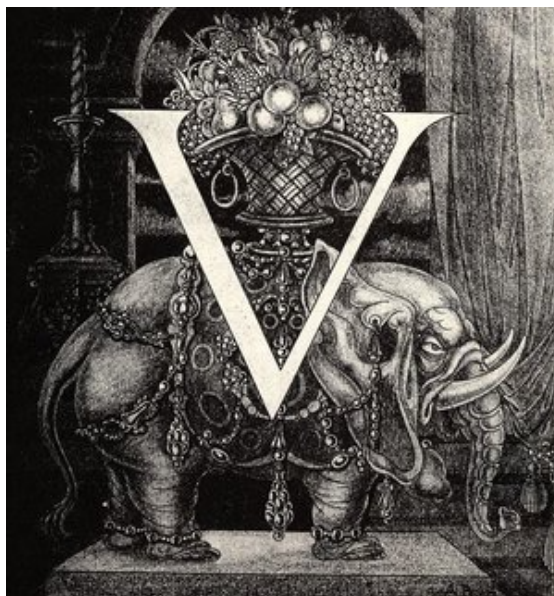


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Volume 2, Issue 2, December 2019

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Preface

The publication of this issue of *Volupté* is momentous in various ways. Not only does it position cinema as a prime site for engaging with decadence and establish ‘deciné’ (the editors’ shorthand for this site) as a fruitful comparative research area bringing together scholars of literature, cultural, and film history, but this is the first issue not to be based, either in whole or in part, on conference papers. *Volupté* is taking proper root. Since we launched in June 2018, our digital footfall has substantially increased, our pages viewed by visitors from 23 countries, and rising.

I am especially delighted to announce the publication of the very first BADS essay prizewinners, in the categories of ‘best postgraduate essay’ and ‘best essay by an established scholar’. Our warm and seasonal congratulations to Amelia Hall (Cornell University) and the independent scholar, Graham John Wheeler, who treat us to impressive, wide-ranging essays. Our judges reserved particular praise for their innovative arguments and interdisciplinary approaches. They described Hall’s essay on ‘Elliptical Thinking: Planetary Patterns of Thought in *De Profundis*’ as

saying something truly new about the manner in which astronomy allowed Wilde to conceptualize his time in prison and the events that placed him there. The author has [...] worked to extend this reading to the visual culture surrounding Wilde and the manner in which artists such as Beardsley and Beerbohm represented him as a planetary body and an outsize figure bringing lesser figures into his orbit.

And they commented on Wheeler’s essay on ‘Apuleius and the Esoteric Revival: An Ancient Decadent in Modern Times’ as

a thoroughly researched and fluent interdisciplinary essay, [...] build[ing] on previous discussions of the influence of *The Golden Ass* by identifying elements of style and narrative which seem particularly relevant to decadent preoccupations. The essay is innovative in its exploration of connections between mannered and transgressive texts and esoteric religion, emphasizing the intrinsic similarities between ancient and modern decadence as well as questions of influence.

Voluptuous thanks to our judges, and to our expert peer reviewers, who keep us on our toes and whose feedback, guidance, and advice are very much appreciated.

Before I hand over to our Guest Editor, David Weir, I would like to announce one more thing that our eagle-eyed readers will certainly notice. While we will always respect individuals’ preferences, we have decided from here on in to go ‘small-d’ decadence (consistent with both Chicago Manual of Style and MHRA guidelines for cultural terms). For many years, I, and others too, capitalized the word ‘Decadence’ as a way of signalling its significance as a distinct field of scholarly enquiry. As *Volupté* and the extraordinary burst of scholarly activity over the last decade attest, however, decadence studies has arrived and is now a defined field of considerable depth and complexity. As we go lower-case, the field goes high.

Jane Desmarais
Editor-in-Chief
22 December 2019

Necrocinephilia, or, The Death of Cinema and the Love of Film:
An Introduction by the Guest Editor

David Weir

The Cooper Union

In 1995, at the centenary of the brothers Auguste and Louis Lumière's invention of the *cinématographe*, the device that made public viewing of moving pictures possible, Susan Sontag assessed 100 years of film history thus: 'Cinema, once heralded as *the* art of the 20th century, seems now, as the century closes [...], to be a decadent art'. Perhaps unsurprisingly, she thought capitalism was the culprit, finding 'movie making everywhere in the capitalist and would-be capitalist world' devoted to the production of 'films made purely for entertainment (that is, commercial) purposes' that were 'astonishingly witless' – a form of 'derivative film-making, a brazen combinatory or recombinatory art' capable only of 'reproducing past successes'.¹ Sontag died in 2004, so she did not have the pleasure of seeing *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), the fourth film in the *Avengers* series and the twenty-third feature in the Marvel Comics franchise (now owned by Walt Disney productions), nor did she have the satisfaction of knowing that it is now the highest grossing film in cinema history, having banked almost \$2.8 billion in box-office gross to date. Ever the cosmopolitan internationalist, Sontag would likely have found scant solace in knowing that just shy of 70% of that enormous haul came from foreign distribution.² Not to put too fine a point on it, but if Sontag were alive today she might well look back to the decadent year of 1995 as the golden age of cinema (the year, after all, of Amy Heckerling's *Clueless*, Brian Singer's *The Usual Suspects*, and Todd Solondz's *Welcome to the Dollhouse*).

Sontag's use of the epithet 'decadent' to describe a type of art that has become 'derivative' and 'formulaic' will be familiar to most readers of this journal who know how apt those negative descriptors are to the literature of certain periods (the usual example is fourth-century CE Roman poetry). Equally familiar is the ideological association of decadence with capitalism, the stock-in-trade of Soviet-era agitprop that made Western socioeconomic arrangements the foil of the

supposedly superior system of Marxist-Leninist communism. Sontag, of course, was writing after the collapse of the communist system (one of them, anyway), the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 being the harbinger of the complete disintegration of the Soviet Union in December 1991. Sontag does not mention this epoch-shifting development, perhaps because the demise of communism was too recent for her to draw the conclusion that seems obvious today: that capitalism triumphant and unchained could only compound the problem of witless, derivative cinema she had identified. The events of 1989 and 1991 led the latter-day Hegelian historian Francis Fukuyama to describe the collapse of communism as ‘the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government’.³ Fukuyama went on to explain that he did not mean that history as the simple ‘occurrence of events’ had arrived at a terminus, but, rather, that History had ended, ‘history understood as a single, coherent, evolutionary process’. Karl Marx had posited communist society as the end of this process, while G. W. F. Hegel believed the process would conclude with the liberal state.⁴ In the decades since the fall of the Soviet Union, new challenges have emerged that pose problems for liberal democracy (populism, terrorism, political corruption, ethno-nationalism, etc.), and reasonable people can debate how best to ensure that economic equality obtains in the liberal state (free trade, regulated capitalism, socialism, etc.), but, by and large, for better or worse, Western liberal democracy seems here to stay, even if the best form of that system remains aspirational.

This may seem a rather ponderous way to introduce the topic of decadence and cinema, but it is necessary to acknowledge at the outset that there may be something inherently antagonistic about decadence, whose original apologists and practitioners expressed considerable unease with Western bourgeois liberalism, and cinema, the preeminent form of mass entertainment today (and not only in the West) whose ongoing commercial success depends completely on the capitalist system, the economic engine of that same bourgeois liberalism the decadents decry. At first, the temptation is to seize on this disharmony and declare that cultural manifestations of decadence

simply cannot coexist with commercial ambitions, but that assertion is readily refuted by, for example, Oscar Wilde's career prior to 1895 and the posthumous exploitation of both his life and his works, including by film producers, beginning in the early decades of the twentieth century and continuing to this day. Even though the most recent Wilde project, Rupert Everett's *The Happy Prince* (2018), is still a long way from recovering its relatively modest production costs of \$13 million,⁵ as I have pointed out elsewhere Wilde's numerous 'screenwriting' credits show a willingness on the part of profit-minded producers to return to his work in search of cinematic material time and time again.⁶ That said, there is no shortage of examples of films that deal somehow with decadence but come to commercial ruin because of it. The best example is probably Alla Nazimova's production of Wilde's *Salomé*, which foundered at the box office and drove the erstwhile megastar Nazimova into bankruptcy.

Nazimova's *Salomé* also points to some additional issues that attend the problem of extending the study of decadence to cinema. Decadence is certainly more than a cultural movement, but to the extent that it is considered as such the tendency has been to fix on the fin de siècle as the predominant period when decadence as a culture of decline (paradoxically) flourished. The fact points to another disharmony, namely, the chronological disconnect between fin de siècle decadence and its cinematic treatment. Such disharmony does not obtain in the case of a number of other cultural movements that have found expression through the medium of film. Take expressionism, for example: while the movement was established in painting well before it took form in the art of cinema with Robert Wiene's *Das Cabinet des Dr Caligari* [*The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*] (1920), that film is clearly contemporary with expressionism generally. Likewise with surrealism: Germaine Dulac's *La Coquille et le clergyman* [*The Seashell and the Clergyman*] (1928) appears at a moment when the movement was perhaps at its height. Fin-de-siècle decadence, however, obviously appeared at a time when cinema was in its infancy, the *cinématographe* at first functioning as little more than a visual recording device, with a few notable exceptions, such as Alice Guy Blaché's *La fée aux choux* [*The Cabbage Fairy*] (1896), made the same year that Georges Méliès, a

former magician, began his long run of trick films with *The Vanishing Lady*. By the time cinema developed into a more mature artistic medium in its own right, fin-de-siècle decadence was well in the past. Nazimova's *Salomé* includes some memorable efforts to make its fin-de-siècle material contemporary, as when Salomé envisions herself as a 1920s flapper atop a mountain of jewels, but generally speaking, such efforts only serve to make the film seem even more disconnected from the tradition that inspired it.

Nazimova's flapper Salomé does, however, remind us that artists well removed from fin-de-siècle decadence can take that decadence as both inspiration and material for the exploration of contemporary concerns. Considering film art in relation to decadence, in short, provides an opportunity not only to expand the meaning of decadence but also to engage with it in a more intellectually serious way by asking what the social and political conditions are that allow us to make the cultural determination of decadence in the first place. To take the Nazimova *Salomé* as an example, the 1922 film appeared not only in the wake of the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment giving women the right to vote in 1920 but also in the context of the virulent xenophobia that periodically emerges in the United States. Anxiety over the recent empowerment of women at the ballot box has to be understood as a possible cause of the unease that the predominantly male Hollywood production establishment felt over the involvement of women in the industry they controlled. Add to this the fact that the film made by the Russian-born Nazimova appeared between the passage of the 1917 Immigration Act imposing (among other strictures) a literacy test on all immigrants and the enactment of the Immigration Law of 1924 that established a highly restrictive quota system (not overturned until 1965).⁷ Moreover, it had not been that long since the notorious 'Red raids' of January 1920, when US government agents literally broke into the homes of suspected 'Bolsheviks' in the middle of the night.⁸ Given this historical context, it is perhaps unsurprising that United Artists decided to re-release D. W. Griffith's racist epic *The Birth of a Nation* (the first film ever screened for a US president at the White House)⁹ on the same date (15 February 1923) that *Salomé* had its official première (see my essay in this issue for further

discussion). More importantly, the context suggests additional insight into the problematics of decadent culture during the period. While it is true that decadence was undergoing both a revival of its fin-de-siècle practitioners and an adaption of that earlier culture to modernist expression during the 1920s, when Nazimova's *Salomé* appeared a number of ideological forces, purist and regressive, were operating against the decadence her film embodied. The recent tendency to construe the cultural expression of decadence as a form of 'political' resistance perhaps finds some historical support in the Nazimova case, even though the director-producer-writer-actor does not appear to have thought of her *Salomé* in such charged ideological terms at the time.

For my part, I first came to consider the role of decadence in cinema almost by accident, when I happened across a presentation copy of Ben Hecht's novel *Fantazius Mallare* (1922) and discovered a book plate indicating that the book once belonged to one Roderick La Rocque [fig. 1], who had received it from Wallace Smith, the artist whose drawings illuminate (in a dark way) the depravities of his friend Hecht's decadent narrative. Smith's inscription reads: 'For Rod La Rocque – who has a thousand masks for his face – but, thank Christ, never an one for his heart' [fig. 2]. More important, it is dated 'Hollywood 1926'.¹⁰ The name Rod La Rocque was vaguely familiar to me from a line in the voice-over narration in Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) spoken from beyond the grave by Joe Gillis (William Holden) when he recalls looking out of his garage apartment at the empty swimming pool owned by Norma Desmond (Gloria Swanson): 'And of course she had a pool. Who didn't then? Mabel Norman and John Gilbert must have swum in it ten thousand midnights ago, and Vilma Banky and Rod La Rocque'.¹¹

I already knew that Hecht was a Hollywood screenwriter, and I knew that his prior literary career had led some critics to relate his fiction to the decadent tradition, but Smith's inscription to La Rocque helped cement the probable connection between decadence and cinema. As did H. L. Mencken before him, Hecht received his education in fin-de-siècle literature from the journalist James Huneker. Hecht wrote several books reflective of Huneker's influence, and then took the decadent sensibility with him when he moved to Hollywood early in 1927, the very year when the

need for screenwriters escalated with the advent of sound technology that allowed the formerly silent ghosts on the screen to have conversations with one another that audiences could actually hear.

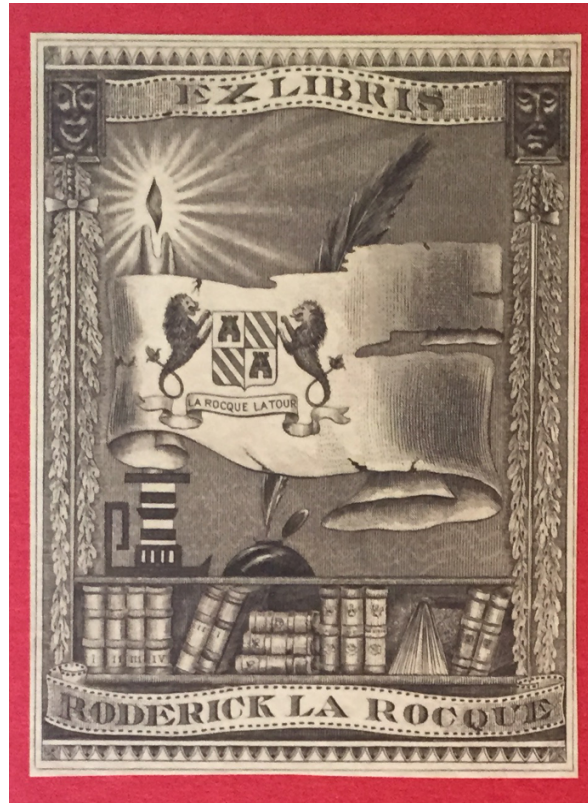


Fig. 1: Bookplate of Roderick La Rocque in a presentation copy of Ben Hecht's *Fantazius Mallare* (1922).

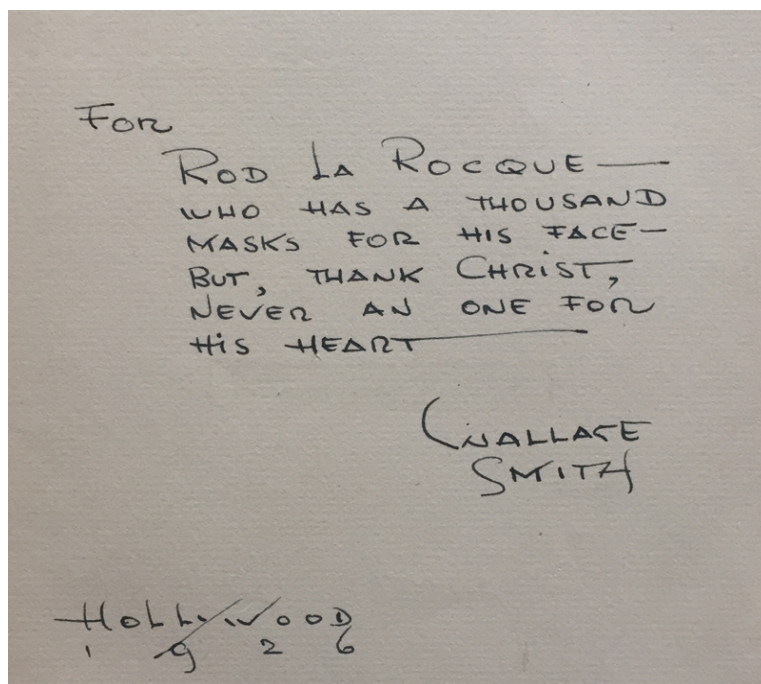


Fig. 2: Wallace Smith's inscription to Roderick La Rocque.

In my first book on decadence, I summarized the cultural transmission of literary decadence to commercial cinema rather too alliteratively as a line running from ‘Huysmans to Hunecker to Hecht to Hollywood’.¹² But that bit of stylistic bombast does not gainsay what now seems like a rather significant observation – that decadent culture flourished at a critical point in the development of classic Hollywood film.

In the case of Hecht, more work remains to be done to gauge the extent to which the decadent sensibility he displayed in his novels made it into the films he scripted. In my 1995 book, I mentioned *The Scoundrel* (1935), which Hecht not only scripted but also directed – most assuredly a film that should be included in the as-yet unformed canon of decadent cinema. The *New York Times* reviewed the film as ‘a suavely mannered portrait of decadence’ in which Noel Coward plays ‘the New York publisher, Anthony Mallare, a man of brilliant surfaces and a bad case of elephantiasis of the ego. Mallare postures against a background of sick intellectuals, the degenerate literati who pose blearily in the warmth of their own wit and their superior disinterest in the world outside’.¹³ As this review shows, one rationale for understanding a film as ‘decadent’ inheres in the way it captures the culture of decadence by transposing it from the medium of literature to the medium of cinema. That is a rather different rationale from the simple filmic adaptation of a recognized work in the literary canon, such as Nazimova’s *Salomé* or Anthony Asquith’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1952) – not that adaptation is always necessarily simple, as such cases as Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* [*Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom*] (1975) or Ken Russell’s *Salome’s Last Dance* (1988) show, the former involving a complex ideological transposition from French absolutism to Italian fascism and the latter a double adaptation of both Wilde’s play and Nazimova’s film. The larger point here is that any consideration of decadence in relation to film must involve a clear rationale for doing so – but, as the essays in this issue illustrate, the rationale will vary depending on differing definitions and understandings of the capacious concept and culture of decadence.

In addition to my own efforts to bring cinema into the orbit of decadence,¹⁴ David Wayne Thomas uses Peter Greenaway's *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover* (1989) to interrogate 'a specifically decadent procedure of social representation',¹⁵ and Kostas Boyiopoulos incorporates Greenaway's *The Pillow Book* into an analysis of 'the eroticized text' of decadent literature.¹⁶ (Greenaway does seem an apt candidate for inclusion in discussions of 'decadent cinema', not least because his avant-garde technique, like all avant-garde aesthetics today, seems belated.) Also, a number of recent screenings and special issues of academic journals suggest that interest in decadence and film is on the rise. These include a special issue of the journal *Offscreen* (August 2017) titled 'Europe and a Cinema of Decadence', where the focus is on 'films that set their sights on the notion of a fallen glory, or a bounty of goodness gone too far'. That last formulation seems hardly to encapsulate the idea of decadence, but, nonetheless, we are told that there is a category of 'films that often focus on a lifestyle or class (usually upper) that exhibits both cultural and aesthetic elements of decadence'. This dual idea of decadence becomes clearer with the discussion of actual films, such as Federico Fellini's *La dolce vita* (1959) and Max Ophüls' *Madame de...* (1953; known in English as *The Earrings of Madame de...*). Fellini's film presents social decadence in the context of the alienation and emptiness that follows from the sort of manic hedonism made possible in Italy by the post-WWII boom known as *il miracolo economico*, while Ophüls' involves such an intensely aesthetic experience of visual elegance that, according to Rita Quelhas, cinema becomes 'a necessary, revealing and extraordinary disease'.¹⁷ At base, the *Offscreen* essays take two basic approaches to decadence and cinema that are familiar enough from literature: the first considers some social conditions as decadent for whatever reason (aristocratic depravity, anarchic individualism, loss of organic wholeness, and so on), while the second regards certain styles of representation as decadent for whatever reason (ostentatious elegance, ornate fragmentation, excessive conventionality, and so on). A recent symposium at Birkbeck, University of London, in June 2019 approached decadence in terms of disease, as the title of the symposium makes clear: 'La Maladie Fin de Siècle: Decadence and Disease'. The proceedings included a screening of one

Russian silent, Yevgeni Bauer's *The Happiness of Eternal Night* (1915), and one Ukrainian, Vyacheslav Vyskovsky's *Satan Married Them* (1917), both introduced by Olga Kyrylova of the National Pedagogical Dragomanov University in Kyiv.

Notions of decadence as both illness and excess – and the political sensibility those conditions engender – motivate the selections in a recent film series curated by Tara Judah for Watershed in Bristol in the summer of 2019. Titled 'Gluttony, Decadence, and Resistance', the programme featured such films as Greenaway's *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover* and Marco Ferreri's *La grande bouffe* [*The Big Feast*] (1973), in which several characters literally eat themselves to death. Judah herself provides a full description of the series in this issue. Finally, a recent issue of *Moveable Type* devoted to decadence (vol. 11, 2019) includes an essay by James Jackson on the now-classic art film *Pink Narcissus* (1971) directed by the photographer James Bidgood.¹⁸ Although released two years after the Stonewall protests, the film is at base a fantasia inspired by the pre-Stonewall gay underground in downtown New York City. The designation 'decadent' is justified partly because same-sex desires were understood as both immoral and illegal at the time the film was made (sodomy laws remained enforceable in New York until 1980),¹⁹ but, historical context aside, we can no longer accept such a rationale for considering a film 'decadent' because to do so would validate both bourgeois morality and legally sanctioned homophobia. Jackson quite rightly explores other rationales for describing the film as decadent, including the lush aestheticization of the filmic representation of sexuality. Future investigations of cinema and decadence include my own essay planned for the forthcoming *Oxford Handbook of Decadence* on filmic adaptations of decadent literature and Kate Hext's work-in-progress, provisionally titled *Wilde in the Dream Factory*, a study of how Wilde and the decadent tradition influenced Hollywood filmmaking from 1915 to 1945. No doubt there are more such explorations of decadence and cinema forthcoming than those I have mentioned here.

The present special issue of *Volupté* shows just how rich and varied cinematic explorations of decadence can be, beginning with Michael Subialka's 'Acting Aestheticism, Performing

Decadence: 'The Cinematic Fusion of Art and Life'. Subialka argues that 'a decadent-aesthetic paradigm' informs the identification of performer and performance in the silent-screen diva in early Italian films. The fusion of person and persona made the diva into a sort of synthesis of the two most pervasive female types in decadent culture – the New Woman and the femme fatale. The *homme fatal* puts in an appearance in the next essay, Kate Hext's study of the influence of fin-de-siècle decadence on cinematic scenarios from the silent era in 'Decadence on the Silent Screen: Stannard, Coward, Hitchcock, and Wilde'. The least familiar of those four names is likely to be that of Eliot Stannard, whose parents welcomed the exiled Wilde to their home in Dieppe in 1897 when Eliot was nine years old. Stannard went on to become a prolific screenwriter, adapting the plays of Noel Coward for the screen and scripting scenarios for Hitchcock, notably *The Lodger: A Story of the London Fog* (1927), a film about a man (the aforementioned *homme fatal*) who may or may not be a Jack-the-Ripper-style murderer of young women (the story is too foggy for certainty).

The New Woman or, more precisely, the *neue Frau* also appears in Alcide Bava's analysis of the way Paul Czinner's 1928 adaptation of Arthur Schnitzler's 1924 novella *Fräulein Else* transposes the world of fin-de-siècle Vienna into a version of Weimar society in the late 1920s. By modernizing the literary narrative about one decadent society (Vienna during the Austro-Hungarian Empire) into a cinematic scenario of contemporary social decadence, Czinner's film offers evidence of the cinematic unconscious Siegfried Kracauer identified in Germany during the interwar period. Weronika Szulik's essay, '*The Powerful Man*: Young-Poland Decadence in a Film by Henryk Szaro', examines how the director has modernized the fin-de-siècle decadent culture that finds its way into the work of Stanisław Przybyszewski in his trilogy of novels published from 1911 to 1913. The first of these, *Mocny Człowiek* [*The Powerful Man*], is taken as the title of Szaro's film about a kind of anti-*Übermensch* who will stop at nothing to acquire the fame he thinks is his due (Przybyszewski was highly influenced by both J.-K. Huysmans and Friedrich Nietzsche, whom he insisted was essentially a Polish writer).²⁰ As with Czinner's *Fräulein Else*, Szaro's *Mocny Człowiek* 'updates' its fin-de-siècle material by taking advantage of the modernity of the medium itself, especially as

practised in contemporary Berlin, where Szaro lived and worked in 1923–1924. Indeed, Szulik takes stock of Szaro's evident debt to several innovations in Weimar filmmaking, including the expressionist devices of an earlier era of German cinema as well as the later aesthetic known as new objectivity (*Neue Sachlichkeit*).

With Richard Farmer and Melanie Williams's essay on *The Touchables* (1968) and Ainslie Templeton's study of *Myra Breckinridge* (1970) we enter a different era of decadence – the sexually liberated, mod world of 'Swinging London' in the late 1960s and the equally liberated Hollywood scene of the early 1970s. Of course, this 'decadence' is so only from the perspective of the outraged bourgeoisie of the times, but it is ever thus: regardless of the age, the culture of decadence always derives a measure of its weary energy from the opposition of those mandarins of morality whose outrage often turns on the hypocritical self-righteousness of seeing their own private perversions put on public display by those who are more accepting of the delights of depravity. That depravity may be more vacuous than vigorous in Richard Freeman's *The Touchables*, but it is perhaps all the more stylish for that very vacuity. This is an exceedingly rare, almost forgotten film, but Farmer and Williams argue that it deserves to be remembered for the way an earlier aesthetic of decadence – primarily the design aesthetic – finds its way into the rebellious youth culture the film both represents and embodies. Templeton's analysis of *Myra Breckinridge* mostly concerns the 1968 novel by Gore Vidal, but the argument that fin-de-siècle sexological conceptions of 'inversion' and the like have a later life as a heteronormative means of dealing with trans feminine identities is certainly borne out by the 1970 film adaptation. The casting choice to pass over the trans actress Candy Darling in favour of the sex symbol Raquel Welch to play the transgender woman Myra speaks volumes about how trans people were misunderstood and misrepresented in mass entertainment – at the height of the sexual revolution, no less.

There are moments in both *The Lodger* and *Mocny Człowiek*, each relatable (in different ways) to an earlier culture of decadence, that clearly look forward to the cinematographic stylizations of film noir [fig. 3]. What seems merely suggestive in those films becomes explicit in another cult film

that is the subject of the essay by Kostas Boyiopoulos. He makes a convincing argument for the alignment of decadence and film noir in ‘Decadence and the Necrophilic Intertext of Film Noir: Nikos Nikolaidis’ *Singapore Sling*’. The film is subtitled *The Man Who Fell in Love with a Corpse*, which functions not only as an allusion to Otto Preminger’s *Laura* (1944) but also as a capsule description of Nikolaidis’ own necrophilic love affair with film noir and other genres buried in cinema history.

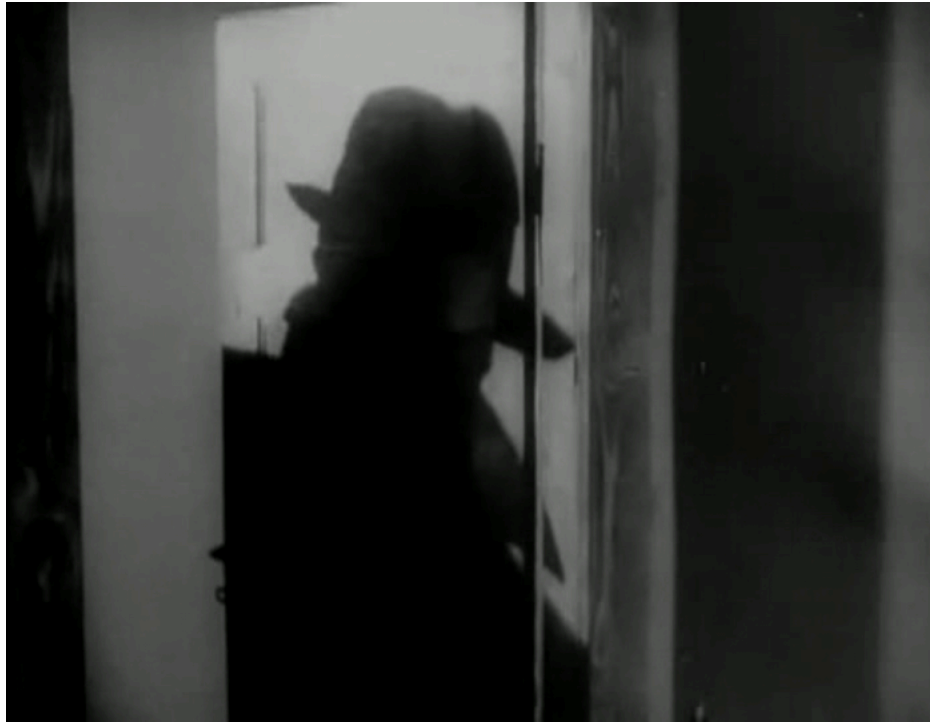


Fig. 3 (00:11:47): A proto-noir moment from Henryk Szaro’s *Mocny Człowiek* (1929).²¹

Finally, I round out the issue with ‘Alla Nazimova’s *Salomé*: Shot-by-Shot’, a study concerned less with the film as an adaptation of Wilde’s play and more as an example of the state of cinematic art at a particular time, including the industry conditions that made the production, direction, and distribution of films by women difficult if not impossible. The study includes two appendices that I hope will be useful as resources to those who wish to teach the film.

Paradoxically, the essays in this special issue, demonstrating as they do how decadent culture, variously understood, often informs the art of cinema, also serve in some measure to refute Sontag’s claim that at the centenary of its birth cinema had become ‘a decadent art’. The lone hope Sontag holds out against the encroachment of witless, industrialized filmmaking is cinephilia – that

ardent, eccentric love of film that, ‘by the very range and eclecticism of its passions’, helps to keep the art alive.²² Although she does not remark on the development of computer-generated imagery (CGI) in her essay, the digital revolution in cinema (the origins of which can be traced to Disney’s *Tron* (1982)) gained momentum in the 1990s, with Stephen Spielberg’s *Jurassic Park* (1993) and George Lucas’ *The Phantom Menace* (1999) both revealing a mastery of CGI technology.²³ I mention the digital revolution in filmmaking here because it points to another paradox, namely, that digital technology has not only facilitated the making of artless, formulaic films, it has also made possible a dramatic renaissance in cinephilia. All of the films discussed in this issue are available in digitized format, either as DVD/BD transfers or on streaming platforms like YouTube, Criterion, and others. While the true cinephile will always prefer to watch films projected onto a screen in a theatre amid fellow movie-lovers, that classic enactment of cinephilia has become increasingly rare for many devotees of film art (especially those who do not live in major cities where revival houses still operate). The paradox that finds the art of film revived by that same digital technology that not only leads to formulaic filmmaking – decadent art, in short – but also makes possible a new, digital cinephilia that gives movie-lovers the opportunity to see and study films whenever they want seems, to me at least, yet another example of the complex dynamics of decadence whereby endings often engender new, enriched beginnings. This issue of *Volupté* demonstrates that paradox at work: for our contributors have used decadence itself to argue for an alternative to the ‘decadent art’ of cinema that so unsettled Sontag at the end of the twentieth century. They may not have put an end to the end of cinema, exactly, but they offer ample reason to luxuriate in that ending. As anyone who has given up all hope of knowing knows, nothing stays decline like the delectation of decay.

¹ Susan Sontag, ‘A Century of Cinema’, in *Where the Stress Falls: Essays* (New York: Picador, 2002), p. 117. The essay originally appeared in a German translation in the *Frankfurter Rundschau* of 30 December 1995 before appearing as ‘The Decay of Cinema’, *New York Times Magazine*, section 6, pp. 60–61.

² ‘All Time Box Office’, Box Office Mojo, IMDb Pro, <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/alltime/world/>. Accessed 9 October 2019. The *New York Times* uses this site to report box office revenue.

³ Francis Fukuyama, ‘The End of History?’, *The National Interest*, 16 (1989), 3.

⁴ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 2006), p. xii.

⁵ The film has thus far grossed less than \$2.5 million. See *The Happy Prince* (2018), The Numbers, Nash Information Services, LLC, [https://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Happy-Prince-The-\(UK\)-\(2018\)#tab=summary](https://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Happy-Prince-The-(UK)-(2018)#tab=summary). Accessed 10 October 2019.

⁶ See my *Decadence: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 110; and ‘Decadence and Cinema’, in *Decadence and Literature*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and David Weir (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 300.

⁷ Information about the immigration legislation of 1917 and 1924 is taken from the *Congressional Record*, 64th Congress, 2nd Sess. (5 February 1917), chap. 29; and 68th Congress, 1st Sess. (26 May 1924), chap. 190.

⁸ See Robert K. Murray, *Red Scare: A Study in National Hysteria, 1919–1920* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1955), especially chapter 13, ‘The January Raids’ (pp. 210–22).

⁹ See Donald E. Staples, ‘Wilson in Technicolor: An Appreciation’, in *Hollywood’s White House*, ed. by Peter C. Rollins and John E. O’Connor (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2003), pp. 115–16.

¹⁰ The inscription appears on the unnumbered page 3 of Smith’s presentation copy to La Rocque of Ben Hecht, *Fantazius Mallare: A Mysterious Oath* (Chicago: Covici-McGee, 1922). Collection of Alice Condé and Jessica Gossling.

¹¹ *Sunset Boulevard*, dir. Billy Wilder, Paramount Pictures Corp., 1950, DVD.

¹² David Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), p. 189.

¹³ Andre Sennwald, ‘The Music Hall Presents Noel Coward in the New Hecht-MacArthur Film, The Scoundrel’, *New York Times*, 3 May 1935, p. 23.

¹⁴ In addition to my *Decadence and the Making of Modernism*, see the ‘Afterword’ to my *Decadent Culture in the United States: Art and Literature against the American Grain* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008), pp. 191–202, and ‘Decadence and Cinema’, in *Decadence and Literature*, pp. 300–15.

¹⁵ David Wayne Thomas, ‘Decadent Critique: Constructing “History” in Peter Greenaway’s *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover*’, in *Perennial Decay: On the Aesthetics and Politics of Decadence*, ed. by Liz Constable, Dennis Denisoff, and Matthew Potolsky (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), p. 102.

¹⁶ Kostas Boyiopoulos, ‘“Use my body like the pages of a book”: Decadence and the Eroticized Text’, in *Decadence and the Senses*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and Alice Condé (Cambridge: Legenda, 2017), pp. 101–20.

¹⁷ Rita Quelhas, ‘The Gaps and Detours in *Madame de...* Part 1: The Enigmatic Body’, *Offscreen*, 21.8 (August 2017). <https://offscreen.com/view/the-gaps-and-detours-in-madame-de-part-1>. Accessed 19 October 2019.

¹⁸ James Jackson, ‘Decadence, Homoeroticism & the Turn Towards Nature in James Bidgood’s *Pink Narcissus*’, *Moveable Type*, 11 (2019). [https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10079971/1/III%20James%20Jackson%20Pink%20Narcissus%20\[Final\].pdf](https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10079971/1/III%20James%20Jackson%20Pink%20Narcissus%20[Final].pdf). Accessed 23 October 2019.

¹⁹ See *People v. Onofre*, 51 N.Y.2d 476, 434 N.Y.S.2d 947, 415 N.E.2d 936 (1980), certiorari denied sub nom. *New York v. Onofre*, 451 U.S. 987 (1981) and discussion in Arthur S. Leonard, *Sexuality and the Law: An Encyclopedia of Major Legal Cases* (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 109–15.

²⁰ For this point about Przybyszewski’s insistence on the essential Polish nature of Nietzsche’s writing, and for a detailed survey of Przybyszewski’s career, see George C. Schoolfield, *A Baedeker of Decadence: Charting a Literary Fashion, 1884–1927* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 117–31.

²¹ With one exception (the image from *Thaïs* in the first essay), time indications for all screenshots are indicated in standard 00:00:00 format, as here. Time counters vary, however, depending on the device or the streaming software being used. In this issue, most time indications are based on the VLC media player counter.

²² Sontag, ‘A Century of Cinema’, p. 122.

²³ For a discussion of the origins and development of CGI technology, see J. Hoberman, *Film after Film: Or, What Became of 21st-Century Cinema* (London and New York: Verso, 2012), especially Part I, ‘A Post-Photographic Cinema’, pp. 3–46.

Acting Aestheticism, Performing Decadence: The Cinematic Fusion of Art and Life

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In 1917, the futurist artist Anton Giulio Bragaglia released what is today the only extant work of futurist cinema, a silent film called *Thaïs*, starring a Russian performer, Thaïs Galitsky. The overlap of performer and performance extends beyond the fact that the film shared her name: the Russian dancer portrays Vera Preobrajenska, a decadent aristocrat from Eastern Europe. Vera lives in a bizarre house constructed out of abstract geometrical shapes, equipped with secret rooms that include a gas chamber. This set, designed by Enrico Prampolini, is the most overtly futurist element of the film, as the plot consists of a typical love triangle leading to ruin: Vera seduces the lover of her friend Bianca (a countess), resulting in Bianca's accidental death, which in turn drives Vera to commit suicide by locking herself in the secret gas chamber of her labyrinthine house. Her motivation for betraying Bianca is an aristocratic desire to experiment with the lives of others – an amoral aestheticism that explains her nickname in the film, 'Nitchevo', an obvious allusion to Nietzsche that signals a futurist intertext as well as a paradigm for her coldhearted game with life and death. Her liberated sexuality and amorality shape a tragic story where ultimately Vera is trapped in her own game (in the plot) and in the bizarre architecture of her own house (on the set). This dramatic death merges her with the romantic story she has crafted as well as with the artistic setting of her aesthetic existence [fig. 1].

More than just a thematic connection to nineteenth-century models of the tragic love triangle, *Thaïs* demonstrates how a decadent-aesthetic paradigm informs the development of early film through the figure of the film diva. Thus, we can see in early film a case study of decadence as an aesthetic mode that shapes not only the content of these films but also the theorization of the medium itself. To show how this is the case, I will first excavate the aesthetic-decadent paradigm that focuses its artistic ideal on the figure of the actor or actress, examining three

decadent writers (Charles Baudelaire, Auguste de Villiers de L'Isle-Adam, and Oscar Wilde) who help create the pattern that I then trace into the acting of the first Italian film diva, Lyda Borelli. While Borelli's films reactivate key aspects of the decadent fascination with the fusion of art and life, as well as its deathly trajectory, they also add elements of modern gender and sexuality that complicate that paradigm – as well as our assumptions about the political significance of decadence. The cinematic reworking of this decadent-aesthetic paradigm not only brings it to a wider audience but also deploys it in an ambivalent way that celebrates the New Woman's independence (sexual, financial, moral) while also confining her transgression.

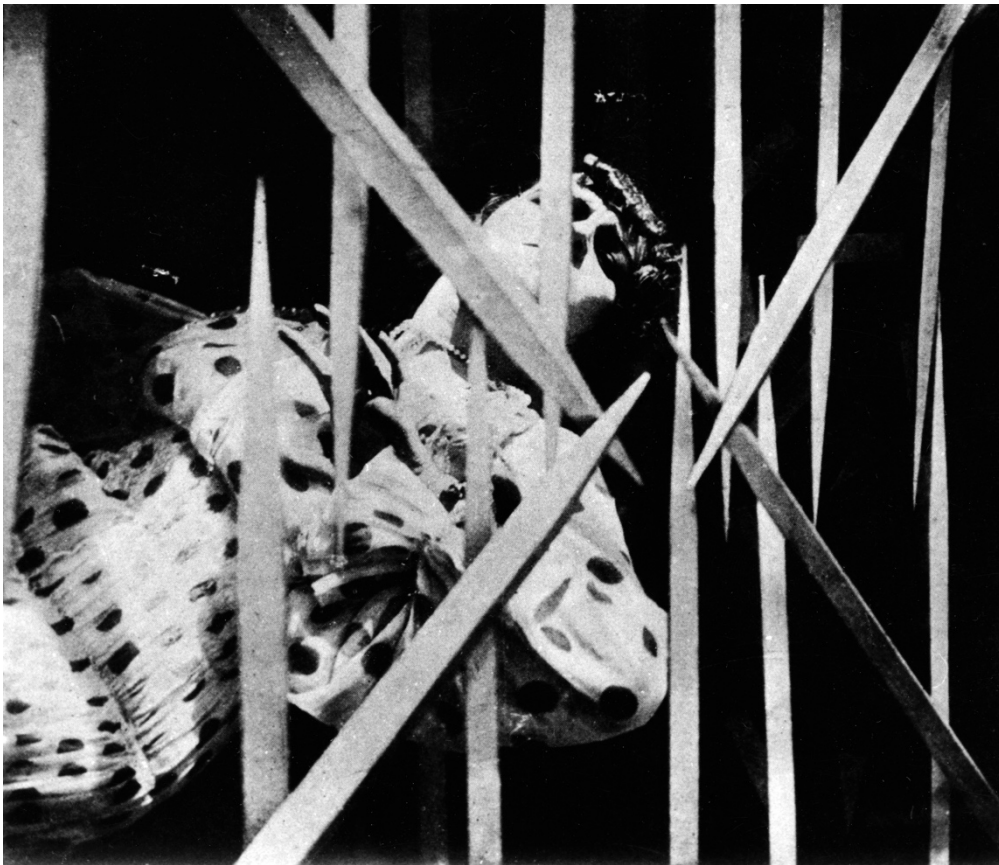


Fig. 1: Thaïs Galitsky performing Vera's death in *Thaïs* (1917).

Act I. Aesthetic Actors: The Tragic Experiment of Art as Life

Aestheticism may not begin with Baudelaire, but he is doubtless one of its primary fashioners.¹ It is thus telling that in Baudelaire's late poetic work, *Le Spleen de Paris* [*Paris Spleen*], published posthumously in 1869, the figure of the wandering aesthete/dandy relates in key ways to the ideal of performance. As Rhonda K. Garelick has put it, focusing particularly on his earlier essay, *Le peintre de la vie moderne* [*The Painter of Modern Life*] (1863): 'Baudelaire's [dandyism] rejects work and condemns the production of anything save one's own carefully tended self'.² This penchant for self-fashioning necessitates a fusion between life and art, and Baudelaire's aestheticism locates that fusion in the dandy's street-wandering performance, which combines the decadent's display with the flâneur's aesthetic investigation of the modern metropolis.

But the dandy's combination of performance with the search for aesthetic experiences is taken a step further in Baudelaire's vision of the actor.³ In the prose poem 'Une mort héroïque' ['A Heroic Death'], the poet depicts the actor, a buffoon named Fancioulle, as both a perfect ideal of aestheticism and the victim of a morally sick aesthetic experiment conducted by a Prince who is himself a Baudelairean aesthete fusing art and life. Indeed, 'the misfortune of the Prince was in not having a stage vast enough for his genius'.⁴ The Prince instead plays with the lives of others. When Fancioulle is condemned to die for participating in a conspiracy, the Prince decides to give him a pardon so he can go on acting, allowing him to enact his revenge in a more aesthetic way. Fancioulle's performance, heightened by his near-death experience, is magnificent, and Baudelaire describes it as fusing art and life with a divine power into a 'perfect idealization, so that one could not help believing in the impersonation as alive' (p. 56). This fusion of art and life is so intense that it becomes total. The actor enters his role, but then the Prince's plot is revealed, as at the pivotal moment of Fancioulle's performance the Prince sends a boy to hiss and thus burst the artistic bubble: 'Fancioulle, awakened from his dream, closed his eyes, and when almost at once he opened them again, they seemed to have grown inordinately large, then he opened his mouth as though struggling for breath, staggered forward a step, then backward, and fell dead upon the stage' (p. 57).

The true fusion of art and life is not attained in his acting, no matter how divine and how closely aligned with the ideal of art itself. At its most radical, the fusion of art and life requires the sacrifice of the actor's own, actual life – as he gives himself over to art and takes on the reality of the artistic dream. What makes his immersion complete is his inability to return to life once the artistic dream is pierced. It is as if only the actor's death could confirm that he had entirely given himself over to the life of art.⁵ This condition, I contend, forms the paradigm of a specifically decadent notion of aestheticism, one in which the perfect fusion of art and life leads down a deadly path. The aesthetic ideal of fusing art and life is pervasive in decadent literature, but it is telling that the figure of the actor takes on a special role in realizing its limit case.

It is worthwhile briefly to trace that Baudelairean paradigm to some later resonances in French decadentism and in Wilde's decadent aestheticism so as to establish that it is, indeed, a paradigm and to show how its dynamics change in ways that prefigure the cinematic diva. While the field of literature that can be classified as French 'decadentism' is a matter of some contention, here a single example will suffice.⁶ Villiers published a collection of short stories in 1883 called *Contes cruels* [*Cruel Tales*], containing the story 'Le Désir d'être un homme' ['The Desire to Be a Man']. Its protagonist is an actor, a certain 'Esprit Chaudval, born Lepeinteur, known as Monanteuil', whose whole life has been so devoted to art that he has never experienced his own existence as a man. At the end of his long career he desires above all to become a man, to feel his own inner subjectivity rather than inhabiting that of his characters. Speaking in a long dramatic monologue, he reveals that motivation:

For nearly half a century I have *acted*, I have *played* the passions of other people without ever feeling them – in fact I have never felt anything myself. [...] So does that make me nothing but a *shadow*? Passions! Feelings! Real actions! REAL! They are the things that make up a MAN! Now that age is forcing me to rejoin the human race, I owe it to myself to take possession of the passions, or at least of some *real* feeling... because that is the *sine qua non* for anyone pretending to the title Man.⁷

The distinction he makes between life and art traces the familiar lines of the Baudelairean model: the consummate actor is defined by the suspension of his 'real' personhood; the imaginary life of

the artistic character, realized on stage, dominates his reality. The consummate actor has no real identity of his own and so lacks the inner experience of passions, feelings, and real actions. In this story what the actor seeks is not the fusion of art and life but rather a shift back from that fusion.

But the narrative does not allow him that happy ending, with the plot instead resulting in precisely the tragic fusion of art and life that Baudelaire's paradigm establishes: a fusion consummated in death. The actor's plan is to make himself feel remorse by committing a terrible crime; he will set a neighborhood in Paris on fire and watch it burn so that the ensuing suffering is etched in his memory, allowing him to cultivate an inner subjectivity defined by regret. He carries out the experiment and then flees, retiring to keep a lighthouse for the rest of his days. Yet he feels no remorse. At the end of the story, the actor becomes obsessed with this failure to feel, and in this way he unwittingly becomes what he had sought – a ghost of regret, not for his crime and victims but for his own failure to achieve reality and become a man. While he is unsuccessful in cultivating the kind of remorse he envisioned, quite against his own will he ends up fusing life and art into an aesthetic spectacle that is both an experiment and his own doom. He has given himself a tragic death, filled with regret, and it is only at the moment of that death that he embodies the ghosts of his tragic models in his own life. The character's failure is the story's success – that is, it depicts a limit case for the tragic fusion of art and life that the actor represents.

Villiers had always sought to become a successful playwright, and he was deeply enmeshed in the fin-de-siècle Parisian theatre scene. But neither he nor Baudelaire had the kind of theatrical experience that made Wilde into a household celebrity. It is thus unsurprising that Wilde's representation of the actress and her relation to the aesthetic ideal of fusing life with art should be more complex than his predecessors'. For Wilde, too, the actress fuses art and life in a tragic story culminating in death and serving as a kind of playground for the amoral aestheticism of his protagonists. This is the fate of Sibyl Vane in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890/1891), but it is also mirrored in Dorian's fate and resonates with Wilde's own public persona. In Sibyl's story, in the novel as a whole, and in Wilde's relation to it, what is ultimately conveyed is not only the same set

of aesthetic ideals focused on acting but also the newly gendered, and queered, understanding of that tragic ideal.

Wilde's novel is well-known and requires little exposition, but it is still worth pausing on a few details to highlight key elements of the argument here. That the actress is fetishized as a perfect ideal of the aestheticist paradigm is clear enough. From the start Dorian Gray falls in love with Sibyl Vane not for who she is but for who she performs and her ability to perform, which he figures in familiar terms as her immersion into the characters she portrays. But what is particularly interesting is the gender dynamic, which contrasts the conventionality of everyday womanhood with that of an actress who represents a transgressive figure. Thus, when Dorian first confesses his new love to Lord Henry, he says:

Night after night I go to see her play. One evening she is Rosalind, and the next evening she is Imogen. [...] I have seen her in every age and in every costume. Ordinary women never appeal to one's imagination. They are limited to their century. No glamour ever transfigures them. One knows their minds as easily as one knows their bonnets. One can always find them. There is no mystery in any of them. They ride in the Park in the morning, and chatter at tea-parties in the afternoon. They have their stereotyped smile, and their fashionable manner. They are quite obvious. But an actress! How different an actress is! Harry! why didn't you tell me that the only thing worth loving is an actress?⁸

The power of Sibyl's skill as an actress contrasts with the vulgarity of the quotidian world around her. This contrast heightens the effect of her prowess as an artist: she elevates existence. This makes her into the ideal aesthetic type; at the same time it marks her with a difference that is praised precisely because it represents a transgression of social order.⁹

Of course, the aesthete's gaze is fleeting, and Dorian tires of Sibyl as soon as she fails to conform to his ideal vision of her. He never loved Sibyl but rather the idea of her – the romance of her as a character (p. 75). After he leaves her, he finds, for the first time, that his portrait is altered in appearance, and he studies it 'with a feeling of almost scientific interest' (p. 82). The look of cruelty there convinces him he must have been unjust and that he has a duty to marry Sibyl as he promised. Yet moments later, when Lord Henry comes and tells him that Sibyl Vane has killed herself, he finds himself strangely unmoved: 'It seems to me to be simply like a wonderful ending

to a wonderful play. It has all the terrible beauty of a Greek tragedy, a tragedy in which I took a great part, but by which I have not been wounded' (p. 86). Her suicide makes his love story into a work of art – a tragic romance – repeating the Baudelairean theme of art and life fusing in the ideal death of the actor or actress.

It is perhaps unnecessary to go into great detail examining how Dorian's experiment in moulding Sibyl's life into a tragic story mirrors the experiment that Lord Henry is performing with Dorian as his subject (itself an aestheticist alternative to Basil's more typically romantic relationship with Dorian).¹⁰ Lord Henry uses Dorian as a beautiful canvas, a piece of clay to mould and form, to play with as he will (p. 34). It is thus unsurprising that the tragedy of Sibyl's story is mirrored in Dorian's own. We can read this mirroring in aesthetic terms: both immerse themselves into art, fusing art and life (Dorian as an aesthete turns his life into art, Sibyl as an actress lives her art so intensely that it becomes her life). That perfect fusion culminates in self-destruction, as their mirrored suicides solidify the fusion of art and life in a final unity.

The novel thus features both a queer man and a woman as the figures of the Baudelairean decadent-aesthetic ideal. This independent woman with her own artistic career was certainly a transgression of gender norms, just as the effeminate and queer protagonists of the novel were scandalous enough for the prosecution to use the text at his trial to accuse Wilde of 'gross indecency'.¹¹ Hence, the model of the actor shifted into more transgressive territory as the decadent imagination continued to play with its own aesthetic ideals. For the aesthete, the danger of this transgression is perhaps allayed by the dynamics of aestheticism itself: the perceived 'threat' of transgression in gender or sexuality is felt by those attached to systems of power and social order, but the aestheticist outlook denies primacy to precisely those systems.¹² And so Wilde's re-articulation of this decadent-aesthetic paradigm already begins to dovetail with a new figure who would increasingly come to take centre stage in the anxious aesthetic self-reflection of modernity: the diva.

Act II. Diva as Dying Muse: The Aesthetic Actress as Femme Fatale

In the opening of her essay on the position of the actress between decadentism and modernity, Lucia Re highlights the way in which the actress's ability to take on multiple identities – and thus her own lack of a fixed or stable 'female' identity – unsettled Victorian-era viewers and led to the conception of the actress as somehow 'monstrous'. It is, she maintains, unsurprising that Gabriele D'Annunzio, Italy's great decadent-aestheticist author, places tremendous focus on actresses as he articulates his own version of the art-life fusion.¹³ The most obvious instance is D'Annunzio's *Il fuoco* [*The Flame*] (1900), a novel modelled on his own love affair with the great Italian stage diva, Eleonora Duse. The great actress was somehow situated between the inner and the outer, the feminine and the masculine, and thus in tension with the act of artistic creation represented by the author's writing. At once challenging and also replicating the gender discourse of the romantic and Victorian ages, aesthetes like D'Annunzio are troubled by the actress as a figure of independence and enter into a kind of artistic battle that seeks, in various ways, to control the feminine by limiting it to its supposedly empty, decorative function, while nonetheless using it to generate the aesthetic power of their own artistic performance.¹⁴

Re's productive reading captures a key conflict at the core of the relationship between the author and the actress in this moment of modern anxiety over the status of the New Woman. That conflict, I argue, illuminates a new phenomenon that defined the emergence of film culture in early-twentieth-century Italy: *divismo*. The diva – a word taken from the operatic tradition and explicitly deifying the prima donna – notably had no significant male counterpart in the early years of Italian film.¹⁵ The film diva is thus an ideal case to examine how the shifting gender dynamics of the period reconfigure the decadent-aesthetic paradigm of the actress who fuses art and life through death. The product of a new modern mass culture, the figure of the diva not only encapsulates the aesthetic ideal charted by those earlier writers but also projects it to a new, increasingly wide audience, particularly with the emergence of cinema and the celebrity culture it

helped to foster. In this context, the decadent diva becomes a figure of exoticized fascination that simultaneously celebrates and contains her transgressive sexuality and independence.

Early cinema in Italy was dominated by two primary genres: large-scale historical epics and diva films.¹⁶ Both offered forms of tantalizing visual spectacle, though in markedly different ways. It is clear enough how the diva genre emerges out of and continues the legacies of the decadent stage. As Angela Dalle Vacche has shown, the diva of the early cinema is caught between the experimental modernity of the avant-gardes and the decadent stylings of writers like D'Annunzio; the film diva also embodies the Orientalist fantasies common to both nineteenth-century theatre and twentieth-century reconfigurations of it, like those of the Ballets Russes.¹⁷ Indeed, many actresses moved from stage to screen and from performing in the works of decadent-symbolist artists like Wilde (*Salomé*) and D'Annunzio (*La figlia di Iorio* [*The Daughter of Iorio*], among others) to the new variations on those familiar themes offered by the diva film.



