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## Decadence on the Silent Screen: Stannard, Coward, Hitchcock, and Wilde

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In the final pages of Alan Hollinghurst's novel *The Swimming Pool Library* (1988), the figure of Ronald Firbank appears flickeringly in an early home movie: this master of decadent-camp style presents himself, by turns, as a flamboyant entertainer and a Chaplinesque mime, playing up to the camera.<sup>1</sup> It is a fitting tribute because, though Firbank was never really captured on film, cinema defined his own writing, just as his writing would later help to define the aesthetics of filmmakers in Great Britain, Europe, and the US. He was after all a connoisseur of all degenerate and transgressive art forms.<sup>2</sup> This, combined with his love of cinema and a desire to profit from his self-funded novels made him 'very elated at a letter sent to him by some transatlantic cinema magnate, asking for the film rights of *Caprice*'.<sup>3</sup> Sadly, the film was never made. But of course it couldn't have been; as Christopher Fowler reflects, 'you can't build a national cinema industry on people hermetically sealed in heavily draped drawing rooms, having peculiar conversations'.<sup>4</sup> Those we recognize as aesthetes and decadents in the mould of the 1890s would not be the ones to bring the principles of their tradition to the big screen. Although a few of these, including Arthur Symonds, would recognize the potential of cinema,<sup>5</sup> more would reject any claim it might have to cultural significance – let alone any claim to be a form of art.<sup>6</sup> The decadent tradition reached the screen through figures of the next generation who could make decadence new, restyling it into forms to befit the mass-market appeal of motion pictures.

As David Weir notes, such restyling can be difficult to trace.<sup>7</sup> This is precisely why it has been largely absent from critical discourse. As decadent culture metamorphosed in the twentieth century, the semblance of a core *movement* became lost, even whilst elements of its principles and styles came to influence the broader culture. Decadence in the new century became not so much a tradition as a spirit that helped to define camp style and operated to signify a defection from

bourgeois values and sexual propriety. As such, Firkbank may be its most clearly recognizable product: a man whose penchant for decorating his college rooms in black drapery, altar candles, and copies of *The Yellow Book* while adding allusions to Wilde's *Salomé* in his novels show him to be an out-and-proud inheritor of the decadent tradition. Elsewhere the influence of decadence was more nebulous, making it all too easy to dismiss entirely, a relic consigned to history by modernism.<sup>8</sup>

Early film adaptations of Wilde's fictions do not help a counterargument. There were over a dozen highly successful West End revivals of Wilde's social comedies in the first three decades of the new century and three British film adaptations of Wilde's work: *Lady Windermere's Fan* (Ideal Film Company, 1916), *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Barker-Neptune, 1916) and *A Woman of No Importance* (Ideal Film Company, 1921; lost). The trend for adapting Wilde was nothing unusual in the first decades of narrative cinema; literary adaptation was the stock-in-trade for motion-picture companies looking for familiar and popular stories to film, having the advantage – given the constraints of length and dialogue limited to intertitles – that cinema-goers were likely to know the plots. However, in the case of Wilde's silent adaptations in Britain and the US, they were bowdlerized out of any meaningful contribution to the history of decadence: self-censored and restructured to foreground a moral message, and silent, left even without Wilde's epigrams on the intertitles. A major exception is Ernst Lubitsch's US adaptation of *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1925), which cut Wilde's epigrams in order to translate their spirit into 'Wildish' action.<sup>9</sup> For the most part, though, these films are no more than melodramatic morality tales.

The diffuse and sometimes muted character of early twentieth-century decadence makes it little wonder that the critical history of cinema and literature in the 1920s has begun with modernism. The three most influential studies of literature and early cinema – David Trotter's *Cinema and Modernism*, Laura Marcus' *The Tenth Muse*, and Andrew Shail's *Cinema and the Origins of Literary Modernism* – have looked almost exclusively at how cinema exerted an influence on the forms of literary high modernism. Meanwhile, studies that have considered literary influences on

filmmakers and writers have been few, written again from the perspective of modernist studies, such as David Trotter's useful article 'Hitchcock's Modernism'.<sup>10</sup> But what happens if we flip the focus away from both canonical modernism and the influence of film on literature? What if we even turn away from adaptation, the most obvious legacy of decadent literature on film? The fact is that whilst critics approaching film through literary modernism have identified the ways in which film influenced high-modernist literature and to a limited extent vice versa, the literary influences on filmmakers in the 1910s and 20s were not always so contemporary when we look more closely. In fact, looking at the key motifs of cinematic fiction in the 1920s suggests that one of the defining literary and theatrical influences on filmmakers in this period was, instead, the decadent tradition. Decadence – diffused, adapted, and sometimes denied outright – re-emerges in British cinema in the 1920s, just as it re-emerges as a shadow of literary modernism in the period. To find its most interesting progeny we must look beyond adaptations of Wilde to try to understand how decadence came to exert a defining influence on the aesthetics of film and the depiction of sexual transgression. Only by looking at such submerged influences can we begin to appreciate the direct role decadence had in shaping culture and the arts in the twentieth century. In 1923, Edmund Wilson was not wrong to notice that the decadent tradition in literature had begun 'to grow dimmer and dimmer'.<sup>11</sup> However, identifying avowed admirers of Wilde, especially, can reveal a new genealogy of decadence as it is recast into the principles of cinema, illustration, and fine art, as well as literature. This tendency contributes to the intervention made in recent years by Vincent Sherry's *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (2014) and Kristin Mahoney's *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence* (2015), but it makes a further claim, too: that the twentieth-century influence of decadence on the visual arts revivifies the tradition's inherent interdisciplinarity.

