with earth-centered spirituality and ecstatic pansexuality. But my personal interest does not translate into some kind of policy or official perspective. My role in *Fifth Estate* certainly influenced publishing the 1993 special issue with a focus on queer sex and psychedelic drugs or the late 2002 edition exploring anarchist spirituality. These being my passions never constituted some kind of editorial position; in fact, on lifestyle issues generally, we've resisted assigning essentialist political value to personal decisions, even as we recognize the essentially political nature of everything.

With all that said, this might be a good time to mention that the core contributors to *Fifth Estate* have often been white men, with some notable exceptions. As a collective member with a lot of responsibility these days, I have made a conscious decision to recruit writers and artists outside our majority demographic. While this anarchist version of affirmative action is informal and imperfect for sure, diversity is a quality we all value in this project as in life. Likewise, it's important for people concerned about race, class, and gender issues to adhere to a kind of always evolving ally etiquette. But these qualities are much easier to talk about than to attain.

Furthermore, despite some rumors or reporting to the contrary, the *Fifth Estate* never left Detroit and moved to Tennessee. What happened is this: a minority of core members, who happen to reside on a rural commune in central Tennessee, assumed several primary duties that have guaranteed the publication's recent revival and regular publishing schedule. That core group has recruited others throughout the southeast. While Pumpkin Hollow is our new geographic hub and the home of our rural library and distro at The Barn, many of our current collective members still live in southeast Michigan, and the rest are decentralized across the continent. (The relationship between rural living and radical publishing is a strange and exciting one. Since Pumpkin Hollow's first bumpy decade as a rural commune only overlaps in part with the FE, this is the topic for another, very different essay.) The decentralized nature of the current FE group means that many of the heated debates that once happened over beers in the Cass Corridor now occur in online discussions.

By the nature of the society we inhabit and oppose, much of what we write must be devastatingly sober and sharply defiant, but still, always percolating just beneath the surface, are revolutionary love and the Great Ideal. While the FE was once unique in the kind of anti-tech and ultra-left critique it relentlessly pursued, this is no longer the case. To some of us, the unique and prolific vigor of our previous critiques must translate into an equally prolific and vigorous effort to create communal projects worthy of our present dreams. What we are living and learning is that we can fight for freedom on multiple levels and in many contexts; we have been in the process of rejecting all dogma—even if it's our own—that makes action impossible, and instead, we often entertain a multiplicity of possible actions.

In some sense, our success and endurance as radical publishers must be balanced by our failure as revolutionaries. If our enduring demand to abolish all war and government were achieved, the importance of this project might soon fade as our lives themselves became the pages of the next edition. Since the current state of affairs still requires loud critics, since the anarchist milieu still needs a journal like ours, we carry on. It's in subverting' our enemies' power with creative courage, in supporting our comrades with loving loyalty, in living with each other in both a comradely and critical fashion that I think we can still make a contribution, and as Ginsberg said, put our queer shoulder to the wheel.

– central Tennessee, January 2005

# fifth Estate

Sunfrog (Andy “Sunfrog” Smith)  
Still From Detroit: *Fifth Estate* reflection  
Cass Corridor to Pumpkin Hollow  
2005

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/368-369-spring-summer-2005/still-detroit-fifth-estate-reflection>  
Fifth Estate #368-369, Spring-Summer, 2005

**[fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net)**