Fig. 2: Lyda Borelli as Salomé in Oscar Wilde's *Salomé*. Photo by Mario Nunes Vais.

One such artist was Lyda Borelli, who can serve as a case study here not only because she is recognized as the first diva of this new genre but also because of how she showcases the dual-faceted legacy of the decadent-aestheticist paradigm traced above [fig. 2].¹⁸ In the content of her films, Borelli enacts the discourse of the tragically-doomed figure who merges art and life. Likewise, in her public persona, Borelli became a figure of celebrity devotion such that her actual self as a performer and her personae on screen were ultimately inseparable in the popular imagination, her screen characteristics even spilling over into the behaviour of her fans.¹⁹ In both respects, her mode of fusing art and life plays out the gender dynamics of the femme fatale whose seductive power must be contained.

The film recognized as initiating the diva genre in Italian cinema, *Ma l'amor mio non muore* [*Love Everlasting*] (1913), features Borelli's breakout performance in a film structured around love and death. The protagonist, Elsa Holbein (Borelli), is forced to flee into exile when her father kills himself after being falsely accused of betraying the Grand Duchy of Wallenstein, where he was an officer. She goes to Paris and becomes a performer, singing and playing the piano with a new identity as Diana Cadouleur. In this guise, she meets the heir to the Grand Duchy, the Prince Massimiliano, who falls in love with the double role she is performing, meaning both her false identity and the exotic persona that false identity assumes on stage. Her true identity is, however, revealed to the Prince, who is called back to the Grand Duchy. Ultimately, he decides to ignore his orders and return to Elsa, but she has already poisoned herself, bringing the tragic love story of double identities to its predictable conclusion.

It is not just the storyline that enacts the tragic aspects of the decadent-aesthetic vision of the actress; Borelli's acting style, which helped launch the craze for diva films and for Borelli herself, is likewise a significant part of the visualization of the fusion of art and life that leads to that tragic outcome. When she moves to Paris and begins to perform on stage, Borelli's character transforms from a respectably dressed society woman to a fetishized Orientalist vision of the exotic performer adorned in a revealing, beaded dress with bracelets and arm bands, her long hair pinned

by elaborate discs. As the curtain is pulled back to reveal her figure on stage for the first time, we see her seated in a dramatic profile, her eyes cast down and her jaw sharply protruding, resting ever so lightly against her left hand. This sharp profile was already familiar in the visual repertoire of the stage diva – what critics have referred to as a typically sphinx-like portrayal of the exotic feminine.²⁰ If Borelli's gestures and poses represent a kind of decadent re-envisioning of the nineteenth-century Pre-Raphaelite ideal, here we see how those poses are also used as a visual code to represent the theatricality of performance itself. In the guise of the exotic, decadent woman, the diva's character represents the fusion of life with art, the immersion of her character (Elsa) into the role portrayed by that character (Diana) [fig. 3].



Fig. 3 (00:33:31): Lyda Borelli on stage as Diana in *Love Everlasting* (1913).

The scene of Elsa's transformation into the singer-performer Diana lasts but a moment on screen, offering just enough visual information to communicate the necessary point that she has been absorbed into this new role. The film then cuts to backstage where we see Diana still in costume while adoring male fans vie for her attention [fig. 4]. This kind of scene is a part of our

standard visual repertoire for the life of showbusiness. However, it is worth pausing to recognize that what such scenes represent is the way in which, for the audience, the performer is already identified in some important way with her performance, the role she has inhabited. When the Prince falls in love with Diana, he is falling in love with the persona she represents on stage, and that in turn (and unbeknownst to the Prince) is itself the performance of another persona, since Diana is a character invented by Elsa in her quest to restart her life. In this double sense, the film focuses on the fusion of art and life as an ideal, as the locus of love, passion, exotically fetishized interest, and the display of desire. It combines this amalgamation with the ambivalent fetishization of the New Woman – the independent female who is at once seductive and transgressive and therefore dangerous, an object of both adoration and male anxiety.



Fig. 4 (00:34:15): Lyda Borelli as Diana receiving fans in *Love Everlasting* (1913).

Borelli's actual life mirrored key facets of this discourse and indeed played out aspects of her first diva film's narrative in a startling way. In the wake of *Love Everlasting* Borelli became a household name. Young women in Italy began to imitate the iconic movements and gestures they had seen on screen in a dynamic reversal where life now imitated art. The verb *borelleggiare* entered

the lexicon to describe this mimicry, echoing the earlier fashion captured in the word *duseggiare*, which meant acting in the fashion of the great stage diva Eleonora Duse.²¹ Borelli's presence on screen thus not only extended into her own life but also reshaped elements of how other women lived. At the same time, her subsequent film roles amplified these same elements: in *Rapsodia satanica* [*Satanic Rhapsody*] (begun as early as 1914 but first screened in 1917) and *Malombra* (1917), for instance, Borelli's characters exhibit the same distinctive acting style, the same gestures, the same iconic imprint of the diva. Likewise, in both of these films, the plot traces the familiar lines we have seen before: art fuses with life, but that fusion proves deadly.²²

If Borelli's presence in the popular imagination made her screen performances (her art) into elements of the actual world (life) by way of the fans who imitated her, we can also say that her life story shares an eerily parallel arc to that of her protagonist in *Love Everlasting*. In 1918, only five years after her film debut, Borelli retired to marry the Count Vittorio Cini – just as her character in *Love Everlasting* had seduced a nobleman with her performance. Like Dorian's Sibyl, who calls her lover 'Prince Charming', *Love Everlasting* recognizes the fascination and danger that 'lowly' acting holds for the upper echelons of society. That Borelli's real life should act out this same script is thus somewhat uncanny. Even if, in contrast to her characters on screen, Borelli died an undramatic death, her life story nevertheless realizes the key gender dynamic at the root of the femme fatale storyline: the dangerous independence of the woman artist is in either case contained again, neutralizing the threat that the New Woman poses to the traditional, masculine social structure [fig. 5].²³ If on screen only a spectacularly dramatic death would suffice to contain her, in life it was enough that she ascended the aristocratic hierarchy and renounced her role as diva – she appeared on screen again only twice, when she briefly came out of retirement to make propaganda films during the Great War, no longer representing the same decadent New Woman as before.

The femme fatale on screen, however, inhabits a different space, and her very purpose is to die in a performance of overt theatricality. This may have been captured best in an article penned

by Colette, that famous French New Woman who had liberated herself through her art and gained thunderous notoriety through her scandalous love life and performances. Writing a series of four reflections on cinema for *Excelsior* in 1918, she answers the question of what must happen to a femme fatale: ‘She dies, preferably on three stairs covered by a carpet’.²⁴



Fig. 5 (01:16:25): Lyda Borelli and Mario Bonnard in the final scene of *Love Everlasting* (1913).

Act III. Cinematic Aestheticism: The Mediated Actress and Modern Decadence

Colette’s words mock the by-then standard visual tropes of the femme fatale. She knew from personal experience how these tropes worked: she had fashioned them as a screenwriter herself, working with the iconic French vamp, Musidora, whom she accompanied to Italy first in 1916–1917 for the premiere of *La Vagabonde* [*The Vagabond*] (1917) and then in 1918 when *La Flamme cachée* [*The Hidden Flame*] was shot in Rome.²⁵ Furthermore, Colette had fashioned her own public persona in the discursive space of the exotic diva or femme fatale, an image cultivated by her scandalous early performances in the music halls and on stage where she famously bared her breasts (in *La Chair* [*Flesh*]) and kissed her lesbian lover, Missy (the Marchioness de Belbeuf), who

cross-dressed as a male archeologist in *Le Rêve d'Égypte* [*The Egyptian Dream*] (1907), performed at the Moulin Rouge [fig. 6].²⁶ Her 1910 novel *La Vagabonde* drew autobiographically on these experiences to build her myth and turn it to financial gain. Colette had, in other words, fashioned a literary style and public image using the vocabulary of the diva – the New Woman who was at once a seductive spectacle and a transgressive danger in a moment of rapid social change.



Fig. 6: Colette in costume for *Le Rêve d'Égypte*, 1907. Photograph by Léopold-Émile Reutlinger.

Neither Borelli nor Colette died from fusing art and life. As in the decadent literary tradition, art here holds the place of honour, for in art it is possible to fashion the ‘ideal’ death that life rarely allows in practice. But this, we have seen, can happen in prose or on the stage as well as on screen. And if the proliferation of film widens the audience and thus amplifies the discourse of the decadent-aesthetic paradigm for acting, this seems to be a difference of degree rather than one

of kind. All of this begs the question as to whether there is anything particular to cinema's imagination of this decadent trope. It is to this question that I now want to turn.

One answer arises from amidst the heyday of the diva film genre in Italy via the pages of Luigi Pirandello's modernist novel about filmmaking, *Si gira... [Shoot!]* (first published in 1915). Pirandello's book views the film business from behind the scenes, using the first-person account of a cameraman working in the wild first years of the budding new industry in Rome. Its plot deconstructs the tropes of the diva film genre by mimicking the typical narrative arc of that genre in a humorous mode. At the same time, the novel also offers a literary theorization of film and its place in the transforming landscape of technological modernity, suggesting how the medium might be thought of as dangerous or even deadly in a way that mirrors the discourse on the diva as femme fatale.

The plot of *Si gira...* follows the familiar trajectory of the diva film's own favoured doomed-love-triangle tale. The first-person narrator, Serafino Gubbio, is obsessed with a film diva at the company where he finds work as a cinematograph operator. Through the lens of his obsession, we see a double (or triple, if we count Serafino's unrequited love) set of doomed love triangles emerge. The femme fatale in question is a mysterious Russian woman named Varia Nestoroff who has a tragic love affair with the protagonist's friend, subsequently driven to suicide when he discovers that she has been cheating on him with an actor, Aldo Nuti. Now in Rome, Nestoroff has taken up with another actor, but Aldo Nuti's return on the scene creates a new love triangle with equally deadly results. Nestoroff's character in the novel represents how the diva's on-screen personae and her off-screen 'reality' blend, as her off-screen love life mirrors the deadly on-screen personae she plays. This fusion is taken a step further as the plot reaches its culminating moment: Nuti, who is unable to regain Nestoroff's affection, ultimately becomes homicidal. The fatal event occurs as they film a key scene for her upcoming film, *The Woman and the Tiger*, in which Nuti's character is supposed to shoot a dangerous tiger he hunts in the wild – in reality a caged tiger that will be slaughtered for the sake of the film. But at the critical moment, he turns the gun

and instead shoots Nestoroff, with the result that the unharmed tiger pounces and slaughters Nuti. The novel thus ends with a grisly double-homicide in which art and life overlap in confusing and deadly ways. Nestoroff's personal story has fused with that of her diva femme-fatale character completely, not only through the fatal love-triangles that drive her lovers to despair but now also through a mad passion that has resulted in what Colette identified as the only possible outcome for a femme fatale: her own death. The exotic woman and the exotic animal, the tiger, likewise fuse – beautiful, deadly, and both only apparently wild and free though actually caged and contained.²⁷

Pirandello's novel offers an incisive understanding of the film system that it criticizes. The diva is a construction, an image. We are fascinated by what appears to be her wild exotic danger, but we can be fascinated by it only as long as it is false, as long as it is actually contained (not unlike the cage that contains the tiger, though it is invisible on screen thanks to the angle of the camera). At the same time, the novel also offers a clear vision of how the new medium unifies art and life in a deadly conjunction. Film allows the performer and the persona to merge in a way that exceeds what can happen in the theatre, where the performer remains an embodied individual who will disappear backstage when the performance has ended. But the image on screen has no backstage, and the actress projected in the cinema has been reduced to pure image – she is spectacle and nothing more. Throughout Pirandello's novel this aspect of film's mechanical transformation of acting is referenced by way of a repeated metaphor that figures the camera on its tripod as a giant black spider sucking the life out of the actress before it, converting her lived reality into mere celluloid and, eventually, a flickering image of light against a screen.

What Pirandello's novel shows us, then, is both how the film diva brings art and life together in a deadly fusion and also how the medium itself contributes to that fusion in a new way. This view of cinema as a medium that reduces life to a vulgar spectacle in order to appeal to the tastes of the masses recognizes the ways in which film gives rise to a new kind of audience. Similarly, while the theatre-goer may have gone backstage to see the diva in the flesh, the cinema audience

likewise expects the same kind of immersion whereby the actor or actress continues to *be* the iconic figure that they not only represent on screen but also, in fact, are. The burgeoning industry of celebrity culture, what would develop into the full culture industry in later years, is already present *in nuce* here.²⁸ And at its heart we find precisely the fusion of art and life idolized in the decadent-aesthetic outlook – one given literary form in the nineteenth century and lived out by the likes of Duse, Colette, Borelli, and the other divas of the silver screen.²⁹

Epilogue

The endurance of this nineteenth-century outlook in the medium of modernity par excellence speaks to one of the defining traits of decadence as a mode of modernism. As Vincent Sherry has argued, decadence and modernism are two sides of the same coin, both responding to a radical temporal rupture that constitutes the feeling of modernity as a ‘now’ separated from the ‘then’ of the receding past.³⁰ In the diva film’s decadent-aesthetic paradigm, we see the same dynamic at work: the new medium is figured as a danger, and at the same time film replicates the aesthetic ideals and tropes that animated previous media. Walter Benjamin identified this aesthetic continuity as the auratic aspect of cinema, fostered and exploited by the burgeoning culture industry of Benjamin’s day (the 1930s) where the celebrity figure became a new idol for the public to worship and a new way of containing what Benjamin saw as the revolutionary capacities of cinematic vision to reconfigure modern life.³¹ In the context of the early cinema this auratic aspect is thematized in the content of the films, which replicate the aesthetic fascination with the actress as a deadly site of art-life fusion. As the film industry develops, that aspect is increasingly sublimated into a celebrity culture that normalizes but also renders invisible the aesthetic impulse at its core.

This political reading of decadence follows the familiar pattern of labelling it a regressive aesthetic attitude attached, in the ultimate analysis, to fascism.³² But the story I have told here is indicative of why we should be cautious of such broad strokes: in fact, and in consonance with

arguments by scholars who have sought to rehabilitate the critical reception of decadence, the paradigm of art fusing with life that I have articulated here works in a fundamentally ambivalent way. While it surely engages the auratic aestheticism that Benjamin decries, it also highlights the visibility of a new type of woman whose sexuality and independence challenge the old order; as a space of queer experience, decadence contributes to a shifting social imaginary that responds to the changed conditions of modernity even at the same time that it clings nostalgically to a lost past.

¹ The literature on Baudelaire and aestheticism is extensive. Françoise Meltzer articulates Baudelaire's aestheticism in relation to his situation at a historical threshold in her *Seeing Double: Baudelaire's Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

² Rhonda K. Garelick, *Rising Star: Dandyism, Gender, and Performance in the Fin de Siècle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 28. Cf. Rosemary Lloyd, *Baudelaire's World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 188.

³ Margaret Miner shows how the theatre pervades Baudelaire's imagination with what she nicely calls a 'paradoxically marginal centrality', in 'Music and Theatre', *The Cambridge Companion to Baudelaire*, ed. by Rosemary Lloyd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 145–63 (p. 144).

⁴ Charles Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen*, trans. by Louise Varèse (New York: New Directions, 1970), p. 54. Further references cited parenthetically in the text.

⁵ My interpretation of the 'heroic' death thus adds an important element to Francis Heck's reading: 'Baudelaire's Une mort héroïque: A New Interpretation', *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature*, 33 (1979), 205–11. Heck sees the actor as a martyr of art's true, pure expression (p. 210), but we must add that it is only through this martyrdom that the ideal of art could be realized in the first place.

⁶ As Matei Calinescu observes, the 'aesthetic-historical category' of decadentism is itself the product of a transformation in notions of decadence; see *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), p. 157. Likewise, the scope of the term shifts in different cultural contexts, and in Italy, as Luca Somigli observes, 'the label "*decadentismo*" has come to identify much of what in other traditions is described as "modernism"'; see 'In the Shadow of Byzantium: Modernism in Italian Literature', in *Modernism*, Vol. II, ed. by Astradur Eysteinnsson and Vivian Liska (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007), pp. 911–29 (p. 922).

⁷ Auguste de Villiers de L'Isle-Adam, 'The Desire to Be a Man', in *French Decadent Tales*, trans. by Stephen Romer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 36–44 (p. 40).

⁸ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. by Joseph Bristow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 45–46. Further references cited parenthetically in the text.

⁹ The actress was coded as lowly and essentially a prostitute, although, as Angela Dalle Vacche shows, this label is reductive, masking degrees of complexity; see *Diva: Defiance and Passion in Early Italian Cinema* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), pp. 131–34.

¹⁰ Cf. Michael Subialka, 'The Seduction of Innocence: Erotic Aesthetics from Kierkegaard to Decadentism', in *Innocence Uncovered: Literary and Theological Perspectives*, ed. by Beth Dodd and Carl E. Findley (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 58–75; pp. 65–66.

¹¹ Oscar Wilde, et al., *The Trial of Oscar Wilde: From the Shorthand Reports* (Paris: C. Carrington, 1906), p. 55.

¹² Vincent Sherry, *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 25. Cf. Dustin Friedman, *Before Queer Theory: Victorian Aestheticism and the Self* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019); Matthew Burroughs Price, 'A Genealogy of Queer Detachment', *PMLA*, 130 (2015), 648–65.

¹³ D'Annunzio's aesthetic fusion of art and life is partially rooted in a particular approach to artistic attention, what Stefano Bragato has analyzed as D'Annunzio's 'sixth sense' in 'Of Attention: D'Annunzio's Sixth Sense', *Forum Italicum*, 51 (2017), 408.

¹⁴ Here I summarize Lucia Re's excellent 'D'Annunzio, Duse, Wilde, Bernhardt: Author and Actress between Decadentism and Modernity', in *Italian Modernism: Italian Culture between Decadentism and Avant-Garde*, ed. by Mario Moroni and Luca Somigli (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), pp. 86–129.

¹⁵ The shift toward a gendered model of the actress as diva is important in this regard. Cf. Julie K. Allen, 'Doing It All: Women's On- and Off-screen Contributions to European Silent Film', in *Silent Women: Pioneers of Cinema*, ed. by Melody Bridges and Cheryl Robson (Twickenham: Supernova Books, 2016), pp. 109–30; Katharine Mitchell,

'Beauty Italian Style: Gendered Imaginings of, and Responses to, Stage Divas in Early Post-Unification Literary Culture', *Italian Studies*, 70 (2015), 330–46; Francesco Pitassio, 'Famous Actors, Famous Actresses: Notes on Acting Style in Italian Silent Films', in *Italian Silent Cinema: A Reader*, ed. by Giorgio Bertellini (New Barnet: John Libbey Publishing, 2013), pp. 255–62.

¹⁶ Peter Bondanella, *A History of Italian Cinema* (New York: Continuum, 2009), pp. 8–14; Angela Dalle Vacche, 'The Diva Film: Context, Actresses, Issues', in *The Italian Cinema Book*, ed. by Peter Bondanella (London: British Film Institute, 2014), p. 25.

¹⁷ Dalle Vacche, *Diva: Defiance and Passion*, pp. 253 and 86–95.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

¹⁹ Stephen Gundle describes Borelli as a 'template for imitation' in *Mussolini's Dream Factory: Film Stardom in Fascist Italy* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2016), p. 43.

²⁰ Dalle Vacche, *Diva: Defiance and Passion*, p. 142.

²¹ Victoria De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy 1922-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 211. Cf. Cristina Jandelli, *Le dive italiane del cinema muto* (L'Epos, 2006), p. 18; Dalle Vacche, *Diva: Defiance and Passion*, p. 142.

²² Michael Subialka, 'Diva Decadence: Conflicted Modernity from Death to Regeneration', in *The Poetics of Decadence in Fin de Siècle Italy*, ed. by Stefano Evangelista, Valeria Giannantonio, and Elisabetta Selmi (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2017), pp. 273–98; pp. 277–86.

²³ Cf. Diana Aramburu, *Resisting Invisibility: Detecting the Female Body in Spanish Crime Fiction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019), pp. 29–30 and 81.

²⁴ 'Elle meurt, de préférence, sur trois marches recouvertes d'un tapis', my translation. Colette's 'La femme fatale', in Alain Virmaux, *Colette et le cinéma* (Paris: Fayard, 2004), p. 345.

²⁵ Virmaux, *Colette et le cinéma*, pp. 18–20.

²⁶ Patricia Tilburg argues that Colette's music-hall nudity is indicative of an 'active femininity' developing in the period in *Colette's Republic: Work, Gender, and Popular Culture in France, 1870-1914* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), p. 137. My argument is that this active femininity is itself a part of the ambivalence of the decadent discourse on acting.

²⁷ Luigi Pirandello, *Shoot! The Notebooks of Serafino Gubbio, Cinematograph Operator*, trans. by C. K. Scott Moncrieff (New York: Dodo Press, 2013). Cf. Michael Symimis, *The Great Black Spider on Its Knock-Kneed Tripod: Reflections of Cinema in Early Twentieth-Century Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012).

²⁸ John Welle, 'The Beginnings of Film Stardom and the Print Media of Divismo', in *The Italian Cinema Book*, ed. by Peter Bondanella (London: British Film Institute, 2014), pp. 17–23.

²⁹ In this regard my reading dovetails with that of David Weir in his consideration of 'Decadence and Cinema', in *Decadence and Literature*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and David Weir (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 300–15.

³⁰ Sherry, *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence*, p. 34.

³¹ Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility. Second Version', in *Selected Writings. Volume 3, 1935–1938*, ed. and trans. by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 101–33.

³² In addition to Benjamin, see Norberto Bobbio, *La filosofia del decadentismo* (Turin: Chiantore, 1944) and Giorgio Agamben, *L'uomo senza contenuto* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1970).

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.¹ 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.² 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*'.³ 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'.⁴ 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,⁵ more would reject any claim it might have to cultural significance – let alone any claim to be a form of art.⁶ 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.⁷ 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, Firbank 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.⁸

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.⁹ 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'.¹⁰ 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'.¹¹ 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 Symonds, 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.¹² In the mid-1910s, now in Hollywood, Chaplin read and admired works by Lafcadio Hearn and Frank Harris,¹³ getting to know Harris well in New York.¹⁴ He was by his own account fascinated by the life of Oscar Wilde,¹⁵ 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 1897.¹⁶ Eliot would have been 9 years old when Wilde began to call regularly at their family home in Dieppe,¹⁷ 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’.¹⁸ 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,¹⁹ 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’.²⁰ And again, on reading *De Profundis*, ‘Poor Oscar

Wilde, what a silly, conceited, inadequate creature he was and what a dreadful self-deceiver'.²¹ 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'.²² 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.²³ Having been inspired by Wilde to write stories about Pan in his teens,²⁴ 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 Symonds'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.²⁵

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.²⁶

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'.²⁷ 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'.²⁸ 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.²⁹ 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),³⁰ 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'.³¹ 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'³² – 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.³³ 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'.³⁴ 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.³⁵ 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'³⁶ – in his essays 'Vortex' and 'Vorticism'.³⁷ 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.³⁸ 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.³⁹ As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explains, ‘drug addiction is both a camouflage and an expression for the dynamics of same-sex desire and its prohibition’.⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹ 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,⁴² 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.⁴³ 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.⁴⁴ He read *Dorian Gray* ‘several times’ as an adolescent,⁴⁵ and one of his favourite sayings in later life was from *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*: ‘Each man kills the

thing he loves'.⁴⁶ 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].⁴⁷ 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).⁴⁸

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.⁴⁹

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'.⁵⁰ 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!⁵¹

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.⁵² 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.⁵³ 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.⁵⁴ 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.⁵⁵ 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.⁵⁶ 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.

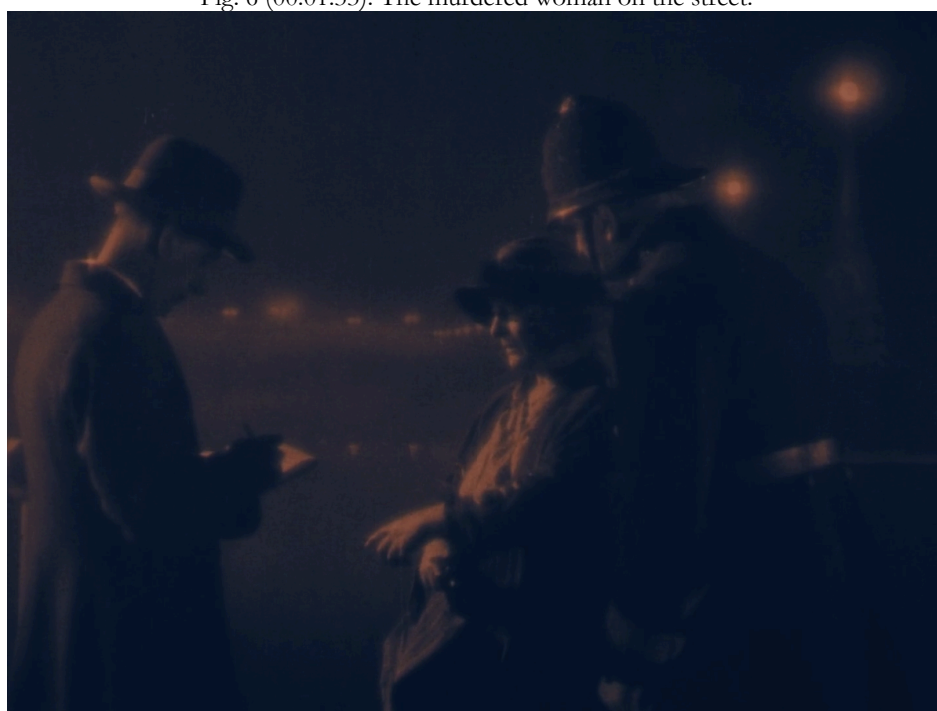


Fig. 7 (00:01:58): The policeman speaks to the witness while the reporter takes notes.

Trotter links Hitchcock's approach to sensuality with Émile Zola's 'spectacle of lowness itself' and the 'radical ordinariness' of Hitchcock's contemporary modernism.⁵⁷ However, looking at this opening scene in the context of the director's knowledge of Wildean aesthetics suggests an aesthetic influence closer to home.⁵⁸ 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'.⁵⁹ 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.

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

- ² 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).
- ³ Osbert Sitwell in Ifan Kyrle Fletcher, *Ronald Firbank: A Memoir* (London: Duckworth, 1930), p. 140.
- ⁴ Christopher Fowler, *Film Freak* (London: Doubleday, 2013), p. 125.
- ⁵ See Arthur Symons, 'At the Alhambra: Impressions and Sensations', in *Spiritual Adventures*, ed. by Nicholas Freeman (Cambridge: MHRA, 2017), pp. 97–98.
- ⁶ 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.
- ⁷ 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.
- ⁸ 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.
- ⁹ 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).
- ¹⁰ David Trotter, 'Hitchcock's Modernism', *Modernist Cultures*, 5 (2010), 106–26.
- ¹¹ 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.
- ¹² 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.
- ¹³ Charles Chaplin, *My Autobiography* (London: Penguin 2003), p. 239.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 258–59.
- ¹⁵ 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.
- ¹⁶ See Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Vintage, 1988), pp. 537–38.
- ¹⁷ 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.
- ¹⁸ Matthew Sturgis, *Oscar: A Life* (London: Head of Zeus, 2018), p. 634.
- ¹⁹ 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.
- ²⁰ Noël Coward, *The Noël Coward Diaries*, ed. by Graham Payne and Sheridan Morley (London: Macmillan, 1983), 14 July 1946, p. 60.
- ²¹ Coward, *Diaries*, 11 November 1949, p. 135.
- ²² Coward, *Diaries*, 21 April 1954, pp. 234–35.
- ²³ Philip Hoare, *Noel Coward: A Biography* (London: Mandarin, 1996), pp. 34, 40, 71–73.
- ²⁴ Coward, *Present Indicative* (London: Methuen Drama, 2004), p. 45.
- ²⁵ 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.
- ²⁶ Noël Coward, *Bitter Sweet* (London: Chappell & Co Ltd., 1929), pp. 146–47.
- ²⁷ Noël Coward, *A Withered Nosegay* (London: Methuen, 1984), p. 7.
- ²⁸ Noël Coward, *The Letters of Noel Coward*, ed. by Barry Day (London: Methuen, 2007), p. 157. Emphasis in original.
- ²⁹ Vincent Sherry, *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 266–67.
- ³⁰ Coward, *Present Indicative*, p. 174.
- ³¹ Rachael Low, *The History of the British Film, 1918–1929* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1971), p. 169.
- ³² Noël Coward, *The Vortex*, in *Collected Plays: One*, ed. by Sheridan Morley (London: Methuen, 1989), p. 76.
- ³³ 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).
- ³⁴ Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 151.
- ³⁵ Kate Hext, *Walter Pater: Individualism and Aesthetic Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), pp. 27–32.
- ³⁶ Ezra Pound, 'Vortex', *BLAST*, 1 (1914), 153.
- ³⁷ See Pound's acknowledgement of Pater in 'Vortex' (p. 154) and 'Vorticism', *Fortnightly Review*, 96 (September 1914), 461.

- ³⁸ 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.
- ³⁹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), pp. 171–72.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 172.
- ⁴¹ 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.
- ⁴² See Allen's discussion in *Hitchcock's Romantic Irony*, pp. 117 ff and Elsaesser, pp. 175ff.
- ⁴³ Allen, *Hitchcock's Romantic Irony*, p. 126.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁵ Donald Spoto, *The Dark Side of Genius: The Life of Alfred Hitchcock* (London: Frederick Muller, 1983), p. 264.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 460.
- ⁴⁷ Stephen Rebello, *Alfred Hitchcock and the Making of Psycho* (London: Marion Boyars Publishers, 1990), pp. 126–27.
- ⁴⁸ Mogg, 'Alfred Hitchcock Master of Paradox', n.p.
- ⁴⁹ 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).
- ⁵⁰ Quoted in Elsaesser, p. 177.
- ⁵¹ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 55–56.
- ⁵² 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.
- ⁵³ 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.
- ⁵⁴ 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.
- ⁵⁵ Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, 16 (1975), 8–10.
- ⁵⁶ 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 Cracksman* (London: Penguin, 2003), pp. xxvi–xxvii.
- ⁵⁷ Trotter, 'Hitchcock's Modernism', pp. 110–15, 109–10.
- ⁵⁸ Trotter admits that 'it is most unlikely that he stayed up late reading Zola' ('Hitchcock's Modernism', p. 115).
- ⁵⁹ Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 55.

In the Name of the Father:
Paul Czinner's *Fräulein Else* and the Fate of the *Neue Frau*

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'What does cinema know that we don't?'
— Rüdiger Suchsland¹

The question that the filmmaker Rüdiger Suchsland repeatedly asks in *From Caligari to Hitler: German Cinema in the Age of the Masses* (2014), his incisive documentary about the great films of the Weimar Era, is based on Siegfried Kracauer's landmark book of 1947: *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*. In the book, Kracauer does not frame his famous thesis as the question Suchsland poses, but the critic does indeed suggest that during the 1920s German cinema somehow knew something that even the filmmakers who were making that cinema did not, or, at least, something of which they were not fully aware. Why else would they make film after film glorifying the authority of powerful men of obscure origins who were capable of inculcating something like madness in their followers as a means of controlling them? Thus it is with sinister male authority figures such as the title characters of Robert Wiene's *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* [*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*] (1920) and Fritz Lang's *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler* [*Dr. Mabuse, the Gambler*] (1922). For Kracauer, *Caligari* 'glorifie[s] authority' and makes the title character 'a premonition of Hitler', while *Dr. Mabuse* is a 'tyrant film' set in a world that 'has fallen prey to lawlessness and depravity'. And even though the criminal mastermind Mabuse is eventually brought to justice, the agent of the law is not so different from Mabuse himself, 'a kind of legal gangster [who] is morally so indifferent that his triumph lacks significance'. 'To be sure', Kracauer concludes, 'Mabuse is wrecked; but social depravity continues'.²

But what of the women in such films? The full history of how women are represented in the films of the Weimar Era has not been written (at least not in the same encyclopedic sense that Kracauer chronicled the cinematic precursors of fascism). If we ask what Weimar cinema might

know about the women of the era we are sure to arrive at more than one answer, but one of them has to be that the films of the period capture something of the economic desperation many women most certainly felt, and, moreover, show how they dealt with that desperation – by selling their own bodies, if not to those all-powerful men that Kracauer identifies as the cinematic prototypes of fascist authority then to other men who were ultimately all too willing to accept such authority. To be sure, the *neue Frauen* [new women] of the Weimar Era experienced a level of independence and self-determination perhaps unprecedented at that point in history, but the age was also rife with opportunity for the sexual exploitation of women in a society at once highly erotic and economically unstable. This is certainly something that cinema knew during the Weimar Era: that the conflict between sexual and economic freedom was especially stressful for a great many German women. But, as we shall see, that reality was not the only thing that cinema knew in the twilight of the Weimar Republic.

From Austro-Hungary to Weimar Germany

Questions about the role of women in Weimar society become especially pertinent in Paul Czinner's *Fräulein Else* (1928, premièred 1929), adapted from the 1924 Arthur Schnitzler novella of the same name. Though published after the Great War, the novella is clearly set well before it, on September 3rd of an unspecified year during the 1890s. Narrated exclusively from the point of view of the nineteen-year-old protagonist Else in stream-of-consciousness style, the story presents a collection of characters from the haute bourgeoisie vacationing in the Dolomites at a time when the region was still a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Viennese social world to which they belong is still intact, however corrupt and compromised it may be by the excesses of capitalist ideology. Indeed, the plot hinges on Else's father's desperate need to cover his losses from speculating in the stock market and gambling to make up those losses. The father is a lawyer who has embezzled money from a trust fund he manages and has been found out by the district attorney, who is threatening arrest unless the money is paid back within a few days – on September

5th, in fact. Else receives this news in the form of a letter from her mother on the evening of the 3rd, after having earlier let her mother know that Herr von Dorsday, a wealthy art dealer and friend of the family, is also staying at her hotel. The mother tells her daughter that she must request a substantial amount of money from Dorsday to save her father from ruin, and when Else does exactly that, Dorsday counters that he will do so only if the beautiful young woman agrees to stand naked before him in his hotel room (or in a small clearing in the nearby woods) for fifteen minutes. Else is thoroughly unnerved by the prospect but, after a tortured process of reflection and rationalization (that includes the admission that she enjoys exhibitionism),³ she lets drop the coat she is wearing and stands naked before Dorsday – not in his room but in the hotel’s music salon, where other guests and her friends also see her. ‘Der Papa ist gerettet’ (p. 117) [Papa is saved (p. 252)], she says to herself, then collapses to the floor. Else is taken to her room, seemingly comatose but completely conscious, and when those who are attending her look away for a moment, she gulps down an overdose of the barbiturate Veronal (common treatment, at the time, for menstrual pain) and dies.

Czinner’s cinematic adaptation necessarily varies from Schnitzler’s literary original in significant ways. The first and most important difference is the double shift from pre-war Viennese society to post-war Weimar society. Although the film is supposedly set in Vienna, there is nothing specifically Viennese about it, aside from one location shot showing the Michaelerplatz through the Hofburg Palace gate known as the Michaelertor [fig. 1]. Yet even that shot, which tracks backward from the Michaelerplatz, shows not the neo-baroque Hofburg Palace but the Goldman & Salatsch Building (on the left), designed by the modernist architect Adolf Loos in 1910, that sits across the square from the palace. Czinner, in other words, seems intent on capturing images that his Weimar audience could readily identify as modern first, with the Viennese meaning secondary at best, to update the narrative to contemporary times. The second shift is the aesthetic transposition from the verbal to the visual medium, always a crucial point of difference in cinematic adaptations of literary works. Here, however, the shift is even more crucial because of

the stream-of-consciousness technique, which could easily have been handled by means of a narrative voice-over in a talking picture but has no easy cognate in a silent film. A third difference likely follows from the second one and exists as a partial solution to the problem of representing Else's inner narrative by means of the silent medium; that narrative includes critical information about her father and his desperate financial circumstances, information which Czinner chooses to represent by shifting parts of the literary narrative to a segment of the cinematic scenario dramatizing the steps leading to the father's ruin. The fourth and final difference concerns Czinner's decision to re-sequence a critical moment in the literary narrative – Else's suicidal downing of the draught of Veronal – from after the public display of nudity to before.



Fig. 1 (00:11:19): The Michaelerplatz in Vienna, with Adolph Loos' modernist office building on the left.

Of these various differences – large and small – none is more crucial to the transformation of Schnitzler's literary narrative to Czinner's cinematic diegesis than the vast socio-historical contrast between Vienna in the declining years of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (1867–1918) and Berlin at the height of the culturally vigorous but politically doomed Weimar Republic (1919–

1933). Each of these societies was decadent in different ways, with Schnitzler's fin-de-siècle Vienna illustrating the moral hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie in the context of imperial decline, while Czinner's Jazz Age Vienna-cum-Berlin reveals some of that same hypocrisy in a more vigorously hedonistic and consumerist context that, true to Krakauer's thesis, portends the destruction of the Republic.

The Bourgeois Milieu of Schnitzler's *Fräulein Else*

The historian Peter Gay so identified the bourgeois culture that developed in the period between Napoléon's defeat at Waterloo in 1815 and the outbreak of The Great War in 1914 with Arthur Schnitzler that he named the era 'Schnitzler's Century'. This despite the fact that, as Gay says, the Austro-Hungarian version of the bourgeois class, especially the liberal wing to which Schnitzler belonged, 'suffered catastrophic reverses'.⁴ Whereas in England the middle classes had seen an increase in political power through a series of reform acts (in 1832, 1867, and 1884) that resulted in greater bourgeois representation in the House of Commons, liberal reform more or less stalled out in Austro-Hungary after the extension of manhood suffrage in 1873, and even that reform empowered only about six per cent of adult males at the ballot box.⁵ Constraints on the political power of the bourgeoisie, especially those in the professions (such as Schnitzler's father and Schnitzler himself, both medical doctors), were more pronounced in metropolitan Vienna, where those following the professions were more likely to congregate.

Whatever difficulties members of the middle classes may have had in Austro-Hungary in comparison with their fellows in France or England, in Vienna the problems faced by the bourgeoisie were particularly acute among the Jewish community. Towards the end of the century, Vienna's Jewish population became increasingly isolated from society at large, the imperial validation of the 1895 election of the anti-Semite Karl Lueger as mayor of Vienna in 1897 serving to certify a longstanding but largely underground trend in Viennese society. Earlier, both Sigmund Freud in the 1860s and Schnitzler in the 1870s had remarked on the sense of optimism among

Vienna's Jewish population, but by the 1890s the anti-Semites had begun to stage public demonstrations.⁶ During the period, members of the professions – like Schnitzler and the characters he created for *Fräulein Else* – were more likely to be victims of anti-Semitism because conversion from Judaism to Catholicism was not, strictly speaking, a necessity for them, as it was for those Jews who sought careers in the imperial army or the government bureaucracy.⁷

Dating the story to the Viennese fin de siècle, then, becomes of critical importance to understanding the socio-political context of *Fräulein Else* and the sensibility of the story's eponymous protagonist. Some scholars date the action specifically to 1896, others more generally to 1896–1897,⁸ and while it may not be that important to date the action with absolute precision, much of the story's meaning depends on knowing that the action occurs during a period when anti-Semitic activities were on the rise in Vienna. Whatever the particular year, it surely matters that Schnitzler has taken pains to set the action in the period between Leuger's popular election in 1895 and his imperial ratification in 1897. One of the best clues to the time of the action is Else's memory of 'maybe the only time [she] was really in love',⁹ 'Mit dreizehn war ich vielleicht das einzige Mal wirklich verliebt. In den Van Dyck – oder vielmehr in den Abbé Des Grieux, und in die Renard auch' (p. 10) [with Van Dyck the tenor – no the Abbé Des Grieux – and with Marie Renard, the soprano (p. 194)]. The reference is to Jules Massenet's *Manon* (1884), which premiered in Vienna in 1890 with the Belgian tenor Ernest Van Dyck as Des Grieux and Renard as Manon. Else says she was thirteen when she fell in love with both the character played by Van Dyck and with the soprano Renard [fig. 2], so that would date the action of the novella to 1896 because Else is nineteen years old in the story – assuming she saw a performance in the year the opera had its première.¹⁰ The fin-de-siècle context helps to explain a number of details that run through Else's mind concerning her Jewish background, and, as the Austrian specialist Andrew Barker claims, 'Perhaps more than in any other single work of Schnitzler's, the milieu of *Fräulein Else* is a Jewish one'.¹¹



Fig. 2: An opera card showing Van Dyck as Des Grieux and Renard as Manon in Massenet's *Manon Lescaut*.

The best example of the way this milieu informs the meaning of the story concerns Else's reflections on her own status as a middle-class Jew, which involves a sense of social superiority over her antagonist Dorsday, whose wealth and air of nobility, in Else's view, cannot disguise his provincial origins:

Nein, Herr Dorsday, ich glaube Ihnen Ihre Eleganz nicht und nicht Ihr Monokel und nicht Ihre Noblesse. Sie könnten ebensogut mit alten Kleidern handeln wie mit alten Bildern. – Aber Else! Else, was fällt dir denn ein. – O, ich kann mir das erlauben. Mir sieht's niemand an. Ich bin sogar blond, rötlichblond, und Rudi sieht absolut aus wie ein Aristokrat. Bei der Mama merkt man es freilich gleich, wenigstens im Reden. Beim Papa wieder gar nicht. (p. 27)

[No, Herr Dorsday, I'm not taken in by your elegance, or by your monocle, or by your air of nobility. You might just as well be dealing in old clothes as in old paintings. – But Else! Else, what are you saying? – Oh, I can say it. No one can tell by looking at me. I'm even a blonde, a strawberry blonde, and Rudi [her brother] looks absolutely like an

aristocrat. Of course it's obvious with Mama, at least when she talks. But it's not [at all] with Papa. (p. 203)]

Here, Else herself makes anti-Semitic remarks about Dorsday but gives herself license to do so since she thinks she does not look Jewish because of her blonde hair. She further reflects that her brother Rudi looks like a 'real' aristocrat, in contrast to Dorsday, whom Else twice refers to as 'der Vicomte von Eperies' (pp. 76, 95) [the Vicomte von Eperjes (pp. 204, 229)]. Eperjes is the Hungarian name of the town now known as Prešov in Eastern Slovakia, so here, as Barker puts it, Else expresses 'metropolitan contempt for a man whose all-too visible roots are not in cultivated Vienna [...], but in a *shtetl*'.¹²

Earlier, before she receives the letter from her mother, Else runs into Dorsday and thinks: 'Schraubt sich künstlich hinauf. Was hilft Ihnen Ihr erster Schneider, Herr von Dorsday? Dorsday! Sie haben sicher einmal anders geheißen' (p. 13) [He's just an artful social climber. A first-class tailor isn't enough, Herr von Dorsday! Dorsday! I'm sure your name used to be something else (p. 195)]. Dorsday has evidently been ennobled in fact (as the honorific 'von' suggests), an example of the way the emperor limited and controlled the power of the bourgeoisie – by dispensing minor titles rather than permitting political rights. Else's 'nobility', by contrast, is completely self-styled, itself evidence of a widespread social phenomenon in fin-de-siècle Vienna among nouveau-riche Jews, one that ultimately made them the target of anti-Semitic attacks as a so-called 'Young Aristocracy'.¹³ One of the more layered ironies of the novella is that the provincial Dorsday has a legitimate claim to nobility, whereas the metropolitan Else does not – but styles herself such by virtue of her father's wealth and her elevated cultural tastes. The family crisis, however, makes her realize just how tenuous her class privileges are, now that she is forced into the encounter with the man she believes to be her social inferior: 'Ich werde mit Herrn Dorsday aus Eperies sprechen, werde ihn anpumpen, ich die Hochgemute, die Aristokratin, die Marchesa, die Bettlerin, die Tochter des Defraudanten' (p. 29) [I'll talk to Herr Dorsday, the Vicomte von Eperjes, and will solicit money from him. I, the high-minded Else, the aristocrat, the marchesa, the beggar maid,

the embezzler's daughter (p. 204)]. The sequence of epithets Else assigns to herself not only captures the moral hypocrisy of the bourgeois class to which she belongs but also reveals that her present circumstances have forced her to recognize that hypocrisy and come to terms with it: she may have styled herself a high-minded aristocrat, but now she knows she is nothing more than the daughter of a gambler who, most assuredly, is no mastermind like Mabuse.

The *Neue Frau* and the Modern World of Czinner's *Fräulein Else*

The social world of Czinner's *Fräulein Else* is radically different from the one represented in Schnitzler's fin-de-siècle original. The novella may be set entirely in the Dolomites, but the characters are old-world Viennese bourgeoisie through and through. While it is true that Else herself belongs to a new generation, she ultimately falls victim to the older generation represented by her father and Dorsday. The contrast between old and new comes into play through the parallel contrast of the fin-de-siècle story and the modernist technique used to tell it, whereby the avant-garde style casts the retrograde social world that Else is forced to inhabit in a harsher light. But in Czinner's *Fräulein Else*, there is no conflict between the social world of the modern urban bourgeoisie and the medium of its representation. Indeed, the medium of modern cinema gives us a world that is likewise thoroughly modern, so much so that it seems to be based more on contemporary Berlin than post-war Vienna. The film, of course, is ostensibly set in Vienna, but, aside from a brief, double-exposure montage representing Else's shopping trip in preparation for her mountain holiday, the backward tracking shot of the Michaelerplatz immediately following that montage, and the subsequent scene at the train station where her parents see Else off, there are no location shots in the opening Vienna section of the film (and only the Michaelerplatz shot is identifiable as specifically Vienna), or, for that matter, in a later section that returns to Vienna to dramatize the father's financial difficulties. In 1928, when the film was shot, Vienna's reputation as the apotheosis of modernity was mostly a thing of the past, so it makes sense for Czinner not to insist on a realistic Viennese setting in favour of a kind of metaphorical Berlin as the urban

impetus to the modern world represented on the screen. That world is practically personified by the great Elisabeth Bergner, who plays Else as an extremely sympathetic *neue Frau*, all innocence and energy. With her bobbed hair and boyish figure, Bergner's Else must have seemed a compellingly contemporary figure to those who saw her at the film's world première on 7 March 1929 at the Capitol Theatre on the Budapesterstrasse, one of the largest movie palaces in Berlin (1,300 seats).¹⁴ No doubt Vienna also had its *neue Frauen* (after all, the Weimar star Bergner was herself Viennese), but the modern social type was – and is – so identified with the city on the Spree that the pervasive presence of that type (Else is not the only *neue Frau* on the screen) is enough to shift the urban sensibility that the film captures in the direction of Berlin.

That shift, however, highlights certain other modifications that the modernization of the story entails. If the film moves the action not only from the fin de siècle to the 1920s but also from the Austro-Hungarian Empire in fact to a kind of crypto-Vienna that is 'really' Weimar Berlin, then of course Schnitzler's story is bound to acquire new meanings. By far the most significant difference between novella and film is Czinner's removal of any suggestion that Else and her family – not to mention Dorsday – are Jewish. Barker points out that in writing *Fräulein Else* Schnitzler 'was looking back at a period [...] that could be seen to have provided the seeds for both the financial and racial woes of the present age'. The novella, in other words, gave Schnitzler an opportunity to contemplate the 'modern antisemitism' contemporary with the story's composition by reflecting back on the 'old Judeophobia' that is such an important component of his characters' fin-de-siècle world.¹⁵ By modernizing the story for the screen and setting it in contemporary times, Czinner obviously loses the opportunity to contrast the present age with an earlier one, but given the cultural context of Weimar Germany either the director or the writer must have felt that making the main characters of the film Jewish would have entailed a high degree of risk. Had Czinner insisted on the Jewish identity of the protagonist, much of his contemporary audience would likely not have sympathized as strongly with her victimization. The Weimar historian Eric Weitz comments on the rise of anti-Semitism in the form of popular imagery during the period, noting

that ‘the anti-Jewish image’ was ‘even more virulent in the 1920s’ than in prior decades. He quotes contemporary commentators, in this case a leader of the Lutheran Church, who warned against ‘the threat posed by a totally degenerate and degenerating urban spirit, whose bearer is first and foremost the Jewish race’.¹⁶ Schnitzler could allude to anti-Semitism in a much more circumspect way through the medium of avant-garde fiction than Czinner ever could by means of the mass entertainment medium of modern cinema, but whatever the rationale, the fact is that the Jewish milieu of the novella is nowhere to be found in the film. Czinner and Bergner were both Jewish, but Czinner was obviously behind the camera, and Bergner was known for her ability to ‘pass’ as non-Jewish;¹⁷ moreover, aside from Bergner, there are no Jewish actors in the film.¹⁸

The removal of the Jewish context effectively heightens Else’s sexual dilemma and makes her victimization by the brutish Dorsday seem more severe. This is so because, in the novella, Else feels a certain bond with Dorsday, and this bond complicates the action considerably. Yes, the metropolitan Else feels a sense of social superiority over the provincial Dorsday, but the very terms of that superiority derive from differences in their status within the same cultural community. Else the ‘aristocratic’ Jew may harbour resentments against the Jewish Dorsday for being noble in name only, but they are both Jews tasked with negotiating their minority status within the larger Viennese society as best they can. This sense of commonality may account for Else’s occasional recognition of Dorsday’s appeal, as when she observes that ‘Er sieht noch immer ganz gut aus mit dem graumelierten Spitzbart’ (pp. 12-13) [He still looks pretty good with his greyish Van Dyck beard (p. 195)]. Mostly however, Else’s interest in Dorsday comes across in unconscious fashion – through her perverse fantasies of exhibitionism (which we know she has enacted on at least one occasion; see note 3), for example, thereby making her and the voyeuristic Dorsday complementary figures, psychologically speaking. The novella is replete with unconscious intimations of Else’s desire for Dorsday that might justly be called Freudian, not least because Freud himself was struck by how closely Schnitzler’s fictional explorations of sexuality resembled his own clinical investigations.¹⁹ (In the film, the only Freudian enactment concerns not Dorsday

but the father (Albert Bassermann), in an Oedipal moment when Else removes the band from her father's cigar and places it on her finger [fig. 3]). The larger point here is that the removal of the Jewish bond with Dorsday also removes the sense of Else's own perversity and depravity that the bond entails.²⁰



Fig. 3 (00:08:44): Else's Oedipal moment.

In addition, the removal of the Jewish milieu in Czinner's film all but eliminates one of the more explicitly decadent features of the novella: the relationship of the story of Else to the drama of *Salome*, an association that is clearly intended in Schnitzler's original. As Barker says, 'The allusions to *Salome* in *Fräulein Else* are [...] particularly apt since both works feature prominently the public unveiling of main female (Jewish) characters to assuage lascivious male (Jewish) voyeurs'.²¹ Barker has in mind not Oscar Wilde's play but Richard Strauss opera that was based on it, which he says Schnitzler saw performed at least five times, once in 1922 as he was working on *Fräulein Else* (p. 79 n.40). Perhaps the clearest allusion to Strauss's *Salome* comes near the end of the novella, as Else walks about naked in her hotel room and looks at the image of herself in the mirror: 'Ach, kommen Sie doch näher, schönes Fräulein. Ich will Ihre blutroten Lippen küssen'

(p. 100) [Oh, won't you come closer, beautiful Fräulein? I want to kiss your blood red lips (p. 242)]. In both the play and the opera, of course, the most memorable scene is the one near the end where Salome kisses Jokanaan's decapitated head on the lips, described earlier as being various shades of red. In the novella, as she gazes at her image in the mirror, Else seems like some combination of Salome and Jokanaan, at once temptress and victim. She is, after all, doing what Dorsday has said he wants to do. Only the presence of the Salome dynamic in the novella allows us to entertain a like relationship between Else and Dorsday in the film. To be sure, the perverse and powerful Dorsday (Alfred Steinrück) might be compared to Herod, since he appears in the film as the ageing libertine he is in the novella (the first shot of the character shows him reading the mildly risqué *La Vie Parisienne* [fig. 4]), but for precisely that reason he has nothing in common with the virginal Else, who has no interest in tempting and manipulating Dorsday as Salome does Herod. Indeed, she reacts to Dorsday's initial greeting – formal yet somehow overly-familiar – with a mixture of courtesy and bafflement: she hardly knows the man and takes no interest in him whatsoever until she is forced to do so. After meeting him, Else writes a letter to her mother informing her that 'a Herr von Dorsday' recognized her immediately, even though she 'has no recollection of him' at all ['Ich kann mich nicht an ihn erinnern']. The dynamics of desire in the film, unlike in the novella, clearly run in only one direction.

Czinner's Else, in short, is much more innocent and appealing than Schnitzler's; less neurotic, certainly; slight, refined, but also physically vigorous. In the film, the first glimpse we get of Else is almost furtive – all we see is an unidentifiable young woman from behind as she walks briskly out of a room at a lavish party in her parents' house. Possibly, the director deliberately placed his Weimar audience in the position of Dorsday later on – they are eager to *see* Else, or, at least, the famous actress Bergner playing the role that she originated to great acclaim on the stage.²² In any event, the audience has to wait just over three minutes before they really see Else with her cousin Paul (Jack Trevor), picking out sheet music – Schubert – for a piano duet with Paul on violin, which they perform at the party.²³



Fig. 4 (00:17:20): The first shot of Dorsday, reading *La Vie Parisienne*.

The musical segment serves as both a social and a formal device: it helps to establish high culture as part of the bourgeois social milieu of the household, but it also balances against the disastrous ending of the film, in which Else also ‘performs’ – not in a music salon to the accompaniment of Schumann, as in the novella, but at a formal gala with a jazz band providing the music. In the film’s first music scene, Else is shown seated at the piano from behind, her spirited playing style suggesting a young woman confident in her abilities and comfortable in the social world she inhabits. At the end of the film, Else is shown from the front, briefly, calling out ‘Herr von Dorsday’ (no title card is necessary because her lips are easy to read) before a reverse-angle cut shows her from behind as she lets the coat she is wearing drop. In both the opening party scene and the closing scene at the hotel, Else is surrounded by fashionable men and women in evening wear – the women in elegant gowns and the men in tuxedos: another visual element that serves to balance the beginning of the film with the end. But this is not formalism for formalism’s sake because the end of the film undercuts the beginning by showing the final result of the father’s

financial irresponsibility and Dorsday's predatory perversity, both species of bourgeois social decadence that leave Else with the impossible choice between submission and suicide.