Those who defined the film industry in Britain and America had often come of age in the culture of fin-de-siècle decadence. Take Charlie Chaplin as an example. Growing up in London during the 1890s as a professional child performer, he knew first-hand the music hall world depicted by Arthur Symons, Walter Sickert, and Max Beerbohm. They might even have watched

him performing with his brother at the Tivoli on the Strand; he might have passed them at the stage door of the Alhambra. Circumstantial evidence alone proves nothing. And yet, to discount it would be an error at the beginning of an enquiry, a failure of imagination. The music-hall world Symons and Beerbohm wrote into the fabric of decadent literature was the scene of Chaplin's youth, exerting a lasting influence on his cinematic imagination and literary career.<sup>12</sup> In the mid-1910s, now in Hollywood, Chaplin read and admired works by Lafcadio Hearn and Frank Harris,<sup>13</sup> getting to know Harris well in New York.<sup>14</sup> He was by his own account fascinated by the life of Oscar Wilde,<sup>15</sup> and of course the Little Tramp – no less than a dandy fallen on hard times, waddling from the 1890s into a modern epoch he understands not – shows Chaplin's fascination with the slippage between comedy and tragedy.

Noël Coward and Alfred Hitchcock also grew up in London in this era that saw the ascent of cinema as well as the ignominious fall and clandestine revival of decadence. The fact that they were both interested in Wilde, in particular, has long since been mentioned as a matter of minor biographical interest; the question that has not been asked, much less answered, is how their work illustrates the influence of decadence in British cinema. Coward and Hitchcock are alike in that their early screen work drew on decadent styles and interests, including drug abuse, homosexuality, the double life, immorality, the flâneur, promiscuity, and the cult of youth, uncoupling these themes from the ennui of form and structure that had rendered the decadent novel stagnant by the turn of the century and repurposing them to create thrilling entertainment. How they did this, and with what success, varies considerably. In adaptations of Coward's plays during the 1920s, we see how his playful gestures to Wildean decadence are reframed to appease the increasingly powerful British Board of Film Censors. Meanwhile, Hitchcock's silent films of the late twenties show him formulating a directorial style to visually render *l'art pour l'art* and evade the censors.

The early work of Coward and Hitchcock is connected by another man, one who knew Wilde personally as a child: Eliot Stannard, the prolific screenwriter, who adapted the films on which this essay focuses. Stannard was the son of Arthur Stannard, a civil engineer, who was a

friend and correspondent of Wilde, and the novelist known as John Strange Winter (Henrietta Stannard), whose kindness to Wilde marked the beginning of a close friendship in 1897.<sup>16</sup> Eliot would have been 9 years old when Wilde began to call regularly at their family home in Dieppe,<sup>17</sup> and on these weekend visits Wilde ‘was delighted [...] to find himself among children again, entertaining the Stannards’ three daughters and one son with a stream of improvised tales and jokes’.<sup>18</sup> It is in a way fitting that as an adult Eliot Stannard would rewrite Wilde and his acolytes for the screen. The irony is that although Stannard was a pioneering filmmaker and theorist of film,<sup>19</sup> his scripts appear to morally cleanse these stories to appease the censors – even though his parents had rejected the moral standards of polite society and accepted Wilde into their home. He is another example of a filmmaker for whom decadence and its defining figures were the fabric of his culture. The easy familiarity of this generation with the key ideas and controversies of decadence, often piqued by personal connections to its protagonists, is essential to understanding how the tradition exerted a ghostly influence on the first generation of filmmakers.

### **Noël Coward, *The Vortex* and *Easy Virtue***

Noël Coward’s early work offers an example of the ambivalent way decadence and the cinema became intertwined in the 1920s. Close attention to his early plays and their screen adaptations shows how Coward drew on Wilde especially, for the scaffolding of his own depiction of pleasure for its own sake and its consequences. At the same time the rewriting of Coward’s Wildeanism – by his screenwriter Eliot Stannard and later, indeed, by himself – tells a story about how these influences went undercover.

Coward was a master in the art of repurposing the motifs of the decadent tradition for the stage. Paradoxically, those who were most influenced by decadence often ended up wishing to deny its influence, and Coward is certainly one such example. Fast-forwarding to the 1940s there is no mistaking his disdain for Wilde. ‘Am reading more of Oscar Wilde’, he wrote in a typical diary entry, ‘What a tiresome, affected sod’.<sup>20</sup> And again, on reading *De Profundis*, ‘Poor Oscar

Wilde, what a silly, conceited, inadequate creature he was and what a dreadful self-deceiver'.<sup>21</sup> Writing in his diaries, Coward perhaps sought with these comments to convince himself of the unimportance of Wilde's legacy to him. Less than a decade later he wrote a stage musical based on *Lady Windermere's Fan*, titled *After the Ball* (1954). Even then he protested in a diary entry, 'I am forced to admit that the more Coward we can get into the script and the more Wilde we can eliminate, the happier we shall all be'.<sup>22</sup> It had not always been like this, and Coward's sneering at Wilde was of course affected, galvanized by his stiff-upper-lip reserve in the wake of the Second World War. When he grew up during the 1910s he was very attracted to the ghost of Wilde lingering in the homosexual literary and artistic circles in which he himself was a young pretender. His mentor, Philip Streatfield, introduced him to Wilde's work when he was a teenager and through Streatfield he met a number of Wilde's devoted friends and admirers: C. K. Scott Moncrieff, Robert Ross, Siegfried Sassoon, and Edmund Gosse.<sup>23</sup> Having been inspired by Wilde to write stories about Pan in his teens,<sup>24</sup> Coward's first collection of short fiction, *A Withered Nosegay* (1922), shows that his knowledge of decadence was broader and deeper than Wilde alone. The collection finds its natural home alongside Walter Pater's *Imaginary Portraits* (1887), Arthur Symons's *Spiritual Adventures* (1905), and Ronald Firbank's *Vainglory* (1915). It is an arch parody of their imaginary portraiture, which adopts the gently patrician voice of Pater to trace ill-fated lives in historical Europe, borrowing Firbankian names and the Paterian-Symonsian conceit of focusing on unremembered stories.

Immersed though he was in the modes of decadent writing, the fact is that the mature Coward could not make up his mind about Wildeanism: was he an inheritor of Wilde's humour and campy or was he its usurper? In his stage operetta, *Bitter Sweet* (1929), it appeared to be the former. There, the song 'Green Carnation' provides a testament to the persistent cultural presence of Wilde and the decadent tradition and the understanding of its features Coward shared with his audience.<sup>25</sup>

Pretty boys, witty boys, too, too, too lazy to fight stagnation.  
Haughty boys, naughty boys, all we do is to pursue sensation

The portals of society are always open'd wide.  
The world our eccentricity condones.  
A note of quaint variety we're certain to provide.  
We dress in very decorative tones.  
Faded boys,  
Jaded boys,  
Woman kind's gift to a bulldog nation.  
In order to distinguish us from less enlightened minds,  
We all wear a green carnation.<sup>26</sup>

The *Bitter Sweet* decadents who perform this song recall Coward's foreword to *A Withered Nosegay*: 'glorious, flamboyant figures [...] frail, lovely, yet withal earthly creatures'.<sup>27</sup> Like a latter-day Gilbert and Sullivan who have Bunthorne sing 'Am I Alone and Unobserved?' in *Patience* (1888), Coward warmly parodies the decadent character, wheeling out every glorious stereotype. Drawings by Max Beerbohm, collected as *Heroes and Heroines of Bitter Sweet* (1931), highlighted the cosy nostalgia with which Coward's play envisaged the decadent nineties. Ivor Novello particularly enjoyed the way Coward's play resurrected the period, writing to Coward: 'The whole thing is so full of regret [...] for a vanquished kindly silly darling age,' adding, 'you've created it and I bless you for it and take off my hat, drawers, nay *sock* suspenders to you for it'.<sup>28</sup> Novello's innuendo takes up the camp tone of Coward's 'Green Carnation', linking the decadent nineties back to male-male desire with a wink and an air kiss. However, film adaptations of *Bitter Sweet* in 1933 and 1940 cut the song, both erasing the genealogy running from Wilde and the decadent generation of the nineties to Coward's camp naughtiness and obscuring the queer undertones of the otherwise straight – in both senses – operetta. Sherry has shown how the published version of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* has had the establishing circumstances of its 'decadent imaginary' removed from view.<sup>29</sup> To some extent the removal of Coward's 'Green Carnation' parallels this suppression of the decadent element in the construction of twentieth-century literature. In the case of Coward though – like those melodramatic silent adaptations of Wilde – it is the witty irreverence he inherits from decadence that is removed from the screen.

If Wilde's languid aestheticism appeared at least in part in Coward's original *Bitter Sweet* as a spent force to be invoked for the pleasures of nostalgia, it appeared in *The Vortex* as a dangerous

threat to the social order. Written by Coward for the stage in 1924 and adapted as a silent film by Gainsborough Pictures in 1928, *The Vortex* again drew on its writer's intimate knowledge of Wilde and his contemporaries. Its first production was funded by £250 of Michael Arlen's considerable profits from his neo-decadent novel *The Green Hat* (1924),<sup>30</sup> and its plot, like that of Arlen's novel, featured the most controversial concerns of decadent literature: the cult of youth, promiscuity, the double life, drug abuse, and homosexuality – brought together here in a drama about the relationship between a married middle-aged woman caught between her young lover and her son, who is a pianist and secret drug addict.

The film adaptation of *The Vortex* emerges from a perfect storm of censorship and the limitations of silent cinema. For one reason or another – or possibly both – the Wildean dialogue was cut; 'the attempt to transfer Coward's essentially verbal style to a visual medium was difficult, and epigrams depending on a throw-away delivery looked merely facetious in the portentous pause of a title'.<sup>31</sup> The same had been true in the early silent adaptations of *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1916; Warner Brothers) and *Dorian Gray* (1916). Silencing the witty epigrams of Wilde and Coward also aided the establishment of clear moral terms, quite possibly the more compelling reason to remove them from the intertitles. Allied with judicious plot restructuring, *The Vortex*, like the 1916 *Lady Windermere* and *Dorian Gray*, could voice a clear moral message and a sense of social responsibility to appease the censors.

Take, for instance, the opening of the film version of *The Vortex*. In the stage production, scene one is a drawing-room dialogue between two minor characters, Pawnie and Helen. This dialogue comes complete with Wildean epigrams – 'He's divinely selfish; all amusing people are' and 'He has that innocent look that never fails to attract elderly women'<sup>32</sup> – which create a flippant tone to unbalance a straightforward moral reading of the events that follow. The film adaptation cuts this irreverent dialogue and instead begins with a new, ostentatiously moralizing, intertitle:

When the tides of War drove down upon the world, a host of false values was swept out to sea. But even now, with war only a memory, many a spinning vortex hides where fakes and shams turn and twist and never come to rest.

These words recall prevalent assertions in the conservative press that the Great War was a watershed, after which pleasure for its own sake would be revealed for its true immorality.<sup>33</sup> The patrician tone could not be more different from the opening dialogue of Coward's stage play. What is going on here, however, is not a complete erasure of the film's Wildean inheritance but something more complicated. Having removed Coward's verbal wit, the film reconceives its links to the decadent tradition through its image of 'false values' as 'a spinning vortex' to suggest that decadent principles present a persistent threat to social order. This central image is reprised in a later intertitle: 'This house is a vortex – a whirlpool of false values'. The vortex at the centre of the film reconceives Pater's (in)famous image in the conclusion to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*: 'if we begin with the inward world of thought and feeling, the whirlpool is still more rapid, the flame more eager and devouring'.<sup>34</sup> For Pater, the whirlpool is a metaphor for a conception of epistemology and ethics that follows David Hume's and the consequent eradication of metaphysics.<sup>35</sup> It is at once frightening, dangerous, and liberating, enabling the individual to plunge headily into the life-affirming pursuit of sensation for its own sake. Coward's title draws on Pater by way of Ezra Pound for Pound acknowledged Pater's influence on his conception of the vortex – discussed by Pound himself as 'the point of maximum energy'<sup>36</sup> – in his essays 'Vortex' and 'Vorticism'.<sup>37</sup> As the title of Coward's play, the vortex retains the positive enthusiasm of Pound alongside the ambivalence of Pater: it is both exciting and destructive. Rewritten into the 'spinning vortex' of the film adaptation, though, the image becomes the subversion of a subversion: rewriting the eradication of Christian values as an unequivocally dangerous notion.