That she manages to choose both is partly the result of her own sense of herself as a 'verworfenen Geschöpf' (p. 84) [depraved creature (p. 233)] in the novella, but the absence of this dimension in the film increases the sense of injustice and victimization, suggesting that the vivacious, innocent young woman has been punished for the misdeeds of the profligate father, with the predatory Dorsday as the agent of punishment. Cinema here seems to know that German society would find certain types of women more acceptable than others in the coming years, and it was precisely the *neue Frau* of the Weimar Era who would not survive the rise of fascism. As Weitz puts it, "The new woman seemed to threaten the very existence of the nation or race. By pursuing her own pleasures, she revealed a self-indulgence that gnawed away at the core of the people: she should be having children, replenishing the population lost in the war".²⁴ To be sure, Bergner's Else is not a completely typical *neue Frau*: she is not economically independent, nor does she embody the negative stereotype of self-indulgent hedonism to any great degree; but she is clearly a modern woman who enjoys herself, and nothing about Bergner's characterization suggests that Else has any great wish to marry and start a family. There is one brief scene on the train to St. Moritz where Else plays with the child of the woman named Cissy (Grit Hegesa) with whom her cousin Paul is having an affair, but that scene does not convey maternal feeling so much as it does the child-like nature of Else herself (indeed, Else behaves in an almost identical way with a small dog later in the film).

The mise en scène of the film itself, however, suggests a conflict between what we might call 'Weimar woman' and 'National Socialist woman', between the liberated but degenerate *neue Frau* and the wholesome, healthy matron who satisfied the ideals of Aryan womanhood. Once Else leaves for her mountain vacation, the mise en scène is divided between brightly lit outdoor scenes in St. Moritz, site of the 1928 winter Olympics [fig. 5], and indoor scenes set in the luxury hotel showing the cream of interwar Continental society dining in evening wear, drinking

champagne, and dancing to jazz [fig. 6]. The fact that the St. Moritz scenes are interrupted by the shift back to Vienna dramatizing the stock market crash [fig. 7] and the ensuing financial ruin of Else's father only adds to the feeling of decadence which is captured by the scenes at the opulent Hotel Carlton.



Fig. 5 (00:19:28): Else and her cousin Paul at the 1928 Olympics in St. Moritz.



Fig. 6 (01:24:52): The ballroom scene at the Hotel Carlton.



Fig. 7 (00:20:37): The stock market crash.

Weimar audiences would have recognized those segments of *Fräulein Else* set in the Swiss Alps as a nod to one of the most popular film genres of the time, the *Bergfilm* [mountain film]. These films celebrated outdoor life in the high Alps as somehow expressive of the true German spirit. One of the most famous of these films, Arnold Fanck's *Der heilige Berg* [*The Holy Mountain*] (1926) critiques the kind of Alpine tourism we see in Czinner's film in favour of the more heroic values represented by the solitary mountain climber whose encounter with nature forces recognition of the sublimity and spirituality embodied by the high Alps. *Der heilige Berg* starred Leni Riefenstahl, whose acting career included several other mountain films directed by Fanck before she went on to direct one of her own, *Das blaue Licht* [*The Blue Light*] (1932). Numerous critics, following Kracauer, have seen in these films, with their 'grandiose images' and 'heroic idealism' a link to the 'underlying ideology' of fascism.²⁵ Kracauer devotes some three pages to the mountain film in *From Caligari to Hitler*, concluding that 'the idolatry of glaciers and rocks was symptomatic of an anti-rationalism on which the Nazis could capitalize'.²⁶ That assessment is certainly borne out by the sublime shots of towering clouds that open Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935), her

documentary of the 1934 Nuremberg Nazi Party Congress. Such shots were a feature of the mountain film (Kracauer mentions ‘the magnificent play of clouds forming mountains above the mountains’²⁷) and while nothing quite so ostentatious makes its way into the St. Moritz segment of *Fräulein Else*, it is indeed telling that forbidding shots of the high Alps [fig. 8] are intercut with shots of Else as she reads the letter from her mother announcing her father’s desperate straits, and, even more tellingly, when she is on her deathbed. Certainly, the closing mountain shots of Czinner’s film are subject to more than one interpretation, but one retrospective reading has to be that, consciously or not, the director has created a contrast between the degenerate modernity of Weimar, represented by the *neue Frau* on her deathbed, and the noble Aryan nation to come, represented by the sublime grandeur of the snow-capped Alps.



Fig. 8 (00:53:50): The tinted Alpine shot intercut with shots of Else reading her mother’s letter.

Else in Furs

The most critical diegetic segments of Czinner’s *Fräulein Else* are set inside the Hotel Carlton, or, more precisely, in the lobby and other public parts of the hotel (the bar, the lounge, the restaurant, the ballroom, and so on). For this reason, ‘The Hotel Lobby’ (written 1922–1925), another

Kracauer essay from the Weimar period, has contemporary relevance to the film. The critic describes the hotel lobby as a site of human alienation where people ‘become detached from everyday life’ and ‘find themselves *vis-à-vis de rien* [face to face with nothing]’. This severe assessment derives from Kracauer’s somewhat gratuitous comparison of the assembly of strangers in a hotel lobby to the congregation of a church, making the public spaces of the hotel ‘the inverted image of the house of God’, a ‘negative church’ where the guests ‘[l]ack any and all relation’, such that ‘the togetherness in the hotel lobby has no meaning’.²⁸ That, at least, is the way it should be, but Else finds herself forced to deal not with a lack of meaning but with more meaning than she can handle, thanks to her father’s dilemma and Dorsday’s craven exploitation of that dilemma. Moreover, her public display of nakedness, to say the least, shatters the formal emptiness and anonymity of the hotel lobby so intensely that the sudden advent of meaning shocks the other guests almost to the point of riot. The sense of panic is conveyed by a montage of rapid cuts on movement and a great variety of shot types – medium shots, close-ups, overhead shots, swish-pans, and more, with a number of shots showing different guests pantomiming the movement of disrobing in public. Here, at least, the film has the advantage over the novella because we can actually see the terrifying effects of Dorsday’s demand and Else’s response to that demand.

In 1928, the year *Fräulein Else* was filmed, Kracauer expressed disappointment with the state of film art at the time – the commercialization, the Americanization, etc. – and, especially, the lack of ‘*filmic construction*’: ‘The subjects that are chosen – apparently indiscriminately – are not at all visually conceived; Schnitzler, Zuckmayer, and Sudermann are the victims’.²⁹ Schnitzler appears on the list of literary ‘victims’ of mediocre directors because several of his works had been indifferently adapted for the screen in the 1920s (and even earlier), but Kracauer could not have seen Czinner’s film at the time he wrote the essay. Largely because of the work of the great cinematographer Karl Freund, whose earlier work with F. W. Murnau established the moving camera as the most influential element of Weimar cinema, *Fräulein Else* is nothing if not ‘visually conceived’. The power of the film over its last half-hour or so is impossible to convey by means

of verbal description, but two extended scenes in that last half-hour succeed in capturing the fraught emotional state of the protagonist in especially compelling fashion. In the first, the camera tracks Else through the hallways of the hotel as she nervously follows Dorsday after receiving the letter from her mother telling her what she must do to save her father. Alternately shooting from Else's and Dorsday's perspectives, the camera follows Else as she hesitates, turns away as Dorsday turns around, pretending to read a newspaper or ducking behind a column to avoid eye contact. Then Czinner cuts to track backward with Dorsday in the frame, shows him looking back, catching a glimpse of Else as she looks away, becoming more and more aware that she is following him [fig. 9]. Finally, the two meet, with Else feigning surprise, as though running into Dorsday were an accident, and, after a few false starts, she finally manages to explain her father's troubles, asks for help, and breaks down in tears. When Dorsday says he will wire the money if Else will let him 'see' her, she is confused until the man gestures toward a nude statuette of Venus [fig. 10], whereupon a sick look crosses Else's face as the realization dawns on her that she must, in effect, prostitute herself to save her father. The images truly tell the story here.

Else goes back to her room and discovers the vial of Veronal in a drawer. In the novella, Else has the Veronal as a remedy for menstrual pain, but in the film, she gets the vial after Paul finds it in Cissy's purse (Cissy says she needs it to help her sleep) and passes it to Else because he knows it is potentially dangerous and does not want Cissy to have it. We do not see Else empty the vial in the glass of water, but we do see a close-up of the empty glass [fig. 11] after Else leaves her room dressed in a coat with a fur collar and cuffs [fig. 12]. Schnitzler objected to the change in his story that has Else dosing herself with the fatal draft before the display of public nudity,³⁰ but the change works cinematically because it creates a sense of suspense and urgency: Else knows she has poisoned herself and has a limited amount of time to save her father by letting Dorsday see her naked. In fact, she enters Dorsday's room and panics when she discovers he is out – a pair of title cards gives us her thoughts: 'I really am ... poisoned!' ['Ich bin doch ... vergiftet!']. Now the second great scene begins as Else follows the same route through the hotel she took earlier,

only now the pace of the film quickens with Else's elevating anxiety. Will she find Dorsday in time? The camera tracks Else down the same hallway and flight of stairs she took before until, finally, she sees Dorsday. In the novella, this critical scene occurs in the hotel's music salon; in the film, we know the jazz band is playing for the guests dancing at the gala, but the scene is set in a gambling parlour, thereby completing the circle that began with Else's father, *der Spieler* who bet gleefully and recklessly, first on cards, then on stocks. As Else looks intently at Dorsday, standing with other men over what looks to be a roulette table, a reverse angle shot tells us that he sees her as she says his name; another shot taken from Else's point of view shows us Dorsday's shocked face – which blurs out of focus as Else loses consciousness – when the coat slips from her shoulders and Else collapses. Scenes of panic ensue as Else is taken to her room just as Paul and Cissy enter the hotel. By the time Paul reaches her room a doctor has pronounced the young woman dead. We see her face [fig. 13]. We see the distant mountains [fig. 14]. A final shot of Else's face dissolves to the shot of the high Alps. The film is over.



Fig. 9 (01:01:39): Else following Dorsday through the hotel lobby.

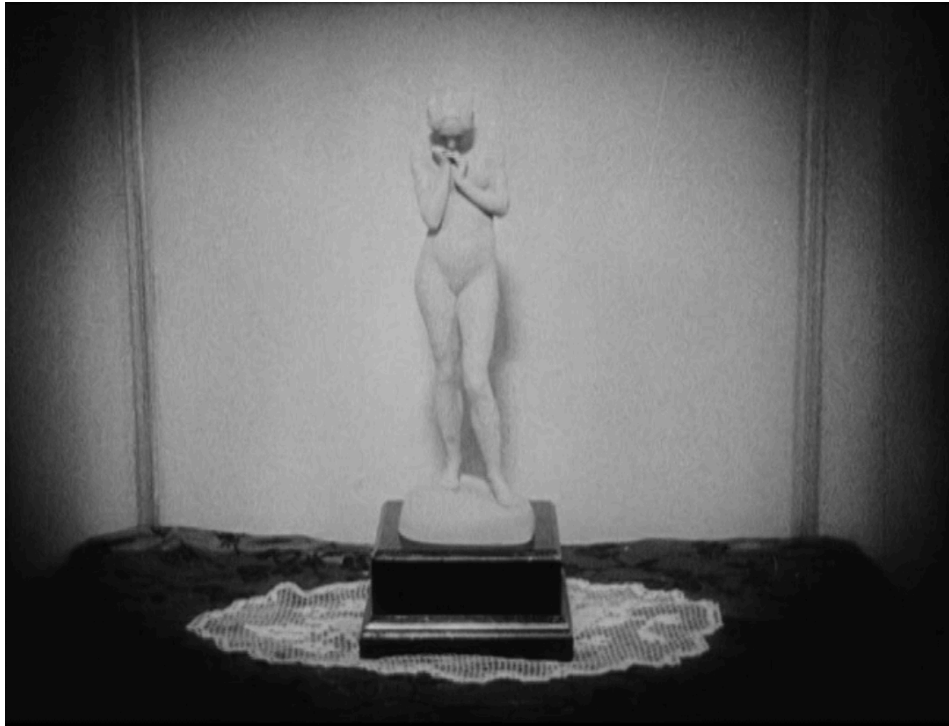


Fig. 10 (01:13:39): The nude statuette of Venus.



Fig. 11 (01:22:37): The empty glass and vial of Veronal, with a picture of Else's father at the far left of the frame.



Fig. 12 (01:23:04): Else in furs.



Fig. 13 (01:28:59): Else on her deathbed.



Fig. 14 (01:29:21): The final shot of the film.

Conclusion

In the end, *Fräulein Else* seems to have intimated quite a few things that contemporary cinema audiences could not possibly have known. The fictional stock market crash that they saw on the screen in March of 1929 looks forward to the real-life crash that was only seven months away. And while the removal of all Jews from the cinematic representation of modern German society was likely a conscious decision on the part of the filmmaker, that decision nonetheless portends the terrifying reality that lay ahead. The clock was ticking for women as well: in 1929, the *neue Frau* had only a few years left before all the freedom and independence she represented would come to an end; she would be superseded by a still ‘newer’ woman whose ‘newness’ lay in her subordination and service to the master race. In fact, only three days before Adolf Hitler was named Chancellor of Germany on 30 January 1933, an article in *Die literarische Welt* [*The Literary World*] announced that ‘[b]obbed hair and short skirts have beaten a retreat’, the military metaphor for the social change being perfectly consistent with the author’s observation that the *neue Frau* ‘never became average, never became the mass female’.³¹ In March 1929, the audience at the Capitol Theatre were

no doubt moved to see a modern young woman sobbing ‘Papa! Papa!’ before she makes what she thinks is the only choice available to her – to sacrifice herself for his sake. Only a few years hence, once the Führer rose to power, most of the women in Germany would do something similar in the name of the Father.

¹ Rüdiger Suchsland, *From Caligari to Hitler: German Cinema in the Age of the Masses* (New York: Kino Lorber, 2014), DVD.

² Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*, revised edition, ed. by Leonardo Quaresima (Princeton, NJ, and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 67, 72, 81, 82–83.

³ At one point Else recalls the pleasure she felt in knowing that two men were looking at her as she stood on a hotel balcony in her underwear: ‘Mein Gesicht haben sie [...] freilich nicht genau ausnehmen kommen, aber daß ich im Hemd war, das haben sie schon bemerkt. Und ich hab’ mich gefreut. Ah, mehr als gefreut. Ich war wie berauscht’ (p. 64) [Of course they couldn’t really make out my face [...], but they couldn’t help noticing that I was in my underwear. And I enjoyed it. Oh, more than enjoyed it. I was almost intoxicated (p. 223)]. Page citations are to Arthur Schnitzler, *Fräulein Else* (Berlin: Paul Zsolnay Verlag, 1924), and Arthur Schnitzler, *Fräulein Else*, in *Desire and Delusion: Three Novels*, trans. by Margret Shaefer (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2003). Further references to these editions are cited parenthetically in the text.

⁴ Peter Gay, *Schnitzler’s Century: The Making of Middle-Class Culture* (New York and London: Norton, 2002), p. 21.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Michael Burri, ‘Thedor Herzl and Richard von Schaukal: Self-Styled Nobility and the Sources of Bourgeois Belligerence in Prewar Vienna’, in *Rethinking Vienna 1900*, ed. by Steven Beller (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2001), p. 120.

⁸ Bettina Matthias, ‘Arthur Schnitzler’s Fräulein Else and the End of the Bourgeois Tragedy’, *Women in German Yearbook*, 18 (2002), 265 n.30, says ‘several allusions to cultural events in Vienna suggest the story takes place in 1896–97’, but she does not say what these events are.

⁹ Thanks to Professor Frank Krause for this translation.

¹⁰ Achim Aurnhammer, *Arthur Schnitzlers intertextuelles Erzählen* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2013), p. 194. The opera was extraordinarily popular with Viennese music-lovers and was performed multiple times, so Else might have seen a performance as a thirteen-year-old. In any event, the action of the story could not possibly have occurred later than 1898 because that is the year when Van Dyck left the Vienna Opera. See Demar Irvine, *Massenet: A Chronicle of His Life and Times* (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1994), p. 169; and J. B. K., ‘Letter from Vienna’, *The Monthly Musical Record*, 30.351 (1 March 1900), 57.

¹¹ Andrew Barker, *Fictions from an Orphan State: Literary Reflections of Austria between Hapsburg and Hitler* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2012), p. 51.

¹² Barker, *Fictions from an Orphan State*, p. 51.

¹³ Burri, ‘Thedor Herzl and Richard von Schaukal’, p. 120.

¹⁴ Matteo Galli, ‘Fräulein Else by Paul Czinner or Diegetic Negotiation’, in DVD booklet of *Fräulein Else*, directed by Paul Czinner, ed. by Stefano Boni and Grazia Paganelli (Florence, IT: CG Home Video, 2014), p. 43.

¹⁵ Barker, *Fictions from an Orphan State*, p. 57.

¹⁶ Eric D. Weitz, *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), pp. 321, 340.

¹⁷ Lisa Silverman, *Becoming Austrian: Jews and Culture between the World Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 223 n.12.

¹⁸ S. S. Praver, *Between Two Worlds: The Jewish Presence in German and Austrian Film, 1910–1933* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2005), p. 186.

¹⁹ See Freud to Schnitzler, 14 May 1922, *Letters of Sigmund Freud*, ed. by Ernst L. Freud, trans. by Tania and James Stern (New York: Dover, 1962), pp. 339–40. Shaefer’s English translation often acknowledges the ‘Freudian’ nature of Schnitzler’s text, as when she translates ‘Spitzbart’ (literally, ‘pointed beard’) as ‘Van Dyck beard’ after Else says that ‘she really was in love [w]ith Van Dyck, the tenor’ (p. 194). The association of the name of the tenor with whom Else claims to have been in love with the verbal description of Dorsday’s beard is precisely the sort of linguistic symptom of erotic interest conventionally called ‘Freudian’.

²⁰ Barker, *Fictions from an Orphan State*, pp. 53–54, enumerates a number of anti-Semitic stereotypes that are bound to make ‘a modern readership uneasy’, including ‘the projection of Jews as abnormally sexualized’.

²¹ Barker, *Fictions from an Orphan State*, p. 56.

²² Prawer, *Between Two Worlds*, p. 186, says that 'Bergman had performed the monologue on stage with great success, in Schnitzler's presence'.

²³ It is tempting to suppose that the sheet music is a piano-violin setting of the second movement of Schubert's String Quartet No. 14, known as *Der Tod und das Mädchen* [*Death and the Maiden*], or of the song by the same title from which the tune of the second movement is derived. But it is impossible to see any title on the sheet music other than 'Schubert', which Else selects after first considering something by Beethoven.

²⁴ Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, p. 328.

²⁵ Sabine Wilke, *German Culture and the Modern Environmental Imagination: Narrating and Depicting Nature* (Leiden and Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2015), p. 128.

²⁶ Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, p. 112.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

²⁸ Siegfried Kracauer, 'The Hotel Lobby', *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, ed. and trans. by Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 177, 175–76.

²⁹ Kracauer, 'Film 1928', *The Mass Ornament*, p. 313. The essay originally appeared in two parts in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* on 30 November and 1 December 1928 as 'Der heutige Film und sein Publikum' [Contemporary film and its audience]. In the essay Kracauer also suggests the need for the sort of comprehensive critical analysis of cinema that he later provided in *From Caligari to Hitler*.

³⁰ Schnitzler evidently objected to the change partly because he thought it limited the acting opportunities available to Bergner. He wrote to a friend that '[t]he idea I utterly opposed [...], where Else takes the "Veronal", before going to the lobby, naked under her fur coat, at the end has been kept; [...] and so what has come out is complete idiocy, but also many opportunities have been lost for Elisabeth' (quoted in Galli, 'Fräulein Else by Paul Czinner or Diegetic Negotiation', p. 49).

³¹ Alice Rühle-Gerstel, 'Back to the Good Old Days?', *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, ed. by Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 219, 218. The essay originally appeared as 'Zurück zur guten alten Zeit?', *Die literarische Welt*, 9.4 (27 January 1933), 5–6.

The Powerful Man: Young-Poland Decadence in a Film by Henryk Szaro

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In the Polish cinema of the interwar period, especially in the 1920s, it is difficult to find any depictions of the decadent worldview, although authors affiliated with decadence once dominated the artistic imagination prior to the First World War. To some extent, the disappearance of decadence was a result of Poland regaining national independence in 1918 after having been partitioned by three neighbouring countries for over one hundred years. Such films as *Dla Ciebie, Polsko* [*For You, Poland*] (dir. Antoni Bednarczyk, 1920) or *Cud nad Wisłą* [*The Miracle at the Vistula*] (dir. Ryszard Bolesławski, 1921) concentrate on a propagandist reconstruction of Polish identity by presenting a cohesive narrative of Polish history. Moreover, popular melodramas, often period pieces, referred to subjects previously barred by censorship. For example, a novel by Stefan Żeromski about one of the most tragically unsuccessful Polish uprisings, *Wierna rzeka* [*The Faithful River*] (1912), was adapted for the screen in 1922 as *Rok 1863* [*The Year 1863*] (dir. Edward Puchalski), while the Polish national epic poem *Pan Tadeusz* by Adam Mickiewicz (1834) was filmed in 1928 (dir. Ryszard Ordyński). Commercial filmmakers also produced entertaining films inspired by Hollywood.

It was only in 1929 that a production entitled *Mocny człowiek* [*The Powerful Man*], by the director Henryk Szaro (1900–1942), reminded the audience somewhat of the fin de siècle.¹ *The Powerful Man* is based on a literary trilogy by Stanisław Przybyszewski (1868–1927): *Mocny człowiek* (1911), *Wyzwolenie* [*The Liberation*] (1912), *Święty gaj* [*The Holy Grove*] (1913). The main character of the novel, Bielecki, is a sort of *Übermensch*, but also a decadent, torn between his art and his career, between common theft and true artistic creation. Having contributed to the death of a writer named Górski by giving him a lethal dose of strychnine, Bielecki steals Górski's manuscripts and poses as their author, gaining extraordinary fame. By exploiting lovers and collaborators,

committing further crimes, and destroying the works of other artists, he climbs higher and higher on the social ladder, while hitting rock bottom as an artist and a man. The novel concludes with Bielecki's ultimate self-annihilation when he decides to put his will to a definitive test and confesses to all of his crimes publicly. He is then shot by a painter named Borsuk, whose works Bielecki made his lover burn in the first volume of the trilogy. In the film, Bielecki commits suicide in a theatre after the première of the play he has stolen, abandoned by his lover Nina and tormented by Górski's ghost.

Here, I will analyse certain decadent themes in Przybyszewski's novel and in its 1929 film adaptation. I have two central concerns. First, I will consider the changes the scriptwriters (Jerzy Braun and Henryk Szaro, in collaboration with novelist Andrzej Strug) and the director made to the idea of decadence in the face of the flourishing medium of cinema. Second, I will reflect more broadly on how decadence, also understood as degeneration and the deterioration of certain values, was part of the change in mass culture at a particular period in the development of the Polish film industry, situated at the periphery of the West but striving to meet European standards. What seems especially interesting about decadence in this context is the ambivalence of the relationship between extraordinary individuals – or at least individuals who perceive themselves to be extraordinary – and the rest of society which they fear will reduce them to mediocrity. As Regenia Gagnier observes in her analysis of decadence as modern individualism with respect to the globalization and technologization of culture: 'decadence is not a fixed state but a relation of part to whole within systems that change. Individuation as progress (autonomy) and individuation as decadence (alienation or isolation) are differently imagined relations to the whole'.² The complicated, fluid, and time-dependent relationship Gagnier describes between the individual and the masses is also an apt description of decadence in the Polish context.

Before I begin analysis of the film *The Powerful Man*, I would like to briefly outline the origins of Polish decadence and the role played by Przybyszewski in its development.

The Diagnostician and the Meteor

In 1898, Przybyszewski, already renowned in the community of German Bohemia, arrived in Cracow, a city located in Galicia, a province of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He would go on to fill the editor's position at the literary magazine *Życie* and start a literary revolution. He introduced truly modern artistic trends from the culturally distant Germany and Norway that caused a stir in the provincial city of Cracow, which had once been the seat of Polish kings before it became a city dominated by a conservative circle loyal both to the Emperor and to the traditional values of Polish culture.³

In his introductory manifesto, *Confiteor*, printed in *Życie*, Przybyszewski presented Cracovians with a new artistic programme that included the provocative ideas of art for art's sake, decadence, and symbolism, which he had derived from artists such as Edvard Munch and August Strindberg. His debut essay, *From the Psychology of the Creative Individual* (1892), subverted positivist-naturalist theories on sickness and health by presenting an extremely individualistic theory of art inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche.⁴ Przybyszewski wrote about the modern artist suffering 'the painful tension of his nerves' making him 'incapable of action', but from this painful tension 'the unhealthy creative individual' arises who 'feels [...] differently from other people, he feels where others do not'.⁵ The creative individual is a tragic figure, characterized by a sense of loneliness in the crowd and the resulting deep revulsion towards the mediocre masses. Thus, the decline of an era is a testament to the exhaustion of 'materialist paradigms', whereas the appearance of brilliant neurotics who pursue self-annihilation foretells a civilizational shift into a higher metaphysical register.

In *Życie*, Przybyszewski also presented his own notion of amoral art whose only role is to 'recreate the soul in all of its manifestations'⁶ and whose only value is the energy, will, or power of the artist who is a high priest of art, one who 'stands beyond life, beyond the world, who is the Lord of Lords, unbridled by any laws, unrestricted by any human force'.⁷ Przybyszewski thus

abandoned the tradition of Polish art and liberated writers from the necessity of popularizing nationalist and moral teachings among readers deprived of Polish statehood. He expressed his revolt against the tendentiousness and utilitarianism of literature by removing the social commentary section from his magazine.⁸ Ultimately, Przybyszewski sealed his propositions by publishing the long poem *Requiem aeternam* in 1900, originally written in German as *Totenmesse*, then translated into Polish. Not only did it present daring sexual themes that revolutionized Polish literature and indicated the crisis of masculine identity in the late nineteenth century, it also introduced the concept of art as the expression of an artist's individual and unique soul by breaking with mimesis or a realistic representation of the world. Thus began the search for a new language for Polish literature: one that would be idiomatic, poignant, original, and capable of articulating an individual's previously inexpressible emotional states.⁹ At the same time, these experiments produced a long poem unintelligible to the audience of the time, devoid of plot and based not on cause and effect but on the memories of a narrator tormented by strong emotions and planning suicide. The mixing of emotional registers, the use of colloquialisms, and even an idiolect, together with numerous literary devices such as hyperbole, synaesthesia, sophisticated metaphors, and a style akin to stream-of-consciousness, were all intended to express the tragedy of a modern man submerged deeply in the fin-de-siècle crisis. This is why Przybyszewski still remains a 'meteor of the Young Poland',¹⁰ the brilliant diagnostician of the sentiments and atmosphere of that era.¹¹

Przybyszewski's ideals fell on fertile ground because many young artists – especially writers and literary critics – had already started looking for radically new artistic models, especially from France.¹² As a result, Przybyszewski's own Cracow bohemian circle began forming around him, fascinated by the charismatic decadent figure who proclaimed the re-evaluation of all previously-established cultural values. Clearly, Przybyszewski's arrival in Cracow was a turning point in the history of Polish literature – a symbol of its receptivity to entirely new trends and truly European ideas.¹³ Przybyszewski's success was emulated by a number of other writers who adopted the poetics of his *Requiem aeternam* and shared with their mentor a faith in the hypersensitive, creative

individual. Ultimately, Przybyszewski's original project became an affectation and a fashion – eventually a cliché. *Życie* collapsed from bankruptcy brought about by the over-ambition of the editor-in-chief, who then moved to Warsaw before leaving for Munich in 1906.

During the First World War – in 1917–1918 – Przybyszewski collaborated with the magazine *Zdrój* (founded in Poznań), which in 1920 sought to define Polish expressionism and distinguish it from the German original. He returned to the inspiration provided by Polish romanticism, especially the poetry of Juliusz Słowacki from his so-called 'mystical period' towards the end of his life.¹⁴ Moreover, his writing began to be coloured with nationalism and an 'awareness of the Polish historical mission'.¹⁵ Around this time Przybyszewski also authored *Krzyk* [*Scream*] (1917), a novel classified as expressionist.

Scream is one of Przybyszewski's last novels. In many respects, it is similar to *The Powerful Man*, especially in its structure and themes. On the one hand, popular, sensationalist conventions dominate in the novel, but, on the other, it addresses the most critical problems a modern artist can face. Gasztowt, an artist and painter, tries to transfer to the canvas the essence of the city, which manifests itself as a suicidal scream. Przybyszewski implements the aesthetic theory he called 'soul scream', which consists of trying to find form and language to express a precognitive shout, a sound that begins and ends life. Despite the expressionist motives (reality as a dream, the city as a labyrinth, the timelessness and indeterminacy of space), the novel undermines the possibility of expressing a man's soul – Gasztowt is defeated eventually – and the artist appears as a maniac and persecutor of others. Also, the author continues the pre-war elements of Young Poland's modernism – blatant anti-urbanism and naturalistic, physiological depictions of not only the character but also his surroundings.¹⁶

Polish expressionism was first and foremost a guarantee of a certain continuity between the pre-war and the later avant-garde aesthetics that dominated the art of independent Poland.¹⁷ Its dual preoccupations are the demonic, monstrous modernist city and man's foundationless identity.¹⁸ Thus, expressionism was not just a response to the traumatic experiences of war but

was supposed to blend in with the modernist vision of the world where the artist is the one and only high priest.

In all of his later novels, stylistically closer to popular literature (among others *Dzieci nędzy* [*The Children of Misery*] (1913–1914)), Przybyszewski called into being a kaleidoscopic world of hopelessly doomed characters who maniacally believed in ‘metaphysical’ intuition, absolute truth, and cosmic synthesis. Bielecki, the main character of *The Powerful Man*, seems more of a parody of the demonic protagonist or the Nietzschean *Übermensch* than anything else.¹⁹ He is a destroyer of his own life and of everyone around him – in his books Przybyszewski portrays the *Übermensch* as a person affected by illness.²⁰ Bielecki is aware that he is not a real artist; he knows that he must lie, steal, and finally engage in a game with public opinion, which makes him dependent upon the commercial requirements of the publishing marketplace. In contrast, Henryk Szaro’s adaptation of *The Powerful Man* in 1929 gives us a Bielecki who becomes entangled in his own conscience. Unlike the true Nietzschean *Übermensch* who is beyond good and evil, Szaro’s character cannot escape morality.

***The Powerful Man* and a Powerful Film**

Szaro’s film version of *The Powerful Man* premiered in an atmosphere of awareness of the fossilized clichés of Przybyszewski’s style, so-called ‘Przybyszewskianism’ [Przybyszewszczyzna].²¹ The Polish novelist Andrzej Strug, who adapted the novel to the screen, was already aware of the archaic character of the piece. In an interview for a film-industry newspaper, he admitted that the difficult task of updating the novel to contemporary times ‘required not only for the psyche of the “Powerful Man” to be modernized, but also for certain key themes of Przybyszewski’s book to be modified’.²² To Strug, Bielecki’s demonic features, so thrilling before the First World War, would be received by the late-1920s audience as completely unfamiliar and too one-sided. Because the modern cinema-goer wanted to see a psychologically complex protagonist, Strug argued that

Bielecki 'had to be made more human – and his slightly unrealistic spiritual darkness brightened up by remorse, doubt, uplifts and hopes which are not foreign even to the worst of scoundrels'.²³

The main theme of the novel was structured around its title: Przybyszewski attempted to say who 'the powerful man' was – Górski or Bielecki – and what he was like. The first figure, Górski, is bestowed with literary talent and tirelessly makes his art, producing manuscript after manuscript until his apartment is buried under heaps of disorganized papers. The character is isolated from society and dying of tuberculosis, going so far as to allow his body to gradually disintegrate. It seems that all those papers are a record of the artist's soul and the fragile cord that attaches the dying writer to the material world of the living. Once Górski has rejected his legacy in its entirety, he gives his manuscripts to the con-artist Bielecki and suggests he burn them; he then decides to commit suicide and thus rule over his own death. It is only then that he is enlightened, ready for his demise:

And he felt such a power now that it seemed to him that if he wanted, he could control his blood flow [...]. Now, if he had wanted, he could have even stopped it entirely so that he could be buried alive, and he would rise from the grave in a couple of months. ... Because even Christ sweat[ed] blood and begged his Father to take that cup away from him, and on the cross, he moaned why [God] had forsaken him. ... Let alone these two-legged, shabby vermin which crawled around, swarming and disturbing his peace!²⁴

Still, Górski's apotheosis of death as ecstasy or even a godly will to power is complicated by the appearance of a young woman named Łusia (Łucja in the film). In the end, the artist decides to commit suicide by injecting the strychnine supplied by Bielecki with his new companion by his side, as though he wanted another person to bear witness to his existence for the last time. Clearly, Górski is not as detached from the human world as might be suggested by his vision of himself as someone greater than Christ, who had feared death.

After the shocking scene of Górski's suicide, the narrative turns to the man who enabled Górski's death: Bielecki. He enters the storyline to start a chain of crimes which will lead him to the top of the social hierarchy. Bielecki, the editor and critic, dreams of entering the literary world himself – as a writer, a real creator. Gabriela Matuszek has aptly observed that *The Powerful Man* presents the complicated problem of the ambivalent judgement of the pure, authentic record of

Górski's soul – which, incidentally, is unreadable – versus Bielecki's laborious task of making Górski's literature understandable to readers.²⁵ The question of who the author or artist really is, and whether Bielecki had the right to sign the works he appropriated and edited, is left unanswered in the novel. But it is not the question of authorship that proves to be the slippery slope leading to Bielecki's self-destruction and the final public confession to all of the atrocities. Instead, his demise is caused by the numerous crimes that lead to a development of a personal moral code based either on achieving individual goals and fame or on experimenting with the morality of the people attached to him rather than upholding social values. However, the punishment is inflicted on him externally.²⁶ Bielecki is shot by the painter Borsuk, whom Bielecki has deprived of all his artworks. However, Bielecki meets his death calmly, like a long-lost friend, and feels it like bliss which 'drops heavily onto his eyelids'.²⁷ Therefore, the reader never learns whether the novel concludes with complete moral degeneration and the spiritual fall of a man or, rather, the birth of a new man created on the debris of all the values that connected him to society.

In an article preceding the première, Szaro explained that he wanted to 'accommodate Przybyszewski to Poland; popularize the author of *The Powerful Man* and demonstrate the novel's atmosphere in a visual, vivid manner'.²⁸ It is worth mentioning that Szaro's was not the first attempt to put Przybyszewski's trilogy on the screen. In 1916–1917, the Russian director Vsevolod Meyerhold – who also staged Przybyszewski's plays – adapted the novel and played the role of Górski. He had great expectations that the production would reform Russian cinema, but the unintelligible editing likely discouraged distribution of the film.²⁹ It was only Szaro who succeeded in the adaptation fourteen years later. The Polish director maintained that after obtaining an engineering degree, he studied in Moscow under Meyerhold.³⁰ Unfortunately, we do not have more detailed information about this relationship and cannot say with certainty whether each director created his adaptation independently or whether Szaro was inspired by the achievements of his master Meyerhold. After returning to Warsaw, Szaro had already directed six films, including the

popular *Przedwiośnie* [*Seedtime*] (1928), based on Stefan Żeromski's novel (1924). Eventually, he became a member of the 'Union des Artistes Cinématographiques'.³¹

The Powerful Man succeeded because Szaro had no ambition to transfer the novel onto the screen intact, especially not the complicated psychology manifested through long descriptions of the characters' internal states, which resemble the stream of consciousness style in the poem *Requiem aeternam*. Szaro appreciated Przybyszewski's prose for its universality and topicality because it did not have a national-independence or social-progress bias, unlike much of Polish literature during the period.³² At the same time, he unwittingly ascribed to Przybyszewski's writing the status of popular literature addressed to a mass audience, even though it had originally been intended for elite readers.

Szaro's changes to the original aimed to transpose the plot into a truly contemporary world, symbolized in the film by images of Warsaw, the capital city of a country under reconstruction. The cinematographer Giovanni Vitrotti ensured that the opening sequence of *The Powerful Man* included all the elements that would introduce the viewer into the world of the modern city. First, the camera offers a panorama of the Vistula riverbank extending before the audience's eyes, only to travel to the centre of the city, identifiable by landmarks such as the Chopin Monument, Sigismund's Column, and the Grand Theatre. We then see the fast pace of urban life in Warsaw, when, at the end of the sequence, a double-exposure montage cleverly combines the symbols of modernity – trams, cars, pedestrians – in interpenetrating vignettes, emphasizing its fragmentation [fig. 1].

Later, the nocturnal landscape of Warsaw appears in the film with its cafés and crowded, smoky clubs. In one of these clubs, Bielecki (Gregori Chmara) finds refuge after the first quarrel with his lover; in the film, he is not a critic but an unfulfilled artist pulling his hair out over a manuscript. His motivation is clear. Reading a daily newspaper, he finds a notice about the incredible success of Erich Maria Remarque's *Im Westen nichts Neues* [*All Quiet on the Western Front*] (1929): suddenly all the headlines in the paper turn into a call to fame which he, too, might achieve.

Later, Bielecki again hallucinates the word *śława* [fame] emerging from Górski's manuscript [fig. 2]. As in the novel, the opportunity to fulfil his desire appears with the manuscripts abandoned by the dying Górski (Artur Socha). In the film, Górski's character resembles images of Christ to some extent, with his minimalist acting and tired, slow movement. This impression is dismantled with a close-up of Górski's naked breast scarred and pocked by numerous morphine injections. Thus, he becomes merely an addict wanting to shorten his suffering [fig. 3].



Fig. 1 (00:01:48): A montage of Warsaw modernity.

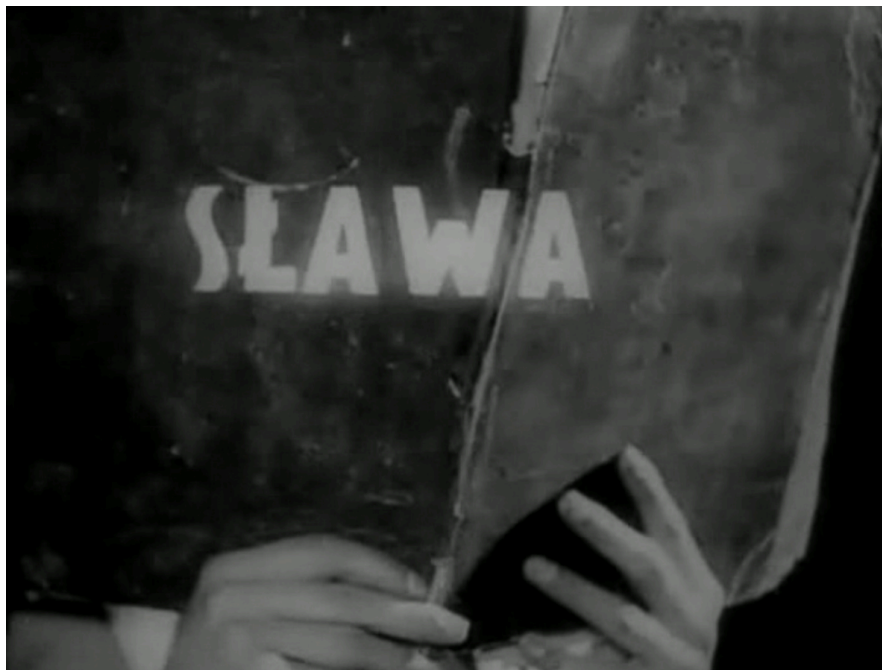


Fig. 2 (00:06:23): Bielecki becomes obsessed with 'sława' [fame].



Fig. 3 (00:10:27): Górski injects morphine into his chest, scarred and pocked from previous injections.

Another serious modification to Przybyszewski's original plot, as Strug explained, was making Bielecki appear more human. Whereas in the novel he mostly seeks to manipulate everyone he encounters to his own ends, the film shows the sincerity of both Bielecki's love for Nina – who is abused by her husband, and Bielecki's remorse for his crimes against Górski and his former lover Łucja, whom he tried to drown. Interestingly, the film depicts the theme of the 'overwoman' – a true ideal which Bielecki seeks in his lovers – in a much more modern, less misogynistic way than the novel does. The novel's Nina, who is in love with Bielecki, commits suicide at the end of the third volume as a result of a premonition that her lover is also dying. She decides to follow him faithfully, even if that means following him to death itself. By contrast, the film's Nina finds within herself the power to resist such toxic, humiliating love. When she learns what her beloved has done, she leaves him and therefore contributes to Bielecki's ultimate demise.³³ Rejected, unmasked, and haunted by visions of his crimes, 'the powerful man' decides to deliver a speech on stage during the première of a play that he stole from Górski and commits suicide among a group of mysterious masked actors. Unlike the opening sequence, the conclusion of the film plays out on an intimate, individual level. Bielecki dies surrounded by figures who represent not just his guilt but also the desire to be who he is not, hiding his face behind the mask of a modern artist.

The Powerful Man was enthusiastically received by audiences and critics alike. The innovative formal properties of the film met with accolades as they drew inspiration from German expressionism, the Gothic, and romanticism.³⁴ Some critics, however, said that Szaro was doomed to fail from the outset because of the psychological dimension of the adapted novel.³⁵ Critics also praised the change in the ending as one more consistent with 1920s bourgeois morality. One reviewer wrote that he had seen 'a powerful film which is firmly set in the standards of what is demanded of film art by the postulate of visual aestheticism and technology. The final parts of the film are at the highest level of Western European film class'.³⁶ Another critic argued:

[I]n its social role, film must be a constructive factor, leaving the viewer with at least a margin of optimism. [...] It is a great advantage of the film that the moral face of the protagonist was tempered. Before every offence of Bielecki's, a title card gives psychological motivation for his deeds.³⁷

Doubtless, the Polish film was expected to follow a set of values, such as ‘optimism’ and ‘the constructive factor’, to which Przybyszewski’s novel had to be adapted. In other words, a work of art was modified to fit the demands of a modern medium. It seems that the reasons for the critics’ beliefs can be found precisely in the properties of film as a medium: the audience took its visuality literally, accepting the images concretely, without understanding the particular arbitrariness of the visual language.³⁸ The new ending was suited to cinema as a mirror medium in which viewers could mainly see themselves.

The adaptation of *The Powerful Man* from page to screen is an excellent example of the transformation of high art to popular art under the conditions described by Gagnier that create the necessity for the artist to keep up with the developing modern world and mass culture at a time of ‘the rapid interface of technologies and subjectivities [...] the rise of the giant corporation, mass production, and mass consumption’.³⁹ Przybyszewski himself had an ambivalent attitude toward the popular culture developing at the time and was able to successfully combine a decadent worldview with the demands of mass entertainment. After all, the novel was commissioned by the publishing house Gebethner and Wolff, which paid its authors handsomely for conforming to the demands of bourgeois readers.⁴⁰

***Caligari* and Modern Berlin, *The Powerful Man* and Modern Warsaw**

The Powerful Man is often discussed in the context of German expressionism,⁴¹ as evidenced by some deformations of the world shown in the film; for example, Bielecki sees strange visions and ghosts from his past, represented on the screen by a series of overlapping images [fig. 4]. These distortions of reality represent the sense of remorse that haunts the protagonist, rather than an ontological change in reality. In addition, the Stanislavski method of acting that asks performers to feel the emotions of the characters they play is employed by the lead actor Gregori Chmara and sometimes brings to mind the actors’ wide-open eyes or mouths contorted by screams in expressionist productions. (Incidentally, the Russian émigré played the title role in *Raskolnikov*

(dir. Robert Wiene), a 1923 Weimar Republic film unambiguously considered to be part of the German expressionist movement.⁴²⁾ There are also multiple references to Gothic romanticism in the representation of the shattered, evil interior world of the main character, as in, for example, ‘the glow of candles, deformed shapes of objects (the monstrous “devil’s horns”) and the elongated shadows on walls’⁴³ [fig. 5]. Another feature of Weimar cinema is the representation of the modernist, blasé metropolis as a critique of modernity and the industrialization of life in Berlin. Similarly, in Szaro’s film the nighttime cityscape is also presented in an expressionist style – artificial lights flash in the dark, making Warsaw seem like a distant shadow. Such effects were often achieved in expressionism through hand-painted sets, but *The Powerful Man* captures many outdoor locations of Warsaw, on the one hand, through long shots taken from a moving camera and, on the other, by montage segments made up of double-exposure images of buildings and crowds. As such, they are closer to psychological Polish cinema⁴⁴ than to the abstract aesthetic effects of German expressionism. However, they also have something in common with the more realistic aesthetics of the new objectivity (*Neue Sachlichkeit*).



Fig. 4 (01:10:12): Bielecki haunted by ghosts from his past: Górski, Nina, and Łucja.



Fig. 5 (00:47:36): The shadowy world of Gothic romanticism.

Henryk Szaro stayed in Berlin for only a year (1923–1924), where he collaborated with the well-known cabaret of Russian immigrants in *Siniaia Ptitsa* [*Berlin Blue Bird*]. The new objectivity developed as a counter to expressionism after WWI and was most pervasive during the period of economic stabilization of the Weimar Republic after the hyperinflation of 1923 (*circa* 1924–1925), so it is difficult to say whether it inspired the director.⁴⁵ In its various manifestations, the new objectivity can be regarded as a particular cultural sensitivity in response to the experience of war and a dynamically developing civilization with all its social, political, and economic problems.⁴⁶ In addition to the ‘neutral’ and ‘sober’ cityscapes in *The Powerful Man*, more ‘conscious’ motifs appear that could be equated with the socialist elements of the new objectivity. In this context, it is worth mentioning how Szaro portrays objects in the film; for example, in the first shot of Bielecki, viewers can see only his hands and a piece of paper in a medium shot as he helplessly tries to put his thoughts into words [fig. 6]. The film also features shots of a printing press, representing the modern, mechanized world; or a sea of white hats representing crowds gathered at a horse race [fig. 7]. Similar shots can also be found in Walter Ruttmann’s *Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt* [*Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*] (1927). The German director focuses not only on

the Berlin cityscape in general but also on objects symbolizing urban life (for example, store mannequins, neon lights, cars, trams). He shows human legs hurrying through the streets like objects isolated from the rest of the body. Most of the images from *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* show the enthusiasm, movement, and dynamism of the city, while *The Powerful Man* sometimes reveals the demonic nature of a modern city, exposing the characteristic loneliness resulting from individual isolation in the mass of urban society⁴⁷ despite the fact that many of these scenes have the mainly informative value characteristic of Polish psychological film.⁴⁸ This effect is achieved partly by close-ups that bring objects to the foreground.⁴⁹ Even the last scene of *The Powerful Man*, when Bielecki is lost on the stage among surreal figures, can be interpreted in terms of the new objectivity. Wieland Schmied has postulated that such a presentation of objects might make them appear simultaneously real and uncanny because they are accompanied by a sense of alienation.⁵⁰ The impassive masks of the actors in the final scene suggest a wordless judgement on the deeds of the main character [fig. 8], symbolizing the ambivalence between Christian morality and the hard reality of the twentieth century.



Fig. 6 (00:01:53): The first shot of Bielecki: hands and paper.



Fig. 7 (00:24:11): The modern crowd.



Fig. 8 (01:16:50): The passive, wordless judgement of the masked figures.

However, at the same time the theatrical staging of Bielecki's play – from the last scene of the film – is also reminiscent of expressionist conventions. In addition to actors in masks, a tall, demonic figure with spectral make-up appears, wearing a long robe; moreover, the set design resembles the optical exaggerations of Weimar expressionist films. For example, the angular, painted door in the centre of the set creates the impression of unreality, an entry into a dreamspace detached from the everyday [fig. 9]. The decision to imitate the expressionist aesthetic here seems justified based primarily on Przybyszewski's affiliation with that movement (see discussion above). Nonetheless, it is vital to remember that Przybyszewski was not attempting to introduce the new expressionist aesthetic into Polish literature by collaborating with *Zdrój* – which never caught on.⁵¹ Instead, in the post-WWI period he wanted to revive the tendencies and qualities for which he was best known, namely Young Poland decadence.⁵² Similarly, Szaro's film returns to the proper moral order of bourgeois cinema by making the repentant Bielecki, a villain dressed up as a law-abiding citizen, commit suicide.

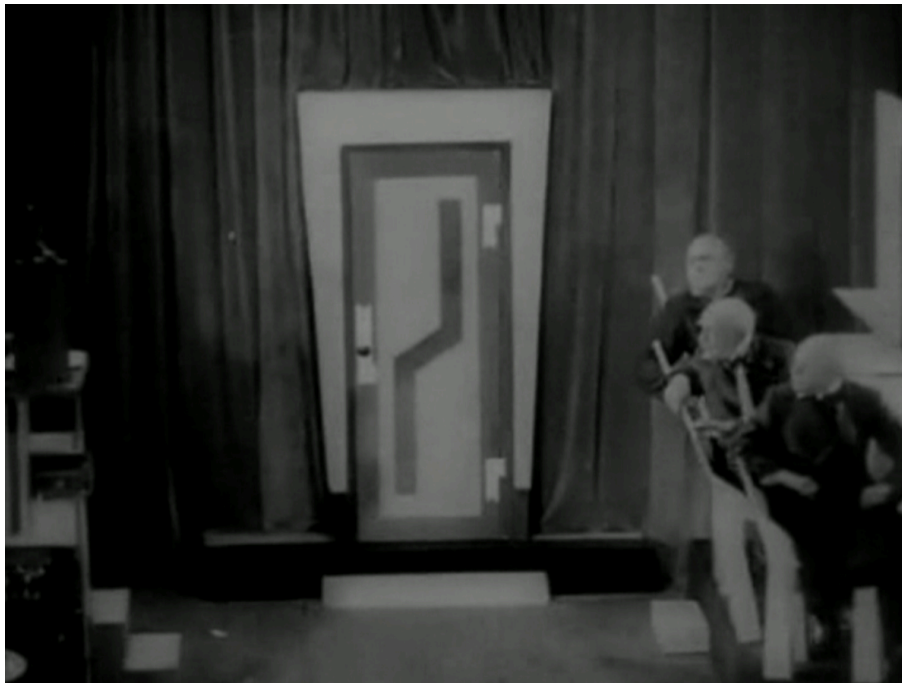


Fig. 9 (01:06:11): An expressionist portal.

Fascinatingly, both the revolutionary ideas of German expressionism and socially engaged new objectivity had to be dulled as well. The original screenplay for *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), a film which some expressionist writers saw as a harbinger of the death of the expressionist movement,⁵³ turned out not to contain the narrative frame of the final version of the film but instead suggested that the tyrant-doctor was a product of the protagonist's sick mind and should not be taken seriously by the bourgeois audience. According to Siegfried Kracauer, this means that the director Robert Wiene preferred to adapt the message of this originally revolutionary screenplay to the needs of the mass audience:

This change undoubtedly resulted not so much from Wiene's personal predilections as from his instinctive submission to the necessities of the screen; films, at least commercial films, are forced to answer to mass desires. In its changed form, *Caligari* was no longer a product expressing, at best, sentiments characteristic of the intelligentsia, but a film supposed equally to be in harmony with what the less educated felt and liked.⁵⁴

Thus, the expressionist style, developed by artists such as Alfred Kubin, Hermann Warm, Walter Rohrig, and Walter Reimann and originally corresponding to the themes in the film, ultimately proved to be a mere formal property, a style detached from the message of the artwork. Moreover, the original theme of liberation from the authority of the tyrannical doctor, and therefore an expression of faith in the power of a creative individual, was entirely reversed. In Kracauer's words, the final version of the film 'seemed to combine the denial of bourgeois traditions with faith in man's power freely to shape society and nature'.⁵⁵ The final message was that the individual can either succumb to tyranny or be swallowed by chaos.⁵⁶

The new objectivity, to the extent that it was understood as a search for a 'national style', was sometimes considered to be a prelude to fascist aesthetics.⁵⁷ Moreover, by using elements of technology and symbols of modern civilization in the field of art – best exemplified by cinema – the new objectivity began to shape a 'program for unitary, "middle-brow", and predominantly escapist mass culture'⁵⁸ expressive of both conservative values and the capitalist-imperialist worldview.⁵⁹ As Steve Plumb noted, 'Siegfried Kracauer ascribes "New Objectivity" to social resignation and cynicism'.⁶⁰

Apparently, extremely individualist or radical art has no chance in a duel with the constant development of modernity followed by the technologization of art, the production of conservative bourgeois clichés, and the appropriation of its values by the mass audience. In Przybyszewski's novel, the character's rejection by society, his isolation, and ultimately his self-annihilation are the only means of escape, as exemplified by Górski's control over his own death. It seems that Szaro's film avoids that question, concentrating instead on the melodrama. Nonetheless, the film still manages to reflect a measure of individualism despite the appeal to mass culture, remaining at once artful and popular.

According to Gagnier, 'progress was decadent because increasing individuation led to the disintegration of the whole'.⁶¹ Paradoxically, degeneration is an integral part of progress – gaining awareness of one's identity leads to the destruction or collapse of old structures. This was the case with Przybyszewski's arrival in Cracow: by diagnosing a crisis of culture and bringing decadent art from the West, he introduced new themes and tendencies, and contributed to the revival of the otherwise conventional language of Polish culture. At the same time, Przybyszewski's own body of work, cultivated rather than renewed by many, including its author creating his own legend, was beginning to ossify into clichés, easily understandable by the audience. In other words, it was starting to atrophy. The film version of *The Powerful Man* returned to decadent clichés not to administer them to the contemporary audience, but to adapt them to the new visual language of cinema and change them so that they might be understood in a different context altogether – both in terms of a historical moment and the new medium, as the filmmakers themselves declared in their statements to the press. This meant that something had to be destroyed. Przybyszewski's grand project, based on the values of individualism, was transformed into a drama of ethics familiar to the audience. Yet the dismantling of the novel led to the making of the first Polish artistic film which referred to the aesthetics of expressionism and new objectivity, experimented with editing, and attempted to represent the plot in its visual dimension rather than just adapt the narrative onto the screen. In this context, Gagnier's words ring true when she reminds us that

creative repudiation can mean creative destruction or war [...] as easily as critique [...]. Death can imply rebirth. As Baudelaire's figure suggested, the dominant organic metaphor of decay and degeneration could turn seamlessly into a cross-fertilized compost of amazing light and color.⁶²

The case of *The Powerful Man* is therefore another example of how modern culture emerges from the remains of old paradigms.

In fact, *The Powerful Man* continued the cycle of death and birth. As a silent film, in 1929, the year of its première, it was already a thing of the past. Like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, which German expressionists considered to be the first and last expressionist film, *The Powerful Man* was the first and last Polish silent art film.⁶³ Across the Atlantic Ocean, the so-called 'talkies' led by the 1927 *Jazz Singer* were starting to triumph, and the press was wondering whether sound on screen was the beginning of an entirely new era in the world of cinema. The transition to sound was also reaching Poland,⁶⁴ slowly but surely eradicating silent film. In hindsight, it does not seem like a coincidence that *The Powerful Man* was one of the last silent films. After all, it was a production which referred to the decadent worldview by reproducing schematic, clichéd tropes of bohemian café life, amoral criminals, artists isolated from social life, and finally death – which becomes a foundation for something new. The work of the individual artist, namely Przybyszewski, who managed to start a revolution in his own country, was thus adapted to the bourgeois requirements of the mass medium of cinema. It seems that was the only way this unique work could become a permanent part of Polish culture.

¹ This silent film was produced in the late 1920s. It was lost during the Second World War. A copy was found in 1997 in a Belgian archive, which suggests its international distribution. For more about the history of the film's production, see Marek Kochanowski, 'Modernizacje mocnego człowieka (Mocny człowiek Stanisława Przybyszewskiego i Henryka Szaro)', in *Kody kultury: interakcja, transformacja, synergia*, ed. by Halina Kubicka and Olga Taranek (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Sutoris, 2009), pp. 320–29.

² Regenia Gagnier, *Individualism, Decadence and Globalization: On the Relationship of Part to Whole, 1859–1920* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2010), p. 5.

³ The autonomy of Galicia allowed Poles, whose territory was partitioned into three sectors ruled by Austria, Prussia, and Russia, to cultivate their history and pursue careers in state institutions. Therefore, loyalism towards the Austro-Hungarian Empire prevailed in the second half of the nineteenth century in Cracow; see Larry Wolf, 'Inventing Galicia: The Josephine Enlightenment and the Partitions of Poland', in *The Idea of Galicia: History and Fantasy in Habsburg Political Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), pp. 13–62.

⁴ For Przybyszewski, depravity was a characteristic of a genius rather than of an individual unnecessary to society. He likely developed this idea based on Cesare Lombroso's fashionable theories of the late nineteenth century. In his book *Genio e follia* (Milan, 1864), Lombroso proposed that the more complex human bodies are, and the more

advanced the stage of evolution is, the more prone they are to sickness and degeneration, especially of the nervous kind.

⁵ Stanisław Przybyszewski, 'Z psychologii jednostki twórczej', in *Wybór pism*, ed. by Roman Taborski (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1966), pp. 7, 9. All fragments from Polish literature translated into English specifically for the present paper unless indicated otherwise in the footnotes.

⁶ Stanisław Przybyszewski, 'Confiteor', in *Programy i dyskusje okresu Młodej Polski*, ed. by Maria Podraza Kwiatkowska (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1977), p. 236.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ See Przybyszewski, 'Confiteor', pp. 241–43.

⁹ See Ryszard Nycz, 'Język modernizmu. Doświadczenie wyobcowania i jego konsekwencje', in *Język modernizmu. Prolegomena historycznoliterackie* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2013), pp. 49–90 (p. 55).

¹⁰ See Wojciech Gutowski, 'Wstęp – Meteor czy konstelacja?', in *Konstelacja Stanisława Przybyszewskiego* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, 2008), pp. 7–14 (p. 7).

¹¹ See Gabriela Matuszek, *Stanisław Przybyszewski – pisarz nowoczesny. Eseje i proza – próba monografii* (Kraków: Universitas, 2008), p. 16. Notably, the long poem *Requiem aeternam*, along with the proposition to extract the most profound mysteries from one's internal world in order to describe them, corresponds to Freud's psychoanalytical theory, whose founding text *The Interpretation of Dreams* was only published in 1899.

¹² In Cracow, they included Adam Górski, who returned to the Romantic roots of Polish literature, especially to Adam Mickiewicz's poetry. In Lviv, Maria Komornicka, Cezary Jellenta and Waclaw Nalkowski extended the naturalist law heredity with the Nietzschean vision of the evolution of a unique individual who dwarfs the mediocre masses with his spirit. Finally, in the Russian sector, the so-called Kingdom of Poland, Zenon Przesmycki (Miriam), the editor-in-chief of the Warsaw *Życie*, in 1901 founded the most ambitious magazine of that time: *Chimera*, which published pieces representative of the latest Western European artistic movements, especially French and Belgian symbolism and Art Nouveau.

¹³ The greatest Polish critics of that time, namely Karol Irzykowski and Stanisław Brzozowski, agreed on the importance of the event. See Karol Irzykowski, 'Dwie rewolucje', in *Czyn i słowo oraz Fryderyk Hebbel jako poeta konieczności; Lemiesz i szpada przed sądem publicznym; Prolegomena do charakterologii* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1980), p. 220. See also Stanisław Brzozowski, *Legenda Młodej Polski. Studia o strukturze duszy kulturalnej* (Lwów: Księgarnia Polska Bernarda Polonieckiego, 1910), p. 238.

¹⁴ See S. Przybyszewski, 'Ekspresjonizm – "Słowacki i Genezis z Ducha"', *Zdrój* 1–6, 2–5/6 (1918).

¹⁵ Heinrich Kunstmann, 'O związkach między ekspresjonizmem polskim i niemieckim', trans. by Józef Zaprućki, in *Pisma wybrane*, ed. by Marek Zybura (Kraków: Universitas, 2009), p. 245. This is not surprising at a time when Poland associated the end of the war with the hope of regaining independence.

¹⁶ Kunstmann sees the most significant difference between Polish and German expressionism in the baroque inspirations of Polish expressionists, which meant a lack of civilization in their work. See 'O związkach między ekspresjonizmem polskim i niemieckim', p. 243. Gabriela Matuszek confirms this thesis, placing Przybyszewski's anti-urbanism with pre-war modernism. See G. Matuszek, 'Współlistnienie dwu poetów: ekspresjonistycznej i modernistycznej w powieści "Krzyk" S. Przybyszewskiego', *Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego. Prace Historycznoliterackie*, 43 (1981), 83–102.

¹⁷ See Marek Bartelik, *Early Polish Modern Art: Unity in Multiplicity* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 4.

¹⁸ See Matuszek, *Stanisław Przybyszewski*, p. 348.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 303.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 239.

²¹ The much-needed crisis would later emerge as the crisis of language in 1910. Once writers had realized that language is a code, malleable and prone to deformity, they began deconstructing conventions, one of which was the aforementioned Przybyszewskianism. See Nycz, p. 57.

²² 'Na drogach "Mocnego człowieka"' (wywiad z Andrzejem Strugiem), *Kino dla Wszystkich*, 95 (1929), 7.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ See Stanisław Przybyszewski, *Mocny człowiek* (Warszawa: Gebethner i Wolff, 1912), pp. 29–30.

²⁵ See Matuszek, *Stanisław Przybyszewski*, p. 299.

²⁶ Bielecki repeatedly exploited others for personal gain. The clearest example of this is the character of Karska, on whom he experiments in order to make a 'overwoman' of her, akin to his overman. See Przybyszewski, *Mocny człowiek*, p. 219.

²⁷ Stanisław Przybyszewski, *Święty gaj* (Warszawa: 'Lektor', 1923), p. 320.

²⁸ Henryk Szaro, 'Dlaczego "Mocny człowiek"'. Wywiad z samym sobą, *Kino-Teatr*, 20 (1929), 13.

²⁹ See Matuszek, *Stanisław Przybyszewski*, p. 297. Natasza Korczarowska-Różycka, 'Ekspresjonizm to gra... Ale właściwie, czemu nie? Mabuseria, czyli eksperyment ekspresjonistyczny w "Mocnym człowieku" Henryka Szaro', *Konteksty*, 89–90 (2015), 306–19 (p. 310).

³⁰ See R. Włodek, 'Henryk Szaro (Henoch Szapiro)', *Internetowy Polski Słownik Biograficzny* (Warszawa: Narodowy Instytut Audiowizualny), <http://www.ipsb.nina.gov.pl/a/biografia/henryk-szaro> [accessed 25 November 2019].

- ³¹ See 'Dookoła "Mocnego człowieka". Siódmy film reżysera Szaro', *ABC*, 270 (1929), 7.
- ³² Szaro, 'Dlaczego "Mocny człowiek". Wywiad z samym sobą', p. 13.
- ³³ Even in the 1920s, the romance subplot of the novel was interpreted as Bielecki's search for a 'overwoman', a lover with whom his body and soul would connect completely. In Przybyszewski's works, this was a fulfilment of the myth of Androgyne: the ideal combination of the male and female element. See W. Z., "'Mocny człowiek" a kobiety, *Ziemia Lubelska*, 175 (1929), 5. Maria Majdrowicz (who played Nina) said in an interview that the idea behind Nina's relationship with Bielecki was that a woman would draw out the human face of the criminal. See 'Kiedy "mocny człowiek" kocha... (co mówi Marja Majdrowicz?)', *Ziemia Lubelska*, 210 (1929), 4.
- ³⁴ See 'Ze świata filmu. Casino: "Mocny człowiek"', *Polska Zbrojna*, 275 (1929), 5; and 'Recenzje filmowe. "Mocny człowiek"', *Nasz Przegląd*, 280 (1929), 6.
- ³⁵ See 'Mocny człowiek', *ABC*, 83 (1929), 8; and 'Ze świata filmu. Casino: "Mocny człowiek"', 5.
- ³⁶ 'Z ekranu. Kino metropolis – Mocny człowiek', *Dziennik Poznański*, 251 (1929), 4.
- ³⁷ Ibid.
- ³⁸ The necessity of developing a vocabulary of the modern film language was stipulated by the literary critic Karol Irzykowski. He was the author of a very early Polish monograph on the medium of film – *The Tenth Muse* (1924), where he distinguished between communication in reality and certain signs used by film. See Karol Irzykowski, *Dziesiąta muza oraz pomniejsze pisma filmowe* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie: 1982), pp. 274, 324. See also Elizabeth Nazarian, *The Tenth Muse: Karol Irzykowski and Early Film Theory* (Saarbrücken: LAP LAMBERT Academic Publishing, 2011), p. 130.
- ³⁹ Gagnier, *Individualism, Decadence and Globalization*, p. 95.
- ⁴⁰ Matuszek, *Stanisław Przybyszewski*, p. 297.
- ⁴¹ See Korczarowska-Różycka, 'Ekspresjonizm to gra... Ale właściwie, czemu nie?' and Jerzy Stachowicz, 'Ekspresjonista', in *Komputery, powieści i kino nieme. Procesy remediacji w perspektywie historycznej* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2018), pp. 110–11.
- ⁴² See Dietrich Scheunemann, 'Activating the Differences: Expressionist Film and Early Weimar Cinema', in *Expressionist Film – New Perspectives*, ed. by Dietrich Scheunemann (New York: Camden House 2003), pp. 2, 12.
- ⁴³ Korczarowska-Różycka, 'Ekspresjonizm to gra... Ale właściwie, czemu nie?', p. 313.
- ⁴⁴ Irzykowski wrote that the feature film ('life drama') – cheap and fast in production – was prominent in the Polish cinema. For such a drama, he noted, 'apart from the actors, you only need a living room, a sofa, several chairs, a dance hall and a piece of Tatra Mountains' (*Dziesiąta muza oraz pomniejsze pisma filmowe*, p. 203).
- ⁴⁵ Steve Plumb, *Neue Sachlichkeit 1918–33: Unity and Diversity of an Art Movement* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi 2006), p. 13.
- ⁴⁶ Richard W. McCormick, 'Private Anxieties/Public Projections: "New Objectivity", Male Subjectivity, and Weimar Cinema', *Women in German Yearbook*, 10 (1994), 1–18 (p. 3).
- ⁴⁷ Plumb, *Neue Sachlichkeit 1918–33*, p. 51.
- ⁴⁸ Irzykowski, *Dziesiąta muza oraz pomniejsze pisma filmowe*, pp. 207–08.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 43.
- ⁵⁰ Wieland Schmied, *Neue Sachlichkeit and German Realism of the Twenties*, Exhibition Catalogue (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1978), p. 13.
- ⁵¹ 'The local variation [on Expressionism] was jokingly called "Mabusery" by Polish critics – a combination of Dr. Mabuse's name with buffoonery' (Korczarowska-Różycka, 'Ekspresjonizm to gra... Ale właściwie, czemu nie?', p. 308).
- ⁵² Kunstmann, 'O związkach między ekspresjonizmem polskim i niemieckim', pp. 252–53.
- ⁵³ Scheunemann, 'Activating the Differences', p. 25.
- ⁵⁴ Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler. A Psychological History Of The German Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 67.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 68.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 74.
- ⁵⁷ Maria Makela, "'A Clear and Simple Style': Tradition and Typology in New Objectivity", *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies*, 28 (2002), 38–51 (p. 51).
- ⁵⁸ McCormick, 'Private Anxieties/Public Projections', p. 12.
- ⁵⁹ Makela, 'A Clear and Simple Style', p. 39.
- ⁶⁰ McCormick, 'Private Anxieties/Public Projections', p. 4.
- ⁶¹ Gagnier, *Individualism, Decadence and Globalization*, p. 11.
- ⁶² Ibid., p. 91.
- ⁶³ Many reviewers saw in *Mocny człowiek* a long-awaited true Polish art film, see Ika., 'Z teatrów świetlnych: Casino-Apollo, "Mocny człowiek"', *Robotnik*, 282 (1929), p. 5. Excerpts from most enthusiastic reviews from the Warsaw press were reprinted in an issue of the magazine *Kino dla Wszystkich*, 99 (1929), p. 21.
- ⁶⁴ See Tadeusz Lubelski, 'Nasze kino klasyczne. Krzywe zwierciadło polskiej mentalności (1930–1939)', in *Historia kina polskiego. Twórcy, filmy, konteksty* (Chorzów: Videograf II, 2009), p. 90.

Wrestling with Decadence:
The Touchables (1968) and Swinging London Cinema of the 1960s¹

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The primary touchstones when considering the relationship between decadence and cinema are probably those films in closest chronological proximity to the emergence of the decadent tradition in literature and the visual arts in the fin-de-siècle period of the late nineteenth century – the same historical moment in which cinema itself was born. Hollywood cinema of the pre-sound era spanning the 1890s to the 1920s certainly offers no shortage of figures whose work is amenable to being categorized as decadent, including directors such as Cecil B. DeMille or Erich Von Stroheim, or stars such as Theda Bara or Louise Brooks (figures whose vampishness would eventually transmogrify into the spider women and femmes fatales of 40s film noir). Alternately, one might turn to representations of particular historical moments seen as decadent, such as the fall of Babylon or the decline of Rome, or in the twentieth century, the Weimar era and its tragic aftermath: the ‘divine decadence’ Liza Minnelli’s Sally Bowles attributes to her green nail polish in *Cabaret* (1972) that was also on dark display in films like Luchino Visconti’s *The Damned* (1969) and Liliana Caviani’s *The Night Porter* (1974), both decried by Susan Sontag for espousing a sense of perverse decadent glamour.² Or perhaps the relationship between cinema and decadence might be most effectively conceptualized through the aesthetic and narrative obsessions of particular filmmakers, possible examples including the likes of Visconti, Josef von Sternberg, Federico Fellini, or David Lynch, whose respective oeuvres are coloured by different kinds of engagement with decadent images and ideas.

However, in this article we wish to make a case for the 1960s as a particular period of ‘neo-decadence’ in cinema, and to use the cult film *The Touchables* (1968; fig. 1) as our core case study for exploring how decadent tropes were adapted and updated for a new moment of cultural licentiousness, excess, and experimentation, within what some conservative-minded critics feared

was becoming a decadent society. It will explore how both the film's on screen diegesis and the off-screen conditions of its production might both be read in relation to ideas of decadence, both in terms of Hollywood history and post-war British society.



Fig. 1: Movie poster for *The Touchables* (1968).

Described by one contemporary reviewer as an ‘incredibly obtuse’ and ‘self-indulgent’ film in which ‘the world is youth-oriented, sex roles are being reversed and nothing shocks anymore’, *The Touchables* certainly corresponds with literary scholar M. H. Abrams’s textbook definition of decadence as a mode of ‘lassitude, satiety, and ennui’ centred on ‘drugged perception, sexual experimentation, and the deliberate inversion of conventional moral, social, and artistic norms’ as well as stylistic ‘high artifice’ and an emphasis on ‘the bizarre in [its] subject matter’.³ These attributes are all in evidence in *The Touchables*, a film as frequently visually arresting as it is mystifying

and irritating: while that same reviewer decried its ‘switched-on nonsense’ they still had to give it credit for its ‘stunning editing and photography’.⁴ Its selection as the film to close the 1968 San Francisco Film Festival says something of the attempt to see it as a defining cultural text of the era, being shown in the beating heart of the contemporary counterculture.⁵ But what is of greatest interest to us here is how *The Touchables* updates and reinvents the provocations of fin-de-siècle decadence for an equivalent ‘permissive society’ in the 1960s.

Swinging London and Ailing Hollywood: The Production Context of the 1960s

The Touchables was a product of the specific production climate of ‘swinging London’, the phenomenon by which Britain became a hotbed for Hollywood runaway production during the decade. This zeitgeist capitalized on the idea of Britain, or more specifically London, as a hub of cultural novelty and excitement, immortalized through the *Time* magazine cover of April 1966 that proclaimed London ‘the swinging city’. London thus became internationally understood as an intriguing and compelling site of aesthetic and moral innovation in the 1960s, which often happened to chime with imagery and ideologies associated with decadence. As Nick Freeman notes:

For those in the vanguard of social change, it was a powerful symbol of a new Britain that was supposedly classless, dynamic, *fun*. [...] For those inclined to see decadence in a less positive light, the city was an equally convenient and memorable image of decline. Whether or not there actually was a Swinging London is less important than what it might represent, and this was invariably a nebulous ‘permissive society’ that licensed sexual and narcotic experiment and rejected traditional social and moral constraints.⁶

Moreover, films that engaged with these permissive elements of 1960s British culture were seen as particularly attractive to the much sought-after youth audiences who were increasingly becoming the mainstay of a cinemagoing public dramatically declining in overall numbers (in the Western world), particularly because of the growth of television. By the 1960s, it had become clear that the old logics of successful studio production no longer applied; the age of ‘nobody knows anything’ (to quote William Goldman’s famous dictum) had begun, and this sense of perplexed desperation among studio controllers about how to attract audiences only accelerated as the decade progressed,

resulting in some strange corporate behaviours. As Aubrey Solomon suggests, 'If there was ever a time when all rhyme and reason (if there ever was any in films) was missing from the movie business, it was 1968–70'.⁷ Studios put financial heft behind the gamble of wholesome big-budget musicals trying to appeal to family audiences, in the hope of replicating the record-breaking box-office takings of *The Sound of Music* (1965). However, they mostly fell far short of that goal, with super-productions such as *Doctor Dolittle* (1967), *Star!* (1968), *Finian's Rainbow* (1968), *Paint Your Wagon* (1969), and *Hello Dolly!* (1969) suffering catastrophic losses instead.⁸ The lure of colour film spectacle had been considerably weakened by the increasing availability of colour television, already ubiquitous in the US by the mid-1960s and introduced to the UK in 1967, then across all its channels by the decade's end. But the other answer to the question of how to prevent haemorrhaging film audiences was to avoid the blanket cross-demographic appeal of the family film in favour of something more niche, and to go for the youth market. From about 1963 onwards, this often entailed trying to capitalize on the contemporary enthusiasm for British youth culture, riding high from Beatlemania.⁹ Equally important in movie circles was the Oscar-winning success of *Tom Jones* (1963), the bawdy and visually inventive costume picture which made an international star of Albert Finney, and the growing popularity of the James Bond films; both centred on the sexual adventures of their licentious young male protagonists.

Tom Jones, James Bond, and The Beatles were all brought to cinema screens through the auspices of United Artists, the first Hollywood studio to make British productions a crucial component of their sixties slate, but not the last.¹⁰ As director John Boorman noted of this period, 'There was a complete loss of nerve by the American studios' that left them 'so confused and so uncertain as to what to do', and 'London was this swinging place, and there was this desire to import British or European directors who would somehow have the answers'.¹¹ By the mid-1960s every major Hollywood studio was undertaking significant production activities in Britain, in the hope of harnessing some of that success for themselves. This resulted in a cycle of London-centred films encompassing numerous spy thrillers and caper movies such as *The Ipcress File* (1965),

Kaleidoscope (1966), and the social satire of *Darling* (1965), as well as a host of modish but melancholic comedies like *The Knack ...and how to get it* (1965), *Alfie* (1966), *Georgy Girl* (1966), and *Morgan: A Suitable Case for Treatment* (1966), all of which seemed designed to speak to young audiences beguiled by British culture both in the UK and overseas. These films were also appreciated for their sexual candour, pushing against the strictures of the unsustainable and soon-to-collapse Production Code.¹² The surprising US box-office success of MGM's London-set, Antonioni-directed *Blow Up* (1966), a film deeply mired in the culture of swinging London and as narratively opaque and enigmatic as the director's previous Italian work, provided further fuel for the idea that new kinds of audiences were looking for new kinds of things in their films, and that the classical virtues of cogent narrative were no longer paramount to their requirements (although the crucial factor in *Blow Up*'s success was more likely to have been its incorporation of sexually explicit material and plentiful female nudity – enough to see it denied a Production Code seal of approval).¹³ *Blow Up* may have 'left most of the older executives scratching their heads', according to Peter Biskind, but its success in spite of that not only destabilized received wisdom but also had liberating concomitant effects for emergent filmmakers, one of whom told Biskind: '*Blow Up* confused the hell out of them. People really started feeling they didn't know what was going on. It was much easier to get stuff going'.¹⁴

This milieu – in which new kinds of filmmaking, however outlandish or risk-taking, might be backed by studios if they were felt to potentially connect with youth audiences, and in which London settings were still the acme of fashionability – provided the context for Twentieth Century Fox's decision to support John Bryan's production company Film Designs in their making of *The Touchables*. The directorial debut of noted sixties photographer Robert Freeman [fig. 2] (who shot Khrushchev and John Coltrane as well as The Beatles' first five album covers and the first Pirelli pin-up calendar), *The Touchables* follows the cool London lives of an 'indomitable clan of ultra-modern girls' – Sadie (Judy Huxtable), Melanie (Esther Anderson), Busbee (Marilyn Rickard) and Samson (Kathy Simmonds) – who kidnap a pop star (Christian, played by David Anthony) and

then transport him to a transparent plastic pleasure-dome in the countryside, where they take turns in using him for their gratification.¹⁵ A meandering parallel subplot about professional wrestling, predatory gay desire, and criminal extortion develops alongside until the two plotlines converge and culminate in a moderately violent but ultimately inconclusive *dénouement*. It is a thriller of sorts – although putting any decisive generic label on an evasive film described by its own director as seeking to communicate ‘an atmosphere or a vague modern environment’ rather than tell a story is a questionable endeavour.¹⁶ The film may commence on a curtain being dramatically drawn back to reveal a waxwork of Alfred Hitchcock, but overall it is very far from the Hitchcockian model of suspense in film, opting for a far more diffuse construction.¹⁷ The Hitchcock waxwork behind a *Psycho*-esque curtain is less significant as auteurist touchstone than as kitsch memorabilia, a piece of quirky set dressing at the achingly hip party that opens the film, and the first of the ‘genuine replicas’ that litter the film. Arguably, the waxwork of Michael Caine, then one of the top British acting exports after the success of *Alfie*, plays a more vital role, as the girls’ first practice ‘kidnap’ victim before they move on to abduct a real live man.

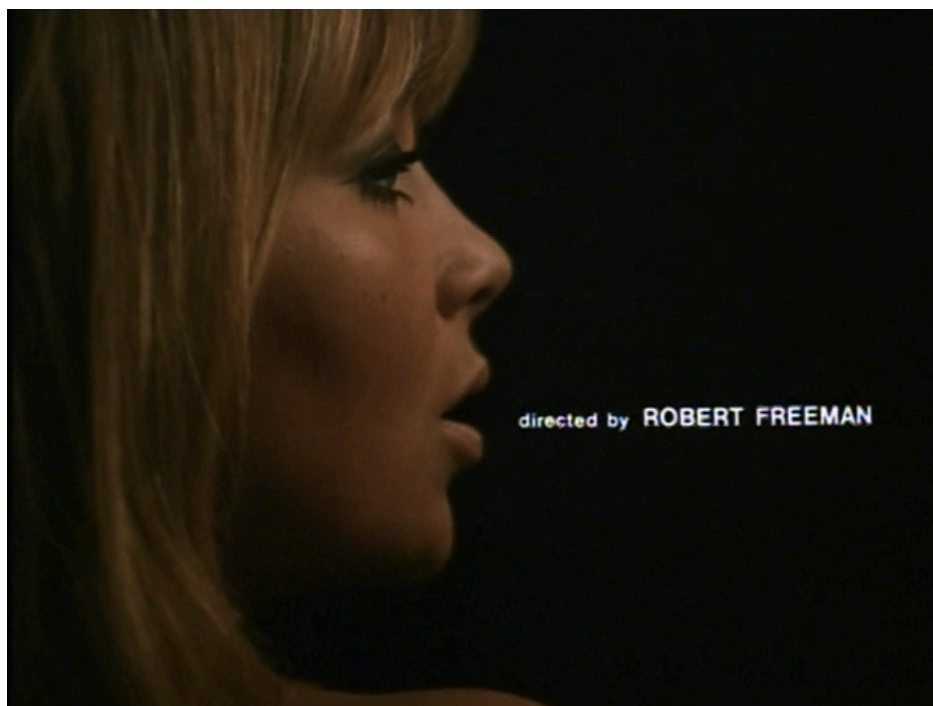


Fig. 2 (00:05:38): Robert Freeman's directorial debut.

Beginning *The Touchables* on the happenstance and kitsch randomness of a swinging party, with all its loosely-motivated interactions and actions, sets the tone for the film to come, in the most apposite fashion. Plot, as Robert Freeman suggested in his description of the film, is not *The Touchables*' driving force; rather, its stylized presentation of a series of fashionable vignettes is its true raison d'être. Freeman underlined this quality in describing the film in the trade press as a 'time-slice happening' and 'a collection of experiences' rather than a film that would offer viewers a standard narrative.¹⁸ The 'vague modern environment' it seeks to invoke is swinging London in all its aspirational modishness and permissiveness, and American trade paper *Box Office* predicted 'all the English gear and slang' in this 'latest piece of pop propaganda to come from swinging London' would make the film 'a winner'.¹⁹

Heavily indebted to the aesthetics of magazine and television advertising and editorial and fashion photography (in which Freeman had frequently worked) as well as nascent music video, *The Touchables* attempted to harness contemporary trends in service of a production that would be expressive of, and appeal to, youth. This directly tied into Twentieth Century Fox's tactic at the time to 'Think young!', as it announced in an advertisement in the UK film trade press for its 1967 production slate (which included the forthcoming *The Touchables*).²⁰ The film seems to have had a chaotically impromptu genesis, typical of the risk-taking, febrile cultural moment of swinging London. Willing to stake some of Fox's *Sound of Music* profits on a bid to appeal to a more fashionable demographic, the studio's young new head of production, Richard Zanuck, apparently green-lit both *The Touchables* and Mike Sarne's *Joanna* (1968), another swinging London story by a debutant director, 'on a street corner, outside Zanuck's hotel, in a matter of seconds', Mike Sarne recalled, as 'Zanuck just looked at me, looked at Bob, and said, "I'm going to give each of you a million to do your pictures" and that was that.'²¹ This anecdote is especially evocative of a neo-decadent production context, as large sums of money were being chaotically dispensed perhaps in order to try to pull back from the precipice of unstoppable Hollywood decline, or perhaps in a feckless gesture of disregard for the future as the whole system got ready to plunge over the edge.

A Penchant for Decadence: The Late 1960s as Neo-decadent Era

According to design historian Lesley Jackson, the ‘sharp edged, precise’ aesthetic of early-to-mid-60s swinging London began to give way to a ‘melt-down of forms’ around 1967, with a new countercultural aesthetic which ‘began to rediscover and revel in the richness of Victorian design’, including visual culture associated with the decadent tradition of the *fin de siècle*.²² The 1966 exhibition of Aubrey Beardsley’s work at London’s Victoria and Albert Museum had proven especially instrumental in effecting a stylistic shift; Beardsley featuring on the cover of The Beatles’ *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967) is testimony to this, as is his work’s influence on both the cover art of their earlier album *Revolver* (1966) and the animation style of their 1968 feature, *Yellow Submarine*.²³ Equally influential was the art-nouveau style of Alphonse Mucha, in particular his curlicue-haired goddesses, co-opted and repurposed for the psychedelic poster art of the late 1960s and remarkably similar to the new feminine ideal espoused in late-60s fashion exemplified by the flowing gowns and flowing locks worn by Biba’s models.²⁴ Their vampish, panda-eyed personae chimed with the vamps of silent cinema; therefore, it made perfect sense that the forgotten face of Theda Bara would be reanimated as the cover girl for the key countercultural publication of the moment, the *International Times*.

As this widespread renewal of interest in the aesthetics of decadence and the *fin de siècle* manifested itself across popular culture in the late-60s, it was inevitable that it should also seep into the cinema of the period as it attempted to keep pace with changing fashions. In cinema, the monochrome mod look of earlier swinging London films like Richard Lester’s *The Knack* gave way to a different and more sumptuous visual style inspired by the decadent revival. We can discern its imprint upon the ornate sets created by production designer Assheton Gorton for Hollywood-financed London-set films such as the swinging rom-com *The Bliss of Mrs Blossom* (1968) and the psychedelic fantasia *Wonderwall* (1968), or in the exotic, sequestered spaces curated by interior

designer Christopher Gibbs for the Mick Jagger film *Performance* (completed 1968 but only released in re-edited form by a disgusted Warner Brothers in 1971).²⁵

In many ways *Performance* exemplifies high-sixties neo-decadence. A jaded young artist, Jagger's musician Turner, shuts himself away and dedicates himself to a life of sensual pleasure and inner examination, fuelled by narcotics, in a manner somewhat reminiscent of Des Esseintes, the protagonist of J.-K. Huysmans's foundational 1884 decadent text, *À rebours*, translated into English by Robert Baldick as *Against Nature*. The very precepts of 'natural' masculine heteronormative western identity are called into question through Turner's psychologically-combative encounter with Chas, James Fox's violent gangster who seeks sanctuary within Turner's refuge, with *Performance*'s narrative motif of uncanny doubling and split personality recalling the fin-de-siècle literary work of Robert Louis Stevenson and Oscar Wilde (around this time, swinging London also provided an apt setting for Massimo Dallamano's updated *Dorian Gray* (1970)). Entrancingly perverse in both style and subject matter, a film like *Performance* demonstrates how the appeal of decadence at this time was not only a matter of aesthetics but also of ethos, especially its emphasis on sensual, experiential pleasure, sexual rule-breaking, and the querying of fixed identities. In fact the two were inextricably intertwined: thus it was not only for his unique exotic graphic style that Beardsley's work was admired but also for the iconoclastic content presented through it, still outré enough to see prints of his work seized from a shop on Regent Street on grounds of obscenity in 1966 – even while the V&A were celebrating him.²⁶

The Touchables also presents that same potent combination of sensual aesthetics allied with sexual and social experimentation that animated the neo-decadent *Performance*. Indeed, the writer and co-director of *Performance*, Donald Cammell, also had a hand in the making of *The Touchables*, as co-originator of its screenplay (alongside his advertising executive brother David Cammell).²⁷ One might view *The Touchables* as a partial rehearsal of some of the themes and ideas developed in *Performance*, another film centred on underworld thugs who track down and menace a bunch of countercultural butterflies who have hidden themselves away to pursue their sensory

experimentation. Like Jagger's enigmatic and inscrutable Turner, the 'touchable' girls are impossible to read, their feelings inaccessible to the viewer. This is partly due to the film's deliberate attempt to have its characters maintain their cool throughout, no matter how preposterous the situation they find themselves in. But it might also be an inadvertent side-effect of the casting decisions being motivated more by model good looks than acting ability.²⁸ Either way, it has the effect of making what reviewer Renata Adler called 'mod vacuous' the film's primary performative mode.²⁹ Sometimes the mode is enacted through a listless lackadaisical delivery of the dialogue – the scene in which the girls monotonously chant 'rhubarb rhubarb' (standard cover dialogue for background extras) while in conversation at the dinner table is especially illustrative of this deliberately slipshod approach to meaningful character dialogue – and sometimes through a cinematographic style in which the girls are deployed more in the manner of props. Sometimes they are shot in fetishistic ad-style close-up (the film's title sequence provides an extended example of this) but other times in longer shot, posed and positioned to adorn a stylish interior in the manner of a magazine layout; Busbee lounging seductively on multi-coloured globular floor cushions in the dome is a good example of this 'Sunday colour supplement' visual style [fig. 3].³⁰ Even moments that should ostensibly provide dramatic excitement, like the girls' daring abduction of the pop star Christian, are shot and edited in such a way as to make them feel curiously empty: the action is framed in the middle distance, positioning it more as monochromatic spectacle (with each character clad in black and white) than a moment of genuine struggle or suspense. It sums up the overall emotional tenor of *The Touchables*: nothing carries emotional weight or depth; everything takes place at the level of spectacle and surface.

The emphasis placed on production design in *The Touchables* also plays into these tendencies, although this aspect of the film is perhaps unsurprising given its producer was the celebrated set designer John Bryan who had created astonishing *trompe-l'œil* production design for films such as *Oliver Twist* (1948) and *Becket* (1964). Although there are some more casually arrayed scenes that take place in cars and on real London streets as well as locations like modern office

blocks and a Mayfair gentleman's club, three carefully curated domestic interiors provide the venue for much of the film's main action.



Fig. 3 (00:39:27): 'Sunday colour supplement' cinematography.



Fig. 4 (00:16:14): A kitsch dinner with Michael Caine and Michelangelo.

The first is the palatial bachelor pad of wrestler Ricki Starr (playing himself in the film), self-styled Renaissance man and Melanie's erstwhile boyfriend, who acts as host to the girls as they hatch their initial kidnap plans. His wood-panelled home is full of paintings and sculptures by Michelangelo [fig. 4] although these artworks are, he admits, 'genuine replicas' and 'genuine reproductions', playing on ideas of authenticity in a manner highly reminiscent of decadent discourse – indeed, as noted earlier, imagery associated with simulacra, replication, and automata reverberates throughout the film, from waxworks to wind-up robots. Through his surroundings, Starr is presented as a connoisseur who not only quotes Pope and Aristotle, referring to his extensive library of leather-bound volumes, but also dines on lobster at a table laid with all the accoutrements of aristocratic gracious living. This fitted into Starr's off-screen reputation as connoisseur and 'erudite intellectual who read Thoreau's *Walden*, listened to classical music and drank fine wines', but it also corresponded with the Sunday supplement tropes of luxurious living that John Berger skewers so brilliantly in *Ways of Seeing* as 'translat[ing] the language of oil painting into publicity clichés'.³¹ Starr's reputation as neo-decadent dandy and aesthete also mapped onto his effete professional persona, and the film shows him performing his (real-life) balletic, acrobatic act, pirouetting round the wrestling ring bedecked in gold trunks and silver slippers.

Whereas Starr's bachelor pad is a more conventionally decadent sequestered masculine and queer space, the second significant domestic space in the film, the girls' shared London flat, offers a different kind of trendily repurposed old-fashioned space, as an open-plan apartment at the top of what looks like a Victorian school building.³² Just as in *Blow Up*, the fashionable protagonists live in re-styled Victorian buildings rather than ultra-modern settings, 'apt environments for the beautiful people to inhabit, exacerbating their coolness through the piquantly contrasting traditionalism'.³³ The shared space is kitted out in the fashionably bohemian, apparently casual style of the period with furniture in unexpected places (Samson's bed in the main living area), and pictures tacked up on the asymmetric whitewashed walls. The slightly removed camera positioning mentioned previously is also in evidence here, although there is intimate under-the-bedcovers

photography of Samson watching Christian being interviewed on television, with the mini portable television placed between her legs imbuing the scene with a masturbatory feel [fig. 5]. Such up-to-the-minute technology being foregrounded – as with the mobile television Sadie watches in her speeding car – also consolidates the idea that these are ultra-modern girls even if they do live in the attic of a Victorian schoolhouse.



Fig. 5 (00:24:02): Getting off on the telly.

These representational tropes – the distanced camerawork, the combination of modernity with more traditional elements in the *mise en scène* – continue and increase in the third and most significant domestic space of all: the inflated plastic pleasure-dome to which the girls flee with their captive pop star. Described in an early version of the script as ‘a beautiful transparent dome [...] about eighty feet high, towering above the nearby trees’, when built it was the largest transparent pneumatic dome in the world.³⁴ With its polished aluminium floor and see-through walls, the dome appears simultaneously boundless and finite. Its transparency allows a view of the landscape in which it is located – Frensham Ponds, near Farnham in Surrey – to permeate its man-

made membrane, situating the interior of the dome in its wider rural setting. Yet the slightly opaque quality of the plastic creates a hazy barrier that keeps what is inside in sharp, brightly lit focus, and renders what is outside less precise, more impressionistic [fig. 6].



Fig. 6 (00:35:26): Dome sweet dome, at dawn.



Fig. 7 (00:33:20): One of the first shots of the plastic pleasure dome.

This separates the dome from the outside world, creating a sense of distance that is all the more pronounced because the shapes and colours of that outside world are still recognizable. Exterior long shots show the dome resting in the landscape like a huge bubble or amniotic sac, ethereal despite its vast size, at once there and barely there [fig. 7]. The dome plays with the eye, and with the viewer's perception of space and distance, like a giant piece of three-dimensional op art. This was, as an advertisement in *Variety* put it, 'the kind of pleasure-dome that Samuel Coleridge [...] never hallucinated'.³⁵

The dome itself functions as the supreme neo-decadent space. It is a form of retreat, a fantastic bubble that keeps its inhabitants removed from the normal world, akin to those cloistered environments in which the protagonists of fin-de-siècle decadent literature situate themselves, all the better to relish their apart-ness and the asocial artificial realms they have created. In *À rebours* this is a dark interior space, full of synthetic sensory delights, which can be tightly controlled and into which no quotidian tedium is permitted to penetrate. In an entirely appropriate updating of this trope for the modern plastic age, the dark chambers in which acts of unspeakable perversity and amorality are committed have been transformed in *The Touchables* into polyamorous free love in broad daylight (even accompanied by a cover of The Beatles' 'Good Day Sunshine') in a dwelling made of the quintessential modern material, and the zenith of the unnatural and the artificial: plastic.³⁶

However, the set dressing of the dome points towards some more established or familiar decadent associations. The fur rug that covers the naked bodies of the fivesome as they sleep together in their carousel bed invokes the famous Redlands drug bust of February 1967 which resulted in the arrest of the Rolling Stones' Mick Jagger and Keith Richards and salacious press reportage of Jagger's girlfriend Marianne Faithful being caught *in flagrante* and naked save for the draping of a fur blanket: the acme of 60s neo-decadence even accompanied by 'a strong, sweet smell of incense', according to tabloid coverage.³⁷ The revolving fairground carousel bed (to which Christian is later pinioned like Vitruvian Man; see fig. 8) along with the pinball and billiard tables

are reminders of the centrality of decadent visual culture to the arch appreciation of the kitsch vernacular folk art of popular entertainment, from Des Esseintes' enthusiasm for circus acrobats and ventriloquists to the poster art of Toulouse-Lautrec featuring popular dancers and comedians.³⁸ *The Touchables* shows off the shiny embellishments of its carefully selected *objets d'art* in a musical montage sequence which intercuts the girls playing pinball and billiards with each of them seducing Christian in turn, playing on the double meaning of the idea of 'scoring'.

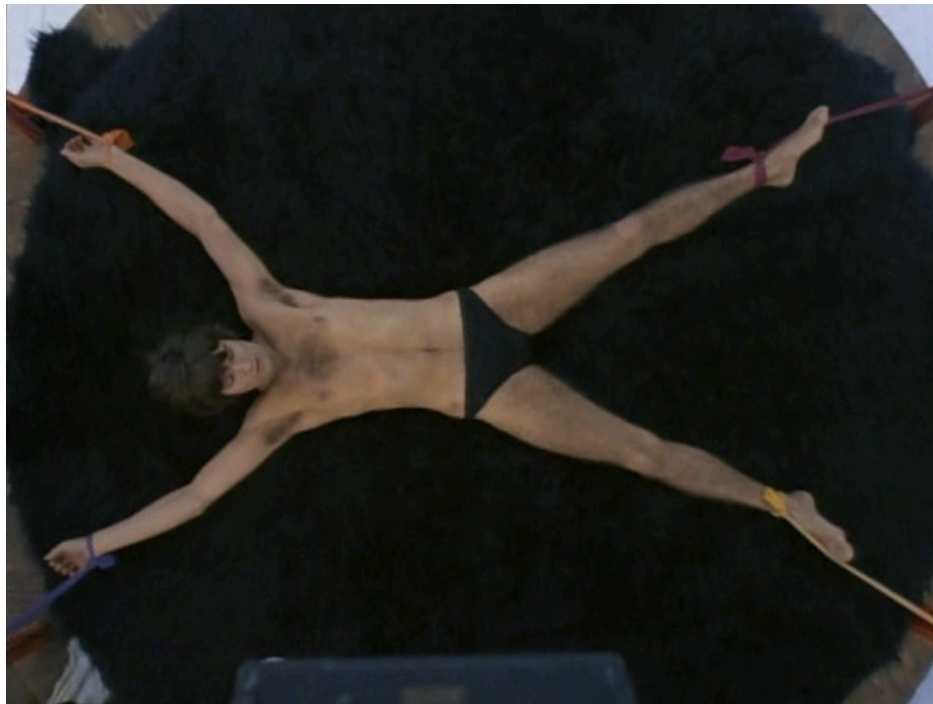


Fig. 8 (00:38:58): The pop star (David Anthony) as Vitruvian man.

Appealing to our Worst Instincts? Advertising, Affluence, and *The Touchables*

The only sequence in *The Touchables* critic Renata Adler felt really worked was Melanie's silhouetted freeform dance in front of a rapid-fire strobing montage of projected images from contemporary advertising.³⁹ This sequence being the point where the film came alive for at least one critic is perhaps a sign that it was on surer ground in a moment heavily imbricated with the imagery of consumer culture. *The Touchables* was the product of creatives with strong track records in advertising: not only had Freeman already done extensive award-winning work in print and film

advertising for David Cammell's leading advertising agency partnership, Cammell, Hudson, and Brownjohn, art director Peter Hampton, associate producer John Oldknow, assistant director Ted Morley, and camera operator Tony Troke had also all previously made television advertisements, and cinematographer Alan Pudney had collaborated with Freeman on commercials (and would continue to work with him in the same medium after finishing the film).⁴⁰ The movement of personnel between advertising and film was common in Britain throughout the 1960s, not least because employment in the film industry frequently remained precarious even during a boom time for production, and the two forms exerted an increasingly recognizable stylistic influence on each other.⁴¹ For instance, the aforementioned elevated and slightly removed camera position taken in numerous scenes mimics the imagery of an interior decor magazine spread, presenting objects as potentially purchasable commodities. Numerous reviewers of the film picked up on *The Touchables*' advertising-inflected aesthetic: one noted 'a *mise en scène* that drips with the highly lacquered kinkiness of a glossy advertising lay-out' conjuring up a 'world of disposable daydreams', while Adler felt its sex scenes were 'a bit like commercials, in their timing, for stockings or shaving cream'.⁴² Yet another suggested that *The Touchables* represented a *reductio ad absurdum* in the cross-pollination of advertising style into cinema, with the film functioning as 'simply a commercial for itself'.⁴³ Resemblance to advertising was inevitably viewed in pejorative terms at this time: its influence was conceptualized as being inherently negative. Ken Russell, who himself directed a number of commercials, nevertheless described ad-men as a scourge on society whose 'minds and values were depraved'.⁴⁴ *The Touchables*, therefore, appeared to exemplify all that critics believed to be wrong with the advertising industry's baleful influence both on British society and on cinema, frequently understood as an indicator of Americanization and moral turpitude, promoting ephemeral sensation, illusion, and acquisitiveness.⁴⁵ The arrival of commercial television in Britain in late 1955 had increased the amount and accessibility of moving image advertising, prompting its opponents to claim that it would 'pervert and reduce the standards of taste, morality and culture in this country for a generation'.⁴⁶ Particular targets were the musical stings or jingles deployed in

TV adverts, banal and yet unforgettable: one of the most famous, ‘Good morning, good morning, our best to you this morning’ for Kellogg’s Corn Flakes, is chorused by the girls in *The Touchables* at breakfast time; the same jingle would inspire John Lennon’s *Sgt. Pepper* composition ‘Good Morning Good Morning’.

Advertising needed to have an immediate impact and encouraged a focus on catchy tunes and surface beauty, on the immediate (and often artificially stimulated) desires of the individual rather than the needs of society as a whole. As such, it was deemed to promote the superficial, rather than the substantive; the ephemeral, rather than the enduring; the sensual, rather than the rational, urging the public at large to spend money that it did not have ‘on items it may not want or does not need’.⁴⁷ No wonder its most vociferous critics, such as Labour politician Aneurin Bevan, considered the advertising industry to be ‘evil’ and guilty of ‘artificially appealing to [mankind’s] worst instincts’.⁴⁸ But advertising was only a symptom of the underlying problem. To a certain extent, affluence itself was understood as a form of decadence, with damaging effects on the population. The sense that Britain may have changed for the worse, and moved away from its perceived traditional ascetic virtues and values towards self-indulgence was evident in frequently critical responses to affluence ‘conceived in terms of moral and cultural loss besides material gain’.⁴⁹ Greater amounts of disposable income and increased access to credit via hire-purchase agreements meant that more workers were able to define themselves not by what they made or did at work, but by what they consumed or did at home. A greater cultural emphasis on pleasure and indulgence was understood by some to speak to national lassitude and a lack of moral integrity or collective purpose. Even Harold Macmillan, the Prime Minister who acted as midwife to post-war affluence, maintained ambivalent feelings about the society he had helped to usher in, noting as early as 1960 that in ‘a large part’ of British life ‘a sort of vague, materialist, agnostic creed flourishes’.⁵⁰

Therefore, the glossy amoral aimlessness of a film like *The Touchables* – whose ‘vague modern environment’ even recalls Macmillan’s expression of his fears – slotted neatly into ongoing

debates about social, cultural, and moral change in 1960s Britain. Freeman claimed in the press that it was a story of ‘expendable living and casual amorality’, but it is unclear whether the film is intended as a satire or critique of contemporary consumer culture in an age of affluence.⁵¹ Certainly, Freeman, the Cammells, and other personnel’s extensive work in advertising might blunt or problematize any sense of outright attack. Keeping its agnostic, coolly uncommitted ‘mod vacuous’ stance, *The Touchables* remains hard to read in terms of intentions, as one critic noted: ‘Film’s concept is never clear. If meant as a put-down of a current cinema cycle, it is a puerile effort; if eyed as a psychological study, it is immature; if conceived as escapism, it is entirely inadequate and forced.’⁵² It is certainly bold of the film to include an extended discussion of the definition of the word ‘farrago’ (looked up in Ricki Starr’s leather-bound dictionary) when it so closely resembles a farrago itself.

In their ceaseless, indolent sensation-seeking, the girls come to resemble – albeit in a lower register – the anti-heroes of decadent literature, like Des Esseintes, always seeking rarefied and exquisite experiences (the ‘new perfumes, larger blossoms, pleasures still untasted’ Huysmans refers to, quoting Flaubert); shifting from stealing waxworks, to kidnapping pop stars, sleeping with them to sentencing them to death by firing squad – just for (attempted) kicks.⁵³ But these ‘birds from mod and far-out London [...] who drive fast cars, shower in men’s locker rooms, [and] shed lovers the way they do their clothes’, endlessly seeking new ways to pique their jaded appetites, also exemplify the contemporary disease of ‘neophilia’, as defined by conservative critic Christopher Booker, which he felt was incubated and encouraged by a vapid superficial culture.⁵⁴ Certainly the listless qualities of their performances contribute to this sense of dissipated numbness, as does the film’s constant movement from one spectacle to the next (Ricki Starr even comments at one point: ‘you’re confusing movement with action’), in a mood Adler aptly characterized as ‘a sort of fidgety mod pornography’.⁵⁵

Bursting the Bubble: A Cautionary Tale of Pneumatic Pleasure-domes

Along with its beautiful young cast, *The Touchables*' space-age inflated PVC dome was one of its prime visual attractions. On screen, it appears serene and still, despite whatever farragoes might be taking place within and around it, harmonious within its pastoral setting. But during the film's production it was the source of continual difficulties and delays: a *folie de grandeur* that seemed to speak eloquently of the overblown extravagance of budgets and production design in British cinema during its peak moment of overseas investment. Fabricated by waterproof garment manufacturer Pakamac, the dome had been designed by Arthur Quarmby, an architect who was hugely excited by the possibilities offered by the combination of plastics and pneumatics. Building with these materials and technologies had the potential to free designers from some of the restraints that had previously determined a building's formal and aesthetic properties and made possible some of the more playful, ovoid/spherical designs that emerged during the 1960s. Demonstrating that the phrase 'blow-up' had multiple meanings during the period, Quarmby had developed a prototype inflatable chair in 1964 – the type of furniture which, like paper dresses and cardboard seats, spoke of the era's emphasis on disposability and modernity.

Quarmby later recalled that the dome desired by Freeman was an inherently problematic shape: 'a three-quarter sphere is a pretty dodgy form pneumatically – pressure and uplift conditions vary around it and a difficult concentration of stresses develops at the crown'.⁵⁶ In short, it looked stunning, but was prone to wind damage. This was an issue that would haunt the production, especially as shooting on the film did not start until September 1967 – just in time for the gustier autumn weather that followed the balmy 'Summer of Love'.⁵⁷ Following various 'mis-adventures', Film Designs took delivery of four different domes, each of which cost £2,400. The daily progress reports compiled by production manager John Oldknow give a flavour of problems faced:

Monday 6 November: '[Third] Dome arrived on site at 8.30 a.m.'

Thursday 9 November 1967: 'Dome successfully inflated.'

Saturday 11 November 1967: 'The dome was totally destroyed at 12.15 a.m.'⁵⁸

With each new bubble came more, and increasingly restrictive, usage instructions. For much of the shoot, the dome had to be deflated if wind speeds rose above 30mph, although there was some concern after the initial inflation of the third dome that this might be lowered to just 10mph. Days were lost as the producers arranged meetings to insure the dome(s). Because high winds were likely to burst its crown, the crew became greatly interested in atmospheric conditions: the policy that was eventually agreed obliged the production to contact 'the nearest official meteorological forecast office' twice a day. A recording anemometer was installed on site for good measure. The production team eventually adopted a fatalistic attitude towards this capricious plastic god: 'It is obviously impossible to foretell what will happen with these domes, though from past experience it would seem unlikely that we will complete shooting without further disasters'.⁵⁹

Although shooting on *The Touchables* was initially anticipated to take fifty days, in the end, the production overran by an extra thirty-four days, and problems with the dome were held to be the root cause of twenty-eight of these. This slippage from the schedule was, of course, hugely expensive. Budgeted at £301,055, *The Touchables* ended up costing £150,000 more, with the dome responsible for at least £90,000 of this additional expenditure. Because the dome was so central to much of the film, when it was out of action there was not always much else for the cast and crew to do, yet they still needed to be paid. It appears that so desperate were Freeman and Bryan to make progress that some scenes were rewritten so that they no longer featured it.⁶⁰

Quarmby suggests that the various mishaps that befell the production inspired a new ending: 'the [earlier] bursting was so effective that it was done again, deliberately, at the climax of the film.'⁶¹ 'Climax' is perhaps an overstatement, but certainly in the film's final scenes the dome is burst and we see it fall in on itself, while the girls, unmoved by this spectacle, simply flee the scene and return to London. Ending on an image of a bursting bubble, of deflation and collapse, is so much more than a serendipitous way to end an aimless, plotless film. It was not only a kind of in-joke about admitting defeat in the Sisyphean endeavour of keeping the dome erect but it also

acted as a perfect metaphor for so many aspects of the broader culture from which *The Touchables* originated [figs 9–11].



Fig. 9 (01:28:49): The Swinging Sixties' bubble begins to burst.



Fig. 10 (01:28:52): Going, going...



Fig. 11 (01:28:58): Gone.

1968 was the peak year of Hollywood investment in the British film industry, when all the major studios' extensive UK production slates were at their height. Thereafter, the 'swinging London' film scene went into dramatic decline as too many of its products had failed to provide the box-office returns that had been hoped for. *The Touchables* certainly did not catch on with audiences and performed poorly.⁶² Studios were also tightening their belts after the failure of numerous mega-productions: *Doctor Dolittle* and *Star!* lost Fox in excess of \$13 million and \$10 million, respectively.⁶³ But the studio system of old was on borrowed time, as the takeover by conglomerates and in some cases asset-stripping of the Hollywood majors was imminent, with hotelier Kirk Kerkorian's 1970 takeover of MGM – mainly to use its name and trademarks for his Las Vegas resort – perhaps the most blithely philistine of all. There were some green shoots of recovery in the shape of smaller Hollywood films which did connect with smart younger audiences, such as *Easy Rider* (1969), representing the emergence of 'New Hollywood' which would come to fuller fruition in the 1970s. But this kind of success only demonstrated how the locus of global youth culture had shifted away from the UK and back to the US: Haight Asbury, San Francisco,

had taken over from the Kings Road, Chelsea, as its epicentre. It was certainly of no comfort to a British film industry facing the catastrophic effects of the withdrawal of American financing. Their bubble truly had burst.

Although the deflating dome in *The Touchables* might be read in terms of moral guardian Mary Whitehouse's idea of Britain being in a state of 'moral collapse', we might equally read it as a bursting of the bubble of a particular moment of possibility in post-war British culture, the utopian potential of the 1960s 'cultural revolution', however ridiculous some of its cultural relics may appear with hindsight.⁶⁴ It did not lead to an extensive film career for Freeman who made only one further feature, *Secret World* (1969), co-directed with Paul Feyder, and then returned to his original trade of photography thereafter.⁶⁵ The collapsing membrane of a pumped-up, precarious structure acted as a perfect metaphor for the end of British cinema's good times and the extravagant death throes of a studio system which had bankrolled it. Although not a popular film at the time with audiences or critics, and hardly visible since except as a cult item, *The Touchables* is nonetheless profoundly expressive, both in its on-screen (in)action and in its off-screen woes, of a moment of cinematic neo-decadence, a beautiful haphazard 'monstrosity' fragrant with the tradition's 'special, sweet savor of incipient decay', and as such worthy of interest.⁶⁶

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² Susan Sontag, 'Fascinating fascism', *New York Review of Books*, 6 February 1975, 23–30.

³ Anon, 'The Touchables', *Box Office*, 11 November 1968, p. 94. M. H. Abrams, *Glossary of Literary Terms*, 6th edn (New York: Harcourt, 1992), p. 43.