With the playful irreverence of Coward's stage play edited out and the plot reframed, Stannard's scenario for *The Vortex* reworks the thematic characteristics of decadence into a family melodrama. As the earlier adaptations of *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* show, it was not uncommon for commercial films and middlebrow novels (such as *Rose Cottingham* and *The Green Hat*) to exploit the titillations of decadence, whilst rewriting their concerns into a stylistically conservative mould to encompass and contain the dangers posed by their ethics. The

screen adaptation of *Downhill* (1927), written by Stannard and directed by Hitchcock, operates in the same way. Only, in the film version of *The Vortex*, in a parallel to the novel *The Green Hat* and its own film adaptation as *A Woman of Affairs* (MGM; 1928), the ‘spinning vortex’ of sensation for its own sake and its implications for the social order cannot be quelled.<sup>38</sup> Stannard evokes Florence’s obsession with youth in flourishes that echo Wilde’s Lord Henry in the opening scenes of *Dorian Gray* and pitch her as one of his belated followers. Her ostentatious self-fashioning is remarked on ruefully by one of her friends: ‘Remember, it cost Faust his soul to keep youth’. Later on, another comments, ‘Youth flies to youth, Florence. Time beats us all in the end’. These lines do not appear in Coward’s play; they are Stannard’s additions put in place of Coward’s own Wildean dialogue to reshape the story’s links with fin-de-siècle decadence. Thus reframed, Florence’s relationship with the young lover she met as an Oxford undergraduate echoes not only the destructive fatality of *Dorian Gray* but also the pederastic eros of Wilde and Bosie.

It is Ivor Novello, in the male lead as Florence’s troubled, drug-addicted son, who embodies the intangible aura of erotic transgression. This role was played by Coward himself in the original stage production, and Novello – Coward’s friend and part of the same social set of Wilde admirers – brings to the role a camp excess that queers any attempt at a heteronormative happily-ever-after. The parallel between homosexuality and drug abuse was established by *Dorian Gray* and *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, with each drawing on the new taxonomies of the late nineteenth century by which sexual deviancy and drug use were rendered in parallel as addictions, both criminalized and rendered unnatural.<sup>39</sup> As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explains, ‘drug addiction is both a camouflage and an expression for the dynamics of same-sex desire and its prohibition’.<sup>40</sup> At the time of the film’s release in 1928, Novello was the most famous entertainer and heartthrob in Great Britain. His own sexuality is hidden in plain sight in the film. He is an effeminate *homme fatal* like Dorian, indeed. With Coward’s Wildean quips removed and the plot streamlined to eliminate the early drawing room dialogues, resonances between *The Vortex* and Wilde are submerged. The ghost of Wilde plays about the edges of *The Vortex*, suggestive but

unprovable; dangerous but oh so desirable, like Novello himself. With the dialogue cut or altered *The Vortex* is not so much an illustration of Wildeanism suppressed but Wildeanism reconceived for the mass market.

### **Alfred Hitchcock and *The Lodger***

In the same year that *The Vortex* was released, a young Alfred Hitchcock directed the screen adaptation of another Coward play, *Easy Virtue* (Gainsborough Pictures; 1928). It is one of the first major examples of how Hitchcock formulates a new visual grammar to subvert the overtly moralistic screenplays required by the British Board of Film Censors. His direction was based on the aestheticism that defined his treatment of criminality on screen, from the British-made film *The Lodger: A Story of the London Fog* (Gainsborough Pictures; 1927) to the Hollywood movies that later became synonymous with his name.

Before looking at *Easy Virtue* in any detail, some explanations are necessary, beginning with the term *aestheticism*. Several film critics agree in general terms about the ‘utmost seriousness’ of Hitchcock’s aestheticism.<sup>41</sup> Richard Allen identifies this quality, by which he means, quite rightly, the principle of art for art’s sake which governs Hitchcock’s visual aesthetic. Only Allen and Thomas Elsaesser have linked Hitchcock’s art-for-art’s-sake sensibility back to his early interest in Wilde and the decadent tradition,<sup>42</sup> and Hitchcock has yet to be understood in the broader context of how decadence influenced twentieth-century culture. If we relocate Hitchcock for a moment away from the Los Angeles studio lots of his most reproduced publicity shots and trailers to the London of his youth, the foundations of this aestheticism start to come into focus. Like Coward, he came of age in London as the Edwardian values of duty and sportsmanship were being challenged by the resurgent dandyism that followed the Great War.<sup>43</sup> Like Chaplin, he had an interest in the tragic rebellion of Oscar Wilde and he learned a lot about post-Wildean dandy style from going to the theatre with his mother.<sup>44</sup> He read *Dorian Gray* ‘several times’ as an adolescent,<sup>45</sup> and one of his favourite sayings in later life was from *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*: ‘Each man kills the

thing he loves'.<sup>46</sup> Of course, the emotions and practicalities of killing a loved one would be the subject of his biggest screen successes. There is other evidence that Hitchcock's interest in decadence persisted in Hollywood and that it ranged beyond Wilde. He was indebted to Albert Lewin's adaptation of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1945), borrowing several ideas from it, including the swinging lantern that casts a spectral light on Basil's murder scene [figs 1 & 2], copied at the end of *Psycho* (1960) [figs 3 & 4].<sup>47</sup> He also staged a private dinner party in the style of Des Esseintes' black dinner in J.-K. Huysmans's *À rebours* [*Against Nature*] (1884).<sup>48</sup>

From here the question is how Hitchcock's knowledge of Wilde and familiarity with the culture of decadence influences his cinematic eye. Hitchcock's expositions of his directorial style are much discussed in film studies but bear repetition in the current context for their strong links to art for art's sake:

I put first and foremost cinematic style before content. Most people, reviewers, you know, they review pictures purely in terms of content. I don't care what the film is about. I don't even know who was in the aeroplane attacking Cary Grant [in *North by Northwest*]. I don't care. So long as that audience goes through that emotion! Content is quite secondary to me.<sup>49</sup>