⁴ *Box Office*, 11 November 1968, p. 94. Available on DVD from only one vendor that we know of (see 'Photo Credits' to this issue) and not available at all on Blu-Ray or VOD (reflecting its marginal place within film canons, in spite of a minor cult following), there is nonetheless currently a version of the entire film uploaded onto YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1eBz2eaqtNY> [accessed 19 December 2019]. The film has never been shown on UK television.

⁵ Announcement in *Variety*, 9 October 1968, p. 14.

⁶ Nick Freeman, 'Permissive Paradise: The Fiction of Swinging London', in *Decadences: Morality and Aesthetics in British Literature*, ed. by Paul Fox (Stuttgart: Ibidem, 2014), pp. 349–74 (pp. 351–52).

⁷ Aubrey Solomon, *Twentieth Century-Fox: A Corporate and Financial History* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2002), p. 161.

⁸ Matthew Kennedy *Roadshow: The Fall of Film Musicals in the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁹ See Barry Miles, *The British Invasion* (New York and London: Sterling, 2009).

¹⁰ See Tino Balio, *United Artists: The Company that Changed the Film Industry* (Madison: Wisconsin University Press, 1987).

¹¹ Quoted in Peter Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex 'n' Drugs 'n' Rock 'n' Roll Generation Saved Hollywood* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), p. 22.

¹² For an account of the end of the PCA (replaced by a new MPAA ratings system in 1968), see Leonard J. Leff and Jerrold L. Simmons, *The Dame in the Kimono: Hollywood, Censorship, and the Production Code* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001). This is also covered in Paul Monaco, *The Sixties, 1960–1969, The History of American Cinema*, ed. by Charles Musser, 10 vols, VIII (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001). The British films benefitted from the freedoms granted by the British Board of Film Classification's increasingly liberal regime under John Trevelyan, 1958–1971. See Anthony Aldgate, *Censorship and the Permissive Society: British Cinema and Theatre, 1955–1965* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

¹³ MGM's decision to go ahead minus a PCA seal is seen as a watershed moment in the making of a new Hollywood, consolidated by the release of the home-grown sex and violence of *Bonnie and Clyde* in 1967 (Jonathan Kirshner, and Jon Lewis, *When the Movies Mattered: The New Hollywood Revisited* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2019)).

¹⁴ Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*, p. 22.

¹⁵ Robert Freeman quoted in John Ware, 'Production-wise', *Daily Cinema*, 6 December 1967, p. 10.

¹⁶ Robert Freeman, 'Touch of Eros', *Films and Filming*, May 1968, p. 21.

¹⁷ There are some interesting moments of Hitchcockian borrowing in the film, however: the girls' disguise as nuns for the purposes of abduction owes something to *The Lady Vanishes* (1938) while the shot from below of Twynning (James Villiers) dragging Busbee across a transparent glass floor is indebted to a similar shot in *The Lodger* (1926).

¹⁸ Anon., 'Bob Freeman to direct *Touchables*', *Daily Cinema*, 11 August 1967, p. 8. Anon., 'The *Touchables*', *Films and Filming*, May 1968, p. 19.

¹⁹ *Box Office*, 11 November 1968, p. 94.

²⁰ Twentieth Century Fox advertisement, *The Daily Cinema*, 1 November 1967.

²¹ Mike Sarne, quoted in Wheeler Winston Dixon, *Cinema at the Margins* (London: Anthem Press, 2013), p. 199. This may have been the moment that sealed the deal but there is footage of producer David Cammell in phone conversation with an unknown party trying to set up in the production in *Go go go said the bird*, the Associated Rediffusion television documentary about swinging London's movers and shakers broadcast on 26 October 1966. The fact remains that Twentieth Century Fox was prepared to finance *The Touchables* to the tune of £295,125 in return for distribution rights. See Film Finances Archive: *The Touchables* – contract between Film Finances Limited and Twentieth Century Fox, 1 September 1967. Whilst this was not a huge budget by contemporary standards (and not the million dollars Sarne mentions), neither was it insignificant. It represented a sizeable investment given that Robert Freeman was directing his first feature.

²² Lesley Jackson, *The Sixties: Decade of Design Revolution* (London: Phaidon, 1998), pp. 206–07.

²³ Chris Snodgrass, 'Beardsley Scholarship at His Centennial: Tethering or Untethering a Victorian Icon?', *English Literature in Transition*, 42 (1999), 363–99 (p. 366). David Bowman, 'Scenarios for the revolution in Pepperland', *Journal of Popular Film*, 1 (1972), 173–84 (p. 175).

²⁴ Prime movers in this were the London-based design houses Hapshash and the Coloured Coat and The Fool which produced fashions as well as posters, paintings, furnishings and *objets d'art*. The Fool was famously the in-house designer for The Beatles' short-lived Apple boutique. In the US context, the artist Peter Max was also a significant exponent of the style.

²⁵ Melanie Williams, 'Production design', in *Transformation and Tradition in 1960s British Cinema*, ed. by Richard Farmer, Laura Mayne, Duncan Petrie, and Melanie Williams (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), pp. 214–15.

²⁶ Anon., 'Beardsley drawings seized', *Guardian*, 10 August 1966, p. 1.

²⁷ The Cammells' screenplay work was based on an original idea from Robert Freeman and was then finalized in screenplay form by Ian La Frenais, better known latterly as a television comedy writer with partner Dick Clement, but who had at that point had a recent film success with the screenplay for the swinging London caper film *The Jokers* (1967).

²⁸ One damning review slated the film's 'astonishing vacuity' and 'abysmal acting'. Anon., 'Murder's a relative thing', *Kensington Post*, 31 October 1969, p. 48. But Robert Freeman had been intent on casting his leads according predominantly for their looks: an open call was placed in *London Life*, seeking 'a totally unknown girl, aged between 18 and 21, hair length and colour unimportant, but she should be between 5ft. 6in. and 5ft. 8in. She should move well and be the sort of girl who stands out in a crowd'. Sarah Drummond, 'Talking fashion', *London Life*, 6 August 1966, p. 31. NB. this article claims that the producer would be Walter Shenson and names the film *The Patchables* (a possible typo).

²⁹ Renata Adler, 'Mod flavor dominates "The Touchables"', *New York Times*, 21 November 1968, p. 41. The film does also feature actors with greater experience and performative skills such as James Villiers, Harry Baird (gay wrestler Lillywhite), and John Ronane (pop manager Kashner), but they are mostly peripheral rather than central to the narrative.

³⁰ For more on the origins and impact of these much-debated magazines, see Richard Farmer, 'Supplemental Income: British newspaper colour supplements in the 1960s', *Media History*, 25 (2019), 371–86.

³¹ Laura Katz Rizzo, '"Gold-dust": Ricki Starr's ironic performances of the queer commodity in popular entertainment', in *Performance and Professional Wrestling*, ed. by Broderick Chow, Eero Laine, and Calire Warden

(Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), pp. 127–39 (p. 130). John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (1972; London: Penguin, 2008), p. 140.

³² This hypothesis is supported by information supplied on the film location website Reel Streets: <https://www.reelstreets.com/films/touchables-the/> [accessed 19 December 2019].

³³ Williams, 'Production design', p. 214.

³⁴ Film Finances Archive: *The Touchables*: Screenplay (Old), Ian La Frenais, p. 31; Arthur Quarmby, *The Plastics Architect* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1974), p. 99.

³⁵ 'Revelations of a Film Fox' (Twentieth Century Fox advertisement), *Variety*, 29 November 1967, p. 12.

³⁶ Famously invoked as a wonder-material and a young man's corporate destiny in the opening lines of *The Graduate* (1968).

³⁷ For more on this infamous cultural moment, see Simon Wells, *Butterfly on A Wheel: The Great Rolling Stones Drugs Bust* (London: Omnibus Press, 2011). Pop artist Richard Hamilton's collage poster 'Swinging London 67' places that headline about incense and the 'girl in a fur-skin rug' right at the top of his memorable critique of establishment hypocrisy.

³⁸ The film's enthusiasm for wrestling relates to this, but also to pop art's fascination with this particular sport, exemplified by the wrestler paintings of Peter Blake. Wrestling was understood at the time as 'cheap and lowbrow light-entertainment'. Benjamin Litherland, 'Selling punches: free markets and professional wrestling in the UK, 1986–1993', *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing*, 4 (2012), 578–98 (p. 581). Commercialized forms of professional wrestling in Britain date back to at least the 1920s, but the sport only started to gain widespread popularity in the late 1950s after it began to be broadcast on ITV, with popularity increasing over the next decade. Dan Glenday, 'Professional wrestling as culturally embedded spectacles in five core countries: the USA, Canada, Great Britain, Mexico and Japan', *Revue de recherche en civilisation américaine*, 4 (2013), 1–14 (pp. 4, 7–8).

³⁹ Adler, 'Mod flavor dominates "The Touchables"', p. 41.

⁴⁰ Cammell's partner graphic artist Robert Brownjohn created the credit sequences for several early Bond films, including *Goldfinger* (1964). Of the Touchables themselves, Judy Huxtable, Esther Anderson, and Kathy Simmonds had each appeared in television or print advertising, or both, with Simmonds having worked previously with Freeman both as a model and as the lead in a short film made with money Freeman had earned making commercials. James Villiers (who played Twynning) had done voiceover work in the sector. Derek Todd, 'Freeman's First', *Kinematograph Weekly*, 4 November 1967, p. 14; Anon., 'Robert Freeman', *Independent Film Journal*, 30 September 1969, p. 36.

⁴¹ On the relationship between television advertising and cinema in this period, see Richard Farmer, 'Film and Television Advertising', in *Transformation and Tradition in 1960s British Cinema*, pp. 303–26.

⁴² Anon., Review of *The Touchables*, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, January 1969, pp. 271–72 (p. 272). Adler, 'Mod flavor dominates "The Touchables"', p. 41.

⁴³ Anon., review, *Independent Film Journal*, 12 November 1968, p. 12.

⁴⁴ Quoted in John Baxter, *An Appalling Talent: Ken Russell* (London: Michael Joseph, 1973), p. 131.

⁴⁵ See, for example, Francis Williams, *American Invasion* (London: Anthony Blond, 1962), p. 22: 'What British families should be taught to feel and think in order to persuade them to spend, has more and more become the prerogative of American advertising men or their disciples'.

⁴⁶ Eric Fletcher, 5 February 1953, House of Commons debates, 5th series, vol. 510, col. 2168. On the lengthy and often heated debates that surrounded advertising in Britain in this period, see Sean Nixon, "'Salesmen of the Will to Want': Advertising and its Critics in Britain 1951–1967", *Contemporary British History*, 24 (2010), 213–33.

⁴⁷ Charles Marowitz, 'The coy, repellent world of the ads', *Campaign*, 11 September 1970, p. 23.

⁴⁸ Aneurin Bevan quoted in Anon., 'Modern advertising attacked by Mr Bevan', *Manchester Guardian*, 2 May 1953, p. 2.

⁴⁹ Lawrence Black, 'The Impression of Affluence: Political Culture in the 1950s and 1960s', in *An Affluent Society?: Britain's Post-War 'Golden Age' Revisited*, ed. by Lawrence Black and Hugh Pemberton (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 85–106 (p. 86).

⁵⁰ Martin Francis, 'Tears, Tantrums, and Bared Teeth: The Emotional Economy of Three Conservative Prime Ministers, 1951–1963', *Journal of British Studies*, 41 (2002), 354–87 (p. 384).

⁵¹ Anon., 'The look ahead from 20th!', *Variety*, 1 November 1967, p. 18. In the same advertisement, Christian is said to have 'never had it so good ... and so often'.

⁵² 'The Touchables', *Variety*, 6 November 1968, p. 6. Their topline summary of the film was 'Inept, forced. No names. Dull'.

⁵³ Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature [À Rebours]*, trans. by Robert Baldick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p. 114.

⁵⁴ 'The look ahead from 20th!', in Christopher Booker, *The Neophiliacs: Revolution in English Life in the Fifties and Sixties* (London: Pimlico, 1992), p. 13.

⁵⁵ Adler, 'Mod flavor dominates "The Touchables"', p. 41.

⁵⁶ Quarmby, *Plastics Architect*, p. 99.

⁵⁷ Indeed, concerns about the weather and the spiralling cost of using the dome persuaded the producers to switch location shooting from a site in the Lake District to meteorologically calmer Surrey.

⁵⁸ Producer John Bryan had to write an apologetic letter to Robert Garrett of Film Finances, the completion guarantee company, which began 'Dear Bobbie, I am afraid I have to report a further disaster to the dome'. Letter in Film Finances Archive: *The Touchables*: John Bryan to Robert Garrett, 12 November 1967.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Financial information taken from Film Finances Archive: *The Touchables*.

⁶¹ Quarmby, *Plastics Architect*, p. 99.

⁶² As of late March 1971, *The Touchables* had gross receipts of \$499,289.80, or less than half of its negative cost. Film Finances Archive: *The Touchables*: Statement of Participation for period ended 27 March 1971.

⁶³ David A. Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970–1979* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 10, 12. *The Sound of Music* may have helped Fox out of the hole created by the expensive failure of *Cleopatra* (1962) but it couldn't rescue them from the impact of their later over-stretch. See Stephen M. Silverman, *The Fox That Got Away: The Last Days of the Zanuck Dynasty at Twentieth Century-Fox* (Secaucus, NJ: Lyle Stuart, 1988), p. 327.

⁶⁴ Mary Whitehouse, *Whatever Happened to Sex?* (Hove: Wayland, 1977), p. 309. The phrase 'cultural revolution' is historian Arthur Marwick's. See Marwick, *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy and the United States, c. 1958–c. 1974* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). Others question how many people were directly affected by this supposed 'revolution': in its narrowest, almost self-parodic sense, swinging London, in Jonathan Aitken's phrase, constituted perhaps 'a few hundred exhibitionists with a flair for self-promotion'. Aitken, *The Young Meteors* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1967), p. 10. See also Nick Freeman, 'Permissive Paradise: The Fiction of Swinging London', p. 368: 'Realistically speaking, very few Romans could have experiences like those recounted in the *Satyricon*: two thousand years later, the horizons of Swinging London seemed similarly circumscribed'. Marwick's counterargument suggests the longer-term shift in attitudes that the sixties set in train.

⁶⁵ See Adam Sweeting, 'Obituary: Robert Freeman', *The Guardian*, 19 November 2019.

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/nov/19/robert-freeman-obituary> [accessed 19 December 2019].

⁶⁶ The first phrase is from critic John Russell Taylor, 'Just a film to enjoy', *The Times*, 23 October 1969, p. 13. The second is from the defining features of decadence as set out by Abrams, *Glossary of Literary Terms*, p. 43.

In the Shambles of Hollywood:
The Decadent Trans Feminine Allegory in *Myra Breckinridge*

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When Twentieth Century Fox announced there would be a 1970 film adaptation of Gore Vidal's controversial novel *Myra Breckinridge* (1968), Candy Darling considered it her prime opportunity to break into mainstream cinema. The novel follows its titular character, an addled trans woman obsessed with the films of the 1940s, as she seeks to claim her inheritance from an uncle who runs an acting academy in Hollywood. Darling, a trans woman herself, had begun her acting career in Andy Warhol's movies, where she formed an important part of the Factory set along with other trans feminine people such as Holly Woodlawn and Jackie Curtis. But these underground films had a limited circulation, and it was Darling's deepest-held ambition to become a legitimate starlet. When she applied for the role, she was rejected in favour of the cisgender actress Raquel Welch [fig. 1]. 'They decided Raquel Welch would make a more believable transvestite', she recounted.¹ While Welch obviously lent the production some star power at the time, Darling's exclusion seems counterintuitive: she was about the same age as Myra in the novel and was also obsessed with vintage Hollywood, modelling herself after peroxide blonde actresses such as Lana Turner, Kim Novak, and Jean Harlow. She could recite whole passages from films such as *Picnic* (1955), demonstrating something of Myra's encyclopaedic film knowledge; in fact, Warhol thought 'she knew even more about forties movies than Gore Vidal did'.² In the novel there are several references to Myra's career as an underground film star prior to her transition that may well allude to films such as Warhol's *Flesh* (1968), a film that Darling had actually been in. She was, in other words, already engaged in the sexual avant-gardism Myra Breckinridge apparently represented, as well as what in the novel becomes a tragi-comic obsession with the Golden Age of Hollywood.



Fig. 1 (00:49:37): Raquel Welch as Myra Breckinridge (detail).

But Darling's rejection plays into a larger cultural tradition of trans women's representation, where the supposed symbolism of trans femininity obscures the actuality of trans lives.³ The film and the novel that inspired it both participate in what Emma Heaney describes as the trans feminine allegory, where trans feminine figures are tasked with illuminating the functioning of cisgender sex. In her recent book, Heaney charts the emergence of the allegory in medical discourse around the fin de siècle, where it is portrayed as symptomatic of broader shifts and contestations in traditional gender roles.⁴ The advent of the New Woman and the debased man are shadowed by the figure of the trans feminine invert who 'reveals' the androgyny and malleability of social codes, but also, ultimately, reinstates them. Sexologists such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing investigated the perceived social degradation of their times by extracting pathological case studies from gender and sexually non-conforming people, reasserting a new sexological norm in the face of the perverse, extreme example. The emphasis placed on narrative in these accounts

paved the way for the transmission of the trans feminine allegory into key literary texts. Heaney charts this passage, demonstrating an ongoing power dynamic that elevates cis reflections on gender norms while delegitimizing trans women as constructed foils, emergent in the extremity of modern society.

The ongoing influence of the trans feminine allegory is evidenced in the film adaptation of *Myra Breckinridge*, which tilts Myra's trans status into a postmodern endorsement of surface over depth. The dialogue with contemporaneous medical discourse is aestheticized in the central scene of her genital surgery, taking place in a silver-walled operating theatre complete with an audience in director's chairs [fig. 2]. Welch acts out a rather forced, campy pastiche of feminine codes, and she bears almost no resemblance to the actor Rex Reed, who plays her pre-transition self as Myron. The ghosting presence of Reed and his commentary on Myra's behaviour makes explicit the functioning of the allegory, casting trans womanhood as a non-specific combination of the binary sexes. The conversation between these two selves forms the centrepiece of the plot, culminating in a scene where Myron is seen to perform oral sex on Myra in a paroxysmal haze. Such a misleading representation of gender transition is embedded in the complex temporality that comes through in the film as a whole. Scenes are intercut with archive footage from well-known Hollywood classics, and there are multiple cameos from vintage screen stars, most notably Mae West, who had come out of retirement to appear in the film. The presence of old Hollywood personalities, 'exhumed in the flesh', as one review had it, alongside new ones such as Welch, made the film a special affront to the tastes of the time [fig. 3].⁵ This affront was compounded by the portrayal of trans femininity, which, though regressive in the ways I have mentioned, was widely reviled for the fact of its inclusion. As such, the film was almost universally panned by contemporaneous critics, emblemized by a scathing review in *Time* that named it 'some sort of nadir in American cinema'.⁶ This characterization as a new low evinces the complex temporal play in the film and its reception – dealing with cinematic tradition so closely while at the same time breaking into debased or extreme forms. I am not necessarily interested in recuperating these

‘unseemly seams’, as David Scott Diffrient has done, in a reparative vision of the joy in the film’s ‘badness’.⁷ Rather, what interests me is the special fact of the film’s perception and self-stylization as an exposé of degraded extremity – what is intimately tied to a sense of general social deterioration and to a vision of the newly-forged trans feminine body as a hallmark of that deterioration. The very concept of a cultural nadir urges examination of cultural precedents, and in this case the sense of decadence surrounding Myra’s trans feminine body provides a critical starting point.

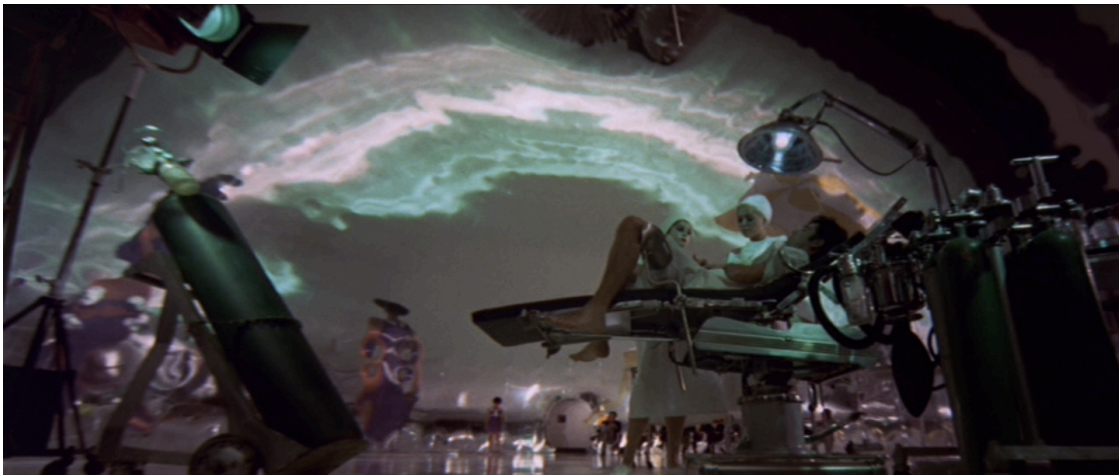


Fig. 2 (00:01:09): The operating theatre.



Fig. 3 (00:55:11): Mae West (detail).

The Decadent Connection

The term *decadence* carries a host of unstable connotations, but I am seeking here to draw a line between the decadence represented by Vidal's Myra and literary decadence – a cultural tendency that first became common in the late nineteenth century, carrying with it a sense of social decline emphasizing what is degraded, fallen, or late – not a movement per se, but a working between other literary traditions, with many decadent works having fluctuating relationships with romanticism, symbolism, naturalism, aestheticism, and later, modernism. Critics such as David Weir and Vincent Sherry have convincingly demonstrated the intimate relationship of decadence to the 'newness' of early twentieth-century modernism, complicating the basic temporal valence of both literary modes. Weir says that 'decadence is transition, a drama of unsettled aesthetics, and the mixture of literary tendencies constituting that transition is at once within and without tradition and convention'.⁸ Sherry claims a connection of decadence to gender non-conformity, most explicitly in the queer personage of Oscar Wilde, that contributed to its elision in critical accounts of the development of modernism.⁹ So in the years following the *fin de siècle*, the simultaneous influence and erasure of trans feminine presence that Heaney explores in the work of modernist authors is in fact mirrored in the characterization of decadence that soon became current: an uncomfortably fey or passive presence, disavowed by modernists even as it informed their work.¹⁰

The influence of decadence was also keenly felt in Hollywood, as a generation of screenwriters emerged in the twenties and thirties who were profoundly influenced by decadent literature. Most notable among these is Ben Hecht, who would pen many of the screenplays for the forties movies that Myra is transfixed on, thus providing a passage of influence into Vidal's novel. For Weir, 'the decadent Hecht' is suggestive of a point partly elaborated on here: 'that the various dilutions of European high decadence [...] eventually trickled down into American popular culture through the medium of the movies'.¹¹ In a later work he also argues that cinematic decadence 'was not so much a transformation as a deformation: decadence disseminated into the

broader culture was also decadence dissipated'.¹² Many cultural products containing decadent tropes from the fin de siècle incorporate those tropes in new ways. *Myra Breckinridge* the novel is therefore partly a recuperation of literary decadence, presenting a vision of social decline and injecting that with an emphasis on sexual variance. But Myra departs from decadent languor in a self-declaration of herself as an 'activist', intent on reforming social codes in crisis rather than passively luxuriating in them.¹³ Transformation and deformation become explicit themes in the novel, as it takes the body of the 'transsexual' – not medically described in full until the mid-twentieth century – and twists her towards a more active, but still decadent, allegorical purpose that finds expression in a sort of campy postmodernism.

Decadence and Sexology

The mobilization of trans feminine figures as allegories of extremity symptomatic of cultural decline has precedent in decadent texts, evincing a dialogue with medical discourse earlier than the one Heaney charts in her analysis of primarily modernist novels. The view of decadence as a proto-modernist tendency in late nineteenth-century texts is thus supported by the presence in those texts of allegorized trans femininity. Rachilde's *Monsieur Vénus* (1884) is probably the most explicit example, detailing the systematic feminization of a young male artist, Jacques, at the hands of the decadently perverse heiress Raoule de Vénérande. She takes the masculine role in their affair, using him for her own pleasure. When Jacques surpasses the feminized bondage in which he is placed, seeking to bed Raittolbe, an alpha male companion of Raoule's who finds himself irresistibly attracted to the youth, she engineers a duel between the two, and thus the murder of her lover. In the novel's notorious closing scene, 'armed with silver pincers, a velvet-covered hammer, and a silver scalpel', she removes Jacques' teeth, hair, and eyelashes so that a German artisan can incorporate them into a wax model of his body.¹⁴ As the title suggests, she has him made into a sort of anatomical Venus, a wax medical model that was common in the nineteenth century. Such models were ordinarily of vivisected women, eerily eroticized with long flowing hair, make-up, and

sometimes strings of pearls.¹⁵ Accordingly, Raoule regularly visits the sumptuous chamber housing her creation and takes her pleasure of it, via a hidden spring that ‘animates the mouth’ and ‘spreads apart the thighs’.¹⁶

Monsieur Vénus enacts decadence in dialogue with sexology, the novel forming one picture in the ‘portrait gallery of types of perversions’ that Melanie Hawthorne identifies in Rachilde’s oeuvre.¹⁷ This is part of a broader trend within decadent literature as a whole, which Maxime Foerster has examined as one of parody, eroticizing and subverting the doctor-patient relationship, among other foundational tenets of scientific medical enquiry.¹⁸ The use of the extreme trans feminine example is common to both decadent and sexological literature and is tied to a broader vision of social decline. And so Raittolbe is one of a series of Raoule’s male acquaintances who are panic-stricken by their attraction to Jacques’ feminine beauty. His becoming involved in the scandalous affair is explained only by the fact that ‘the *century weighed on him*, an infirmity impossible to analyse other than by this phrase alone’.¹⁹ The aside points to a nineteenth-century crisis of masculine sexual identity in response to the presence of trans feminine and same-sex-attracted inverts in the metropolis, increasingly visible due to their involvement in street-based sex work, and to the emergence of apparently masculinized New Women such as Raoule. The perceived newness of Jacques’ and Raoule’s behaviour is integral to the threat they represent, as it is part of their decadent charm. Upon the text’s publication, Verlaine congratulated Rachilde on the invention of a new vice.²⁰

Trans feminine undertones also appear in decadent novels such as Théophile Gautier’s *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835) – despite depicting a woman disguised as a man, the action of the plot is as much about the feminization of a perceived male and the male narrator’s crisis of attraction for that person. There is also the ‘Miss Urania’ episode in J.-K. Huysmans’s *À Rebours* (1884), where Des Esseintes is drawn to a muscular circus performer, and later to a female ventriloquist who is able to speak in many unnatural, placeless voices.²¹ In such examples trans femininity is in easy slippage with other forms of perversity, turned outwards into a general sign of artificiality and

sexual-moral decay. This trend is replicated in sexological texts: Krafft-Ebing, for example, posited a sliding scale of inversion through his case studies, with the milder examples of masculine men who are same-sex attracted giving way to extreme sexually-compulsive trans femininity. Likewise, he presents a sliding scale between same-sex-attracted women and those afflicted by trans masculine ‘viraginity’.²²

This sliding-scale model was contested in early homosexual-rights writing, most of which necessarily engaged sexology in order to depathologize same-sex attraction between cis people. The healthy, upstanding, masculine homosexual was repeatedly contrasted with the pathologically effeminate invert by writers such as Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, Edward Carpenter, and André Gide. The term *Homosexualität* [homosexual] was actually coined in an 1868 letter to Ulrichs in order to differentiate masculine men who desire men from trans feminine inverts.²³ In *Uranisme et unisexualité* (1896), the decadent sexologist Marc-André Raffalovich, an associate of Wilde and Walter Pater, charts for ‘uranisme’ an ornate and dramatic lineage from classical antiquity and early Christianity. In the process he advocates for the ‘superior invert’ who embodies ‘virilised homosexuality’ at the expense of the fatally effeminate ‘weak’ type.²⁴

The works of Wilde also contain echoes of the decadent trans feminine, and there is evidence he was influenced by Rachilde – *Monsieur Vénus* in particular. He apparently spoke about the novel for several hours in front of Raffalovich, and there are several textual allusions to it in early versions of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). In those early versions, the book that corrupts Dorian was originally called ‘Le Secret de Raoul [*sic*]’ by ‘Catulle Sarazzin’.²⁵ The fictionalized author has been taken as an allusion to a member of Rachilde’s decadent circle, Catulle Mendès, but also recalls Balzac’s 1830 novella, *Sarrasine*, about a man who falls in love with a castrato singer named La Zambinella.²⁶ These traces indicate a tradition of feminized gender non-conformity Wilde was activating in the work that would become so influential in transmitting decadence into the twentieth century.

A Female Dorian

Wilde was a significant decadent influence on Hollywood, even if the stigma surrounding his trial and death had dramatic consequences for the fate of decadence in public life and later in the historical record. *Myra Breckinridge* is linked with Wilde through the work of Myra's favourite film critic, Parker Tyler, whose interpretation of the 1945 film adaptation of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is alluded to in the novel and establishes a precedent for the construction of Myra's allegorical trans femininity.²⁷

Tyler's *Magic and Myth of the Movies* (1947) is a hallmark of Myra's worldview, providing impetus for fervent statements like: '*between 1935 and 1945, no irrelevant film was made in the United States*'.²⁸ Tyler wrote the book when he was living in Greenwich Village, associating with the likes of decadent modernists such as Djuna Barnes, at a time that saw the 'queer commingling of decadence with modernism'.²⁹ Tyler examines a range of films in chapters whose titles reveal a fascination with psychoanalysis and sexual transformation, such as 'Finding Freudism Photogenic' and 'Magic-Lantern Metamorphoses I'. The latter examines the 1945 *Picture of Dorian Gray* against the original novel, criticizing the vulgarization of Wilde 'in the shambles of Hollywood' for eroding the carefully constructed homosexual subtext.³⁰ 'Wilde was the prince of an alien and socially aggressive aesthetic philosophy', Tyler argues. Dorian is the primary vector of this philosophy, a sort of invert who perverts the 'stuffiness' of British culture.³¹ The character is 'more loved than loving', carrying 'within himself the seeds of the gross decay of the sexual [...] that Wilde saw everywhere around him in the vulgar and stupid rather than imaginative and aesthetic pursuit of women by men'.³² Seeking to supplant heterosexual desire for women in the name of art, Tyler's reading of Dorian reiterates what Sally Ledger calls the novel's 'aestheticisation of homoerotic desire'. Ledger highlights the nineteenth-century decadent tendency to cast femininity as an embellishment of aesthetic life in contrast to the debased and hopelessly corporeal counterpoint of the woman's body. She sees Dorian as more aesthetic than substantial, having 'little corporeal

reality', at least compared to Sibyl Vane, the woman he pursues and then jilts for her literal approach to their love affair.³³ But Tyler glosses this misogyny, at the same time emphasizing just what a threat Dorian's beautiful body and 'hermaphroditic[,] monstrous' personality, represents to society, to the point that his corporeality must be made to reflect the dangerous femininity of his interior.³⁴ And so his portrait rendering in the homophobic film is a sort of 'Frankenstein', crawling out 'of the American moral jungle'.³⁵

Dorian's gender non-conformity is further clarified in Tyler's conclusion, where he praises two films dealing with 'the possession of a woman's body by a man's spirit'.³⁶ Both employ cinematic magic to make a different voice speak from an actor's body, allegorical devices which Tyler likens to the heart of falsity represented in Dorian. The effect of the films is paralleled

in cases of highly false acting personalities such as Veronica Lake, created half by the beauty parlour and half by stupidity, [...] devising a mannequin, a feminine symbol, a female Dorian, who is not a real woman but who imitates being one and, through beauty, maintains the illusion of reality.

Tyler's allegorized trans femininity thus extends to a general misogyny directed at cis women as well, as he characterizes Lake as 'outside of nature' in *I Married a Witch* (1942).³⁷ This misogyny is therefore not exclusively connected with an 'authentic' woman's body. *Magic and Myth of the Movies* is both a transmission and distortion of a nineteenth-century decadent sensibility, tellingly focusing on sexual variance, which Vidal's novel heightens in elaborating a trans feminine monster lurking in the post-1940s American psyche.

Decadent Myra and Trans Body Narratives

Myra's decadence picks up where Tyler's leaves off in her vision of a degraded social and cultural milieu of which she herself is nonetheless symptomatic. 'I exist entirely outside the usual human experience', she says, referring to her trans status, 'outside and yet wholly relevant for I am the New Woman whose astonishing history is a poignant amalgam of vulgar dreams and knife-sharp realities' (p. 4). Myra engages tropes of medicalized trans femininity and combines these with

references to second-wave feminist movements. ‘I am Myra Breckinridge whom no man will ever possess’, reads the first sentence of the novel, recognizing the threat she poses to the sexual social order (p. 3). Myra’s ailing American empire is defined by its increasing expansion and proliferation of automobiles, televisions, and people: reproductive sex being the root of all social problems. In the opening pages of the novel she describes Sunset Boulevard, ‘filled with noisy cars, barely moving through the air so dark with carbon monoxide that one can almost hear in the drivers’ lungs the cancer cells as they gaily proliferate like spermatozoa in a healthy boy’s testicles’ (p. 7). Her views on population control are later explicated when she says that ‘Malthus had been right’, that global human population has to be decreased according to the availability of the food supply, in order for culture to flourish (p. 126).

The student body of her uncle’s acting academy is emblematic of such problems, portrayed as a never-ending stream of youths, ‘bland, inattentive, responsive only to the bold rhythms of commercials’. Their reading and writing ability tends to be stunted, being just ‘able to write their name, or “autograph” as they are encouraged to call it’ (pp. 25–26). This cultural decline finds locus for Myra in the fading of 1940s Hollywood:

In the Forties, American boys created a world empire because they chose to be James Stewart, Clark Gable and William Eythe. By imitating godlike autonomous men, our boys were able to defeat Hitler, Mussolini and Tojo. Could we do it again? Are the private eyes and denatured cowboys potent enough to serve as imperial exemplars? No. (p. 35)

The degraded pantheon of cinematic gods causes Myra to affirm a belief that the only way to solve social problems is the renovation of sexual mores, the remaking of the sexes so that reproduction is curbed and ‘the race’ is preserved. In the sequel to the novel, *Myron* (1974), Myra’s eugenic and racist views find more explicit expression as she, like Raoule, takes on the role of surgeon. She endeavours to castrate and forcibly transition straight cis men in order to create a ‘race of sterile fun-loving Amazons’, beginning with a Native American man she seduces (p. 342).³⁸

Myra’s darkly parodic engagement with trans surgeries extends to a generalized satire of medical discourse and medicalized trans autobiography. In many ways, the novel comes in the

wake of biographies and autobiographies of trans women such as Christine Jorgensen that began to appear in the twentieth century, holding literary as well as medical value in their recourse to a ‘wrong body’ narrative. This narrative was a development of nineteenth-century sexological frameworks that formulated trans feminine people as ‘women trapped inside the bodies of men’, thus possessing corporealities that needed to be rectified through medical intervention. In the twentieth century, the recitation of the ‘wrong body’ narrative would become imperative for trans people seeking social and institutional legibility, as well as access to the technologies of hormones and surgery. Jay Prosser has examined how nineteenth-century sexology continued to hold sway in the increasing ‘biographizing’ of trans patients: establishing an authentic narrative of trans inauthenticity became necessary because, ‘for the sexologist, the body of the invert was by definition an unreliable text’.³⁹ Inverts professed a different gender from the one they were assigned at birth, and so their self-narrative became one that was symptomatic of their perceived pathology. Thus from Krafft-Ebing’s case studies to the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, accounts of sexual and gender non-conformity continued to be highly sought-after because they reinstated normality through its obverse, the spectre of extreme perversion. Such accounts coincided with dramatic upheavals in the public understanding of sex and gender roles in general.

Myra Breckinridge capitalizes on fears of general social decline by exploiting the genre of trans feminine (auto)biography. The diary entries that comprise it, written by Myra’s fictional hand, exist in a parodic relationship to sexological discourse, having been motivated by a ‘Dr. Randolph Spenser Montag, my analyst friend and dentist, who has proposed that I write in this notebook as therapy’ (p. 4). Dr. Montag is an eccentric whose combined professions exploit the rhyme between ‘mental’ and ‘dental’. He earnestly reminds Myra, ‘Good dental health means good mental health’, emphasizing a relation between physical normality (a ‘Hollywood smile’) and being a reasonable, well-adjusted patient (p. 111). Myra is decidedly not well-adjusted, and we are told that Montag, though instrumental in her transition, was against it. ‘In the great tradition of neo-Freudian analysis, Dr. Montag refuses to accept any evidence that does not entirely square with his

preconceptions', Myra says. Because of this, her gender transition was a 'traumatic experience for us all'. Now that Myra has begun to live as a woman, Montag's worldview has been shaken, and he 'almost believes those stories his younger patients tell him of parties where sexual roles change rapidly [...] stories he used to reject as wish-fulfillments' (p. 91). The parody of psychoanalytical dismissal of sexual variance, including homosexuality, is clear, but Myra's status as a trans feminine allegory remains intact, where she is aligned with the new sexual counterculture.⁴⁰ She does, in fact, attend an orgy thrown by one of the students, mostly observing as she deflects snatches at her off-limits panties. Reflecting on the experience, she admits:

[A]ccess to this sort of pleasure in my adolescence would have changed me entirely. Fortunately, as it turned out, I was frustrated. If I had not been, Myra Breckinridge would never have existed [...] something we, none of us, can afford at this time. (p. 94)

Even in parody of psychoanalysis she remains an expression of the unconscious desires of the cis straight men at the orgy. At another party, she also parodies the nineteenth-century connection between hashish and inversion, invoked by both Krafft-Ebing and Rachilde. Myra smokes a joint and is soon immobilized in 'gaudy reveries' in a bathtub with two rings, 'one light, one dark, his and hers' (p. 49). She is depressed by the vision, continuing to plot the realignment of the sexes in her journal, an act which itself perverts the efficacy of the 'talking cure'.

Myra's parody of medical discourse is extended in the novel's most notorious scene, where she 'renovates' a hyper-masculine student called Rusty by anally raping him. The premise of the scene is a medical examination, with Myra playing teacher-nurse, ticking off items on a chart: she traces his spine, records height and weight, obtains a urine sample, and takes his temperature – through the rectum. The rhythm of the scene engages BDSM, with Myra threatening to 'punish' him for disobedience, clamping his nipples with tongs and spanking him (p. 138). After intensive cross-examination and a thorough inspection of Rusty's 'equipment', Myra takes out a strap-on dildo and completes her humiliation of him on the surgical table (p. 152). She congratulates herself on 'destroying totally [...] a man's idea of himself in relation to the triumphant sex', calling herself 'the god Priapus personified' as well as 'one with Bacchae, with all the priestesses of the dark

bloody cults, with the great goddess herself for whom Attis unmanned himself [...] the eternal feminine made flesh' (pp. 156–57). The scene is the culmination point of the various discourses operating in the novel, parodying the medical examination of trans people on the operating table and 'opening up' the immobilized alpha male for medical inspection. Myra's raptures also force a decadent alignment of the world of classical debauchery with the present moment, her reference to the self-castrating Greek deity Attis providing a possible echo of Wilde's 'The Sphinx' (1894): 'Atys with his blood-stained knife were better than the thing I am'.⁴¹ Myra is the meeting point of these discourses held in allegory: though her actions parody the medicalization of gender variance, the scene is equally an examination of the depth of her perversion, centrally orientated around her castrated genitals, here reinstated by the stereotypical feminist weapon of a strap-on dildo. In the film, this scene was enacted with Welch in a stars-and-stripes leotard and cowboy hat, explicating the decadent social critique at play [fig. 4].



Fig. 4 (01:09:39): The notorious rape scene (detail).

Campy Postmodernism

The apparent fluidity with which Myra embodies competing discourses is rooted in the novel's postmodernist deconstruction of an authoritative narrator. As a sexologically 'unreliable text', she

repeatedly bemoans the ‘treachery and inadequacy’ of language, claiming ‘that there are no words to describe for you *exactly* what my body is like’. Her trans status provides the occasion to draw on poststructuralism and ‘the French New Novelists’ in contesting the authority of her own voice (pp. 10, 117). Her voice is further subverted in her rapid switches from ‘a careful low-pitched voice, modelled on that of the late Ann Sheridan’, to a whisper ‘like Phyllis Thaxter in *Thirty Seconds over Tokyo*’, to several other vocal registers, anticipating the montage sequences of the film, moving rapidly between scene segments taken from Hollywood classics. When Myra is hired to take classes at the academy while working out the inheritance dispute with her uncle Buck, she teaches Empathy and Posture, suggestive of an untrustworthy trans performativity that is paradoxically valued at the Drama and Modelling Academy. Several of the students take on fake southern accents, embodying an ‘anonymous blur’, a ‘fitful, mindless shuffling of roles’ (p. 34). Buck’s accent likewise ‘switches from Cheyenne to Pomona [...] one could go mad trying to define its provenance’, and Myra’s journal entries are interspersed with transcriptions of his personal voice memos, reading like telegrams or Joycean monologues in their lack of punctuation, often broken up with grocery lists and expressions of delight aimed at a hardworking masseuse (p. 41). These touches may be postmodern in their fragmentation of identity, but they also embody a sort of comedy that amounts to an aestheticization of perversity, embodied in Myra’s steady description of herself as an agglomeration of screen starlets. In one such instance, she claims to resemble ‘Fay Wray [in] left three-quarter profile if the key light is no more than five feet high during the close shot’ (p. 3). As in the film, her newness is belied by the fact that she is more of a combination of existing cultural reference points, a sort of remix that is as confronting as it is compelling.

The off-colour humour that permeates the novel enacts a postmodern engagement with tropes of decadence that may also be productively examined through the lens of camp. The characters’ exaggerated social posturings, the emphasis on artificiality and surface, Myra’s easy embodiment of a range of feminine stereotypes, her ‘camp nostalgia’ for the films of the 1940s, and the Wilde connections, all position *Myra Breckinridge* as a kind of campy twentieth-century

transmutation of nineteenth-century decadence.⁴² The dialogue with contemporaneous sexology is also maintained, and Karin Sellbeck has noted the resonances between 1960s sexologists such as John Money and the character of Dr. Montag. Money was a proponent of a socially-constructivist view of sex, arguing for the ‘transpositioning’ of subjects in culture, where trans bodies are seen as fields for the reception of various influences, revealing the malleability of sex and gender in general. Identity ‘may fluctuate and the body thus becomes a territory contested by two oppositional sets of social/hormonal influences’.⁴³ This sexological discourse becomes ripe for a campy postmodern deconstruction of authenticity and voice, especially in light of the play on words that may exist between Montag, Money, and Sontag (Susan).⁴⁴ The influence of Tyler’s criticism, what he refers to in his conclusion as a ‘Comedy of Critical Hallucination’, and the emphasis on gender-crossing voices and body swapping, further highlights the campy postmodernist operations that allegorize trans femininity into a multidirectional social critique, not a valid social position. Such considerations are consistent with David Scott Diffrient’s effort to recuperate the film adaptation in an exercise in ‘camp criticism’ that highlights its ‘transgressive pleasures’.⁴⁵

Gregory W. Bredbeck’s work casts an important light on the genesis of influence from Wilde via Tyler (and, as I suspect, from Rachilde also) in understanding the debt owed to Wilde in the development of camp as an aesthetic sensibility. Advocating a lack of sincerity in order to develop space both ‘within and against the emerging languages of sexology’, Wilde was able to assert a gay male identity through the language of camp, ‘turning the gazer into the gazed, the subject into the object’, so muddling ‘an ability to know who is attracted to what’.⁴⁶ Bredbeck discusses how after his trial and death, Wilde’s work was treated with the nineteenth-century sexological emphasis on narrative, confusing ‘textual inversion and sexual inversion’.⁴⁷ Bredbeck’s analysis is unfortunately limited by his perpetuation of the tendency to elide trans femininity and homosexuality, failing to account for the importance of the extreme trans feminine example in shaping respectability politics surrounding cis same-sex attraction.

Man Revealed

Myra Breckinridge also participates in the elision between trans femininity and same-sex attraction, mobilizing Myra's body as a weapon against the straight society that ridiculed her pre-transition self, the campy gay film buff Myron, as a 'fag'. When she eventually enacts the customary trans 'reveal' of the 'scar where cock and balls should be', Buck has a revelation that the 'awful low voice she sometimes uses [...] now I recognize is a mans [*sic*] voice' (p. 190). Winning the inheritance dispute as a result of this reveal, and intimidating her uncle in the process, Myra presents the ultimate vessel with which the campy gay man can enact his revenge, slipping his voice inside of her body [fig. 5]. After her confrontation with Buck, Myra is hit by a car, placed in a full-body cast, and is forced to de-transition when hospital staff deny her access to hormones. Her breasts are non-consensually removed in surgery (chapter 41 contains only her horrible exclamation, 'Where are my breasts? *Where are my breasts?*') and she begins to sprout facial hair (p. 222). Echoing Money's sexological model, a transformation of her personality ensues and Myron is reborn, now heterosexual. He marries Rusty's ex-girlfriend Mary-Ann, has a phallus reconstruction, and begins writing TV screenplays. This re-inscription of traditional gender roles reverses the formula of the 'wrong body' narrative, replacing 'a woman trapped inside the body of a man' to position trans femininity as the reverse. It comes with Myron's final chilling assertion that 'happiness, like the proverbial bluebird, is to be found in your own backyard if you just know where to look', completing the satirical mobilization of Myra as a decadently scandalous dream visited upon the normatively sexed body (p. 225).

Contemporaneous critics were able to identify the allegorical functioning of Myra's trans femininity, reading her as a platform upon which social anxieties about the fate of American masculinity play out. Purvis E. Boyette's article 'Myra Breckinridge and Imitative Form' provides a key example:

No pop psychology in the world can persuade us that allowing one's penis to be cut off is anything but desperate and hysterical insanity, however articulate. The transsexual Myra is [...] the archetypal pervert[,] the image of a debased and debauched society.



Fig. 5 (01:26:25): The film rendering of Myra's genital reveal.

Her rape of Rusty is understood as 'a figurative rendering of the destructive power Hollywood has over the innate strength of [...] American stock'. Boyette goes on to say that '[i]nverted sexuality' is an excellent symbolic vehicle for 'the cultural and spiritual distortions of contemporary American society [that] represents a metaphorical conflation of sexuality and society'. He adds that '[t]his symbolic equation is by no means new'.⁴⁸ Though Boyette draws attention to eighteenth-century satirists such as Pope and Swift – one thinks of William Blake's 'Mr. Femality', a probable caricature of the trans feminine spy and duellist Chevalier d'Eon, from *An Island in the Moon* (1784) – a line may also be drawn to include the decadent trans feminine. The rhetoric employed by Boyette seems to echo many nineteenth-century concerns about national decline, sexual degradation, and 'the race'. The article demonstrates how the apparent newness of the perversion represented by Myra's decadently transsexual body, with its justification in 'pop psychology' and exacerbation in the spectacle of Hollywood, is as fabricated as the allegorical trans feminine subject herself.

The article is also representative of the relatively warm reception that the novel enjoyed both critically and with the general public, becoming one of Vidal's bestselling works. The

discrepancy between the relative success of *Myra Breckinridge* the novel and the dismal failure of the film version – effectively ending the career of director Michael Sarne – is a point of interest that turns on the difference between what allowed the novel to be considered an effective parody of sexual mores and the film to be considered an unsightly disfigurement of cinematic form and a perversion of good taste. Where the film ends in Myron and Myra performing a cabaret-style number on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, the novel's perfect recantation of its trans content and much more stable plotline may have contributed to its palatability. The immobilization of the trans feminine body, like Jacques being made into a Venus or Dorian being made into a portrait, effectively contains the threat it represents to the established social order. Allegorization thus works in tandem with objectification, as trans feminine corporeality is spirited away via Myra-cum-Myron's full-body cast. There is certainly a Frankenstein element in both the novel and the film, as we see the ghost of Myron rising from the dead and Myra rising from the operating table. But instead of moving in a visible bricolage of reanimated body parts, the pair does so in snippets of Hollywood films.

The final image of Myron penning screenplays in the suburbs also contains another possible reading which is more subversive, given that he is now a participant in the media machinery that attended his former sexual inversion at every stage. The implication is that Myron's apparent normality only masks a form of sexual extremity that is now allowed to subliminally seep into screen culture, decaying it from the inside. In the film, this process is reflected in the casting of Reed, an actual film critic and author of *Do You Sleep in the Nude?* (1968), an anthology of celebrity interviews. There is potential for an unsettling realization that the formal challenge represented by Myra's disfiguring of sexual and cultural references is in fact indistinguishable from the Hollywood culture that produced her. As I have shown, there is a strong cultural precedent for the construction of the decadent trans feminine as a symptom, an allegorical playing-out of social anxieties. Her arrival as a new low, a new form of sexual extremity, is then a function of that

sense of decline. It is the same threat that arrives again and again, with an all-too-familiar face – in this case, that of Raquel Welch, not Candy Darling.

¹ Quoted in Bob Colacello, *Holy Terror: Andy Warhol Close Up* (New York: Harper Collins, 1990), p. 84.

² Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, *POPism: The Warhol Sixties* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1980), p. 170. Footage of Candy reciting lines from *Picnic* are to be found in the documentary *Beautiful Darling: The Life and Times of Candy Darling, Andy Warhol Superstar*, dir. by James Rasin (Corinth Films, 2010).

³ The practice of selecting cis actors over trans actors to play trans roles is depressingly consistent up to the present day, with Candy herself portrayed by Vince Gattin in a 2006 play, *Candy and Dorothy*. Television productions such as *Pose* and *Transparent* are notable exceptions that have initiated shifts in representation in recent years. I use the word ‘trans’ interchangeably where ‘transgender’ or ‘transsexual’ or ‘transvestite’ could be used. Because of the historical scope of my analysis there is slippage between these words, subject to many factors, so I prefer to use a curtailed version because it is flexible and current. Taking my cue from Heaney, I use ‘trans feminine’ to denote femininity that goes against birth assignment, a slightly more expanded version of such labels that is sensitive to historical anachronism.

⁴ Emma Heaney, *The New Woman: Literary Modernism, Queer Theory, and the Trans Feminine Allegory* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2017).

⁵ Judith Crist, ‘Mal de Merde, or Myra in the Mire’, *New York Magazine* (13 July 1970), 55–54 (p. 54).

⁶ ‘Some Sort of Nadir’, *Time* (6 July 1970), 70–72 (p. 72).

⁷ David Scott Diffrient, “‘Hard to Handle’: Camp Criticism, Trash-Film Reception, and the Transgressive Pleasures of Myra Breckinridge”, *Cinema Journal*, 52 (2013), 46–70 (p. 54).

⁸ David Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), p. 14.

⁹ Vincent Sherry, *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 27.

¹⁰ See also Kate Hext and Alex Murray, eds, *Decadence in the Age of Modernism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), and Kristin Mahoney, *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

¹¹ Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism*, pp. 175–76.

¹² Weir, *Decadent Culture in the United States* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), p. 193.

¹³ Gore Vidal, *Myra Breckinridge & Myron* (London: Abacus, 1993), p. 34. Further references are cited parenthetically in the text.

¹⁴ Rachilde, *Monsieur Vénus*, trans. by Melanie Hawthorne (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2004), p. 208.

¹⁵ See Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (London: Virago, 1992), pp. 127–43.

¹⁶ Rachilde, *Monsieur Vénus*, p. 210.

¹⁷ Melanie Hawthorne, *Rachilde and French Women’s Authorship: From Decadence to Modernism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), p. 187.

¹⁸ Maxime Foerster, ‘A New Catalogue of Perversions: Sexology and Decadence’, in *States of Decadence: On the Aesthetics of Beauty, Decline and Transgression across Time and Space*, ed. by Guri Barstad and Karen P. Knutsen, 2 vols (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2006), I.

¹⁹ Rachilde, *Monsieur Vénus*, p. 81. Original emphasis.

²⁰ Hawthorne, *Rachilde and French Women’s Authorship*, p. 56.

²¹ Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature [À rebours]*, trans. by Brendan King (Sawtry, Cambs.: Dedalus, 2008).

²² Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, trans. by F. J. Rebman (New York: Rebman Company, 1922), p. 418.

²³ Heaney draws attention to this tradition. For the coinage of homosexuality, see Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* (San Francisco: Seal, 2009), p. 37.

²⁴ Quoted in Frederick S. Roden, ‘Medieval religion, Victorian homosexualities’, *Prose Studies*, 23 (2000), 115–30 (p. 117).

²⁵ Petra Dierkes-Thrun, ‘Decadent Sensuality in Rachilde and Wilde’, in *Decadence and the Senses*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and Alice Condé (Cambridge: Legenda, 2017), pp. 51–65 (p. 55).

²⁶ Heaney also examines Roland Barthes’ genital-focused analysis of this novella, *S/Z* (1970), but does not include the nineteenth-century novella in her broader argument about modernism. For the Mendès allusion, see Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Knopf, 1987), p. 282.

²⁷ It is mentioned in Vidal on p. 31, and there are quotes and echoes of Tyler’s language throughout.

²⁸ Parker Tyler, *Magic and Myth of the Movies*, British edn (London: Secker & Warburg, 1971), p. 13. Italics in original.

²⁹ Hext and Murray, *Decadence in the Age of Modernism*, p. 18.

- ³⁰ Tyler, *Magic and Myth of the Movies*, p. 77.
- ³¹ Ibid., pp. 79, 77.
- ³² Ibid., p. 85.
- ³³ Sally Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p. 109.
- ³⁴ Tyler, *Magic and Myth of the Movies*, pp. 225, 226.
- ³⁵ Ibid., p. 81.
- ³⁶ *The Dybbuk* (1937) and *Turnabout* (1940).
- ³⁷ Tyler, *Magic and Myth of the Movies*, p. 227.
- ³⁸ Myron sees the extension of Myra as an allegory into a more explicitly postmodern sci-fi involving body swapping and jumping inside TV screens.
- ³⁹ Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Colombia University Press, 1998), p. 142.
- ⁴⁰ In 1968 when the novel was published, homosexuality was still classified as a pathology by American Psychiatric Association in the Diagnostic and Statistic Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), a fact which was not overturned until the publication of the DSM-II in 1973. The diagnostic categories of Gender Dysphoria and Transvestic Disorder are extant in the current DSM-V. See, for example, Jack Drescher, 'Queer diagnoses revisited: The past and future of homosexuality and gender diagnoses in DSM and ICD', *International Review of Psychiatry*, 27 (2015), 386–95.
- ⁴¹ Oscar Wilde, *Poems, with the Ballad of Reading Gaol*, ed. by Robert Ross, 12th edn (London: Methuen & Co., 1913), p. 276.
- ⁴² Mahoney discusses Max Beerbohm's decadent 'camp nostalgia [...] under the assault of the ugliness of the present', wartime England in the 1930s and 40s (pp. 26–27).
- ⁴³ Karin Sellberg, 'The subjective cut: sex reassignment surgery in 1960s and 1970s science fiction', *Medical Humanities*, 42 (2016), e20–e25 (p. e23).
- ⁴⁴ Kate Hext and Alex Murray identify Sontag's *Notes on Camp* (1964) as the first to position Wilde in the evolution from decadence to camp (*Decadence in the Age of Modernism*, pp. 19–20).
- ⁴⁵ See Diffrient's title.
- ⁴⁶ Gregory W. Bredbeck, 'Narcissus in the Wilde: Textual cathexis and the historical origins of queer Camp', in *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, ed. by Moe Meyer (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 44–64 (pp. 45, 47).
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 47.
- ⁴⁸ Purvis E. Boyette, 'Myra Breckinridge and Imitative Form', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 17 (1971), 229–38 (p. 236).