These comments are quintessential Hitchcock, confirming the evidence of his films that he emphasizes style and the audience's experience of intense sensations over all else. Elsewhere he sums up his cinematic philosophy epigrammatically: 'My films are not slices of life. They are slices of cake'.<sup>50</sup> This sort of statement might be expected from Busby Berkeley or Vincente Minnelli, but from a director of crime films working in the era of stringent censorship restrictions, it is striking; nothing less than a subversion wrapped up in the charming guise of comedy; not an admission but a boast that even murder can create indulgent sensuous experiences. The aesthetic has its precedent in Lord Henry's exposition of his interest in people in the novel Hitchcock read again and again:

There were maladies so strange that one had to pass through them if one sought to understand their nature. And yet, what a great reward one received! How wonderful the whole world became to one! To note the curious hard logic of passion, and the emotional coloured life of the intellect – to observe where they met, at what point they were in unison, and at what point they were at discord – there was a delight in that! What matter what the cost was? One could never pay too high a price for any sensation!<sup>51</sup>

For Hitchcock, as for Lord Henry, other people are interesting primarily as aesthetic experiences. The suffering of others, the events of their lives, and their morality are quite beside the point.



Fig. 1 (01:13:07): The spectral light on Dorian's portrait created by the swinging lantern.



Fig. 2 (01:13:08): The portrait darkens as the lantern swings.



Fig. 3 (01:41:50): The swinging light bulb shadows the skeletal face of Norman Bates' mother.



Fig. 4 (01:41:48): Here, the face is more fully illuminated by the swinging light bulb.

*Easy Virtue* was an apt showcase for this aestheticist direction, in part because its central character embodies the desire for sensations on which aestheticism centres. As in Coward's original play, the film focuses on the tensions that ensue when Larita first visits her new husband's family home, and it comes to light that she has a secret past. The screenplay by Stannard rewrites Coward's play in parallel ways to his *Vortex*, foregrounding the moral judgement of society and the new husband's family while eliding comedy with melodrama. Yet, Hitchcock subverts moral certainty with the sensuality of his direction. In a long courtroom sequence added by Stannard at the beginning of the film to foreground Larita's immoral past, Hitchcock's camera zooms in to long close-ups of the textures on screen: the first shot is of the judge's wig in close-up as he slowly

raises his head. As the trial continues, the judge's pocket magnifying glass swings back and forth in the foreground, ostensibly marking time, but more importantly making the act of deliberation into a spectacle, of interest to the viewer primarily – or even solely – for its aesthetic rather than its moral aspect. Having begun to translate the central principle of decadence into a cinematic language, Hitchcock might have appropriated Wilde further: there is no such thing as a moral or immoral film. Films are well made or badly made. That is all. After all, with striking visual touches like these, Hitchcock invites the viewer to focus not on the verdict or its comment on Larita's morality, essential though these will be to the plot. He subverts the moral frame added for the screen by redirecting the audience's attention to the visual pleasures of lush textures, shapes, and rhythmic movements for their own sake.

The sensuous desires inaugurated here are mixed with wit as Hitchcock draws the viewer to identify with Larita. On joining the climactic family party, for instance, she descends the staircase at the centre of the screen swinging the large ostrich-feather fan, given as a prop in Coward's original stage directions. The camera lingers on her, shot in soft focus, at full length, with a wry smile. As she tickles her husband's neck with the fan she captures the arch wit and irreverence of Coward's (cut) dialogue. In this way, *Easy Virtue* covertly challenges censor-approved moral codes by using direction instead of words to align the audience with Larita's pursuit of pleasure. Hitchcock has a genius for playful suggestiveness that never amounts to a provable defection from approved moral codes – like Wilde indeed.

*The Lodger: A Story of the London Fog* (Gainsborough Pictures; 1927) advances Hitchcock's signature aestheticism into darker territory. With a scenario, again, by Stannard, it is the story of a serial woman-killer, based on Jack the Ripper, who walks the London streets at night, undetected under the cover of fog.<sup>52</sup> The drama comes from the Hitchcockian device of the 'wrong man', used by him here for the first time: the Lodger played by Ivor Novello begins to fall in love with the daughter of his landlady, but his strange absences when he wanders the streets at night raise suspicions that he is the killer.<sup>53</sup> The film has strong thematic links to the decadent tradition,

depicting the flâneur, the secret life, sexual deviancy, and the slippage between the flâneur and the criminal, who jostle together undercover through the night streets, watching unseen.<sup>54</sup> These concerns dovetail with Hitchcock's interest in the amoral thrill-seeker. Indeed, *The Lodger* is at the intersection between the flâneur-aesthete-cum-criminal defined in the decadent tradition and the fetishistic looking essential to cinema.<sup>55</sup> The character stands in a space between the fin de siècle and the cinema age, a cousin of Dorian Gray and E. W. Hornung's Raffles.<sup>56</sup> The Lodger also has affinities with the cast of urban wanderers in *1001 Afternoons in Chicago* (1921) by Ben Hecht, a self-fashioned neo-decadent who became a regular screenwriter for some of Hitchcock's most highly regarded films in the 1940s. Like these characters, the Lodger comes and goes in the darkness and fog. 'Even if he is a bit queer, he's a gentleman', his landlord states on an intertitle, rebuffing a suggestion that his Lodger might be the killer. Without doubt, the Lodger is 'a bit queer', an ambiguous term, which had by the 1920s become derogatory slang for 'homosexual' and 'perverted', alongside its mainstream meaning of 'peculiar'. Hitchcock ensures that this comment lingers in the memory by masterfully exploiting Novello's combination of charisma and sexual ambiguity on screen – as, decades later, he would with Cary Grant – to indicate that the Lodger may very well be queer in both senses.

*The Lodger* should be understood not only as a point of beginning for the crime film in Anglo-American commercial cinema, but as one of the last works to draw directly on the slippage between the aesthete-cum-decadent and criminality in decadent writing – one which advances the decadent exploration of sensuous experience in ways that the written word could not. Positioned in the genealogy of decadence, Hitchcock's scopophilic direction in *The Lodger* (and in many of his subsequent films) may be conceived as the creation of intense sensual moments in which Hitchcock queers the real into a series of images designed to evoke intense feeling, and expands them into a sensuous moment that renders the forward movement of the plot itself secondary. Eschewing the moral framing common in 1920s cinema, *The Lodger* opens with a tight close-up of a blonde woman screaming toward the camera [fig. 5], followed by a quick dissolve to an electric

sign flashing “TO-NIGHT “GOLDEN CURLS” TO-NIGHT “GOLDEN CURLS” TO-NIGHT “GOLDEN CURLS”” before dissolving again, this time to a murder scene, with the screaming woman now lying foreshortened on the dark street [fig. 6], with the lights of night-time entertainments visible in the background. This shot is followed by a series of rapid cuts to the witness who saw the murder, to a policeman, to a reporter, to a crowd of people straining to see the victim, to a three-shot of the policeman, reporter, and witness [fig. 7], to the body, then back to the flashing “TO-NIGHT “GOLDEN CURLS” TO-NIGHT “GOLDEN CURLS””. Chiaroscuro lighting effects, borrowed by Hitchcock from the German expressionist filmmakers he met and observed in the mid-twenties, produce a sense of unreality in these shots: with white flashing lights outlining the figures in an unnatural glow and smoke-diffused light.



Fig. 5 (00:01:19): The opening shot of *The Lodger*.



Fig. 6 (00:01:33): The murdered woman on the street.



Fig. 7 (00:01:58): The policeman speaks to the witness while the reporter takes notes.

Trotter links Hitchcock's approach to sensuality with Émile Zola's 'spectacle of lowness itself' and the 'radical ordinariness' of Hitchcock's contemporary modernism.<sup>57</sup> However, looking at this opening scene in the context of the director's knowledge of Wildean aesthetics suggests an aesthetic influence closer to home.<sup>58</sup> The quick succession of images is intense, sensuous, exciting: it elevates the pleasure of intense sensation and pattern over sympathy for the victim or moral

judgement of her killer. Life, as Lord Henry reflects, is '[a] curious crucible of pain and pleasure'.<sup>59</sup> As in *Dorian Gray*, the desire for intense feeling ultimately eradicates any moral distinction between pleasurable sensations. The montage of murder, nightclub entertainments, and voyeurism is as disturbing as it is compelling precisely because, with the juxtaposition of images, Hitchcock asserts the intimate relationship between different facets of the night streets. The murder is not so much an interruption of the evening's pleasures; the frenzy and passion that caused it is on a continuum with those pleasures, just as the voyeuristic crowd exist on a continuum with the flâneur. With this opening sequence, Hitchcock renders the spectacle of fear and horror as an intense, aestheticized moment, the flashes of scenes and words mirroring those 'pulses' Pater prizes as the proof that we are living intensely. The intense queer or even perverse sensation produced by watching the drama play out is an end in itself.

The murder mystery at the heart of Wilde's *Dorian Gray*, the stealthy homoerotic burglaries of Raffles, and the uncertain potential for violence on Ben Hecht's mean Chicago streets, pave the way for Hitchcock's *The Lodger*. Perhaps we could even go so far as to say that without them, there would be no *Lodger*. Certainly, the figure of the Lodger represents a further development of the decadent-cum-flâneur-cum-criminal offered by Wilde, Hornung, and Hecht. Only Hitchcock gives this figure a crucial twist with his creation of suspense and irresolution. In doing so, he makes a bridge from the decadent tradition into classic cinema. So, long shots of the Lodger standing out on the fog with his face covered, and a chiaroscuro-lit scene in which he creeps out of the house at night, create suspense regarding his identity throughout the film. What, Hitchcock asks us, is he doing out in the fog all night? As in *Dorian Gray*, we are asked to imagine – and to imagine the worst – as we watch him disappearing into the streets. The picture reaches its climax when the arrest of another man seems to provide proof of the Lodger's innocence. And yet, the question of his innocence is not resolved. There are various clues, woven into the film by Hitchcock and Stannard, to suggest that the Lodger is in fact guilty. In a love scene between the Lodger and Daisy, his hand on her shoulder contorts into a claw-like grip [fig. 8]; after they kiss, the Lodger

inexplicably pushes Daisy away, turning his back on her as she tenderly reaches out to him [fig. 9]. At the very least, the action implies some kind of ambivalent motivation for the Lodger's interest in Daisy. Moreover, his flashback to witnessing the murder of his sister is problematic, seeming to indicate that only he had to time to murder his sister even whilst he uses the recollection to prove his innocence. In the closing scene, these doubts are magnified as the couple embrace in front of a window through which can be seen that luminous sign "TO-NIGHT "GOLDEN CURLS"" that appeared in the film's opening montage [fig. 10]. As Daisy tips her head up to kiss the Lodger, we see her face at almost the same angle [fig. 11] as the first screaming victim, and as the tableau fades to mark the film's end, it is uncertain whether her new husband has literally got away with murder.

Trotter and Allen single out *The Lodger* as the most prescient of Hitchcock's silent films, showcasing many of the themes and techniques that would come to define the Hitchcock touch in his Hollywood period. But by reviewing Hitchcock through the lens of decadence we are drawn to quite other concerns to the ones pursued by those interested in Hitchcock and modernism, with a renewed focus on the director's aesthetic of amorality. Hitchcock would come back to the figure of the flâneur, his conduit for this concern. The insatiable desire of a man looking through the city streets for a woman, or some excitement to distract him from ennui is central to Scottie as he wanders San Francisco in *Vertigo* (1958) or to Jeff in *Rear Window* (1954) as he spies on his neighbours. At the same time, the success of Hitchcock's aestheticist direction is also what has contributed to its occlusion in Hitchcock criticism: its silence. In fact, Hitchcock's subversive power could be exercised only if it could evade the kind of censorship seen in the fate of the dialogue in *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *The Vortex*. The identification between Wilde, the decadent tradition, and transgression – in particular sexual transgression – was used as a code to reach beyond that which could be said or shown in movies filtered through a prevailing moralizing tendency, adapted by those who grew up in a period when the spectre of Wilde, as well as his aesthetics and ideas, formed an alternative to mainstream culture.