Decadence and the Necrophilic Intertext of Film Noir:
Nikos Nikolaidis' *Singapore Sling*¹

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Because I refuse to discern the boundaries between reality, dream, and cinema,
I concluded that black-and-white film is the richest in chthonic colours.
— Nikos Nikolaidis²

An erudite, inveterate cineaste, dedicated *auteur* and provocateur, Nikos Nikolaidis (1939–2007) became one of the most distinctive and uncompromising voices of Greek and world cinema. *Singapore Sling: O Άνθρωπος που Αγάπησε ένα Πτώμα* [*Singapore Sling: The Man Who Loved a Corpse*] (1990) is his *chef d'œuvre*, a bold, independent film that has acquired cult status internationally. The film is an elitist shocker that, as the exotic cocktail of its title suggests, blends genres and styles: black comedy, Grand Guignol, splatter horror, Gothic melodrama, tragedy, and, most of all, film noir. In fact, classic film noir is not only referenced but is the very skin that gives form and shape to *Singapore Sling*. This is a film whose narrative and visual motifs rely on allusions to other films. Shot in lush black and white, it is a quasi-prequel and tempestuous cinematic love letter of sorts to Otto Preminger's *Laura* (1944) that also gestures towards Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950). Its exquisitely photographed, polished, and highly baroque *mise en scène* is replete with heavy furnishings, bibelots, *objets d'art*, vintage costumes, fabrics, and ostentatious jewellery. Its materiality blends with a fetishistic presentation of the female body in gorgeous, tactile textures and a geometry of dramatic contours. Its ambience of Gothic luxury and decay recalls Norma Desmond's mansion in *Sunset Boulevard* and even Paul Mangin's mansion in Terence Young's debut feature, the noirish Gothic melodrama, *Corridor of Mirrors* (1948).³

Singapore Sling is about a wounded detective who searches for Laura, a woman he has been romantically obsessed with for three years but deep down knows is dead; hence the subtitle *The Man Who Loved a Corpse*, a key line from Preminger's *Laura*. The title of the film derives from the

name Laura gives to the detective after she finds a recipe for the cocktail in his pocket. According to the director, the title ‘evokes something antique, lost, tropical, with much moisture and eroticism’.⁴ The title could also be an allusion to Mother Gin Sling from the exquisitely opulent but less familiar film noir *The Shanghai Gesture* (1941), directed by Josef von Sternberg (starring Gene Tierney, later cast as Laura in Preminger’s film). The investigation leads Singapore Sling (Panos Thanassoulis) to a suburban villa on a stormy night where he finds a mother (Michele Valley) and her daughter (Meredyth Herold), a serial-killing pair of incestuous and dissolute femmes fatales who have murdered the chauffeur and are burying him (even though he is, in fact, still alive). The detective, who we hear in voice-over but who never speaks on camera, becomes an involuntary participant in the two women’s torture and sex games. It turns out that they had employed Laura as a secretary and made her their first murder victim three years ago, after the death of the Father, a mummified figure who had initiated them into the practice of serial murder.

Film Noir and Cinematic Decadence

The network of intertextual allusions to film noir in *Singapore Sling* is composite and multi-layered. If Daughter represents the eponymous heroine of Preminger’s *Laura*, Mother, in her imperious authoritativeness, resembles Norma Desmond from *Sunset Boulevard*. Mother’s characteristic silent-era face with her darkly thick eyeshadow, metal diadem on her forehead (evocative of *Salomé*, Norma Desmond’s own obsession), and her elegant ring cigarette holder reinforces this association [figs 1 & 2]. *Sunset Boulevard* is itself a decadent intertext, and silent cinema seeps through *Singapore Sling* in the implicit allusion to Norma. Hence the film not only offers a ‘geological’ stratification of cinematic eras as a conscious legacy of film noir but also, as we will see, explores and indeed experiments boldly with the dynamics of intertextuality.



Fig. 1 (00:44:48): Norma Desmond (Gloria Swanson) and Joe Gillis (William Holden) from *Sunset Boulevard*.



Fig. 2 (00:11:14): Michele Valley as Mother evokes Norma.

Film noir is all about understatement, mystery, and hidden secrets – psychoanalytic subtexts, figures ensconced beneath the shadows. But Nikolaidis’ ‘decadent worlds’, Vrasidas Karalis notes, are characterized by ‘the dark, asocial, and animalistic tendencies of the unconscious’. The subtext of subdued desire in *Laura* is turned inside-out in *Singapore Sling*, which brings the gamut of obscene materiality to the foreground and finds an analogue in Georges Bataille’s ‘divine filth’ or the Marquis de Sade’s ‘sublime immorality’.⁵ Indeed, *Singapore Sling* is a kind of film noir version of Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* (1975) [figs 3 & 4]. The decadent repertoire of unflinching perversion in Nikolaidis’ film includes necrophilia, incest, food play, vomiting, sadomasochism, urolagnia, electroshock, cross-dressing, dildo fellatio, and even sex with fruit. Nikolaidis’ panorama of perversion is glib, comedic, and over-the-top, rendering his dialogue with film noir pronounced and self-conscious. Still, he has called *Singapore Sling* ‘a very violent, personal explosion’ and ‘filmic vomit, which no one is obligated to bear’; a film that ‘doesn’t make any concessions to *comme-il-faux* aesthetics’.⁶

Yet Hollywood noir of the 1940s was already a decadent form; it was a derailment from 1930s melodrama and the latter’s focus on social concerns. Populated by amoral hardboiled recluses and indecipherable vamps, noir was deemed decadent from its inception. Aesthetic manipulation of light and dark in labyrinthine urban spaces – low-key lighting, chiaroscuro, backlighting, silhouetting, Venetian blinds, and shifting shadows – reflected an obsessive focus on morbid psychological states, or what Richard Dyer recognizes as ‘decadence, perversion, aberration’ and lack of masculinity.⁷ As early as 1946, the German intellectual Siegfried Kracauer noticed that the violence of film noir was not raw and spontaneous but instead ‘originat[ed] from compulsive, sadistic urges’: ‘unlike the gangster movies of the depression era, the new films deal less with social abuses than with psychological aberrations’.⁸ The critic found such films fixated on ‘the sickness of the psyche’ and ‘disintegration’.⁹



Fig. 3 (01:14:21): Meredyth Herold as Daughter with binoculars, one of a number of scenes that alludes to Pasolini's *Salò*.



Fig. 4 (01:50:32): Still from Pasolini's *Salò*.

In addition, there are palpable links between noir and the decadent 1890s. Surprisingly, Preminger at the dénouement of *Laura* references Ernest Dowson: the cantankerous closeted gay dandy Waldo Lydecker (Clifton Webb) appears in Laura's apartment while the radio broadcasts his voice reciting Dowson's '*Vitae summa brevis spem nos vetat incohare longam*' by 'electrical transmission'.¹⁰ The urban ambience of noir also resonates with Arthur Symons's city poems; and the femmes fatales of noir seem to be reincarnations of the cigarette-smoking New Women from the pages of *The Yellow Book*. In a recent study of Ben Hecht, the author who was influenced by British decadence and was later actively involved in the Hollywood film industry (collaborating also with Preminger), Kate Hext demonstrates that the 'deviant behaviour in the night streets' that characterizes noir has its origins in the 'backstreets' of Arthur Machen's and Arthur Conan Doyle's fiction.¹¹

But why does Nikolaidis treat film noir in such an explicitly depraved and genre-violating manner? During the 1940s and 1950s, Hollywood's Motion Picture Production Code, a document that codified the moral guidelines of cinema, was at its apex. Also known as the Hays Code, the guidelines sought to purge cinema of onscreen nudity, immorality, lustfulness, soft-core eroticism, profanity, overtly violent scenes, and taboos of the time such as homosexuality and miscegenation, among others. The Code promoted an ethics of sanitised middle-class family values. Remarkably, within this asphyxiating regime of institutionalized self-censorship, the film noir sensibility thrived through nuance and tacit suggestiveness. Its dark and amoral themes seethed under the surface, and their being muffled was conspicuous. Film noir emerged out of the constricting net of Hollywood's moral mores, just as fin-de-siècle decadence was the unintended by-product of Victorian puritanism. With its panorama of explicit perversions, *Singapore Sling* insinuates itself as a symmetrical inversion of film noir, a cultural product partly defined by the restrictions imposed upon it. Through this manoeuvre, Nikolaidis does not superimpose a radical postmodern reading on film noir but, rather, unlocks its potentialities. He emphatically explodes the latent perversions

under its surface, visualizing and amplifying what Lydecker in *Laura* can only imply in words: ‘a disgustingly earthy relationship’.

Together with the dense tangle of its onscreen tropes of bizarre sexuality, in its intertextual dynamics *Singapore Sling* speaks to the notion of decadence as a departure from what we might call, for all intents and purposes, classicism, a deviation from an accepted standard of proportion. In his introduction to J.-K. Huysmans’s *À rebours* [*Against Nature*] (1884), Havelock Ellis endowed ‘decadence’ with relativism, asserting that a ‘decadent style is only such in relation to a classic style’; ‘a further specialization’ of classic style concerns ‘the whole [...] subordinated to the parts’.¹² In literature, work from the late Roman Empire is often cited as the chief paradigm of deviation from classical proportion. But what about cinema? In his recent essay on ‘Decadence and Cinema’, David Weir tests the applicability of this deductive model, observing that ‘cinema no less than literature has had its classical eras’.¹³ Yet, alert to cinema’s peculiarity as an art form, Weir argues that once a cinema trend is established, periodized, and succeeded by a new trend determined by technological innovation, it turns from decadent to classic. Within this phenomenon there are films that consciously pay tribute to the decadent cultures of the past. Weir singles out the examples of *Fellini-Satyricon* (1969) and *Salò*, which adapt ‘the two most foundational historical periods of decadence – the Roman Empire and libertine France’; however, Weir adds, these are ‘problematic’ since they conventionally reproduce the style and sensibility of the sources they are based on, Petronius and Sade respectively. They no longer constitute deviations and so they do not challenge classically established norms; they are socio-politically somewhat muted.¹⁴

For all its qualities of ‘disintegration’, following Weir’s idea of the forward-shifting boundaries of cinematic decadence, film noir quickly became a classic cinematic style. In line with Weir’s paradigms of Fellini’s appropriating Roman indulgence and Pasolini’s eighteenth-century libertinism, Nikolaidis responds to the psychological and urban malaise of film noir. Since film noir was originally deemed decadent, by analogy, it also accords with a secondary sense that Weir has ascribed to the notion of ‘classical decadence’: not so much a deviation from classical

‘perfection’ but an effort to emulate the ‘decadence of antiquity’.¹⁵ Notwithstanding, Nikolaidis does not just end up recreating retroactively the sensibility of its source material, as Pasolini did with *Salò* and Fellini with *Fellini-Satyricon*. Neither is *Singapore Sling* to film noir what Tinto Brass’s quasi-pornographic *Caligula* (1979), for example, is to the conventional sword-and-sandals epic. The iconography of Bataillean excess in *Singapore Sling* foregrounds and dramatizes an intertextual necrophilic yearning. By chasing the fleeting dream, Preminger’s *Laura*, and by extension the genre of film noir in general, *Singapore Sling* is like Dowson’s desire for the unobtainable Cynara, whose spectre is held within sight yet remains out of reach through a poetics of orgiastic excess, a ‘cry[ing] for madder music and for stronger wine’.¹⁶

Nikolaidis introduces a parallax view to the attraction towards the dead body of film noir that maps onto two broad manifestations of decadence: understatement and intemperance, or the passive suffering of unfulfilled desire and the excesses of taboo-breaking desire. The detective evokes the former attitude whilst the two femmes fatales evoke the latter. While he is enfolded in the generic universe of film noir trappings, the two women, on the contrary, are agents of filmic self-consciousness, subverting the genre with their zany antics and transgressive sexuality. The scenes featuring *Singapore Sling* follow the classical, continuous editing of film noir; on the other hand, the two women constantly make the filmic narrative conscious of itself through roleplaying entangled with a disruptive use of cinematic language: Daughter splits as narrator (and even film director) and play-actor within the same scene, especially when she breaks the fourth wall, speaking directly into the camera [fig. 5], like the sultry Elsa in *Θα σε Δω στην Κόλαση Αγάπη Μου* [*See You in Hell, My Darling*] (1999). In an offbeat scene, Mother, who also addresses the camera, narrates the previous night’s events in three short consecutive takes, as if rehearsing them, in what has been regarded as a little tribute to Jean-Luc Godard.¹⁷ In fact, this is a technique Nikolaidis first used in his debut feature *Euridice BA 2037* (1975), likewise a black-and-white film whose orphic theme of returning from the dead proved to be a recurrent one for the director.¹⁸ In another characteristic

instance, the two women perform a short, impromptu cancan burlesque routine, an allusion to the three libertines' similar dance routine near the end of *Salò*.



Fig. 5 (00:17:42): One of the many instances when Mother and Daughter break the fourth wall.

The Necrophilic Metaphor

The film's overarching theme of necrophilia as a metaphor for Nikolaidis' futile desire for a dead genre is conspicuous enough, but it also calls attention to the viewers' very act of experiencing cinema, their fetishistic obsession with vivid simulacra, with scenes and actors coming to life. This experience is what Paul Willemen calls the 'cinephiliac moment' which carries 'overtones of necrophilia, or relating to something that is dead, past, but alive in memory'; 'you can go back time and again and reconsume' the film 'almost ad infinitum'.¹⁹ Necrophilia in *Singapore Sling* is not just an overarching background metaphor, but a dynamic one that splinters into myriad motific variations on the surface of the narrative and calibrates its intertextual theme.

In their approaches to *Singapore Sling*, both Mikela Fotiou and David Church dismiss 'parody' as an applicable term and focus on 'pastiche'. Fotiou looks at Nikolaidis' film alongside

his other noir ‘necroromance’, *See You in Hell, My Darling*, as ‘an elitist pasticcio of pastiches that demands cinephile and cineliterate audiences’.²⁰ Fotiou emphasizes that, in addition to *Laura*, *Singapore Sling* pastiches Billy Wilder’s *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) in ‘style’ and narrative with the entrapment of Joe Gillis in Norma Desmond’s mansion, as well as in its ‘metacinematic’ aspect.²¹ Nikolaidis’ theme of necrophilia is ‘linked to the longing for the “dead” film noir’.²² Framing the film as a postmodern neo-noir, Church argues that its ‘parodic, modernist potential is deflated by a postmodern use of pastiche’.²³ He sees the film’s cinematic textures as ‘fetishized’ and, in discussing its necrophilic theme, claims that ‘the intertextual references to *Laura* ensure that the film never fully disavows the death of classical noir, nor poses as an independent reinvention of the genre’.²⁴

The necrophilic intertextuality of *Singapore Sling* transcends even pastiche. It pivots on the interplay between decadence as understatement and excess, manifested in a series of inversions that co-exist with what is inverted in double perspective, like a cubist painting: implicitness and explicitness, idealistic desire and graphic sadomasochism, mysteriousness and demystification. In an interview, Nikolaidis himself hinted at the ancillary ingredient that supports *Singapore Sling*’s intertextuality. He rejects parody (validating Fotiou’s and Church’s readings) and arrives at an idiosyncratic use of ‘sarcasm’:

[T]he film is not parody exactly; it doesn’t parody film noir or melo noir²⁵ [...] it just expresses sarcasm for something that is now lost, forgotten [...] one way by which we can experience the lack of this thing is through light sarcasm. ... As it also happens with our great love affairs ... when we are greatly struck by an intense relationship [...] sometimes we sneer at that relationship, struggling to get over it but always with a sense of bitterness, not because of defeat, but with nostalgia [...] that’s how the film is sarcastic and self-sarcastic towards the genres it engages.²⁶

Nikolaidis’ relationship with film noir is personal and engrossing as much as it is aestheticized: it is a studied yet tumultuous love affair. Sarcasm reveals more about the person who uses it than about the target, thinly disguising the subject’s own feelings. Hence, through sarcasm, *Singapore Sling* closes in the parodic distance. It does not just set up a metaphor of nostalgic longing for *Laura* but communes in a bittersweet manner with the dead body of *Laura*, in both senses of the

name. Etymologically, the word ‘sarcasm’ means to tear flesh, from the Greek *sarx* (flesh).²⁷ It implies a maenadic tearing apart (in a sense, the opposite of bringing together, the opposite of pastiching). In the film, this process translates to a fetishistic atomization of the object that is desired and yet is inaccessible, in accordance with the general understanding of decadent style as one in which the details or parts are emphasized at the expense of the whole.

The black-and-white celluloid, the filmic skin itself, is the aesthetic signature that propels Nikolaidis’ deeply personal concept of necrophilia. Nikolaidis collapses the line between cinematic illusion and reality and so prefers the black and white of noir because, as he says, it ‘is the richest in chthonic colours’.²⁸ Of film noir movie stars, Nikolaidis asks: ‘did colour ever manage to [paint their lips] so scarlet and wet, with such deadly temperature, as black-and-white did?’²⁹ The witty question not only highlights the visual intensity of noirish black and white but also plays on its ingrained quality of death mingling with sensuality in portraying the actress-star. In another interview he says: ‘stubbornly refusing to tell the boundaries between reality, dream, and cinema apart, I concluded that black-and-white is the most colour-rich film’.³⁰ Explaining the double meaning of the film’s subtitle, *The Man Who Loved a Corpse*, Mimis Tsakoniatidis posits that the ‘corpse’ symbolizes ‘the black-and-white film violated daily by the crassness and babble of colour’ since ‘only black-and-white celluloid can convey the archetypal confrontation between love and death’.³¹ *Singapore Sling* raises and rapturously destroys and is destroyed by the elusive spectre of the film noir celluloid woman (Laura) and the half-personified film noir genre itself. The result is an intertextual kaleidoscope of distortions, mutations, exaggerations, subversions, and deviations.

The film concocts a number of film noir elements from the outset, fetishizing the dead genre by exaggerating its trappings. It enhances and at the same time unhinges them, alerting the viewer to a curious tension that places the film in the ‘classic decadence’ category. The opening credits are stylized in vintage 1940s font. The wet, stormy nightscape in fine-grain black and white is like gleaming ribbons against masses of tenebrous shadows; the texture of the rain is so luxurious that it even brings to mind Kenneth Anger’s oneiric *Eaux d’artifice* (1953) [figs 6 & 7].³²



Fig. 6 (0:00:20): Film noir meets symbolist fantasy in a shot suggestive of Kenneth Anger's *Eaux d'artifice*.³³



Fig. 7 (00:11:13): Still from *Eaux d'artifice*.

Mother and Daughter are in the garden, clad in frilled nightgowns, lingerie and stockings, yet bespattered and equipped with more practical wellingtons, raincoats, and goggles, burying the half-dead chauffeur's body, tucking in his spilled guts as they do: their mismatched attire intimates their dabbling in both sex and murder. In the meantime, the lackadaisical and moribund trenchcoated detective has pulled up at the villa in a classic-looking black sedan [fig. 8]. He speaks in voice-over (bringing to mind Joe Gillis in *Sunset Boulevard*), over Glenn Miller's mellow 'Laura' jazz theme, a leitmotif that punctuates the film at key moments and signals the intrusion of his necrophilic fantasy. The detective confesses that he is one of those solitary and penniless men 'who chase after lost causes with female names, which lead nowhere', the name of his lost cause being 'Laura'.³⁴ Suspecting that the girl haunting his dreams is dead, he admits he 'is in love with a corpse' [my translation]. This is of course the key line from Preminger's *Laura* that supplies *Singapore Sling* with its overarching theme: in *Laura*, when Waldo Lydecker figures out the obsession Lieutenant McPherson (Dana Andrews) has with the supposedly murdered Laura Hunt after he sees her painted portrait, he taunts him: 'I don't think they've ever had a patient who fell in love with a corpse'.



Fig. 8 (00:04:00): The wounded detective in classic film noir trenchcoat; a wreck and burnout in search of Laura.

Tropes of Transgression

Nikolaidis' necrophilic intertextuality is specialized into a variety of tropes of objectified materiality (representations of transgressive bodies), especially in relation to various postures of authority. In the extended reimagined flashback early on in the film, Daughter narrates how she and Mother lured and murdered Laura: they ritualize her story by playing the incestuous sexual game of the 'Young Secretary', a metafictional ploy in which Nikolaidis frames his film noir nostalgia and elevates it to the level of the narrative. With theatrical bravura, Daughter impersonating Laura enters the scene in formal gabardine and suitcase in hand [fig. 9]. Mother beckons to her from an armchair to approach, assuming the guise of an authority figure, in this case a lewd Roman-Catholic priest hearing confession: 'What's your name my child [...]. Come closer?' and 'How long has it been since you confessed?': she lifts her skirt to reveal a strap-on dildo, forcing Daughter-as-Laura to perform fellatio, which she eagerly does. The film cuts to a scene where the phallic Mother gags the Daughter and rapes her. A little later, in an absurdly jocose vignette of reverse necrophilia, the dead Father as a mummy, wrapped from head to toe in tattered linen strips, also sexually violates the Daughter [fig. 10]. The mummified Father seems to be an allusion to the pre-Code horror melodrama *The Mummy* (1932), directed by Karl Freund and starring Boris Karloff, a film whose theme of moulding a modern Egyptian girl in the style of a lost love, an ancient Egyptian princess, resonates more generally, yet richly, with the necrophilic intertextuality of *Singapore Sling*.

By propping up this power structure, Nikolaidis subsumes film noir's subtle aesthetic negotiations against prescriptive censorship in an ambivalent manner. Nikolaidis stresses that the relationship between Mother and Daughter revolves around 'the ghost of the father, who left bestowing [to them] his philosophy of Authority', fighting 'who will be leader in the house'.³⁵ Their 'competition' marks the entire film as 'an objection against social conventions'.³⁶ Because the film evokes the cinema of an earlier era when the Hays Code was in effect, it also evokes the violation of that code. The two women may represent a Sadean abuse of authority; and yet, in their jabbing

at the heart of the holy family ethos, they are agents of the film's most decadent, radical subversions.



Fig. 9 (00:11:03): Daughter impersonating Laura, playing with Mother the sadomasochistic roleplaying game of 'Young Secretary'.



Fig. 10 (00:17:07): In this expressionistic composition the mummified dead Father copulates with Daughter in the attic.

It is ironic and indeed bathetic that, notwithstanding Mother's and Daughter's *particeps criminis* and sexual perversion, the principal offence Daughter commits that most challenges the patriarchal authority enforced by Mother is her smoking habit. In order to smoke freely, Daughter finds sanctuary in the attic where she has sex with the mummified dead father. The attic is a Gothic, Bosch-like space whose intricate compositional geometry of candle rows, dungeon chains, nets, and metal bicycle wheels – symbolizing lost innocence – populate the depth of field and suggest the sets of German expressionist cinema [fig. 11]. A medical anatomical model torso with its organs exposed looms large in the background. The anatomical model functions as a variant motif of demystifying film noir cinema as an intertextualized dead body, one that undermines the clandestine space of the attic as Daughter's inner sanctum, rendering the film noir heroine open to scrutiny by peering beneath the generic veil of her mysteriousness and laying her sexuality bare. The rule that prohibits smoking is an oblique, playful allusion to Hollywood censorship as part of the legacy of film noir. It is also an expression of male anxiety over dangerous femininity because smoking is a generic signature, a stylized gesture that typifies the empowered, seductive woman so common to the genre.



Fig. 11 (00:18:14): Daughter addressing the viewer. The anatomical medical model looms in the background.

As with the two women's ambivalence in maintaining authority and violating it, the 'male protagonist', according to Nikolaidis, 'accept[ing] things that his reason tells him don't exist, just to re-live the dream, constitutes a reaction. Rejecting the dimension between reality and fantasy is a reaction'.³⁷ Ironically, in his counter-intuitive quest for a foredoomed idealism the detective's entering the women's universe of libertine transgressions is a sort of anomaly that itself seems subversive and radical. Nikolaidis' blurring of reality with fantasy is a shorthand formula for the orphic recovery of the exquisite intertextual corpse of film noir. In this context it is noteworthy that mid-way through the film *Mother* teaches a mock-sign language to the mute Singapore, who imitates her gesticulations with infantile wonder. It is as if Singapore is an avatar for the director himself, who, in the guise of a film noir detective, is like a picaresque hero who steps into the subterranean virtual reality of film noir and has to learn a new film language in order to cope with its excess.³⁸



Fig. 12 (00:15:48): Laura's beating heart and viscera adorned with pearl jewellery.

The intertextual inversions of *Laura* and the genre transgressions of film noir are epitomized in the evisceration and dissection of Laura's body by Mother and Daughter, following

the enactment of the 'Young Secretary' backstory. The scene is accompanied by Sergei Rachmaninov's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, a work of late-romantic nostalgia that resonates with the director's necrophilic obsessions. This is an eye-popping scene where the two women extract the internal organs of Laura's dead body and array them one by one on the kitchen countertop, with the disembodied heart still beating (even hinting at a symbolic vivisection). In a touch of grim humour, they adorn and so stylize Laura's organs with her pearl jewellery [fig. 12]. Throughout his films, Nikolaidis fetishizes and dissects the female body scopophilically, as is the case with Elsa and Vera in *See You in Hell, My Darling* and with the two women whose naked flesh and unbridled sensuality dominate the cinematic frame in *Singapore Sling*. Yet Nikolaidis strips woman, as the unattainable object of desire, of her skin too: Laura, symbolic of the forever lost film noir, is inverted; her body has been turned inside-out: her viscera fill the foreground like the negative of black-and-white celluloid. This is an important scene where Nikolaidis' film *sarcastizes* (destroys obsessively, flesh-tears) Gene Tierney as Laura Hunt in Preminger's film. And yet Laura's corpse, reduced to an absurd arrangement of body organs, wearing jewellery with the heart still beating, formalizes the decadent excess of film noir inversion, as does the anatomical model torso kept in the attic.

In the form of a stylized assemblage of internal organs, the dead Laura doubles as the stylized portrait of Daughter-as-Laura on the wall, a direct allusion to the haunting picture of Laura in Preminger's film [figs 13 & 14]. Nikolaidis experiments with the Gothic trope of the magnetic double as a seductive portrait, developed beautifully in Terence Young's *Corridor of Mirrors* (1948) as well as in Albert Lewin's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1945). In *Laura*, it is through the alluring picture that the police detective Mark McPherson becomes infatuated with the presumably dead woman. In a pivotal sequence, McPherson fiddles with Laura's closet and dresser, sniffing her perfume and fondling her personal effects discreetly and in the briefest of moments: Preminger's subtle touch is enough to communicate the undertones of McPherson's dark infatuation just under the nose of the censors.



Fig. 13 (00:36:25): Daughter's/Laura's portrait in *Singapore Sling* alludes to the one in *Laura*.



Fig. 14 (00:12:56): The haunting portrait in Otto Preminger's *Laura*, or Laura's figurative presumed 'corpse'.



Fig. 15 (00:55:32): Singapore Sling passive, at the mercy of Mother and Daughter.

Besides, as Waldo Lydecker tells Laura: ‘When you were unattainable – when he thought you were dead – that’s when he wanted you most’. *Laura* itself reproduces the unspoken desire of Victorian decadence, and Nikolaidis alludes to these coded transgressions and negotiations with the censor inherent in film noir by blowing them up in his own cinematic universe: the suggestiveness and alluring mystery of Laura’s portrait is juxtaposed with Laura’s bejewelled, disembodied viscera.

About a third into *Singapore Sling*, Daughter, again as a kind of film director herself, conjures up the setting of the original *Laura* when she plays Glenn Miller’s version of Laura’s theme on the turntable. The camera pans across her portrait on the wall, suggestive of the one of Laura in Preminger’s film, looming overhead and fringed by heavy curtains, which for Fotiou constitute ‘a frame of baroque aesthetics that emphasizes Daughter’s obscure multilevelled character and highlights her excessiveness’.³⁹ Daughter then has sex with the male detective who, in an inversion of gender roles, takes on a passive femininity as he is tied to the bedpost, like a male damsel in distress [fig. 15]. In this scene Singapore Sling is also a figure of excess and genre transgression:

the alienated, hardboiled noir detective becomes malleable and his torpid psychology is hyperbolized at the expense of his prescribed masculinity.

Filmic Vomit

Daughter-as-Laura's entrancing portrait is also juxtaposed with Daughter's promiscuous behaviour *in situ* in a dichotomy that reaches into the dark corners of the sexual politics in classic film noir. In the portrait she is depicted in a rather demure polka-dot dress, whilst, as an actual person, she flashes her vulva to Singapore Sling from her white ruffled nightgown, a cross between a brash female satyr and a sultry siren, before proceeding to engage him in sex. Meanwhile, Julie London's otherworldly crooning of 'Laura' takes over the soundtrack, comparable to the intrusion of Dowson's poetry by 'electrical transmission' in Preminger's film noir, and Daughter repeats the closing verse of London's song: 'but she's only a dream'. Nikolaidis comments that 'a song from *Laura* intrudes through Julie London's voice: cinema itself comes to intervene and claim a role that is now dramatic and not cinephilic'.⁴⁰ Film noir turns into an actor, a returning ghostly presence.



Fig. 16 (00:40:08): Daughter's 'memory puke'.



Fig. 17 (00:45:31): Nikolaidis' economy of Sadean eroticism: torture of Singapore Sling by electroshock drives Mother to orgasm.

Then in a gesture that resembles ejaculation, she vomits on him and says softly, 'forget her Singapore Sling' [fig. 16]. Her vomit is symbolic of what Nikolaidis has called 'memory puke'.⁴¹ This is a peculiar, symbolic gesture, one in which cinematic language has been reinvented. Daughter's vomit is a tragic, profound gift to Singapore Sling: as if expressing wistfulness for a kind of idealistic love that was only possible in the enchanting black-and-white cinema of the 1940s, vomit stands for a cultural memory that can never be recaptured and returns to the present reality in the form of something insalubrious. What Nikolaidis places in parallax in his necrophilic intertext are forgetfulness and recall, mystification and demystification, filmic fantasy and filmic reality. A more extreme inversion of film noir predicated on Nikolaidis' economy of waste, juxtaposed with the dreamlike sexual encounter with Daughter, is Mother's unnerving, baroque sadism in raping the detective: gagged and chained to the bed, Singapore Sling is subjected to electrocution while mounted by Mother, who is clad in black. Daughter, dressed in white, cranks up a vintage-looking generator, resulting in the violent jerking of his body whose spasms serve as an instrument for Mother's orgasm [fig. 17]. In the moment of climax, in this economy of

channelling the agony of one's torture into the other's sexual energy – like communicating vessels – Mother urinates on Singapore Sling's face.

In accord with the female characters' sex-associated bodily fluids (vomit, urine), the film showcases excessive imagery of food and eating. Nikolaidis' obsession with food and vomiting brings to mind the two girls in Věra Chytilová's experimental Czechoslovakian masterpiece *Sedmikrásky* [*Daisies*] (1966) who, with comedic excess, indulge in and wreck a lavish long table lined with opulent dishes when they come across it before the arrival of guests; both Nikolaidis and Chytilová with their imagery of culinary excess challenge bourgeois conventions. In addition, the women's morbid gastronomic hedonism alludes to the four degenerate friends in Marco Ferreri's *La grande bouffe* [*The Big Feast*] (1973) who eat themselves to death, sequestered in a villa over the course of a weekend. *Singapore Sling*, alongside these two films, is an example of what Aleksandra Drzał-Sierocka calls 'anti-food films or reverse food films', where food as an essential element acquires a 'metaphorical meaning'.⁴² There are two banquet sequences where Mother and Daughter, styled as a silent-era actress and a kind of heathen princess respectively, indulge in food sensually and carelessly, with Singapore present as a restrained observer and indisposed participant, in what looks like a carnivalesque parody of table manners and bourgeois decorum. The table is opulently set up with elaborate dishes, including aphrodisiac seafood, sheep's brains, and luxurious confectionery, accompanied by blood-red wine. Making the most of his black-and-white cinematography, Nikolaidis' camera arrests the tactile, rich textures of the gleaming tableware, the food, the fabrics, and the characters' beautifully expressive faces [fig. 18]. Everything blends into a lush, sensuous composition, where grossness is tempered by swanky, baroque aesthetics. The sessions quickly degenerate into obscene displays of bad table manners, with the two women becoming messy with their hands, gorging themselves, gagging, and self-inducing reflux and vomiting (yet without being queasy), besmirching Singapore Sling with food, spoon-feeding him in an infantilizing fashion, and making him disgorge. These gastronomic rituals are highly suggestive of the Lucullian banquets of Roman decadence [figs 19 & 20].

What is quite innovative here is that the film's playhouse of perversions (its culinary rituals and *recherché* sex vignettes) enacts its intertextual decadence through the figure of reflux, of something coming back to the surface in a corroded (but not putrefied) form. Referring to the idea of 'scene', Roland Barthes in *A Lover's Discourse* comments that a 'scene' has no meaning; 'it is a luxury – and idle: as inconsequential as a perverse orgasm: it does not leave a mark'. Barthes refers to Sade's prose as an example: a body subjected to violence 'is instantaneously restored – for new expenditures'; hence '[b]y the very insignificance of its tumult, the scene recalls the Roman style of vomiting: I tickle my uvula (I rouse myself to contestation), I vomit (a flood of wounding arguments), and then, quite calmly, I begin eating again'.⁴³ Like a hall of mirrors, *Singapore Sling* rehearses a series of variant confrontations with the enchanting world of film noir in terminal, 'idle' repetitions. From the standpoint of his own time, the late 1980s, and his own experience of struggling for artistic freedom and resources in his dealings with the Greek Film Centre, Nikolaidis strives to capture film noir only to regurgitate its memory and start afresh in endless repetitions, making *Singapore Sling* – in his own words – a conceptual 'filmic vomit'.



Fig. 18 (1:23:37): The dinner table in dappled black-and-white; a tactile and sensual mise en scène.



Fig. 19 (00:47:12): Daughter's food indulgence in a scene that suggests both bourgeois ritualism and Gothic exoticism.



Fig. 20 (00:51:58): Nikolaidis' culinary excesses constitute a legacy of Roman decadence.

The two supper sequences are followed by two equally tactile scenes in the privacy of the attic where we see Daughter as an animalistic force of unbridled orgasm engaging in masturbatory activities, exploring her own sexuality to Rachmaninov's tempestuous music. In the first instance she uses her fingers again to simulate self-induced vomit whilst, in segued jump-cuts, she tussles and stimulates herself with the straps of her own lingerie gown. The second attic sequence showcases a bold piece of method acting by Meredyth Herold: Nikolaidis' scopophilic camera follows Daughter having sex with a kiwi fruit. With clear nods to the eclectic, quasi-pornographic cinema of Walerian Borowczyk, Daughter sensually caresses her body with the fruit; her ecstasy crescendos when she crushes it into her vagina in an unflinching close-up, leading to an eruption of juices. This is a sublime moment when the director's *inversion* of film noir's aesthetic baggage reaches its peak. But, like Laura's disembodied organs in full view, this is a moment when all the layers have been peeled to reveal a terminal, futile excess.

'I'm alive now': Intertextual Convergence

The fantasy of Preminger's *Laura* converges with the filmic reality circumscribed by *Singapore Sling* through stagecraft and playacting. In keeping with the bifurcation of the decadent modes of excess and understatement, the symbolism of bygone genres returning in a rather obscene form ('filmic vomit') is paralleled with the return of *Laura* through pastiche. The women, being disruptive agents of intertextuality, in interacting with the detective and in their effort to outmanoeuvre each other, increasingly smuggle in script segments from *Laura*. Earlier in the film Daughter had pointed out to Singapore that Laura 'is only a dream'. But now, in his voice-over reflections Singapore believes that Laura is alive as the Daughter who slides into this role in order to motivate him to get rid of her controlling mother. Dressed as Laura in her polka-dot attire, she says beguilingly as she plays Laura's theme on the turntable once again [fig. 21]:

You see, Singapore Sling, you don't need to love a corpse. I'm alive now. I've read your notebook and understood that you loved me before you ever met me. The time you saw my portrait and thought I was dead ... But it seems some other girl died in my place. I left

because I was tired. I wanted to be alone to think things over. Don't feel you were deserted. I went to the lake house for three days. Newspapers aren't delivered there and the radio was broken. That's why I didn't hear about my death. But now we'll finally be together. You have to help me Singapore Sling because that woman out there won't let me smoke.

This is a key instance where Preminger's script is embedded and repurposed in Nikolaidis' script. The web of intertextual allusions is compressed in this moment. Daughter-as-Laura initially plays by the intradiegetic script, *Singapore Sling*'s 'notebook' which reproduces Preminger's necroromantic premise that coincides with and describes the detective's situation. Then her character is subsumed by an extradiegetic manipulation, the script of *Laura*, as she paraphrases lines by the original Laura Hunt played by Gene Tierney. Preminger's plot is prompted by the investigation of Laura's supposed murder. Because of the off-screen shotgun blast to the face the victim cannot be positively identified. Lieutenant McPherson conjectures that the body is Laura's because it is found in her apartment. It turns out that the victim is another woman, Diane Redfern, who was secretly brought there by Laura's fiancé Shelby Carpenter (Vincent Price), whilst Laura was away for the weekend in her country house. It is during that investigation weekend that McPherson sees her portrait and falls in love with her 'corpse'. In *Singapore Sling*, Daughter as an intertextual agent resuscitates Preminger's Laura and samples segments of her explaining to a surprised McPherson her weekend getaway and, in light of her reappearance, her alibi. Daughter's bathetic motivation – to escape Mother's restrictions on smoking – nonetheless agrees with Nikolaidis' strategy of inversion. It is a fig leaf that inverts censorship restrictions and reduces them to comic absurdity.

Fotiou fittingly posits that in this scene, 'by recreating [*Laura*] and imitating parts of it' Nikolaidis 'shows his necrophilia for this "dead" cinema through pastiche. Nikolaidis lusts for *Laura* (the film) in the same way that the detective lusts for Laura (the person)'.⁴⁴ In addition to his use of pastiche, Nikolaidis here expresses the sharp irony tinged with personal obsession that designates the sarcastic lover: the statement of the daughter, who is the symbolic mouthpiece of film noir ('you don't need to love a corpse. I'm alive now'), is in itself a contradiction. Nikolaidis'

necrophilia is not an attempt at resurrecting film noir but animating it, leading him to mould his own cinematic material so that it imitates the noir sensibility. The scene features the decadent topos of the mirror's artifice, the preference of the substitute to the real thing. The director, and by extension Singapore, can be compared with the obsessed Scottie Ferguson in Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) who adjusts Judy Barton's appearance to look like the dead Madeleine. Even more so, Nikolaidis is like the aesthete master of ceremonies Paul Mangin in *The Corridor of Mirrors* who is slave to his own fantasy and as a Pygmalion fashions the stately Mifanwy Conway as the reincarnation of the Renaissance princess of the clandestine portrait he owns.⁴⁵



Fig. 21 (0:55:13): Daughter dressed as Laura heralds Preminger's film with theatrical flourish.

Fragments of plot and dialogue from *Laura* bestrew the film's action to the point of blurring role-playing and reality. Daughter may or may not pretend to escape when she enters Singapore Sling's black sedan only to find her move anticipated by Mother, who creeps up from the back seat. The dialogue that follows reads like cryptic nonsense but is cleverly manipulated to resemble Preminger's plot, making sense only in the interstitial space of intertextuality:

[...] 'Where have you been?'
 'I was in the country, at the lake house. Give me the keys.'
 'A woman was murdered in this house. Everyone thought it was you.'
 'I don't know anything. When did this happen?'
 'Three years ago. On a Saturday night. They also found two glasses; guess what was in them.'
 'Singapore Sling.'

Back at the house and in front of the detective, in a classic film noir trope, Mother questions Daughter, flashing an intimidating desk-lamp in her face that alludes to McPherson's interrogation of Laura [fig. 22]. Allusions to *Laura* include Mother pretending to torture Daughter in order to make the detective reveal what he knows about Laura's murder, and the duo immersing him in the bathtub while synopsising a prequel-twist variation of Preminger's film in their characteristic theatrical breaking of the fourth wall. The effect is one of convolutedness of presentation where allusions to film noir are at once signposted and subsumed.



Fig. 22 (1:00:57): Blurred intertextual boundaries: Mother interrogates Daughter/Laura before a spectating Singapore Sling.

Church appositely asks, 'is the noir narrative merely a backdrop for the sex play, or is sex play the backdrop for the noir narrative?'⁴⁶ The multiplicity of roleplaying games transmigrates to

the plane of sexuality and murder: in an extended *decoupage*, an orgy of sexual games and entanglements among the three characters is intercut with Singapore digging a grave. The three characters' shifting, fluid combinations in their choreographed sexual activity reflect the film's multiplicity of intertextual scenarios [fig. 23]. The sequence is accompanied by a late Renaissance choral piece, Giaches de Wert's *Tirsi Morir Volea* [Thyrsis Wished to Die], which is about death though the act of sex. Tsakoniatis remarks of this sequence that 'Laura's erotic embrace leads with mathematical certainty to death'.⁴⁷



Fig. 23 (01:07:05): The roleplaying games of the three characters in their efforts to outmanoeuvre one another lead to sexual orgy and death.

Nikolaidis' films typically end in an orgy of death. Singapore kills Mother and replaces her in the game of the 'Young Secretary', crossed-dressed in a vintage costume and heavy makeup, an appearance that conflates elements of both women but is also evocative of Sadean libertinism. But instead of the dildo, his strap-on is a phallic knife. In the dramatic scuffle that ensues in and around the villa between him and Daughter, he mortally penetrates her with the appended knife-phallus, while she inflicts a deadly wound with her noir-style luger pistol [fig. 24]. Church astutely

comments that each of the three characters ‘has simultaneously occupied multiple positionalities within a scenario allowing the free play of different confused motivations, destabilizing all stable identities and allowing different circuits of desire to flow through each person’.⁴⁸ For instance, Church argues that Singapore Sling occupies ‘three positions at once’: the role of Mother in filling her vacancy in the ‘Young Secretary’ scenario, the role of the Father as a ‘phallic destroyer’, and his own role as a ‘searcher for Laura’.⁴⁹ In resisting fixed identities, Singapore both fills the vacuum of patriarchal authority and sexually violates Daughter/Laura: his deadly appendage means that he is both destructive and impotent. In his transvestite outfit he symbolizes Nikolaidis’ intertext (his name is also the film’s title) further *sarvasizing* (flesh-tearing) Daughter and Mother, synecdochic avatars of *Laura* and *Sunset Boulevard* respectively.



Fig. 24 (00:22:12): Daughter as the archetypal film noir femme fatale wielding a luger pistol.



Fig. 25 (01:49:22): The symbolism of costume: Singapore Sling disguises his libertine identity with his film noir attire.

Conclusion

Early on in the film, Daughter refers to planting ‘decorative and aromatic flowers on the graves’, adding that ‘corpses were the best fertiliser for the soil; and our gardenias had become as tall as trees’, a striking image that brings to mind Clara and the revolting Chinese prison-garden of Octave Mirbeau’s *Le jardin des supplices* [*Torture Garden*] (1899). Daughter’s image of macabre regeneration bears a special significance: the dead Laura (and the eponymous film noir she symbolically represents) becomes the intertextual fertiliser for an altogether different cinematic experience, yet one that is itself subject to a cycle of morbid renewal. *Singapore Sling* is self-aware of the prospect of turning into a work of classic decadence, just like the genre it speaks to in turn. At the end of the film, the wounded Singapore Sling, emerging from the shifting shadows of the moonlit, wet alley, puts on his trenchcoat over the libertine costume, as if encasing his libertine impulses within the more restrained identity of film noir [fig. 25], and ruminates in deadpan voice-over:

You slide inside yourself like falling with a parachute. Then you hold your breath and go without resisting, recalling all those who did the same before you. All those who fell into the void underneath a white parachute. A bunch of suckers and losers, without a future, work and age. Who are still chasing a dream with a female name. I'll be in good company tonight. [my translation of subtitles]

Julie London's 'Laura' resounds this time extradiegetically (forming a symmetry with the beginning of the film) like an irresistible siren's call while Singapore Sling lies in the grave he has opened and makes an attempt at self-burial. The camera freezes on his hand sticking out of the pit. Tsakoniatis interprets this gesture as a 'last-gasp effort to touch the dream'.⁵⁰ It is Nikolaidis' grand attestation of the curse of unfulfilled desire as Dowson expresses it: 'But when the feast is finished and the lamps expire, | Then falls thy shadow, Cynara! the night is thine' (an image that could as well serve as a befitting film noir descriptor).⁵¹ The real femme fatale is the spectre of the eroticized film noir. Singapore Sling is the last in a string of victims, forever trapped in his liminal desire. In addition, his final voice-over and liminal arrest in the grave comprise a free rendering of Lydecker's recitation of Dowson's poem '*Vitae summa brevis*' at the finale of *Laura*:

Out of a misty dream
Our path emerges for a while, then closes
Within a dream.

Singapore Sling's final thoughts are an intimation of a necrophilic intertextual performance. The motions of 'chasing a dream with a female name' are performed in the film's repeat viewings. In his lucid moment of dying, the hardboiled, forlorn detective has an intuition indicative of the film's self-consciousness. He projects the fantasy of Nikolaidis in which his neo-noir film is itself bound to become inert and classic, a corpse to be intertextually torn apart by the decadent cinema of the future.

¹ My gratitude goes to David Weir for his erudition and helpful suggestions on drafting this essay. I am also grateful to Marie Louise Nikolaidis for being so accommodating and generous in providing me with source material from her personal archive, especially hard-to-find interviews by Nikos Nikolaidis. In addition, I wish to express my warm thanks to Marie Louise Nikolaidis for granting me permission to reproduce stills from *Singapore Sling*.

² Mimis Tsakoniatis, *Nikos Nikolaidis*, ed. by Marie-Louise Bartholomew, Simeon Nikolaidis, and Yannis Soldatos (Athens: Aigokeros, 2007), p. 41. My translation. This and other Greek sources in this essay are translated and transliterated.

- ³ For the film's baroque aesthetics and *Sunset Boulevard*, see Mikela Fotiou, 'Nikolaidis' Diptych *Those Who Loved a Corpse*: A "Pasticcio of Pastiche", in *Contemporary Greek Film Cultures from 1990 to the Present*, ed. by Tonia Kazakopoulou and Mikela Fotiou (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2017), pp. 342–68 (p. 351).
- ⁴ Nikos Nikolaidis, interview with Vassos Georgas, 'Nikos Nikolaidis: The Man Who Loved a Corpse', *Cine7* (1990), 40. My translation.
- ⁵ Vrasidas Karalis, *A History of Greek Cinema* (London and New York: Continuum, 2012), p. 228.
- ⁶ Nikos Nikolaidis, interview with Nikos Kavvadias, 'Singapore Sling', *Odos Panos*, 55 (1990), 98–109 (p. 108). My translation.
- ⁷ Richard Dyer, 'Resistance through Charisma: Rita Hayworth and *Gilda*', in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. by Ann Kaplan (London: BFI, 1980), pp. 91–99 (p. 92).
- ⁸ Siegfried Kracauer, 'Hollywood's Terror Films: Do They Reflect an American State of Mind?', *New German Critique*, 89 (2003), 105–111 (pp. 106 & 107). First published in *Commentary*, 2 (1946), 132–36.
- ⁹ Kracauer, 'Hollywood's Terror Films', pp. 108 & 109.
- ¹⁰ *Laura*, directed by Otto Preminger, Twentieth Century Fox, 1944. All quotations are taken from the film version.
- ¹¹ Kate Hext, 'Ben Hecht's Hard-Boiled Decadence: The Flâneur as Reporter', *Modernist Cultures*, 13.2 (2018), 235–54 (p. 241). See also p. 252 n.28.
- ¹² Havelock Ellis, 'Introduction', in J.-K. Huysmans, *Against the Grain*, trans. by John Howard (New York: Lieber and Lewis, 1922), p. ix.
- ¹³ David Weir, 'Decadence and Cinema', in *Decadence and Literature*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and David Weir (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 300–15 (p. 311).
- ¹⁴ Weir, 'Decadence and Cinema', p. 311. On the other hand, a film like *Jaws* with its technological innovations could be regarded as decadent (Weir, 'Decadence and Cinema', p. 312).
- ¹⁵ David Weir, *Decadence: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 13.
- ¹⁶ Ernest Dowson, 'Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynaræ', in *Collected Poems*, ed. by R. K. R. Thornton with Caroline Dowson (Birmingham: Birmingham University Press, 2003), p. 85.
- ¹⁷ Tsakoniatis, *Nikos Nikolaidis*, p. 138.
- ¹⁸ See also Tsakoniatis, *Nikos Nikolaidis*, pp. 128–29.
- ¹⁹ Paul Willemen, 'Through the Glass Darkly: Cinephilia Reconsidered', in *Looks and Frictions: Essays in Cultural Studies and Film Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press; London: BFI, 1994), pp. 227, 237.
- ²⁰ Fotiou, 'Nikolaidis' Diptych', p. 350.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 349.
- ²² *Ibid.*, p. 345.
- ²³ David Church, 'Singapore Sling: Postmodern Noir, Narrative, and Destructive Desire', *Offscreen: Eclectic & Serious Film Criticism*, 11.10 (2007), 1–15 (p. 15).
- ²⁴ Church, 'Singapore Sling', p. 14.
- ²⁵ Classic melodrama with noirish elements such as *Casablanca* (1942) or *Road House* (1948).
- ²⁶ Nikos Nikolaidis, interview with Tasos Sagris, *Rollin Under* (1991), 5–11 (p. 5). My translation.
- ²⁷ Examples of the prefix sarc- include *sarcophagus* (flesh-eating) or *sarcoma* (fleshy outgrowth, tumour).
- ²⁸ See the epigraph to this essay.
- ²⁹ Tsakoniatis, *Nikos Nikolaidis*, p. 41. My translation.
- ³⁰ Nikos Nikolaidis, interview with Maria Katsounaki, 'Visions in White and Black', *Kathimerini*, 7 June 1990, p. 56.
- ³¹ Tsakoniatis, *Nikos Nikolaidis*, p. 130.
- ³² Anger's title is untranslatable because it is a pun on '*jeux d'artifice*' [fireworks], since the film does with waterworks what is ordinarily done with fireworks – create a spectacular visual display.
- ³³ The image also suggests the discharge of various bodily fluids, a recurring motif in *Singapore Sling*.
- ³⁴ *Singapore Sling*, directed by Nikos Nikolaidis, Greek Film Centre, 1990. All quotations are taken from the film version.
- ³⁵ Nikos Nikolaidis, interview with Giannis Halaris, *MEN*, 17 (1990), 122, 126, 128, 122.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*
- ³⁸ Also for Tsakoniatis all three characters blur fantasy with reality, on an 'illusionary, paranoid level'. See *Nikos Nikolaidis*, p. 138.
- ³⁹ Fotiou, 'Nikolaidis' Diptych', p. 352.
- ⁴⁰ Nikos Nikolaidis, interview with Vena Georgakopoulos, 'Time to Feel Exposed', *Sunday Eleftherotypia*, 2 December 1990, pp. 40–41 (p. 40). My translation.
- ⁴¹ Nikos Nikolaidis, interview with Maria Katsounaki, 'Personal Challenges...', *Kathimerini*, 25 November 1990, p. 39.
- ⁴² Aleksandra Drzał-Sierocka, 'Celluloid Flavours: A Brief History of Food in Film', *Łódzkie Studia Etnograficzne*, 54 (2015), 52–70 (p. 66). Italics in original.
- ⁴³ Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), p. 207.
- ⁴⁴ Fotiou, 'Nikolaidis' Diptych', p. 353.

⁴⁵ Lydecker himself shows Pygmalion-like tendencies. Laura for him proves to be a decorative ornament, a trophy, as he projects his cultural tastes onto her, playing her his records and reading her his articles.

⁴⁶ Church, 'Singapore Sling: Postmodern Noir', p. 11.

⁴⁷ Tsakoniatis, *Nikos Nikolaidis*, p. 139. My translation.

⁴⁸ Church, 'Singapore Sling: Postmodern Noir', p. 13.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Tsakoniatis, *Nikos Nikolaidis*, p. 142.

⁵¹ Dowson, '*Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae*', in *Collected Poems*, p. 85.

Alla Nazimova's *Salomé*: Shot-by-Shot

David Weir

The Cooper Union

Alla Nazimova's *Salomé* was a strange film for its time and remains so today because it is so hard to categorize. What kind of film is it? The opening title card describes it as 'An Historical Phantasy by Oscar Wilde', even though Wilde called his play 'A Tragedy in One Act'. Possibly, the Latinate spelling of 'Phantasy', from *phantasia*, is meant to preserve a sense of the original Greek meaning on which the Latin word is based, namely *φαντασία*, 'a making visible' (*OED*). If so, *Salomé* becomes comprehensible as a type of cinema that proliferated in the silent era (and continues to this day), one that sought to make events from some remote historical period visible to modern audiences. Understood thus, *Salomé* seems like a kind of matchbox biblical epic, a scaled-down version of the massively produced sword-and-sandals extravaganza, such as *The Ten Commandments* (1923) or *King of Kings* (1927), made famous by Cecil B. DeMille. Indeed, the lost Theda Bara *Salomé* (1919), called 'an ambitious and elaborate spectacle' in contemporary accounts, seems to have been just such a film.¹ At the same time, Nazimova's smaller-scale 'phantasy' is more than simply a historical visualization because the film includes some genuinely fantastic elements, such as the spectral salver floating before Salome as she holds aloft the scimitar she has taken from Herod's bodyguard [fig. 1; see Appendix I, shot-list: shot 502]. Such effects, as well as the wildly ahistorical mise en scène (more evocative of the fin de siècle than of first century Judea) obviously work against the idea of the film as a mini-epic set in biblical times.