Fig. 8 (01:03:44): The Lodger gets a grip on Daisy.



Fig. 9 (01:05:40): The Lodger turns away from Daisy.



Fig. 10 (01:28:56): The closing scene of the happy(?) couple, with the distant 'Golden Curls' sign barely visible to the left of the frame.



Fig. 11 (01:29:07): The closing shot of *The Lodger*.

## Conclusion

It was almost inevitable that as decadence became loosed from its moorings in nineteenth-century literature it would influence commercial cinema. The decadent tradition was a supernova that left

a long trail behind it, and its sensationalism, racy edge, and visual possibilities offered good box-office returns to those who could manage to appease the censors. Putting decadence and cinema into critical dialogue helps to alter our perspective on both. It supplements burgeoning studies of decadence in the twentieth century by showing that the influences of the decadent tradition are more scattered than literary studies might suggest. These influences are both theatrical and vividly visual, and they spoke to a mass public still very familiar with Wilde's work and trials. In other words, the influence of decadence after Wilde was not only a merely highbrow or niche literary interest: it continued to be part of the culture's dialogue around sexual mores and sensuality. Decadence went undercover, influencing popular culture in ways that were often obvious to contemporary audiences but which are today all but lost along with the collective knowledge of decadent literature and silent movies. This said, the unexpected migration of decadence into the cinema is only unexpected when we take for granted the critical frame given us hitherto by modernist studies. It is almost inevitable when we look again at their overlapping histories and recall – crucially – that decadence always was an inherently interdisciplinary tradition.

By extension, a conversation about how decadence influenced film begs some reconsideration of the logic that has positioned 1920s films in relation to their contemporary modernist literature. The recovery of the continued cultural presence of decadence offers an alternative view of the relationship between British cinema and the literary world, pointing to the fact that amongst the diverse literatures of the 1920s the ghosts of decadence and its irrepressible naughtiness gave filmmakers a code through which to gesture beyond what the censors permitted. Recovering the influence of decadent ideas and aesthetics on figures such as Hitchcock and Coward brings about new synergies. The discussion of decadence complicates our understanding of cinema as a product of twentieth-century modernity, reminding us that cinema is a spectral medium, haunted by ghosts of the past.

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<sup>1</sup>Alan Hollinghurst, *The Swimming Pool Library* (London: Vintage, 1998), pp. 286–87.

- <sup>2</sup> William Lane Clarke, 'Degenerate Personality: Deviant Sexuality and Race in Ronald Firbank's Novels', in *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality*, ed. by David Bergman (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), pp. 134–55 (p.135).
- <sup>3</sup> Osbert Sitwell in Ifan Kyrle Fletcher, *Ronald Firbank: A Memoir* (London: Duckworth, 1930), p. 140.
- <sup>4</sup> Christopher Fowler, *Film Freak* (London: Doubleday, 2013), p. 125.
- <sup>5</sup> See Arthur Symons, 'At the Alhambra: Impressions and Sensations', in *Spiritual Adventures*, ed. by Nicholas Freeman (Cambridge: MHRA, 2017), pp. 97–98.
- <sup>6</sup> See for Richard Le Gallienne, 'The Art of Letter Writing', *Munsey's Magazine*, February 1918, p. 42; Max Beerbohm, *Around Theatres* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1953), pp. 45–46; Vernon Lee, *Satan the Waster: A Philosophic War Trilogy* (John Lane: The Bodley Head, 1920), pp. 63ff.
- <sup>7</sup> David Weir, *Decadent Culture in the United States: Art and Literature Against the American Grain, 1890–1926* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2008), pp. 192–93.
- <sup>8</sup> For a fuller account of how post-Victorian decadence was marginalized by modernism in discussions of early-twentieth century literature, see Kate Hext and Alex Murray's introduction to *Decadence in the Age of Modernism* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), pp. 2–7.
- <sup>9</sup> Ernst Lubitsch quoted in Charles Musser, 'The Hidden and Unspeakable: On Theatrical Culture, Oscar Wilde and Ernst Lubitsch's *Lady Windermere's Fan*', *Film Studies*, 4 (2004), 12–47 (p. 15).
- <sup>10</sup> David Trotter, 'Hitchcock's Modernism', *Modernist Cultures*, 5 (2010), 106–26.
- <sup>11</sup> Edmund Wilson, 'Late Violets from the Nineties', in *Shores of Light: A Literary Chronicle of the Twenties and Thirties* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Young, Inc, 1952), p. 72.
- <sup>12</sup> See *Limelight* (1952), a film centred on the London music hall, which Chaplin wrote as an original screenplay and starred in alongside Buster Keaton, and a novella titled 'Footlights', which Chaplin wrote circa 1916.
- <sup>13</sup> Charles Chaplin, *My Autobiography* (London: Penguin 2003), p. 239.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 258–59.
- <sup>15</sup> Chaplin, 'Charlie Chaplin, Philosopher, Has Serious Side' (Interview with Frank Vreeland), in *Charlie Chaplin: Interviews*, ed. by Kevin J. Hayes (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), p. 58.
- <sup>16</sup> See Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Vintage, 1988), pp. 537–38.
- <sup>17</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), pp. 857, 869, 883, 889, 891, & 927.
- <sup>18</sup> Matthew Sturgis, *Oscar: A Life* (London: Head of Zeus, 2018), p. 634.
- <sup>19</sup> For an appraisal of Stannard's work, see Charles Barr, 'Writing Screen Plays: Stannard and Hitchcock', in *Young and Innocent? The Cinema in Britain 1896–1930*, ed. by Andrew Higson (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 2002); Ian W. MacDonald, 'The Silent Screenwriter: The Re-discovered Scripts of Eliot Stannard', *Comparative Critical Studies*, 6 (2009), 385–400.
- <sup>20</sup> Noël Coward, *The Noël Coward Diaries*, ed. by Graham Payne and Sheridan Morley (London: Macmillan, 1983), 14 July 1946, p. 60.
- <sup>21</sup> Coward, *Diaries*, 11 November 1949, p. 135.
- <sup>22</sup> Coward, *Diaries*, 21 April 1954, pp. 234–35.
- <sup>23</sup> Philip Hoare, *Noel Coward: A Biography* (London: Mandarin, 1996), pp. 34, 40, 71–73.
- <sup>24</sup> Coward, *Present Indicative* (London: Methuen Drama, 2004), p. 45.
- <sup>25</sup> Wilde first wore a green dye-dipped carnation to the opening of *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892). With this he took the cult of artificial sensations to a new height and tipped a nod to the underground Parisian trend for gay men wearing green cravats. The title of Robert Hichens's novel *The Green Carnation* (1894) exploited the well-known innuendo of the flower. Its central characters were loosely based on Wilde and Alfred Douglas. See Karl Beckson, 'Oscar Wilde and the Green Carnation', *English Literature in Transition, 1880–1920*, 43 (2000), pp. 387–97.
- <sup>26</sup> Noël Coward, *Bitter Sweet* (London: Chappell & Co Ltd., 1929), pp. 146–47.
- <sup>27</sup> Noël Coward, *A Withered Nosegay* (London: Methuen, 1984), p. 7.
- <sup>28</sup> Noël Coward, *The Letters of Noel Coward*, ed. by Barry Day (London: Methuen, 2007), p. 157. Emphasis in original.
- <sup>29</sup> Vincent Sherry, *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 266–67.
- <sup>30</sup> Coward, *Present Indicative*, p. 174.
- <sup>31</sup> Rachael Low, *The History of the British Film, 1918–1929* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1971), p. 169.
- <sup>32</sup> Noël Coward, *The Vortex*, in *Collected Plays: One*, ed. by Sheridan Morley (London: Methuen, 1989), p. 76.
- <sup>33</sup> The most famous of these may be Edmund Gosse's 'War and Literature', *Inter Arma: Being Essays Written in Time of War* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916).
- <sup>34</sup> Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 151.
- <sup>35</sup> Kate Hext, *Walter Pater: Individualism and Aesthetic Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), pp. 27–32.
- <sup>36</sup> Ezra Pound, 'Vortex', *BLAST*, 1 (1914), 153.
- <sup>37</sup> See Pound's acknowledgement of Pater in 'Vortex' (p. 154) and 'Vorticism', *Fortnightly Review*, 96 (September 1914), 461.