Today, it is perhaps easiest to think of Nazimova's *Salomé* as an art film, mainly because of the costumes and sets designed by Natacha Rambova, who took her inspiration from Aubrey Beardsley. But the film was distributed by a major production company, a fact more readily reconciled to the commercial conditions of a more conventional Hollywood movie than an avant-garde effort – not that Nazimova's *Salomé* is all that 'avant-garde', at least in terms of technique

(not by comparison, anyway, with *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (1920), say, or *Ballet mécanique* (1924)). On the contrary, the editing and cinematography are hardly experimental but are instead highly conventional, no different from that of most Hollywood films of the period. The ‘art film’ argument might be supported by the fact that *Salomé* was distributed by United Artists, the production company founded in 1919 by Charlie Chaplin, D. W. Griffith, Douglas Fairbanks, and Mary Pickford, a group of artists united (hence the name ‘United Artists’) against the studio system.² But films made independently outside the studio system are not de facto ‘art films’, as the bulk of the films United Artists produced and distributed shows. The company was in the business to make money, after all, an obvious fact made abundantly clear by the re-issue of one of the most commercially successful films of the first two decades of the twentieth century on the same date (15 February 1923) that *Salomé* had its official United Artists premier: Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915).³



Fig. 1 (01:06:10): Extreme long shot of Salomé as the spectral salver floats upward (S502).

A better argument in favour of the ‘art film’ categorization is the evident fact that *Salomé* is a fairly sophisticated example of film art. The three essential elements of film construction in the silent era – mise en scène, cinematography, and montage – are generally well done, the main problem for audiences today being the acting of some of the performers, which tends toward the overstated, pantomimic style typical of silent film generally. Even in 1922 this type of acting was going out of style, as an early notice in *Photoplay* makes clear: ‘Herod and his queen, we fear, savor a bit of [Mack] Sennett rather than of old Judea as Oscar painted it’.⁴ (Sennett achieved fame as a director of hundreds of slapstick comedies, notably the *Keystone Cops* series, doing most of his work prior to 1920.) Performance aside, other aspects of the mise en scène (i.e., what is placed in the scene, in front of the camera) are indeed artful, thanks to Rambova’s art-nouveau set and costume design. Today, the set and costumes are likely to strike most viewers as camp because they seem like a knowing, over-the-top parody of the kind of decadent aesthetic sensibility associated with Wilde and Beardsley. That sensibility, of course, is *already* camp, at least in the estimation of Susan Sontag, who singles out art nouveau in particular as ‘the most typical and fully developed Camp style’.⁵ It is hard to deny that many if not most viewers will experience *Salomé* as camp,⁶ but it is also hard to imagine Nazimova and Rambova actually intending to cultivate that experience. On the contrary, their adaptation of Wilde and Beardsley seems motivated by a sense of their fin-de-siècle source material as high art, consistent with the way Wilde, especially, came to be viewed after the critic and journalist H. L. Mencken – a taste-maker if ever there was one – began the American restoration of Wilde’s reputation, starting around 1916.⁷ When the Modern Library was founded in 1917, advertisements for ‘The World’s Best Books’ put Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* at the top of the list of ‘previously published’ volumes and an edition of his *Poems* at the top of the list of those ‘just published’.⁸ Wilde’s posthumous cultural come-back, in short, was at its peak in the United States in the early 1920s. Hence there is every reason to think that Nazimova and Rambova believed that they were doing something worthy of Wilde (and Beardsley) by creating a serious work of art themselves.⁹

The sense of high artistic purpose is also reflected in the cinematography of *Salomé*, not least because Nazimova had a real professional operating the camera in the person of Charles J. Van Enger, whose gifts for lighting and framing would later reach near-perfection when he became the cinematographer for Ernst Lubitsch's early Hollywood films. Who edited the film Van Enger shot is not completely clear because, as was the case with numerous silent films of the period, no editing credit appears in the opening title sequence. However, the likelihood that Nazimova herself did the editing is strong, based on the evidence provided by 'An Open Letter to Mme. Nazimova' that appeared in the August 1921 issue of *Photoplay* after the release of *Camille*, nominally directed by Ray C. Smallwood (but who was ordered about by Nazimova).¹⁰ The anonymous author of the letter chides the star for 'hav[ing] tried to do too much': 'You have insisted on selecting, casting, practically directing, cutting [i.e., editing], and titling your own pictures'.¹¹ In any case, the montage is perhaps the most interesting and sophisticated aspect of the film, cinematically speaking, because of the variety of shots that comprise the continuity editing, mixed with several other types of shots, including some involving animation, however briefly. There is much more to recommend Nazimova's *Salomé*, in short, than the fact that the film was adapted from Wilde's play: hence the larger purpose of this essay, which is to understand the film on its own terms as a work of cinematic art in its own right.

Titles: Respecting and Interpreting Wilde

Salomé contains 103 title cards, which seems to be an unusually high number for silent films of the early 1920s, when filmmakers tried to limit intertitles and even contemplated making films without any at all. The titles in *Salomé* fall into the three basic categories typical of almost all silent films: credits (8 cards), narrative exposition (8), and dialogue (87). There is one instance of overlap of acting credit and narrative exposition in the title card for the actor who plays Narraboth, 'a Syrian Prince robbed of his throne and forced to serve Herod as Captain of the Guard' (Appendix I, title list: T16; in the play, Herod has indeed made Narraboth captain of the guard,¹² but the detail about

his being ‘robbed of his throne’ is not in Wilde’s text). The opening title card [fig. 2: T1] is especially elaborate, giving the last name of the star in the form of an impressive signature employing the same script that had been used at least as early as 1919 (in promotional material for *The Brat*)¹³ and, more recently, in the title cards for *Camille* (1921). The form of the name seems calculated to call attention to the star as a single-named celebrity, common practice today (Madonna, Lady Gaga, Drake, and so on) but less common at the time. And let there be no doubt that Nazimova was a big name in the early 1920s, having achieved great fame on the stage as the premier American interpreter of Henrik Ibsen’s feminist heroines, notably Hedda Gabler from the play of the same name and Nora Helmer from *A Doll’s House* (Nazimova reprised the role of Nora in her film version of the play, now lost, in 1922, just prior to making *Salomé*). It is a measure of just how precipitously Nazimova’s reputation has declined that following her first film success as the star of the pacifist *War Brides* (1916) ‘she was in the same league as Pickford and Chaplin’, making \$13,000 a week at Metro Pictures Corporation,¹⁴ the equivalent of more than \$220,000 today.¹⁵

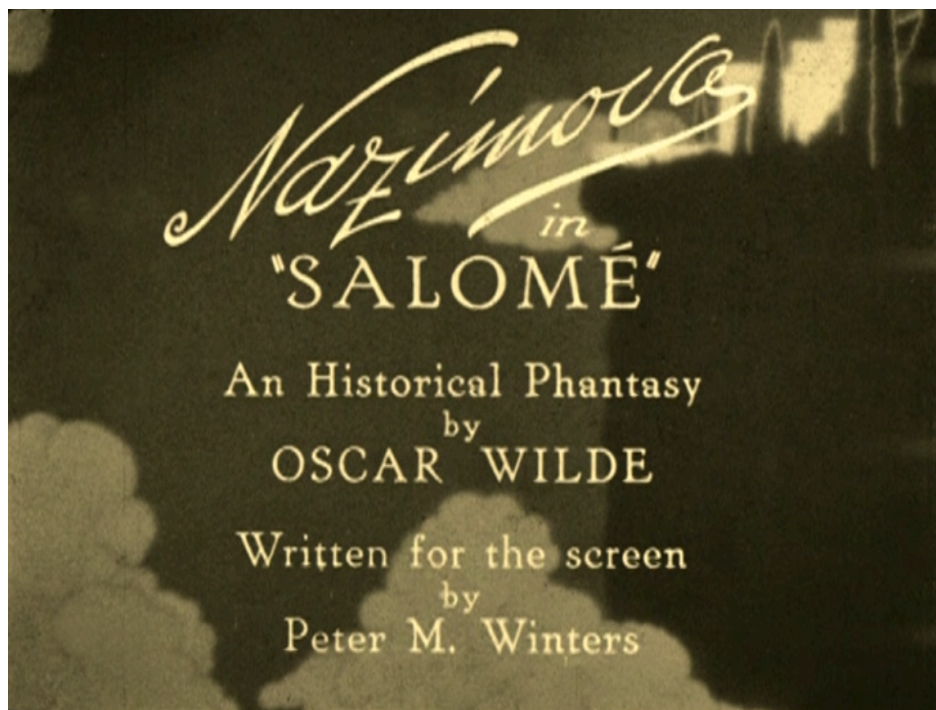


Fig. 2 (00:00:03): Opening title (T1).

The opening title also describes the work as ‘An Historical Phantasy by Oscar Wilde Written for the screen by Peter M. Winters’, a pseudonym of Nazimova herself (the name Nazimova includes an echo of the Russian word ЗИМА ‘zima’, ‘winter’).¹⁶ Despite what the title card for directing says, the critical consensus now is that Nazimova did indeed direct the film – not Charles Bryant (T2), Nazimova’s ‘husband’ (they were not, in fact, married).¹⁷ In reality, Bryant seems to have been little more than a kept man, though kept for what purpose is not entirely clear, aside from providing heterosexual cover for a woman living in a society that condemned lesbians as immoral and gender cover for a woman working in an industry dominated by men – which is purpose aplenty, when you think about it. The reason for the misleading director’s credit is evidently Nazimova’s concern that she not be seen as doing too much, having only recently been charged with ‘overreaching’ (as in that *Photoplay* ‘letter’, above) in the films she had starred in for Metro (she appeared in eleven films for the studio, including the last one, *Camille*). In fact, the studio orchestrated a smear campaign against her as ‘a woman who the Hollywood male establishment decided had grown too powerful’.¹⁸ The animus against any female star-producer as ‘the bane of the industry’ was evident as early as 1916, with one *Photoplay* editorial finding the phenomenon ‘as preposterous, anarchistic and insidious an evil as has ever been introduced into dramatic art in America’.¹⁹

No need for anonymity attaches to the title card for Nazimova’s friend and sometime lover Natacha Rambova. Her credit for set and costume design (T3) is merited because she actually did design the set and the fantastic costumes based on Beardsley’s drawings, not all of which appear as illustrations for Wilde’s *Salomé*. Notable borrowings from Beardsley’s drawings for the play include the images of peacocks in Salomé’s fantasy [fig. 3: S430] derived from *The Eyes of Herod*; an abstract version of *The Peacock Skirt* worn by Salomé after she dances for Herod; and the outfits worn by the troupe of dwarf musicians, based on the drawing of the grotesque figure playing a dulcimer in the bottom left corner of *The Stomach Dance*. The circular, scale-like stylization of peacock feathers that appears first in *The Eyes of Herod* and then again in the top left corner of *The*

Climax finds its way into Rambova's set design in a variety of ways – at the base of the smoking censers, for instance, or as a decorative element in the large fans the servants wave about. The cinematography or 'photography' credit (T4) for Charles J. Van Enger, A. S. C. (American Society of Cinematographers, founded 1919), requires additional commentary because he was charged with lighting the forty-two-year-old Nazimova so she would look like a teenager, although *Salomé* was not the first time the star had played a girl young enough to be her daughter – indeed, Nazimova made dual mother-daughter roles something of a speciality, as in *Toys of Fate* (1918), *Out of the Fog* (1919), and *Madame Peacock* (1920). Van Enger had earlier worked with Nazimova on *A Doll's House* (1922) and would go on to film another Wilde adaptation, Lubitsch's treatment of *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1925). These four titles comprise the opening credits, after which the first narration card appears.



Fig. 3 (00:57:14): Art shot of *Salomé* in a cloud of peacocks (S430).

The four additional credit titles occur immediately before or immediately after the actors portraying key characters appear on screen: first Herod (Mitchell Lewis) and Salome (T12), then Herodias (Rose Dione; T13), then Narraboth (Earl Schenck) and the Page of Herodias (Arthur

Jasmine; T16), and finally Jokanaan, the Prophet (Nigel De Brulier; T28). Before taking the role of Herod, Mitchell Lewis (1880–1956) had appeared in bit parts in close to two dozen films, starting in 1911; he would go on to a middling career as a character actor, mostly in westerns and adventure films, playing small roles in largely forgettable movies, an exception being the part of the captain of the Winkies in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939).²⁰ Nazimova's Herodias, the French-born Rose Dione (1875–1936), appeared in several French films before moving to Hollywood, where among other roles she played Concha's mother in a 1920 adaptation of Pierre Louÿs' *La femme et le pantin*, but her most memorable part has to be that of Madame Tetrallini in Tod Browning's *Freaks* (1932). Earl Schenck (1889–1962) was forced to abandon his career only three years after playing Narraboth because he suffered from what was called 'studio eyes', almost going blind from the harsh klieg lights used at the time.²¹ After a life of adventure in the South Seas, he resumed his Hollywood career briefly in the 1940s. Arthur Jasmine was either twenty-three years old when he played the Page of Herodias or thirteen, depending on whether you believe the actor by that name was born in 1899 (that Arthur Jasmine is supposed to have died in 1954) or 1909, the birth year of Samson De Brier (d. 1995), the principal performer in Kenneth Anger's *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* (1954), who claimed to have acted in Nazimova's *Salomé* using the pseudonym 'Arthur Jasmine'.²² Granted, that name certainly sounds like a pseudonym, but De Brier was known as a poseur fond of fabricating numerous myths about himself, so he may well have made up the story; either that, or he lied about his birth date, because the Page in the play does not look like a thirteen-year-old.²³ No such mysteries attach to Nigel De Brulier (1877–1948), who played Jokanaan. The British actor had earlier performed as Dr. Rank in Nazimova's *A Doll's House* and went on to star in *Ben-Hur* (1925), possibly the best-known sword-and-sandals epic of the silent era. He also played Cardinal Richelieu in at least four films, including both the silent and talkie versions of *The Three Musketeers* (1921, 1935). Several major roles go uncredited, namely Frederick Peters (1884–1963), who plays the executioner Naaman in blackface, and Louis Dumar (1896–1955) as Tigellinus, identified in Wilde's list of 'The Persons in the Play' as 'A Young Roman' – the evident object of

Herodias' affection. Anger's claim that Nazimova 'employed only homosexual actors as "homage" to Wilde'²⁴ has been questioned by her biographer, who quotes one of the extras on the issue: 'some of the cast were gay, and some of the extras as well, but there's nothing surprising or unusual about that'.²⁵ In truth, the sexual orientation of the cast is relatively unimportant: what matters is the way the film explicitly queers Wilde's text. In the play, for example, the homosexual subtext of the Page's anxiety over Narraboth's constantly gazing at Salomé has to be inferred, but in Nazimova's film his attraction to the young Syrian is plain to see.

The eight titles that carry the burden of narrative exposition (including the closing title: 'The End'; T103) are hardly as interesting as the credit cards, but some do require comment. Wilde's stage direction setting the scene at the beginning of the play does just that:

A great terrace in the Palace of Herod, set above the banquet hall. Some soldiers are leaning over the balcony. To the right there is a gigantic staircase, to the left, at the back, an old cistern surrounded by a wall of green bronze. Moonlight. (p. 69)

Nazimova, of course, can let the camera establish the physical scene, so she uses the title cards to set the historical scene as one of extreme decline ('Profound was the moral darkness that enveloped the world' (T5); 'Rome, rotting within' (T6); 'a wilderness of evil' (T10); and so on). At the same time, she announces the prospect of Christian redemption: 'the star of Bethlehem' (T5) has arisen and hope for the darkened world is imminent – 'But a Light was dawning on the horizon and a voice was crying in the Wilderness. "Prepare ye the way of the Lord!"' (T8). That title draws on the bible in the King James translation (all the gospels save Mark use almost identical language to describe the prophecy of John the Baptist) and is one of two literary quotations *not* taken from the text of Wilde's *Salomé*. The other one is taken from Wilde's *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* and modified to describe Salomé's motivation: 'She kills the thing she loves; she loves the thing she kills'.²⁶ This title continues by seeming to echo the 'Light' named in the eighth title: 'yet in her soul there shines the glimmer of the Light and she sets forth gladly into the Unknown to solve the puzzle of her own words' (T10) – and here Nazimova reverts to Wilde's text: 'The Mystery of Love is greater than the Mystery of Death' (T11). Nazimova provides the capital letters Wilde

eschews (see p. 98), evidently to heighten the sense of *symbolisme*, but the quotation is otherwise word-for-word.

For the most part, the dialogue cards present Wilde's text faithfully, with only minor changes to diction and syntax and with necessary and understandable excisions to cut down on the audience's reading time. There seems to be only one title card that is not, strictly speaking, in the text, though it is certainly based on the text. After Herodias kicks Herod for staring at Salomé (S37), Nazimova has Herod say, 'I am not looking at her!' (T21) – a reasonable interpolation that produces one of the few comic moments in the film. As this example shows, Nazimova is quite fond of exclamation points, but this variation, like the others, is still minor.

There is one difference, however, that might be deliberately calculated to modify the meaning of Wilde's play. The opening title cards establish Salomé as the innocent victim of a corrupt environment, 'an uncontaminated blossom in a wilderness of evil'. She is 'still innocent', but 'a true daughter of her day', nonetheless, 'heiress to its passions and its cruelties' (T10). This is the description of the young woman who is shortly to drive Narraboth to kill himself, seduce her step-father with an erotic dance, demand the decapitation of Jokanaan as her reward, and, finally, enjoy a moment of necrophilic bliss by kissing the mouth of the dead man's head. There is some evidence, then, to justify an interpretation of Salomé as not quite the innocent Nazimova makes her out to be. In the play, Jokanaan reminds the audience of the role of woman in the inherent depravity of mankind: 'By woman came evil into the world' (p. 77). That line is omitted in Nazimova's retelling, an omission that can, of course, be explained by the necessity of limiting the film audience's reading time, but Nazimova also consistently changes the epithets Jokanaan uses to describe Salomé in Wilde's text. In the play, the prophet rails at her as the 'Daughter of Babylon' and 'Daughter of Sodom' (pp. 77, 78). Nazimova does allow the first epithet but never the second; the first she sometimes and the second she always replaces with 'Daughter of Herodias', a neutral epithet. It is possible that the avoidance of the word 'Sodom' resulted out of fear of censorship, which was a concern for filmmakers even before the more severe strictures established in 1932

but not really enforced until 1934, when the production code went into full effect, requiring that all films be certified as decent family entertainment by a board of review.²⁷ But whatever the reason for the change, it has the effect of making *Salomé* seem less an agent of evil and more a victim of it, consistent with her characterization in the opening title cards.

Shots: Adapting and Visualizing Wilde

632 separate cinematic shots comprise the film, counting the 103 title cards (which must be counted as cinematic shots because they were, in fact, filmed); the film runs to just over 72 minutes in the restored version (01:12:15), for an average shot length (ASL) of around 6.86 seconds. That ASL is fairly typical of Hollywood films of the 1920s, the industry average being 4–6 seconds per shot.²⁸ Still, the *Salomé* ASL is almost seven seconds, so it would likely have impressed contemporary audiences as a bit more slow-moving than most Hollywood films. Indeed, *Photoplay* said ‘the action of the film adaptation has all the speed of a “slow motion” reel’.²⁹ In addition to the ASL, another aspect of the film that slows the pacing is the camera position. For most shots, the camera is positioned at a 90° angle to the action and most of the movement within the frame is either screen left or screen right; likewise, in close-ups the actors look either left or right. There are no reverse angle shots in the classic shot-counter-shot sense of the term, that is, shots showing a character looking directly into the camera followed by a shot of another character also looking directly into the camera, which creates the illusion that the characters are looking at each other (there are some shots of one character in profile looking off screen, followed by a medium close-up of another character looking directly at the camera). This type of camera work imparts a frieze-like quality to the *mise en scène* that may well have been a deliberate directorial decision to imitate the static quality of Wilde’s play, which achieves the effect mainly through verbal repetition – that, and the sense that the characters are mostly making rhetorical declamations, not engaging in dramatic dialogue with each other to advance the plot. The camera itself is static throughout (no tilts, pans, cranes, tracking or dolly shots), which is standard for the period. *Salomé* was shot in

January and February 1922,³⁰ and it would not be until 1924 that Hollywood directors, most likely after coming under the influence of F. W. Murnau and other German directors, began to experiment with camera movement.³¹

Generally speaking, the higher the ASL, the more the director wants the audience to take in the details of the scene as a way of producing visual meaning. All films combine montage and mise en scène (aside from a handful of single-take exceptions, such as Alexander Sokurov's *Russian Ark* (2002)), and there is no doubt that the mise en scène of *Salomé* conveys important visual information – especially by means of the costumes. For the most part, however, visual meaning is produced by the cuts from one shot to the next, so the viewer is put in the position of responding to the relationship between shots. Obviously, there are some shots that allow the audience time to notice how actors and objects have been placed in the scene, a good example being the way the executioner looms in the background on the terrace parapet while the foreground action concerns Salomé and Narraboth. A more interesting example is the positioning of the Page after the death of Narraboth when Herod's court assembles outside the banquet hall on a kind of proscenium bordering the terrace proper [fig. 4: S295]. Because he is her servant, the Page sits on Herodias' side of the assembly, but he is also positioned only a few feet from the three 'ladies' of the court who are really men in drag. This group is balanced against the group of four 'Jews, Nazarenes, etc.' (p. 67), seated on the opposite side of the proscenium. The mise en scène here effectively suggests an alliance of homosexual figures on one side of the assembly who counter the representatives of conventional, religious morality on the other. These examples notwithstanding, one might say that the mise en scène is largely secondary to montage, not least because there is not that much scene to notice. There is really only one set in the entire film, which is pretty much as Wilde describes it in his stage directions, except that the 'great terrace' and the 'banqueting hall' are on the same level, connected by a broad hallway of sorts.



Fig. 4 (00:39:11): Long shot of court, Page grouped with three drag queens opposite Jews, Nazarenes. etc. (S295).

The generally accomplished level of montage and the unquestionable excellence of the cinematography, however, point to the basic problem that lies behind the perception of the film at the time of its release as just plain weird. Montage and cinematography work naturalistically, but the mise en scène does not. The shots are cut in conformity with the basic principles of continuity editing that audiences had come to accept as realistic, but the action that the shots show is often unrealistic in the extreme, justifying the contemporary sense of the film as ‘bizarre stuff’.³² (The troupe of dwarf musicians [fig. 5: S338] is a good example of just how strange the mise en scène can be). Continuity editing is sometimes called ‘invisible’ editing because it is supposed to be so unobtrusive that it does not interfere with the filmic narrative. But if the montage of *Salomé* is mostly invisible, the mise en scène is, by contrast, all too visible.

At the very beginning of the film, two extreme long shots, the first of the terrace (S1), the second of the banquet hall (S3) establish these two spaces, with a blue-tinted art shot of the moon amid clouds (S2) intervening. Herod and Salome are introduced in a medium shot (S5), then Herodias by herself, also in a medium shot (S6). The first close-up in the film, reasonably enough,

is of Salome (S14), turning screen right toward Herod; this shot is followed by a medium shot of the royal couple, with Herodias turning screen right away from Herod (S15). Here is an easy example of the way Nazimova's montage tells the story: Salomé's interest in Herod, however disdainful, prompts aversion from her mother – she turns away from Herod as her daughter turns toward him. This use of montage is fairly sophisticated, but we tend not to notice the sophistication because the production of meaning through framing and editing, as here, tends to be overshadowed by the hammy, pantomime acting style. Such acting is represented in *Salomé* by just about every performer, with the exception of Nazimova, whose acting is often understated, perhaps because, as the director of the film, she had a better idea than the other actors of just how effective the camera can be in conveying meaning and emotion.



Fig. 5 (00:44:50): Long shot of dwarf musicians (S338).

A good example of the contrast between overstated acting and Nazimova's combination of more subtle performance techniques complemented by montage is the sequence after the servant commits suicide by leaping from the parapet of Herod's court to avoid carrying out Salomé's request that Jokanaan be brought to her (S124; the servant's suicide is an addition to the

scenario not in Wilde's text). The following shots show Salomé at the cistern cage speaking to the guards (S125), then moving across the terrace screen right to stop at the edge of the frame (S126), where she looks toward the banqueting hall (S127). She sees Herod in a medium shot pulling feathers from her fan; he looks up in her direction (S128). A full shot shows Salomé expressing frustration, then looking back at the cistern out of frame, with the executioner in the background (S129). A full shot of the cistern cage flanked by guards (S130) is followed by an extreme close-up of the lock on the cage gate (S131). Next, we see Salomé in medium close-up, looking screen left toward Narraboth and the Page [fig. 6: S132], followed by a medium shot of Narraboth, who reacts to Salomé's glance before the Page does [fig. 7: S133]. The next shot keeps Salomé in medium close-up looking screen left and shows her shifting her gaze slightly downward [figs 8 & 9: S134]; an extreme close-up of the massive key in Narraboth's belt follows [fig. 10: S135]. The camera holds on the next medium close-up of Salomé long enough to show, through the movement of her eyes and her facial expressions, that she is going through some mental process that concludes decisively with an idea [fig. 11: S136]. A medium shot of Narraboth and the Page (S137) is followed by another close-up of Salomé (S138). Next, an extreme long shot of Salomé, with Narraboth and the Page also in the frame (executioner in background), shows her turning to face them (S139). The following shot is remarkable for being the only extreme close-up of an actor's face in the film (there are several extreme close-ups of objects) – a mask shot showing only Salomé's eyes [fig. 12: S140]. A medium shot follows, showing Narraboth and the Page reacting to Salomé's intense gaze, with the Page beginning to back fearfully out of the frame [figs 13 & 14: S141]; an extreme long shot shows the Page still backing away as Salomé stares down Narraboth and then begins her approach [fig. 15: S142], which continues with another long shot (S143). A medium shot of Narraboth with Salomé speaking (S144) is followed by a dialogue card, as Salomé begins her seduction: "Thou wilt do this thing for me, Narraboth, wilt thou not? And tomorrow when I pass in my litter, I will let fall for thee a little green flower" (T36).



Fig. 6 (00:18:02): Medium close-up of Salomé looking at Narraboth (S132).

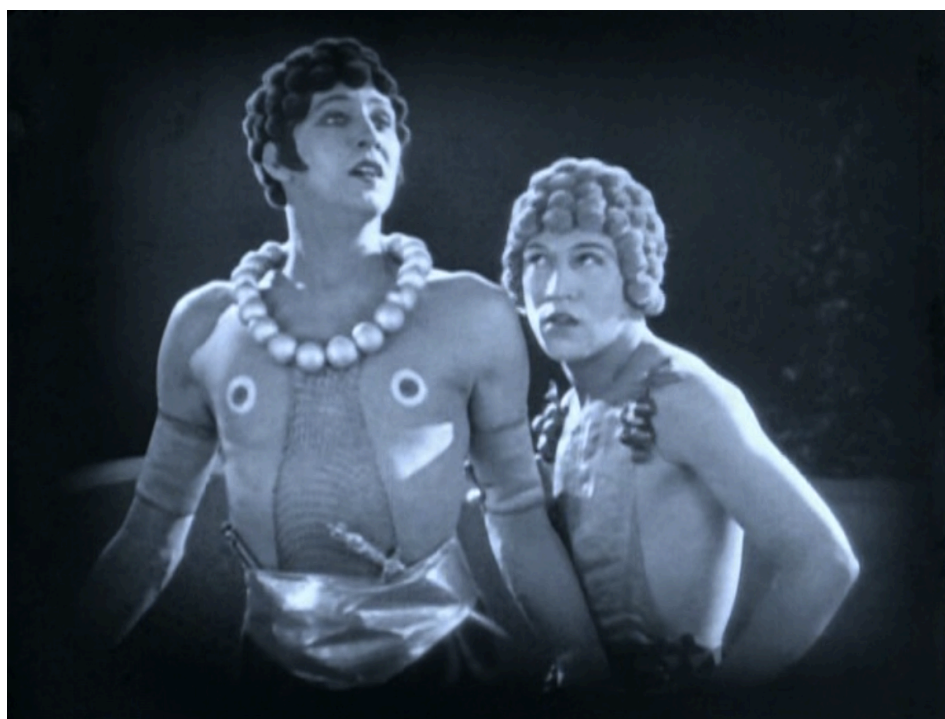


Fig. 7 (00:18:04): Medium shot of Narraboth reacting to Salomé's gaze, with the Page reacting to his reaction (S133).



Fig. 8 (00:18:07): Medium close-up of Salomé continuing to gaze at Narraboth (S134a).



Fig. 9 (00:18:11): Medium close-up of Salomé shifting her gaze slightly (S134b).



Fig. 10 (00:18:13): Extreme close-up iris shot of cistern lock key in Narraboth's belt (S135), the focus of Salomé's gaze (S134b).



Fig. 11 (00:18:19): Medium close-up of Salomé getting an idea (S136).



Fig. 12 (00:18:42): Extreme close-up mask shot of Salomé's eyes as she stares intently at Narraboth (S140).

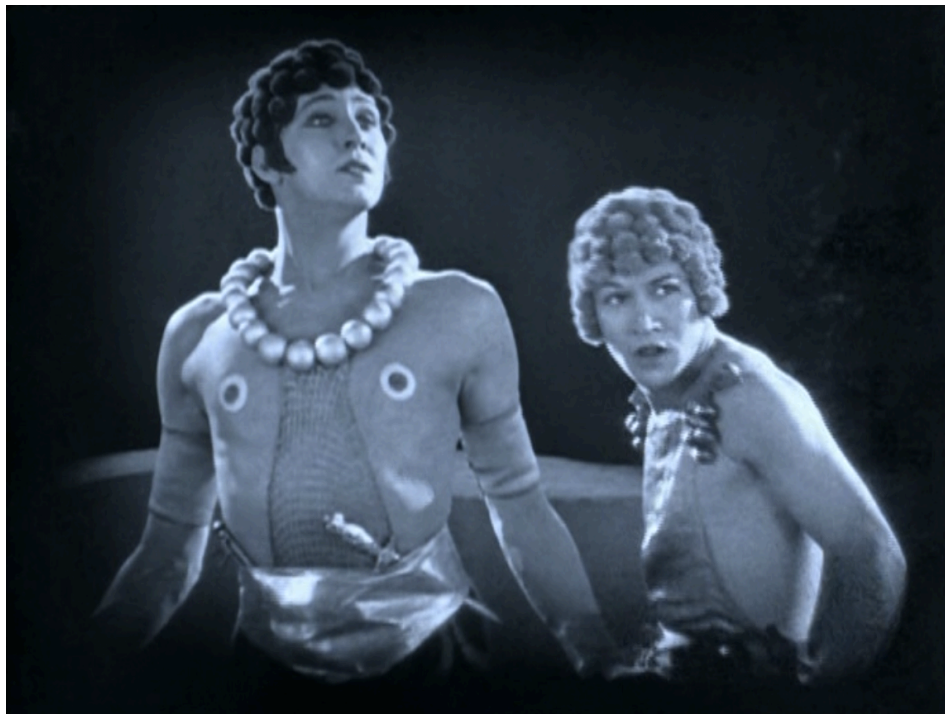


Fig. 13 (00:18:52): Medium shot of Narraboth and the Page, with the Page reacting to Salomé's stare by backing away (S141a).



Fig. 14 (00:18:52): Medium shot of Narraboth and the Page, with the Page continuing to back away (S141b).



Fig. 15 (00:18:53): Extreme long shot of Salomé staring at Narraboth, with the Page continuing to back away, Naaman the executioner in background (S142).

Today, it is hard to appreciate the effectiveness of this sequence because we are so familiar now with the language of cinema. Indeed, most viewers are more likely to notice those elements that do not harmonize with the idea of film that we have internalized as a result of developments that really began in the silent era. What we notice today are things like the staginess of the mise en scène and the exaggerated acting style, in this sequence, of the motionless Schenck especially, with his arched back and wide-eyed expression of alarm. Nazimova, by contrast, conveys a world of emotional material visually by means of a single arched eyebrow. But what we may not fully appreciate is how completely Nazimova has mastered the devices of continuity editing. The eyeline matches, especially in the sequence where Salomé shifts her gaze from Narraboth's face to the key in his belt, seem quite precise, enabling the audience to make inferences about what the character is thinking. The cut from the medium shot of the Page beginning to back out of the frame to the long shot of him continuing to move backward is so exact that one wonders if Nazimova filmed the sequence with two different cameras simultaneously, then cut the film to match the movement. She either did that or had Van Enger move his camera to shoot the same action twice (the difference in shot scale might also have been achieved through a lens change, but, either way, the action would have had to have been photographed twice and the film cut for continuity). Another impressive bit of filmmaking is the extreme close-up mask shot of Salomé's eyes, which includes a slight movement forward within the mask, suggesting the seductress's approach to Narraboth, a small detail that has the effect of a slight zoom shot.³³

Van Enger, of course, deserves a lot of credit for the sophistication of these shots, but Nazimova *was* the director and her contribution to the art of the film has to be acknowledged. Van Enger would go on to perfect his craft in the work he did with Ernst Lubitsch on the five films Lubitsch made for Warner Brothers, where the classic technique of continuity editing achieves a very high level of sophistication. One might even consider *Salomé* as a kind of workshop or laboratory where Van Enger, under Nazimova's direction, tried to work out certain cinematic problems – not always successfully. For example, after Narraboth submits to Salomé's demands

and tosses the key to the cistern lock on the terrace (S151), Salomé looks directly down (S155), as if the key, immediately shown in extreme close-up (S156), were at her feet. But a few shots later we see that the key is in fact some distance away (S157–S158). Salomé's eyeline is wildly off in shot 155, an error that would never find its way into one of Lubitsch's Warner films, perhaps because Van Enger had learned better through his work on *Salomé*.

The sequence from the suicide of the servant involving Salomé's shifting gaze from the cistern lock to the key in Narraboth's belt and the ensuing action up to the dialogue card involves multiple shots (long, full, medium, medium close-up, extreme close-up), all in the service of both physical action and psychological realization. Despite the stylized set, the strange costumes, and the overwrought acting, the action is at base naturalistic: however strange the reality, we remain grounded in it. As such, the sequence and others like it form a contrast to another sequence later in the film where we are removed from reality altogether, as we enter the mind of Salomé and see her fantasies enacted for us on the screen. After Salomé performs her dance and demands the head of the prophet, Herod proceeds to make a series of counter-offers in an effort to get her to change her mind because he believes Jokanaan, as a holy man, has mysterious powers and fears his death might bring harm to him and his kingdom. He first offers Salomé half his kingdom, then the largest emerald in the world; but she continues to demand the head of Jokanaan, whereupon Herod says, 'Salomé, thou knowest my white peacocks! In the midst of them thou wilt be like unto the moon in the midst of a great white cloud –' (T89). We then see an elaborate art shot of the painted figure of Salomé in a cloud of painted peacocks [fig. 3: S430], followed by a medium close-up of Salomé in profile wearing a fantastic headdress made of peacock feathers (S431), then the same art shot as before (S432). The following medium close-up of Salomé gazing into space (S433) tells us that what we have just seen is a fantasy of herself as she would be if she were to accept Herod's offer, but she comes to her senses and repeats her demand: 'GIVE ME THE HEAD OF JOKANAAN' (T90). Herod reacts, recovers, smiles, and speaks (S434–S436): 'I have jewels hidden in this palace that thy mother even has not seen. Thou shalt be as fair as a queen when

thou wearest them –’ (T91). A medium shot of Herod and Salomé (S437) dissolves into an extreme long shot of Salomé atop a mountain of jewels, her arms draped in beads, her head adorned with a tall feathered headdress [fig. 16: S438]. This shot is followed by a medium long shot of Salomé gleefully flapping her arms about [fig. 17: S439], then another extreme long shot of the princess atop the mountain of jewels (S440). A medium close-up shows Salomé moving her head from side to side (as if considering the merits of the offer in fantasy form) (S441), until a full shot of Jokanaan in the cistern intervenes (S442). With arms upraised, he declaims: ‘It is thus that I will wipe out all wickedness from the earth and that all women shall learn not to imitate her abominations!’ (T92) Another medium shot of Salomé and Herod has her turning to the tetrarch and saying, decisively (S443): ‘GIVE ME THE HEAD OF JOKANAAN!’ (T93).



Fig. 16 (00:58:27): Salomé atop the mountain of jewels – before an audience (S438).



Fig. 17 (00:58:29): Salomé as flapper atop the mountain of jewels (S439).

As everyone knows, the Salomé narrative has acquired almost archetypal status as the pre-eminent example of cultural misogyny in the decadent canon. The sequence described above, however, shows Nazimova rewriting that narrative, cinematically, in feminist terms. The first fantasy shows us a Salomé almost literally objectified and, despite the aesthetic appeal of the image, debased and dehumanized: amid the cloud of peacocks in her peacock headdress, she is herself not so different from the fantastic fowl – a static object to be admired for her beauty. In the second fantasy, Salomé imagines herself as she would be if she were to accept the man's offer of material riches: she would be an empty-headed party-girl, a jazz-baby without a care in the world. The anachronistic interpretation here is justified because Nazimova herself relied more on contemporary social imagery than traditional biblical imagery in her conception of the character. In one interview about the film, she told a newspaper reporter that while Salomé 'was usually played as a vamp', she 'did not believe she was like that':

According to history, she was a child of 12. I tried to play her as a sophisticated kid. Then came the post-war rage for sophisticated girls with slender, boyish figures and frank, outspoken manners. She was a far cry from the snaky vampire and the baby doll of Mary Pickford.³⁴

This image of the flapper as a liberated woman is one that Nazimova herself adopted to some degree (on the set of the lost film *Billions* the back of the star's camp chair read 'JAZZIMOVA').³⁵ It goes almost without saying that both of the fantasies that Salomé briefly entertains and then rejects are really male fantasies that objectify women, the first aesthetically, the second materialistically, both with the aim of depriving them of social and sexual agency. When Jokanaan utters what will be the last of the litany of insults he directs against Salomé, her demand for the prophet's head seems less like the spiteful act of a scorned woman and more like feminist vengeance against patriarchal society – and not only against the obvious misogyny voiced by Jokanaan but also against the culturally and socially sublimated versions represented by the two fantasies.

The change in Salomé that ensues as the result of the fantasy sequence is evident in her final costume change, an example of just how important the *mise en scène* can sometimes be to the arc of the story. In fact, it is easy to segment the film on the basis of Salomé's costume changes. There are three of them (not counting the two in the fantasy sequence): the short tunic and bubble wig with the luminescent balls that Salomé wears up until the dance sequence; the micro-skirt and platinum wig she wears in the dance sequence itself; and, finally, the cape with the long train (based on Beardsley's peacock skirt illustration) and the tight turban she wears after the dance. Viewers might well disagree on how convincing a teenager the forty-two-year-old Nazimova makes in the pre-dance and dance segments, but the last segment gives us a Salomé who has left her girlhood behind and become a woman. In the first segment, the short tunic allows Nazimova to show off her slender legs and gamine figure, appearing somewhat androgynous, more boyish perhaps than girlish (consistent with Nazimova's conception of the character as a modern-day flapper). In the second segment, the platinum wig makes Salomé appear more feminine, at least, and Nazimova's breasts are not so tightly bound as in the first segment, but the stylish flapper persona persists – not least because the dance seems more artful than sexual [fig. 18: S352]. The dance of the seven

veils is usually taken to mean that the veils are teasingly removed to gradually reveal more and more of the female body (at one point, Salomé does toss a few bundled veils into the air), but by the end of the dance she is actually more fully veiled than at the beginning [fig. 19: S394].



Fig. 18 (00:46:44): Salomé with her four attendants beginning her dance (S354).



Fig. 19 (00:50:49): Salomé literally winding up her dance (S394).



Fig. 20 (00:49:38): Tigellinus smirking in appreciation as Salomé's dance nears the end (S383).

The whole performance is hard to square with the smirking expressions of various soldiers and courtiers [fig. 20: S383], not to mention the obscenely panting response of Herod (evidently, the tetrarch really gets off on art).

After the dance, Salomé's attendants cluster around her in their square costumes, screening her from view as she changes into the cape with the long train (S469). Salome at this point seems to have undergone more than a mere costume change: she now appears simultaneously imperious and mysterious, especially when she takes the scimitar from Herod's guard (S497) and, with the weapon upraised, walks slowly toward the cistern (S500). This after the executioner has failed to perform his task, dropping his sword and falling to his knees before Jokanaan inside the cistern (S481), and after the soldiers turn aside in horror when Salomé exclaims, 'He is a coward, this slave! Let soldiers be sent!' (T95). After an animated art shot shows the moon, now tinted red, being covered by clouds (S501), we see Salomé, scimitar aloft, in an extreme long shot as the spectral salver floats upward [fig. 1: S502]. A full shot of Salomé dropping the scimitar and walking screen left out of frame (S503) is followed by an extreme long shot of the court, with some

members of Herod's entourage dispersing fearfully in the direction of the banqueting hall (S504). Salomé now appears in a long shot before the cistern holding the salver (in fact, one of the soldier's shields), the decapitated head of Jokanaan evidently on it but not fully visible (S505). A series of close-ups of Salomé speaking (S506, S507, S508) are interspersed with Wilde's text: 'Thou wouldst have none of me, Jokanaan. Thou rejectedst me. Me, Salomé, Princess of Judea!' (T98) and 'Thou wert the man that I loved alone among men. All other men were hateful to me. I saw thee, and I loved thee. Jokanaan – I love thee yet. I love only thee –' (T99). Two long shots show Salomé dropping to her knees, placing the salver before her, covering it with her long cape, then disappearing beneath it (S511, S513). When she emerges from the cloak, still seated, she says, 'I have kissed thy mouth, Jokanaan – Love hath a bitter taste – But what matter? – What matter? –' (T100). As Salomé rises (S518), Herod clenches his fist and shouts (S519), 'KILL THAT WOMAN!' (T101). Whereas Wilde has the soldiers crush Salomé beneath their shields (p. 99), Nazimova makes them circle about the princess and plunge their spears into her body (S525, S527), but not before an expression of satisfaction crosses her face (S523), as she speaks her final words: 'THE MYSTERY OF LOVE IS GREATER THAN THE MYSTERY OF DEATH!' (T102).

Conclusion: Social Feminism, Aesthetic Feminism

The final segment of the film is remarkable for several reasons, not least because it implies that it is Salomé herself – not the executioner – who has cut off the head of Jokanaan.³⁶ In the play, once the executioner descends into the cistern, Salomé listens, expecting Jokanaan to cry out, but hears nothing, and the silence leads her to believe, as she says, that the executioner 'is a coward' (p. 96). But soon enough a '*huge black arm, the arm of the EXECUTIONER, comes forth from the cistern, bearing on a silver shield the head of JOKANAAN*' (p. 97). We see nothing of the sort in Nazimova's film; instead, we see the executioner behaving like a coward in fact, which action – or inaction – leads Salomé to take the scimitar from Herod's guard. Obviously, Salomé does nothing like this in the play, but, in the film, it is not clear what, exactly, she does next: yes, the salver floats toward her

[fig. 1: S502] as she holds the scimitar aloft [fig. 21: S503]; yes, she holds the shield-salver with the head on it [fig. 22: S505], but we never see how the head winds up on the salver – in fact, we never really see the head at all [fig. 23: S506]. In the performance history of the play, dealing with a naturalistic prop head in a symbolist play has always been an aesthetic problem,³⁷ and Nazimova appears to have dealt with the problem by sustaining the *symbolisme* all the way to the end. But there is more to Nazimova's revision of Wilde's play than the cinematic solution to an awkward aesthetic problem. By implying, through cinematic sleight of hand, that Salomé herself has carried out the execution everyone else is too fearful to perform, Nazimova reinterprets Salomé as a woman possessing real, or – one might say – deadly agency. This is a Salomé that makes sense of Herod's command – 'Kill that woman!' – because she has indeed become a woman over the course of the play. Moreover, the punishment she receives, notably different from that in the play (where the soldiers crush her with their shields), also makes sense in the context of patriarchal outrage: death by penetration.



Fig. 21 (01:06:26): Salomé in 'peacock' cape, holding scimitar aloft (S503).



Fig. 22 (01:07:19): Salomé holding the shield with Jokanaan's head on it, the crown of the head barely visible (S505).



Fig. 23 (01:07:39): Salomé sees what we do not – the head of Jokanaan (S506).

Nazimova's cinematic interpretation of *Salomé*, in short, draws on the same feminist sensibility that led her to play Hedda Gabler and Nora Helmer. Indeed, Nazimova's first impulse was to pair the two heroines *Salomé* and *Nora* in a single film, as *Photoplay* reported in February 1922:

Nazimova had an idea. She was going to make repertoire pictures. That means she would make 'Salome' and 'A Doll's House' in a few reels each and release them as one program offering. Then she went back to California and began work and changed her mind. She says 'Salome' has proved so interesting that she is going to make a full-length feature of it.³⁸

Obviously, *A Doll's House* also proved equally interesting, because that staple of the Nazimova repertoire received full-length cinematic treatment prior to *Salomé*. But just as obviously, the two heroines do not exactly belong to the same social context. The Ibsen heroine who gradually comes to resent her husband's control over her and, at the end of the play, slams the door on the patriarchal power he embodies, thereby asserting her own independence and agency, is clearly easier to reconcile with fin-de-siècle feminism than is Wilde's character. In Nazimova's handling, however, it might be possible to think of the two figures – and *Salomé* – as representative of two different kinds of feminism, the first social, the second aesthetic.

'Aesthetic feminism' in this instance refers less to social self-determination than professional self-determination, the assertion of artistic agency and creative freedom in an industry that was, as we have seen, not only dominated by men but also intent on driving women out of it. Nazimova's reinterpretation of Wilde's play may not be an artistic allegory of the female director's position vis-à-vis her male counterparts in full, but Nazimova does have something in common with her heroine: after all, like *Salomé*, she did the cutting (and the casting, and the titling, and the directing). Clearly, Nazimova wanted to be more than a 'movie star', and we can perhaps see what that cultural stereotype meant for her in the first shot of *Salomé* atop the mountain of jewels [fig. 16: S438]. In the fantasy, *Salomé* is clearly performing before some kind of audience, but, in the end, she rejects the offer that might have made her into a bejewelled celebrity everyone wants to see. Here we might also hazard the observation that Herod is seated in what for all the world looks

like a director's chair. At the end, right before the soldiers plunge their spears, a look of beatific satisfaction crosses Salomé's face [fig. 24: S524], and one can only wonder whether Nazimova felt a similar sense of satisfaction herself, having achieved – for the moment, at least – not only stardom but also the kind of complete artistic control 'normally' reserved for men.

There is no question that *Salomé* ruined Nazimova financially and professionally, but the film's failure at the box office might well have resulted more from the smear campaign against the artist than critical rejection of the film itself. Curiously, the reports on *Salomé* in *Photoplay*, a fan magazine, are mostly negative and dismissive, in contrast to the generally favourable accounts of the film's reception in *The Moving Picture World*, a trade magazine. The anonymous reviewer in *Photoplay* did not think the film measured up to the Oscar Wilde original, 'a thing of acute aesthetic appeal – a hothouse orchid of decadent passion', saying, 'We are not sure whether we like Madame Nazimova's idea of Salome as a petulant little princess with a Freudian complex and a headdress of glass bubbles', warning potential viewers: 'this is bizarre stuff'³⁹ – hardly the sort of notice likely to encourage fans to see the film. Another brief notice in the same issue was more direct: 'stay away from this'.⁴⁰ *The Motion Picture World*, however, ran a piece with the headline 'Nazimova Production Appeals to Critics' and summarized reviews in the New York newspapers. The New York *Times* critic called the film 'a visually satisfying spectacle', advising viewers 'do not miss "Salome" whatever you do'. The critic for the *Daily News* 'liked it enormously', while the *Evening Journal* commented, 'Every foot of the production is a gem of composition, of rhythm, of gorgeous lighting'.⁴¹ These reviews, evidently based on a private screening for critics, were followed a couple of weeks later by a highly detailed report of the box-office gross, including receipts for standing room only at the Criterion Theatre in New York, under the headline, '"Salome" Makes Remarkable Showing'.⁴² The trade magazine, in other words, is telling theatre owners that they should book *Salomé*, while the fan magazine is telling viewers to avoid the film.



Fig. 24 (01:11:50): The final close-up showing Salomé beatific: the mystery of cinema is greater than the mystery of death (S524).

The powerful *Photoplay* obviously won out, but the real story likely lies behind the scenes, as yet another brief notice prior to the film's release suggests:

'Salome' will be released through United Artists. There has been some discussion about Nazimova's newest picture. Strangely enough, the censors passed it with scarcely a protest. But Hiram Abrams, president of United Artists, evidently seemed to think that it was not as good as the censors seemed to think; because he is reported to have objected strongly to releasing it. Mary [Pickford] and Doug [Fairbanks] saw the picture and declared themselves for it in every way. And so – 'Salome' will be released through United Artists.⁴³

We cannot know, of course, why Abrams, the powerful managing director of United Artists, objected so strongly to Nazimova's film, agreeing to release it only after the two stars intervened. He may have done so purely for business reasons, and, if so, he might well have been right – despite the film's initial critical and commercial success in New York City. What we do know is that powerful men in the motion picture industry had already singled out Nazimova as someone who should not be allowed to encroach on the exclusively 'male' professions of producer and director. Abrams's decision to reissue the obscenely successful *The Birth of a Nation* on the same day that *Salomé* had its official première almost certainly helped doom Nazimova's film to failure.

Given the choice between a sure thing like Griffith's racist epic and Nazimova's 'bizarre' art film, what theatre owner intent on making a profit would opt for the latter? It may not have been Abrams who ended Nazimova's career in fact, but it was someone like him, or, more likely, several men like him – powerful executives who wanted to exclude women like Nazimova from the industry they controlled. Nazimova alone took the role of Salomé, but in this tragedy the part of Herod must have been acted by more than one man.

¹ Petra Dierkes-Thrun, *Salome's Modernity: Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetics of Transgression* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), p. 141.

² For the early history of United Artists, see Tino Balio, *United Artists: The Company Built by the Stars* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976).

³ Balio, *United Artists*, p. 246. Evidently, because of the distributor's release date, *Salomé* is often dated 1923, but it was screened on multiple occasions in 1922. See, for example, a notice in *Photoplay* from August 1922: 'Salomé – Alla Nazimova Production', *Photoplay*, 22.3 (August 1922), 61.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Susan Sontag, 'Notes on Camp', in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Picador, 1966), p. 279. For Sontag, art nouveau is camp because it means 'to convert one thing into something else', as happens with the cast-iron orchid stalks of vintage Paris Métro entrances, for example.

⁶ Patricia White, 'Nazimova's Veils: *Salomé* at the Intersection of Film Histories', in *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema*, ed. by Jennifer M. Bean and Diane Negra (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2002), pp. 67–68, makes the excellent point that *Salomé* acquired much of its reputation as a camp classic because of a 1967 screening in New York City, after Sontag's 'Notes on Camp', first published in the *Partisan Review* in 1964, was republished in 1966 in *Against Interpretation*. White also notes that the cultural context of the late 1960s helps to account for 'the film's gay reputation' (p. 68).

⁷ David Weir, *Decadent Culture in the United States: Art and Literature against the American Grain, 1890–1926* (Amherst, MA: Massachusetts University Press, 2008), pp. 152–53.

⁸ Jay Satterfield, *'The World's Best Books': Taste, Culture, and the Modern Library* (Amherst, MA: Massachusetts University Press, 2002), p. 21.

⁹ The impetus to high art on the part of Nazimova is also confirmed by reports that Salomé's dance segment was accompanied by music from Richard Strauss's opera in some theatres, played on a Wurlitzer organ. See William Tydeman and Stephen Price, *Wilde: Salomé* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 160.

¹⁰ Gavin Lambert, *Nazimova: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1997), p. 245.

¹¹ 'An Open Letter to Mme. Nazimova', *Photoplay*, 20.3 (August 1921), 31, 94.

¹² Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest and Other Plays*, ed. by Richard Allen Cave (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 81. Further references to this edition of *Salomé* are cited parenthetically in the text.

¹³ Jack Spears, 'Nazimova', in *The Civil War on the Screen and Other Essays* (South Brunswick and New York: A. S. Barnes, 1977), p. 136.

¹⁴ Karen Ward Mahar, *Women Filmmakers in Early Hollywood* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), p. 175.

¹⁵ This inflation-adjusted figure is based on the guaranteed weekly salary of \$13,000 in the contract Nazimova signed with Metro Pictures Corporation in 1918, using this online tool: *US Inflation Calculator*, Coinnews Media Group, LLC (2008–2019); <https://www.usinflationcalculator.com>. Accessed 13 December 2019. Because the US economy had begun to weaken even before the 1929 stock market crash, when *Salomé* had its official release in 1923 Nazimova's \$13,000 weekly salary would have had a lower value in today's dollars – roughly \$195,000 – than it had in 1918.

¹⁶ In a 1922 interview Nazimova said that 'my friends [...] call me Peter. And sometimes Mimi'. See Gladys Hall and Adele Whitely Fletcher, 'We Interview Camille', *Motion Picture Magazine*, 22.12 (January 1922), 24–25, 98–99 (p. 25).

¹⁷ White, 'Nazimova's Veils', p. 65. Spears, 'Nazimova', p. 146, quotes Van Enger as saying that the direction was collaborative: 'Nazimova and Bryant together with myself would talk over each scene.' But Spears also quotes others on the set who said, 'Alla did the actual directing, and was most insistent on her own ideas', with Bryant doing little 'beyond calling, "Lights! Camera! Action!" and "Cut!"'