- <sup>38</sup> For a discussion of how the mise-en-scène, cinematography, and visual storyboarding point to a queer subtext beyond the censor-approved narrative in *A Woman of Affairs*, see Carmen Guiralt, 'Self-Censorship in Hollywood during the Silent Era: *A Woman of Affairs* (1928) by Clarence Browne', *Film History*, 28 (2016), 81–113.
- <sup>39</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), pp. 171–72.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.
- <sup>41</sup> Richard Allen, *Hitchcock's Romantic Irony* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 134. See also Ken Mogg's provocative discussion of thematic links between *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Vertigo* in 'Alfred Hitchcock Master of Paradox', *Senses of Cinema*, <http://sensesofcinema.com/2005/great-directors/hitchcock/2005>, n.p., and Thomas Elsaesser, 'The Dandy in Hitchcock', in *Alfred Hitchcock: Centenary Essays*, ed. by Richard Allan and S. Ishil Gonzales (London: BFI Publishing, 1999), pp. 175–82.
- <sup>42</sup> See Allen's discussion in *Hitchcock's Romantic Irony*, pp. 117 ff and Elsaesser, pp. 175ff.
- <sup>43</sup> Allen, *Hitchcock's Romantic Irony*, p. 126.
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>45</sup> Donald Spoto, *The Dark Side of Genius: The Life of Alfred Hitchcock* (London: Frederick Muller, 1983), p. 264.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 460.
- <sup>47</sup> Stephen Rebello, *Alfred Hitchcock and the Making of Psycho* (London: Marion Boyars Publishers, 1990), pp. 126–27.
- <sup>48</sup> Mogg, 'Alfred Hitchcock Master of Paradox', n.p.
- <sup>49</sup> Hitchcock quoted in M. J. Robinson, 'The Poetics of Camp in the Films of Alfred Hitchcock', *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature*, 54 (2000), 53–65 (p. 57).
- <sup>50</sup> Quoted in Elsaesser, p. 177.
- <sup>51</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 55–56.
- <sup>52</sup> It is based on a novel titled *The Lodger* (1913) by Marie Adelaide Belloc Lowndes, but the story is radically altered in Stannard's screenplay. See Sanford Schwartz, 'TONIGHT "GOLDEN CURLS": Murder and Mimesis in Hitchcock's *The Lodger*', *Contagion*, 20 (2013), 182–83.
- <sup>53</sup> As Ken Mogg explains, this suspicion is never resolved. Although another man is arrested for the murders, Novello's character is officially cleared of involvement and free to marry (to appease the censors), a flashback sequence suggests to the cinema audience that he is in fact the killer as does his vampiric kiss of the landlady's daughter.
- <sup>54</sup> The close relationship between the flâneur and the criminal is suggested by Walter Benjamin in *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. by Harry Zohn (London: Verso, 1997), p. 41. For more on this connection see Tom MacDonough's 'The Crimes of the Flâneur', *October*, 102 (2002), 101–22.
- <sup>55</sup> Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, 16 (1975), 8–10.
- <sup>56</sup> Raffles was an enormously popular protagonist in a series of short stories (1898–1919) first published in *Cassell's Magazine*. Hornung based the title character on Oscar Wilde, while Raffles' partner in crime, Bunny, was based on Lord Alfred Douglas. See Richard Lancelyn Green, 'Introduction', in *Raffles: The Amateur Cracksmen* (London: Penguin, 2003), pp. xxvi–xxvii.
- <sup>57</sup> Trotter, 'Hitchcock's Modernism', pp. 110–15, 109–10.
- <sup>58</sup> Trotter admits that 'it is most unlikely that he stayed up late reading Zola' ('Hitchcock's Modernism', p. 115).
- <sup>59</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 55.