- ¹⁸ White, 'Nazimova's Veils', p. 65; Lambert, *Nazimova*, p. 249.
- ¹⁹ 'Close-Ups', *Photoplay*, 11.1 (December 1916), 63–64 (p. 64). Quoted in Mahar, *Women Filmmakers*, pp. 158–59.
- ²⁰ Jay Scarfone and William Stillmann, *The Road to Oz: The Evolution, Creation, and Legacy of a Motion Picture Masterpiece* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), p. 115.
- ²¹ Earl Schenck, *Come unto these Yellow Sands* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1940), pp. 20, 15.
- ²² William Moritz, 'Visual Music and Film-as-an-Art before 1950', in *On the Edge of America: California Modernist Art: 1900–1950*, ed. by Paul J. Karlstrom (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), p. 214.
- ²³ Lambert, *Nazimova*, p. 257, muddies the mystery further when he says that De Brier 'was taken by friends of one of the gay extras to visit the set', who got him to dress as one of 'the ladies at Herod's court' and, later, after the actor 'playing the Syrian captain was found drunk in his dressing room', de Brier is supposed to have changed costume and stood in for the drunk actor in the background 'of a couple of shots'. There is no mention here of Arthur Jasmine.
- ²⁴ Kenneth Anger, *Hollywood Babylon* (New York: Dell, 1975), p. 163.
- ²⁵ Lambert, *Nazimova*, p. 257.
- ²⁶ See Oscar Wilde, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, in *Complete Works* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), p. 844.
- ²⁷ For a history of the Production Code, see Thomas Doherty, *Hollywood's Censor: Joseph I. Breen and the Production Code Administration* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).
- ²⁸ David Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), p. 121.
- ²⁹ 'Salome – Alla Nazimova Production', 61.
- ³⁰ Lambert, *Nazimova*, p. 256.
- ³¹ Patrick Keating, *The Dynamic Frame: Camera Movement in Classical Hollywood* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), pp. 6, 292 n.3.
- ³² 'Salome – Alla Nazimova Production', 61.
- ³³ Varifocal or zoom lenses were not in widespread use in filmmaking until the middle of the twentieth century, their invention being credited to Pierre Angenieux, although the heirs of the cinematographer Joseph P. Walker (who worked on films in the early 1930s) challenged the honour bestowed on Angenieux by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences on Walker's behalf. See Paul Monaco, *History of the American Cinema: The Sixties: 1960–1969* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 70, 285 n.12.
- ³⁴ Lee Frank, "'Mentally Up to Date?': Modern Ideas are Just as Important as Stylish Costumes, Nazimova Finds", Newspaper clipping, Nazimova Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, DC. Quoted in Dierkes-Thrun, *Salome's Modernity*, pp. 147–48.
- ³⁵ Lambert, *Nazimova*, p. 237.
- ³⁶ Dierkes-Thrun, *Salome's Modernity*, p. 149, comments that after Salomé 'grabs a sword from one of Herod's guards', she 'triumphantly wields it over her head as if she was threatening to single-handedly kill Jokanaan herself'. This is as close as any critic comes to recognizing what seems to be the case: that Salomé *does* kill Jokanaan, but the execution is represented symbolically, not naturalistically, though cinematic devices – the tint change of the moon from blue to red as Salomé wields the scimitar and through another tint change to the *mise en scène*. After the clouds cover the blood moon, the terrace is coloured mauve. When Salomé raises the scimitar the colour snaps back to black and white (S502) as the brightly lit salver floats upward, whereupon Salomé wearily lowers the scimitar and lets it slip from her hand, then walks screen left with her arms outstretched to receive the salver (S503).
- ³⁷ See Ellen Crowell, 'The Ugly Things of *Salomé*', in *Decadence in the Age of Modernism*, ed. by Kate Hext and Alex Murray (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), pp. 47–70.
- ³⁸ Cal York, 'Plays and Players', *Photoplay*, 21.3 (February 1922), 82, 85–90 (p. 86).
- ³⁹ 'Salome – Alla Nazimova Production', 61.
- ⁴⁰ 'The Shadow Stage: A Review of the New Pictures', *Photoplay*, 22.3 (August 1922), 60–65, 100–02 (p. 61).
- ⁴¹ 'Nazimova Production Appeals to Critics', *The Moving Picture World* (27 January 1923), 382.
- ⁴² 'Salome Makes Remarkable Showing', *The Moving Picture World* (17 February 1923), 703.
- ⁴³ 'Plays and Players', *Photoplay*, 23.2 (January 1923), 70–73, 80, 82, 84 (p. 95).

Appendix I: *Salomé* Shot List

This shot list is based on the restored version of the film (see Photo Credits). The 103 title cards are numbered separately with the abbreviation T for the sake of discussion in the essay to which this list is appended, but strictly speaking, the titles are cinematic shots. The titles combined with ‘regular’ cinematic shots come to a total of 632 shots.

For the 529 ‘regular’ cinematic shots, shot scale is given in more or less standard language based on the size of the human figure or a part thereof within the frame. An extreme close-up (ECU) frames a part of the body, like the eyes or a hand (although extreme close-ups can also be used for objects, of course); a close-up (CU) frames the subject’s face and neck; a medium close-up (MCU) frames the subject’s head and shoulders down to the mid-chest area; a medium shot (MS) or half-shot frames the subject from the waist up; a medium long shot (MLS) or three-quarter shot frames the subject from the knees up; a full shot (FS) frames the whole figure (or figures); a long shot (LS) frames a figure or group of figures at a distance in between a full shot and an extreme long shot; an extreme long shot (ELS) frames the whole figure (or figures) from a distance, often considerable, so that the figure appears as only one among several (or many) figures or is isolated in the scene from a distance. In Nazimova’s *Salomé*, there is considerable variability in the distance of the camera from the subject (as there is generally – an extreme long shot in a John Ford film is likely to be more extreme than an extreme long shot in a film by Henri Bresson), but I have used ELS to describe any shot in which the camera is farther away from the subject than that subject would appear in a FS or a LS (those two terms are sometimes used interchangeably). In addition to these standard terms, I also use the invented term ‘art shot’ (AS) to describe those shots of drawn or painted designs (such as the several shots of the moon); some of these art shots are animated, such as the one depicting the slave’s suicide or those showing clouds moving before the moon. In addition to abbreviations for shot scale, I also use two simple abbreviations to

indicate movement within the frame from the viewer's perspective: SL (screen left) and SR (screen right).

There are three types of title cards: credits for acting, etc. (C), narration (N), and dialogue (D). Of the 103 titles, eight are credit cards, eight offer narrative commentary, and eighty-seven present the dialogue, for the most part as Wilde wrote it. Nazimova was obviously working from an older edition of Wilde's play, represented here by one published in 1907 by John W. Luce & Company, Boston (whether she was working from this particular edition I do not know). Two page references are given: the first to the Luce text, the second to the modern edition edited by Richard Allen Cave as *The Importance of Being Earnest and Other Plays* (London: Penguin, 2000). When significant variations of diction occur between the dialogue cards and the play, the text of the Luce edition is provided for comparison.

Time indications are given in parentheses following the standard hour: minute: second format (e.g., the end title occurs at 01:12:12).

T1 (00:00:03): Opening title: Nazimova in "SALOMÉ" / An Historical Phantasy by OSCAR WILDE / Written for the screen by Peter M. Winters (C1).

T2 (00:00:13): Direction by CHARLES BRYANT (C2).

T3 (00:00:18): Sets and Costumes by MISS NATACHA RAMBOVA (After Aubrey Beardsley) (C3).

T4 (00:00:26): Photography by CHARLES J. VAN ENGER, A. S. C. (C4).

T5 (00:00:33): Profound was the moral darkness that enveloped the World on which the Star of Bethlehem arose. (N1).

T6 (00:00:43): To the Court of Herod, Tetrarch of Judea, were attracted representatives of every nation. Rome, rotting within, though still trampling the World; Greece, senile and conquered; Egypt, wrapped like its own mummies in the vestments of the Past – all sent their emissaries. (N2).

T7 (00:01:05): In a chaos of crime and wickedness, Herod ruled Judea but was himself ruled by Passion. He had murdered his brother, usurped his throne, he had stolen his wife, Herodias, and now covets his brother's daughter, Salomé. (N3).

T8 (00:01:28): But a Light was dawning on the horizon and a voice was crying in the Wilderness.
‘Prepare ye the way of the Lord!’ (N4).

T9 (00:01:41): The Prophet, John (Jokanaan in the story) was launching thunderbolts of Divine Wrath against the iniquities of Herod and the abominations of Herodias his Consort. / Herod, filled with superstitious awe, imprisoned the Prophet in an abandoned well to protect him against the violence of the mob and the hatred of Herodias. (N5).

T10 (00:02:07): It is at this point that the drama opens, revealing Salomé who yet remains an uncontaminated blossom in a wilderness of evil. / Though still innocent, Salomé is a true daughter of her day, heiress to its passions and its cruelties. She kills the thing she loves; she loves the thing she kills, yet in her soul there shines the glimmer of the Light and she sets forth gladly into the Unknown to solve the puzzle of her own words – – (N6).

T11 (00:02:49): The Mystery of Love is greater than the Mystery of Death. (N7; p. 98).

1 (00:02:58): ELS of the great terrace in the palace of Herod, soldiers in foreground and elsewhere; Narraboth looking SR toward banquet hall; Page SL looking at cistern.

2 (00:03:01): AS of moon in clouds (blue tint).

3 (00:03:06): ELS of banquet hall with servants coming and going, Narraboth and Page SR.

4 (00:03:21): LS of royal family at table, Salomé SL of Herod looking down.

T12 (00:03:26): Herod, Tetrarch of Judea ... Mitchell Lewis / Salomé, Stepdaughter of Herod ... Nazimova (C5).

5 (00:03:35): MS of Herod looking at Salomé.

T13 (00:03:39): Herodias, Wife of Herod, Mother of Salomé ... Rose Dione (C6).

6 (00:03:45): MCU of Herodias looking SL.

7 (00:03:49): LS of royal table (as in #4).

8 (00:03:54): MS of Herod offering Salomé wine bowl.

T14 (00:03:59): “Drink a little wine with me, Salomé.” (D1: p. 17/82).

9 (00:04:04): MS of Salomé turning to look at Herod shaking her head no.

10 (00:04:20): MCU of Herodias (as in #6).

11 (00:04:23): MS of Herod turning again to Salomé.

12 (00:04:25): LS of table. Herodias pulls Herod away and wags her finger, speaks:

T15 (00:04:32): “You must not look at her! You are always looking at her!” (D2: p. 14/80).

- 13 (00:04:39): MS of royal couple, with Herod banging fist on table.
- 14 (00:04:43): MCU of Salomé turning head SR.
- 15 (00:04:46): MS of royal couple, with Herodias turning SR.
- 16 (00:04:50): LS of table (as in #4 and #9) with Herodias leaning toward Tigellinus, and Herod turning back toward Salomé.
- T16 (00:04:56): Narraboth, a Syrian Prince robbed of his throne and forced to serve Herod as Captain of the Guard ... Earl Schenck / The Page of Herodias ... Arthur Jasmine (C7) (N.B.: The name 'Narraboth' does not appear in Wilde's list of 'persons in the play').
- 17 (00:05:09): FS of Narraboth and Page with executioner in background.
- T17 (00:05:15): "How strange the moon seems! One might fancy she was looking for dead things." (D3: p. 1/69).
- 18 (00:05:24): AS of moon and clouds (blue tint), cadaverous face in moon barely discernible.
- 19 (00:05:31): MS of Page (SL) and Narraboth (SR), Page turning toward Narraboth.
- 20 (00:05:40): MCU of Salomé.
- 21 (00:05:47): MCU of Narraboth looking SR and sighing.
- 22 (00:05:51): FS of Page and Narraboth with Page seeking to distract Narraboth by holding his hands in front of his face.
- 23 (00:05:58): MS of Narraboth and Page, Page holding his hands in front of Narraboth's face.
- T18 (00:06:03): "You are always looking at her. You look at her too much!" (D4: p. 2/69).
- 24 (00:06:08): FS of Page and Narraboth with Narraboth removing Page's hands; Page moves away from Narraboth and sits down despondent.
- 25 (00:06:17): LS of table as before (as in #4, etc.) with Herod looking at Salomé, Herodias leaning toward Tigellinus but looking at Herod and Salomé.
- 26 (00:06:23): MCU of Salomé.
- 27 (00:06:27): MS of four Jews, Nazarenes, etc., in fantastic turbans arguing among themselves.
- T19 (00:06:31): "There ARE angels!" (D5: p. 1/69).
- 28 (00:06:35): MS of four Jews continuing argument.
- 29 (00:06:37): MS of two figures in tall hats looking SR.
- 30 (00:06:40): MS of four Jews continuing argument.

- T20 (00:06:42): “ANGELS DO NOT EXIST!” (D6: p. 20/69).
- 31 (00:06:46): MS of four Jews continuing argument.
- 32 (00:06:48): MS of Herod leaning toward Salomé with Salomé shaking her head no.
- 33 (00:06:56): MS of three ladies of the court, hair coiffed eighteenth-century style.
- 34 (00:07:03): MS of three Romans laughing and drinking.
- 35 (00:07:07): MS of Herod leaning toward Salomé with Salomé shaking her head, turning away, and hiding her face behind a feathered fan.
- 36 (00:07:21): LS of table as before.
- 37 (00:07:26): MCU of Herod speaking.
- 38 (00:07:29): LS of table with Herodias looking at Herod and Salomé still hiding herself with fan; Herodias kicks Herod.
- T21 (00:07:33): “I am not looking at her!” (D7: interpolated).
- 39 (00:07:37): MS of Herod and Herodias arguing.
- 40 (00:07:43): MCU of Salomé looking SR.
- 41 (00:07:48): LS of table, Salomé standing and throwing down fan in disgust.
- 42 (00:07:51): FS of Narraboth and Page.
- 43 (00:07:55): ELS of table with Salomé walking from it, then exiting frame SL.
- 44 (00:07:58): ELS of terrace (as in #1).
- 45 (00:08:01): ELS of banquet with Salomé walking toward camera.
- 46 (00:08:05): MCU of Herod gesturing for Salomé to come back.
- 47 (00:08:09): ELS of Salomé standing between banquet tables with Narraboth and Page in right foreground, who bow before Salomé.
- 48 (00:08:23): ELS of terrace with Salomé SR and Narraboth and Page on knees.
- 49 (00:08:37): LS as before showing only Narraboth SL and Salomé SR.
- T22 (00:08:46): “Will you be seated princess?” (D8: p. 6/73).
- 50 (00:08:50): LS of Narraboth SL and Salomé SR.
- 51 (00:08:53): MCU of Salomé looking at Narraboth, shaking her head no.

52 (00:09:04): LS of Narraboth SL and Salomé SR, Salomé looking up at sky.

53 (00:09:19): AS of moon and clouds (blue tint).

54 (00:09:24): LS of Narraboth SL and Salomé SR as she begins moving SL.

55 (00:09:27): ELS of terrace with Salomé running SL.

56 (00:09:31): FS of Salomé looking up at moon.

57 (00:09:33): ELS of terrace with Narraboth looking at Salomé; Page (still on knees) looking at Narraboth, who stands and moves toward Salomé, Page following.

58 (00:09:39): MS of Narraboth and Page.

T23 (00:09:43): “Why do you speak to her? O! Something terrible will happen!” (D9: p. 6/73).

59 (00:09:49): LS of court with Narraboth and Page looking at Salomé, executioner in background.

60 (00:09:56): FS of Salomé lying on parapet.

61 (00:10:00): AS of moon and clouds (blue tint).

62 (00:10:03): FS of Salomé lying on parapet.

63 (00:10:08): ELS of court with Narraboth and Page looking at Salomé SR, cistern cage and soldiers centre-frame.

64 (00:10:10): FS of cistern guarded by two soldiers, reacting to following:

T24 (00:10:20): “Behold! The Lord hath come! The eyes of the blind shall see the day, and the ears of the deaf shall be opened.” (D10: pp. 6/73, 1/71).

65 (00:10:33): FS of Salomé lying on parapet reacting to voice.

66 (00:10:43): FS of cistern with guards looking down into it.

67 (00:10:51): MLS of Salomé sitting on parapet, speaking:

T25 (00:10:55): “Who was that who cried out?” (D11: p. 6/73).

68 (00:11:00): FS of Salomé on parapet with soldier turning to her, bowing and speaking:

T26 (00:11:05): “It was the prophet Jokanaan who cried out, Princess.” (D12: p. 6/73).

69 (00:11:10): FS of guard standing up with Salomé on parapet looking at him.

70 (00:11:15): MLS of Salomé, thoughtful.

71 (00:11:24): FS of Salomé getting down from parapet, speaking.

- 72 (00:11:26): LS of Salomé looking at cistern with two guards beside it, both on same side, as Salomé walks up to cistern and looks down inside it; Narraboth enters frame from right, and says:
- T27 (00:11:44): “Is it your pleasure that I bid them bring your litter, Princess? The night is fair in the garden.” (D13: p. 6/73).
- 73 (00:11:55): LS of Salomé at cistern with Narraboth; two guards behind her.
- 74 (00:11:58): MCU of Salomé shaking her head no.
- 75 (00:12:02): FS of Salomé looking down into cistern.
- 76 (00:12:07): FS of Jokanaan kneeling in prayer, bare back to viewer.
- 77 (00:12:14): FS of Salomé looking into cistern.
- 78 (00:12:19): FS of Jokanaan kneeling in prayer, in profile.
- 79 (00:12:23): FS of Salomé looking into cistern, walking around it.
- T28 (00:12:28): Jokanaan, the Prophet ... Nigel DeBrulier (C8).
- 80 (00:12:34): MCU of Jokanaan raising his head, eyes closed.
- 81 (00:12:43): Near match-cut to MCU of Salomé lifting her head, in profile, eyes open, sensuously.
- 82 (00:12:52): MCU of Narraboth reacting to Salomé.
- 83 (00:12:55): LS of Salomé leaning back holding onto rails of cistern cage.
- 84 (00:13:02): ELS of terrace with Salomé at cistern with Narraboth, Page, and guards looking at her, executioner far right.
- 85 (00:13:04): FS of banquet table, Herod looking at empty spot where Salomé was, Herodias looking at Tigellinus. Herod picks up Salomé’s fan.
- 86 (00:13:10): MS of Herod smelling Salomé’s fan.
- 87 (00:13:19): MS of Herodias and Tigellinus.
- 88 (00:13:24): MS of disconsolate Herod, who claps hands.
- 89 (00:13:31): ELS of banquet with servant running toward Herod.
- 90 (00:13:36): MS of Herod, speaking:
- T29 (00:13:40): “The Tetrarch bids the Princess to return to the feast!” (D14: interpolated, but cf. p. 6/73 ff.).

- 91 (00:13:46): ELS of banquet with servant rising, exiting frame SL.
- 92 (00:13:55): ELS of cistern scene, as before, with servant entering SR, who prostrates himself before Salomé at cistern.
- 93 (00:14:01): LS of Salomé and prostrate servant.
- 94 (00:14:06): MCU of servant raising his head to speak:
- T30 (00:14:09): “Princess, the Tetrarch prays you to return to the feast.” (D15: p. 6/73).
- 95 (00:14:15): LS of Salomé and prostrate servant.
- 96 (00:14:20): MCU of Salomé in profile.
- 97 (00:14:23): MCU of Jokanaan.
- 98 (00:14:27): FS of Salomé turning back to cistern cage and speaking:
- T31 (00:14:38): “I would speak with this prophet.” (D16: ‘I would speak with him’ (p. 7/74)).
- 99 (00:14:43): LS of Salomé and prostrate servant, with guard left of cistern dropping to his knees.
- 100 (00:14:50): MCU of guard looking up at Salomé (out of frame), and speaking:
- T32 (00:14:54): “The Tetrarch does not suffer anyone to speak with him – it is impossible! We dare not, Princess.” (D17: p. 7/74).
- 101 (00:15:04): MCU of Salomé reacting.
- 102 (00:15:13): MCU of servant, speaking:
- T33 (00:15:17): “What answer may I give the Tetrarch from the Princess?” (p. 7/74).
- 103 (00:15:23): LS of Salomé looking down at servant, then holding his head down with her foot.
- 104 (00:15:29): MCU of Salomé’s foot on servant’s neck.
- 105 (00:15:32): MCU of Salomé speaking:
- T34 (00:15:38): “Bring forth this prophet!” (D19: p. 7/74).
- 106 (00:15:42): LS of Salomé still with foot on servant’s head, looking at kneeling guard.
- 107 (00:15:47): MCU of guard, speaking:
- T35 (00:15:51): “Princess! Our lives belong to you, but we cannot do what you have asked! The Tetrarch has even forbidden the High Priest to speak with him!” (D20: pp. 8, 7/74).

- 108 (00:16:05): LS of Salomé as before (#103).
- 109 (00:16:09): MCU of Salomé reacting.
- 110 (00:16:15): LS of Salomé kicking servant away.
- 111 (00:16:17): MCU of Salomé speaking.
- 112 (00:16:19): FS of Salomé speaking down at servant, who shields his face.
- 113 (00:16:22): MCU of Salomé.
- 114 (00:16:27): LS of Salomé turning to look into cistern.
- 115 (00:16:32): FS of Jokanaan, kneeling, as before.
- 116 (00:16:35): LS of Salomé looking into cistern; kneeling guard SL stands, servant raises his head.
- 117 (00:16:49): ELS of cistern scene with servant running away.
- 118 (00:16:51): FS of servant pausing, executioner in background SR.
- 119 (00:16:54): MS of Herod, brooding.
- 120 (00:16:57): MCU of servant turning his head.
- 121 (00:17:02): LS of servant running toward parapet, standing on parapet, arms up.
- 122 (00:17:08): AS of moon and clouds (blue tint), cadaverous face in moon barely discernable.
- 123 (00:17:12): FS of servant jumping from parapet.
- 124 (00:17:13): Extreme long AS (animated) of servant falling to his death (blue tint).
- 125 (00:17:16): LS of Salomé at cistern cage, glaring at both guards, then walking toward camera.
- 126 (00:17:29): ELS of Salomé crossing terrace, pausing SR.
- 127 (00:17:32): ELS of Salomé looking in on banquet.
- 128 (00:17:34): MS of Herod pulling feathers from Salomé's fan.
- 129 (00:17:43): FS of Salomé (executioner in background), who looks back at cistern out of frame.
- 130 (00:17:53): FS of cistern cage flanked by guards.
- 131 (00:17:55): ECU of lock on cistern cage.
- 132 (00:17:58): MCU of Salomé, who looks SL.

- 133 (00:18:04): MS of Narraboth and Page, Narraboth reacting first, then Page.
- 134 (00:18:07): MCU of Salomé looking SL.
- 135 (00:18:13): ECU of massive key in Narraboth's belt.
- 136 (00:18:15): CU of Salomé having an idea.
- 137 (00:18:23): MS of Narraboth and Page.
- 138 (00:18:27): MCU of Salomé.
- 139 (00:18:35): ELS of Salomé SR looking at Narraboth and Page SL before turning toward them.
- 140 (00:18:42): ECU of Salomé's eyes (mask shot).
- 141 (00:18:45): MS of Narraboth and Page reacting, Page, fearful backs out of frame SR.
- 142 (00:18:53): ELS of Salomé looking at Narraboth, with Page backing away, Salomé walking SL toward Narraboth.
- 143 (00:19:05): LS of Salomé approaching Narraboth, Page and executioner in background.
- 144 (00:19:09): MS of Narraboth and Salomé, with Salomé speaking:
- T36 (00:19:15): "Thou wilt do this thing for me, Narraboth, wilt thou not? And tomorrow when I pass in my litter, I will let fall for thee a little green flower." (D21: pp. 8/74–75).
- 145 (00:19:30): MCU of Salomé in profile, speaking.
- 146 (00:19:33): LS of Salomé and Narraboth, Page and executioner in background.
- 147 (00:19:39): MS of Narraboth and Salomé, Narraboth reaching for key in his belt, speaking:
- T37 (00:19:45): "The Tetrarch has formally forbidden – I cannot, Princess – I can not!" (D22: p. 8/75).
- 148 (00:19:51): MS of Narraboth and Salomé, Salomé speaking:
- T38 (00:20:00): "Thou wilt do this thing for me, Narraboth! Look at me – it may be I will smile at thee!" (p. 8/75).
- 149 (00:20:10): MS of Narraboth and Salomé; Narraboth looks at her and she gives him a fake smile.
- 150 (00:20:32): LS of Salomé and Narraboth, Page and executioner in background; Narraboth removes key from belt.
- 151 (00:20:45): MS of Narraboth and Salomé, Narraboth turning to throw key toward guard.

- 152 (00:20:52): ELS of Narraboth with arm extended toward cistern cage.
- 153 (00:20:55): LS of Salomé and Narraboth, Page and executioner in background, with Narraboth falling to his knees before Salomé.
- 154 (00:21:02): MCU of guard, looking down.
- 155 (00:21:05): MCU of Salomé, who looks down.
- 156 (00:21:10): ECU of key on terrace.
- 157 (00:21:12): LS of Salomé with Narraboth kneeling, etc.; she walks SR.
- 158 (00:21:16): FS of Salomé before cistern cage pointing at key on ground; guard comes forward, kneels, hesitates.
- 159 (00:21:30): MCU of Salomé, eyes glaring down.
- 160 (00:21:32): FS of guard on knees, cowering; he reaches for key and stands.
- 161 (00:21:43): LS of Salomé with guard approaching cistern cage, unlocking door and descending, Salomé hanging on cage looking down.
- 162 (00:21:59): MLS of Narraboth on knees, Page despondent in background on parapet; Narraboth still on knees rises and looks SL.
- 163 (00:22:09): LS of Salomé at cistern.
- 164 (00:22:11): MLS of Narraboth, who hangs his head as he stands.
- 165 (00:22:16): LS of Narraboth, Page at parapet where executioner stands; Narraboth walks back to Page and places hand on Page's shoulder.
- 166 (00:22:27): MLS of Page and Narraboth.
- 167 (00:22:32): AS of moon and clouds (blue tint, cadaverous face clearly visible).
- 168 (00:22:37): MLS of Page and Narraboth.
- 169 (00:22:40): LS of Salomé looking down cistern and reacting, stepping aside SR as Jokanaan slowly emerges.
- 170 (00:23:00): FS of Page and Narraboth at parapet.
- 171 (00:23:02): FS of Jokanaan standing at cistern, turning his head.
- 172 (00:23:11): MCU of Salomé looking quizzical.
- 173 (00:23:17): MCU of Jokanaan.
- 174 (00:23:23): FS of Jokanaan, as before.

- 175 (00:23:28): MCU of Salomé looking quizzical.
- 176 (00:23:31): LS of Jokanaan and Salomé, who runs SR out of frame.
- 177 (00:23:34): FS of Salomé running up to Narraboth, Page in background at parapet; she clutches Narraboth.
- 178 (00:23:38): FS of Jokanaan, who speaks:
- T39 (00:23:43): “Where is she who gave herself up unto the lust of her eyes? Go, bid her come, that she may repent her of her iniquities!” (D24: pp. 9/75–76).
- 179 (00:23:57): MCU of Jokanaan looking anguished.
- 180 (00:24:00): MS of Salomé clinging to Narraboth, looking back at Jokanaan.
- 181 (00:24:03): MCU of Jokanaan looking anguished, lowering his head looking at Salomé.
- 182 (00:24:08): MS of Herodias and Tigellinus at banquet table.
- 183 (00:24:16): MCU of Jokanaan registering disapproval.
- 184 (00:24:20): LS of Jokanaan at cistern.
- 185 (00:24:24): LS of Salomé clinging to Narraboth, Page at rear by parapet.
- 186 (00:24:26): ELS of terrace: guards, Jokanaan at cistern, Salomé, Narraboth, Page; Salomé runs SR as Jokanaan moves forward.
- 187 (00:24:31): LS of Jokanaan approaching Salomé, guard in background.
- 188 (00:24:40): MCU of Salomé, speaking:
- T40 (00:24:45): “I am Salomé, daughter of Herodias, Princess of Judea.” (D25: p. 10/77).
- 189 (00:24:51): MCU of Salomé, eyes downcast.
- 190 (00:24:59): MCU of Jokanaan.
- 191 (00:25:04): FS of Jokanaan and Salomé, speaking:
- T41 (00:25:20): “Speak again, Jokanaan, and tell me what I must do.” (D26: p. 10/77).
- 192 (00:25:26): MCU of Salomé.
- 193 (00:25:30): MCU of Jokanaan.
- 194 (00:25:39): LS of Jokanaan and Salomé, Jokanaan leaning away, then speaking:

T42 (00:25:43): “Daughter of Herodias, come not near me! Get thee to the desert and seek out the Son of Man!” (D27: ‘Daughter of Sodom, come not near me! [...] get thee to the desert and seek out the Son of Man!’ (pp. 10–11/77)).

195 (00:25:56): MCU of Jokanaan speaking.

196 (00:26:00): LS of Jokanaan and Salomé.

197 (00:26:13): MCU of Salomé, speaking:

T43 (00:26:25): “Is he as beautiful as thou art, Jokanaan?” (D28: p. 11/77).

198 (00:26:31): MCU of Salomé.

199 (00:26:36): MCU of Jokanaan.

200 (00:26:45): LS of Page and Narraboth.

201 (00:26:47): LS of Jokanaan and Salomé.

202 (00:26:50): MCU of Jokanaan turning toward Salomé.

203 (00:26:55): MCU of Salomé.

204 (00:26:59): LS of Jokanaan and Salomé, Jokanaan leaning toward Salomé.

205 (00:27:09): MCU of Jokanaan.

206 (00:27:14): MCU of Salomé, head back.

207 (00:27:16): LS of Page and Narraboth.

208 (00:27:19): LS of Jokanaan and Salomé, Jokanaan, gesturing toward banquet, steps back to look at Salomé.

209 (00:27:33): MCU of Jokanaan, looking down.

210 (00:27:36): LS of Jokanaan and Salomé; Jokanaan throws his hands up and speaks:

T44 (00:27:52): “Angel of Death, what doest thou here with thy sword? Whom seekest thou in this palace?” (D29: “Angel of the Lord God, what dost thou here with thy sword? Whom seekest thou in this palace?” (p. 11/77)) (N.B.: Lighting has changed last three shots or so, with Jokanaan and Salomé casting long shadows).

211 (00:28:01): LS of Jokanaan and Salomé, executioner now in background, Jokanaan with arms raised.

212 (00:28:01): MS of Narraboth and Page, Narraboth clutching at dagger in belt.

213 (00:28:10): LS of Jokanaan and Salomé, Jokanaan leaning back, appearing to spurn Salomé, speaking:

T45 (00:28:14): “Back, daughter of Babylon! I listen but to the voice of the Lord God.” (D30: p. 11/77).

214 (00:28:21): MCU of Jokanaan, speaking.

215 (00:28:28): MCU of Salomé, shaking head in anger, speaking:

T46 (00:28:39): “Thy body is hideous! It is like the body of a leper. I love not thy body!” (D31: p. 11/77; “I love not thy body!” interpolated).

216 (00:28:47): MCU of Salomé, shaking head in anger.

217 (00:28:57): LS of Salomé and Jokanaan, Jokanaan’s back turned to Salomé.

218 (00:28:59): CU of Salomé.

219 (00:29:04): LS of Salomé and Jokanaan, Salomé reaching out to touch Jokanaan.

220 (00:29:13): MS of Narraboth and Page.

221 (00:29:16): MS of Salomé and Jokanaan, Salomé touching Jokanaan’s hair and speaking:

T47 (00:29:23): “Thy hair, Jokanaan, is like the long black nights when the moon hides her face! The silence that dwells in the forest is not so black as thy hair!” (D32: p. 12/78).

222 (00:29:37): MS of Jokanaan and Salomé, Salomé still behind Jokanaan.

223 (00:29:40): LS of Jokanaan and Salomé, Jokanaan turning around quickly and speaking:

T48 (00:29:44): “Back, daughter of Herodias! Profane not the temple of the Lord God!” (D33: ‘Back, daughter of Sodom! [...] Profane not the temple of the Lord God.’ (p. 12/78)).

224 (00:29:52): CU of Jokanaan speaking.

225 (00:29:55): LS of Jokanaan and Salomé, Salomé reacting angrily.

226 (00:30:07): MCU of Salomé shaking head in anger, but then softening.

227 (00:30:24): LS of Salomé and Jokanaan, Salomé speaking:

T49 (00:30:30): “Thy mouth, Jokanaan, is like a band of scarlet on a tower of ivory! The red blasts of trumpets are not so red as thy mouth!” (D34: p. 12/78).

228 (00:30:44): MS of Jokanaan and Salomé, Salomé putting her fingers in her mouth.

229 (00:30:50): LS of Jokanaan and Salomé, speaking:

T50 (00:30:58): “Suffer me to kiss thy mouth, Jokanaan” (D35: p. 13/78).

- 230 (00:31:02): LS of Jokanaan and Salomé, different angle (executioner out of frame); shadow representing angel of death descends as Jokanaan puts hand on Salomé's shoulder as if to kiss her.
- 231 (00:31:14): LS of Narraboth and Page, Narraboth reacting wildly as Page restrains him.
- 232 (00:31:17): LS of Salomé and Jokanaan, Salomé appearing to kiss Jokanaan on cheek.
- 233 (00:31:25): MCU of Jokanaan, speaking:
- T51 (00:31:27): "Never! Daughter of Herodias! Never!" (D36: 'Never! Daughter of Babylon! Daughter of Sodom! Never!' (p. 12/78)).
- 234 (00:31:31): MCU of Jokanaan.
- 235 (00:31:35): LS of Jokanaan and Salomé, Jokanaan pushing Salomé away, her back arched.
- 236 (00:31:41): MS of Page restraining Narraboth, who breaks away.
- 237 (00:31:44): ELS of Narraboth running toward Salomé and Jokanaan, Page and executioner in background.
- 238 (00:31:46): MCU of agonized Narraboth, speaking:
- T52 (00:31:49): "Princess, Princess! I cannot endure it!" (D37: p. 14/ 79).
- 239 (00:31:54): ELS of group, as before, Salomé dramatically breaking away and speaking:
- T53 (00:32:02): "Suffer me to kiss thy mouth, Jokanaan." (D38: p. 13/ 78).
- 240 (00:32:07): CU of Salomé.
- 241 (00:32:10): ELS of group, Narraboth steps forward.
- 242 (00:32:13): MCU of Narraboth with dagger; he raises it, turns back to camera, brings dagger down.
- 243 (00:32:19): ELS of group; Narraboth collapses on back.
- 244 (00:32:26): MCU reaction of Jokanaan.
- 245 (00:32:30): ELS of group, Narraboth lying dead at Salomé's feet, Salomé speaking.
- 246 (00:32:41): MCU reaction of Jokanaan.
- T54 (00:32:44): "Art thou not afraid, daughter of Herodias? Hath he not come, the Angel of Death?" (D39: p. 13/79).
- 247 (00:32:52): ELS of group; Salomé steps forward, irritated to stumble over Narraboth's body.
- 248 (00:32:56): MS of Jokanaan and Salomé, speaking:

- T55 (00:33:00): “Suffer me to kiss thy mouth, Jokanaan.” (D40: p. 13/78)
- 249 (00:33:04): MS of Jokanaan and Salomé.
- 250 (00:33:08): ELS of group, Narraboth lying dead, Salomé clinging to Jokanaan, Jokanaan walks out of frame SL, Salomé following.
- 251 (00:33:14): LS of Salomé and Jokanaan approaching cistern cage, guard holding gate open; Salomé at entrance of cistern, speaking:
- T56 (00:33:18): “I will kiss thy mouth, Jokanaan!” (D41: p. 13/79).
- 252 (00:33:22): LS of Jokanaan descending, Salomé clinging to cage, speaking:
- T57 (00:33:34): “I will kiss thy mouth, Jokanaan. I WILL KISS THY MOUTH!” (D42: p. 14/78).
- 253 (00:33:42): LS of Salomé holding on to cage, writhing about.
- 254 (00:33:52): ELS of guards rushing to dead Narraboth with Page stooped over body; executioner in background no longer in static pose.
- 255 (00:33:59): ELS of guards gathered around body with Page weeping over it; two black child attendants also looking on.
- 256 (00:34:05): LS of banquet table; Herod as before, Herodias still flirting with Tigellinus.
- 257 (00:34:11): MS of Herod looking SR.
- 258 (00:34:14): MS of Herodias and Tigellinus, Herodias laughing.
- 259 (00:34:17): MS of Herod turning away in disgust, slams fist on table.
- 260 (00:34:24): LS of Herod rising to give a command; Herodias also rises.
- 261 (00:34:27): FS of trumpeter.
- 262 (00:34:29): ELS of soldiers around body, responding.
- 263 (00:34:31): FS of Salomé at cistern, responding.
- 264 (00:34:33): LS of banquet table, with Herod, Herodias, and Tigellinus standing; Herodias speaks to Herod, who walks out of frame SR.
- 265 (00:34:37): ELS of terrace.
- 266 (00:34:39): ELS of banquet scene with Narraboth’s body in foreground, guard hovering over it, Page looking on; servants rush out to position throne chairs. Herod, Herodias, and Tigellinus in background coming forward, with entire banquet party.

- 267 (00:35:01): FS of Salomé at cistern.
- 268 (00:35:05): LS of Herod walking forward, tripping over body, followed by attendants
- 269 (00:35:11): MS of Herod looking fearful, attended by four Jews, Nazarenes, etc., speaking:
- T58 (00:35:17): “What does this body here? I issued no order that he should be slain.” (D43: p. 15/81).
- 270 (00:35:25): LS of Herod, with four Jews, etc., looking fearfully down at body.
- 271 (00:35:29): CU of main guard (same one who opened cistern), speaking:
- T59 (00:35:34): “He slew himself, sire. With his own hand he slew himself.” (D44: p. 15/81).
- 272 (00:35:40): MS of Herod still attended by four Jews, etc., gesturing fitfully.
- 273 (00:35:47): LS of Herod collapsing into arms of attendants before body; guard stands and orders other guards to take the body away.
- 274 (00:35:54): ELS of guards removing body. Page on knees looking on.
- 275 (00:36:04): MS of Herod turning, still with attendants.
- 276 (00:36:13): MS of Herodias with Tigellinus, fanning herself and smiling.
- 277 (00:36:17): MS of Herod and attendants, Herod looks SL and smiles.
- 278 (00:36:24): FS of Salomé at cistern.
- 279 (00:36:27): MS of Herod as before, still smiling.
- 280 (00:36:32): ELS of court; servants rush forward to place cushions and chairs edge of ‘proscenium’. Herod and Herodias seat themselves, as does the entire court.
- 281 (00:37:02): ELS, frontal, of same scene as before.
- 282 (00:37:07): ELS, reverse angle, of court looking at Salomé at cistern.
- 283 (00:37:12): LS of court, Herod looking at Salomé.
- 284 (00:37:18): FS of Salomé at cistern.
- 285 (00:37:22): LS of court, as before; Herod gestures for wine cup and speaks:
- T60 (00:37:36): “Salomé! Dip into the wine thy little red lips, that I may drain the cup.” (D45: p. 17/82).
- 286 (00:37:43): FS of Salomé at cistern.
- T61 (00:37:40): “I am not thirsty, Tetrarch.” (D46: p. 17/82).

- 287 (00:37:55): FS of Salomé at cistern.
- 288 (00:37:58): LS of court, Herod returning cup, Herodias smiling; Herod gestures for fruit, speaks:
- T62 (00:38:19): “Salomé! Bite but a little of this fruit, that I may eat what is left!” (D47: p. 17/82).
- 289 (00:38:27): LS of court, Herod awaiting reply.
- 290 (00:38:29): FS of Salomé at cistern, speaking:
- T63 (00:38:33): “I am not hungry, Tetrarch.” (D48: p. 17/82).
- 291 (00:38:37): FS of Salomé at cistern.
- 292 (00:38:40): LS of court, Herod returning fruit to tray, Herodias clapping her hands gleefully; Herod speaks to Herodias:
- T64 (00:38:45): “You see how you have brought up this daughter of yours!” (D49: p. 17/82).
- 293 (00:38:51): MS of Herod and Herodias, arguing.
- T65 (00:38:54): “My daughter and I come of a royal race. As for thee, thy father was a camel driver! He was a thief and a robber to boot!” (D50: p. 17/82).
- 294 (00:39:07): MS of Herod and Herodias arguing.
- 295 (00:39:11): ELS of court, Herod and Herodias turned away from each other.
- 296 (00:39:19): FS of Salomé at cistern.
- 297 (00:39:21): LS of court, Herod looking toward Salomé, speaking:
- T66 (00:39:29): “Salomé, dance for me, and I will give thee the throne of thy mother.” (D51: pp. 25, 17/89, 82).
- 298 (00:39:38): LS of court, Herod gesturing toward Herodias, who rises with a shocked expression.
- 299 (00:39:42): FS of Salomé at cistern, speaking:
- T67 (00:39:48): “I have no desire to dance, Tetrarch.” (D52: p. 24/88).
- 300 (00:39:52): FS of Salomé at cistern, who sits and pouts.
- 301 (00:39:58): LS of court, with Herodias exultant, flinging out her arms, taking a goblet of wine from Tigellinus, draining it.

- 302 (00:40:20): ELS, reverse angle, of court looking at Salomé seated at edge of cistern, Salomé suddenly reacts to something.
- 303 (00:40:30): FS of Jokanaan in cistern clutching head, speaking:
- T68 (00:40:34): “Ah! The daughter of Babylon, with her golden eyes and her gilded eyelids!” (D53: p. 22/86).
- 304 (00:40:43): FS of Jokanaan in cistern.
- 305 (00:40:46): MLS of Salomé, still seated at edge of cistern.
- 306 (00:40:49): LS of court, Herodias gesturing and speaking:
- T69 (00:40:52): “This man is forever hurling insults at me. Why do you not deliver him to the Jews who have been clamoring for him?” (D54: p. 18/83).
- 307 (00:41:04): MS of Herod, slowly shaking his head and speaking:
- T70 (00:41:10): “No! He is a holy man. He is a man who has seen God.” (D55: p. 18/83).
- 308 (00:41:17): LS of court; Herodias kicks Page (who gives Herodias a fan) and looks toward Salomé.
- 309 (00:41:29): MLS of Salomé still seated at edge of cistern.
- 310 (00:41:33): MS of Herod looking at Salomé, reaching out his hands and speaking:
- T71 (00:41:37): “Salomé, Salomé, dance for me! And thou mayst ask of me what thou wilt even unto the half of my kingdom.” (D56: p. 26/89).
- 311 (00:41:48): ELS of court, Herod still with arms outreached.
- 312 (00:41:56): MLS of Salomé seated at cistern, shaking her head and speaking:
- T72 (00:42:01): “I will not dance, Tetrarch.” (D57: p. 14/88).
- 313 (00:42:04): MLS of Salomé.
- 314 (00:42:08): LS of court, Herod despondent, Herodias smiling.
- 315 (00:42:10): FS of Jokanaan flinging his arms up and speaking:
- T73 (00:42:13): “Ah, the daughter of Babylon! Let the people take stones and stone her!” (D58: p. 22/86).
- 316 (00:42:20): FS of Jokanaan with arms raised.
- 317 (00:42:22): FS of Salomé, who stands, steps back, and peers down into cistern.
- 318 (00:42:33): MCU of Jokanaan, looking up, raising arm with clenched fist, and speaking:

T74 (00:42:39): “Ah, the wanton one! Let the captains of the hosts pierce her with their swords!” (D59: p. 22/86).

319 (00:42:47): MCU of Jokanaan, shaking his fist.

320 (00:42:50): MCU of Salomé, reacting.

321 (00:42:56): LS of court, Herodias with arm raised, Herod reaching out.

322 (00:42:59): FS of Salomé at cistern turning her head and looking down into cistern.

323 (00:43:02): MCU of Jokanaan, speaking.

324 (00:43:06): FS of Salomé at cistern.

325 (00:43:10): MCU of Salomé, speaking:

T75 (00:43:03): “If I dance for thee, Tetrarch, wilt thou indeed give me whatsoever I shall ask of thee?” (D60: p. 26/89).

326 (00:43:21): MCU of Salomé, awaiting response.

327 (00:43:24): LS of court; Herod speaking:

T76 (00:43:31): “I swear it, Salomé. By my life, by my crown, by my gods! And I am not one of those who break their oaths.” (D61: pp. 26, 27/90, 91).

328 (00:43:43): LS of court, Herod gesturing dramatically and speaking.

329 (00:43:46): FS of Salomé at cistern, stepping forward out of frame.

330 (00:43:57): MS of Herod.

331 (00:44:01): ELS of Salomé standing before the court, speaking:

T77 (00:44:04): “I will dance for you, Tetrarch.” (D62: p. 27/90).

332 (00:44:09): CU of Salomé.

333 (00:44:14): LS of court, Herod exultant, Herodias angry.

334 (00:44:19): ELS of terrace, with child servants running toward camera.

335 (00:44:26): MLS of Herod and Herodias.

T78 (00:44:29): “I will not have my daughter dance while that man is continually crying out. I will not have her dance!” (D63: p. 28/92).

336 (00:44:39): LS of court, Herodias flailing about.

- 337 (00:44:43): MLS of Herod, satisfied, and Herodias, sulking.
- 338 (00:44:48): LS of dwarves in Beardsleyesque costumes, assembling in front of cistern with instruments to play music for the dance.
- 339 (00:44:52): ELS of Salomé in terrace before proscenium, with four servants in square costumes slowly approaching her.
- 340 (00:45:22): LS of four costumed servants gathering around Salomé to form a screen for her costume change.
- 341 (00:45:28): CU of Salomé.
- 342 (00:45:32): LS of four servants gathered around Salomé.
- 343 (00:45:37): ELS of terrace with four servants gathered around Salomé.
- 344 (00:45:43): ELS of court, Herod leaning forward expectantly.
- 345 (00:45:52): ELS of four servants gathered around Salomé.
- 346 (00:45:57): LS of dwarf band, who begin to play.
- 347 (00:46:02): FS of servants around Salomé, whose head rises slowly above them.
- 348 (00:46:05): MCU of Salomé, veiled, arms raised, in platinum wig.
- 349 (00:46:08): MS of Herod, seated, expectant.
- 350 (00:46:11): ELS of servants beginning to move around Salomé.
- 351 (00:46:19): ELS of court.
- 352 (00:46:21): LS of servants moving around Salomé, parting to reveal her, arms raised, veiled, dressed in micro-skirt.
- 353 (00:46:31): ELS of Salomé before proscenium, servants moving away, each with a section of veil tethered to Salomé.
- 354 (00:46:39): LS of Salomé center frame, servants closing about her again, gathering veil sections as they approach, then kneeling.
- 355 (00:46:55): FS of Herod, lustful, Herodias, disgusted, turning away.
- 356 (00:47:00): LS of servants walking away from Salomé, lining up in background, their square costumes forming a long rectangle.
- 357 (00:47:14): MS of Herod, panting with excitement.
- 358 (00:47:18): MCU of Salomé, arms raised, veiled.

- 359 (00:47:21): MS of Herodias, sulking.
- 360 (00:47:24): LS of Salomé, arms raised, veiled, servants in square costumes behind her; she begins to sway, arching her back.
- 361 (00:47:39): MS of Herod, panting with excitement.
- 362 (00:47:43): LS of Salomé as before, arching her back.
- 363 (00:47:53): MLS of four Jews, Nazarenes, etc.
- 364 (00:47:55): ELS of Salomé, dancing on her toes, circling.
- 365 (00:48:05): LS of three court ladies, speaking to one another and smiling.
- 366 (00:48:10): LS of Salomé, continuing her toe dance.
- 367 (00:48:18): FS of Herod, excited, and Herodias, sulking.
- 368 (00:48:21): LS of Salomé dancing; lowering her arms, posing.
- 369 (00:48:39): LS of dwarf band, playing frenetically.
- 370 (00:48:42): LS of Salomé beginning to dance more energetically.
- 371 (00:48:47): MCU of Jew covering eyes.
- 372 (00:48:49): LS of Salomé dancing energetically.
- 373 (00:48:55): FS of executioner, impassive.
- 374 (00:48:58): LS of Salomé dancing energetically.
- 375 (00:49:02): MCU of Page.
- 376 (00:49:05): LS of Salomé dancing, a length of veil in each hand, which she flings in different directions.
- 377 (00:49:09): MS of Herod, panting.
- 378 (00:49:12): LS of Salomé dancing, flinging another piece of veil.
- 379 (00:49:15): MS of three Romans, speaking with each other.
- 380 (00:49:20): LS of Salomé dancing.
- 381 (00:49:27): MCU of court lady, biting her lip.
- 382 (00:49:31): LS of Salomé dancing.
- 383 (00:49:38): MCU of Tigellinus, smirking, eyes glancing from side to side.

- 384 (00:49:43): LS of Salomé dancing.
- 385 (00:49:47): LS of dwarf band, playing frenetically.
- 386 (00:49:54): LS of Salomé and servants unspooling tent-like veil over Salomé; she dances under it and emerges from it, ducks back under.
- 387 (00:50:08): FS of Jokanaan, arms upraised.
- T79 (00:50:12): “Ah! Let them crush her with their shields!” (D64: p. 22/86).
- 388 (00:50:17): MCU of Salomé, head under, out of veil.
- 389 (00:50:21): MS of guard, breathing heavily.
- 390 (00:50:24): LS of Salomé, under tent-like veil, twirling as servants close about her and kneel.
- 391 (00:50:37): FS of Herod, excited, Herodias, sulking.
- 392 (00:50:41): ELS of Salomé twirling under veil.
- 393 (00:50:46): LS of dwarves playing, dancing frenetically.
- 394 (00:50:49): FS of Salomé twirling about under veil, then collapsing.
- 395 (00:50:56): ELS of Salomé on terrace, under veil.
- 396 (00:51:00): FS of Herod, sinking back into his chair, then whacking Herodias (still sulking) with his arm.
- 397 (00:51:12): ELS of Salomé in terrace, under veil; servants rise and move away from her, still under veil.
- 398 (00:51:27): LS of Salomé under veil, cistern in background.
- 399 (00:51:30): LS of court, Herod reaching out to Salomé.
- 400 (00:51:33): LS of Salomé under veil, cistern in background; Salomé slowly rises, raises arms to reveal herself fully, then wraps veil about herself.
- 401 (00:52:05): MS of Herod, gesturing for Salomé to come to him.
- 402 (00:52:09): FS of Salomé, walking SR.
- 403 (00:52:17): ELS of court, Salomé approaching Herod.
- 404 (00:52:21): MS of Herod speaking.
- T80 (00:52:24): “I will give thee whatsoever thy soul desireth! What wouldst thou have? Speak!” (D65: p. 29/92).

- 405 (00:52:34): ELS of court, Salomé standing before Herod; Salomé kneels.
- 406 (00:52:44): MLS of Salomé kneeling before Herod.
- 407 (00:53:02): MS of Herodias glowering, looking at Salomé.
- 408 (00:53:06): MLS of Salomé kneeling, speaking:
- T81 (00:53:08): “I would that they presently bring me in a silver charger –” (D66: p. 29/92).
- 409 (00:53:15): MLS of Salomé kneeling, then rising.
- 410 (00:53:23): LS of court, Herod speaking to group of four Jews, Nazarenes, etc.
- 411 (00:53:30): MS of Herod, speaking to Salomé:
- T82 (00:53:33): “What is it thou wouldst have in a silver charger. O sweet and fair Salomé?” (D67: p. 29/92).
- 412 (00:53:41): MS of Herod leaning back, gesturing toward his right ear.
- 413 (00:53:46): MLS (iris shot) of Salomé, kneeling.
- 414 (00:54:02): LS of court, Herod extending his hand to Salomé as she rises to her feet, walks next to Herod.
- 415 (00:54:12): MLS of Salomé and Herod, gesturing toward his right ear; Salomé leans, speaks into it; Herod registers alarm.
- 416 (00:54:37): LS of court, Herodias reacting.
- 417 (00:54:42): MCU of Salomé, speaking:
- T83 (00:54:45): “I ASK OF YOU THE HEAD OF JOKANAAN!” (D68: p. 29/92).
- 418 (00:54:49): ELS of court, various figures reacting with alarm, stepping back from Salomé and Herod; Herodias stands and speaks:
- T84 (00:54:55): “Well said, my daughter. That man has covered me with insults! Ah, one can see that she loves her mother well!” (D69: pp. 29, 30/92, 93).
- 419 (00:55:06): MS of Herodias, smiling, speaking, laughing, flinging out her arms.
- 420 (00:55:12): LS of court, Herodias with arms out-flung.
- 421 (00:55:15): MLS of Salomé and Herod, speaking:
- T85 (00:55:19): “Do not listen to thy mother’s voice. This is a terrible thing to ask of me! Ask of me the half of my kingdom and I will give it thee!” (D70: pp. 29–30/92–93).

- 422 (00:55:32): LS of court, Salomé still standing beside Herod, speaking:
- T86 (00:55:37): “You have sworn an oath, Herod! Forget not that you have sworn an oath!” (D71: p. 29/93).
- 423 (00:55:44): LS of court, Herodias speaking to Tigellinus, then to Page.
- 424 (00:55:59): MS of Herodias, laughing.
- 425 (00:56:02): MS of Herod, shocked; his mood changes when he notices the large emerald he wears about his neck; speaking:
- T87 (00:56:15): “It is the largest emerald in the world. Ask it of me and I will give it to thee! Only release me from my oath!” (D72: p. 30/93).
- 426 (00:56:26): LS of court, Salomé standing before Herod as he speaks.
- 427 (00:56:30): MCU of Salomé, petulant, speaking:
- T88 (00:56:34): “I DEMAND THE HEAD OF JOKANAAN.” (D73: p. 30/93).
- 428 (00:56:38): ELS of court, various characters again stepping away from Salomé.
- 429 (00:56:46): MS of Herod, shaking his head, tapping his temple, smiling as he gets a new idea, speaking:
- T89 (00:57:00): “Salomé, thou knowest my white peacocks! In the midst of them thou wilt be like unto the moon in the midst of a great white cloud –” (D74: p. 31/94).
- 430 (00:57:14): AS of Salomé in cloud of peacocks (sepia tint).
- 431 (00:57:20): MCU of Salomé in profile, in peacock headdress (sepia tint).
- 432 (00:57:26): AS of Salomé in cloud of peacocks (sepia tint).
- 433 (00:57:32): MCU of Salomé, gazing into space, then speaking:
- T90 (00:57:39): “GIVE ME THE HEAD OF JOKANAAN.” (D75: p. 31/94).
- 434 (00:57:42): LS of court, Herod reacting with dismay and distress
- 435 (00:57:47): MS of Herod, gasping, smiling, speaking.
- 436 (00:58:05): LS of court, Herod speaking:
- T91 (00:58:11): “I have jewels hidden in this palace that thy mother even has not seen. Thou shalt be as fair as a queen when thou wearest them –” (D76: p. 32/95).
- 437 (00:58:24): MS of Salomé and Herod, dissolving to:
- 438 (00:58:27): ELS of Salomé in fantastic costume atop a mountain of jewels (sepia tint).

- 439 (00:58:29): MLS of Salomé flapping her arms about (sepia tint).
- 440 (00:58:35): ELS of Salomé in fantastic costume atop a mountain of jewels (sepia tint).
- 441 (00:58:41): MCU of Salomé, moving her head from side to side.
- 442 (00:58:51): FS of Jokanaan in cistern, arms upraised, speaking:
- T92 (00:58:55): “It is thus that I will wipe out all wickedness form the earth and that all women shall learn not to imitate her abominations!” (D77: p. 22/86)
- 443 (00:59:08): MS of Salomé and Herod, Salomé turning to Herod and speaking emphatically:
- T93 (00:59:16): “GIVE ME THE HEAD OF JOKANAAN!” (D78: p. 33/95).
- 444 (00:59:21): MCU of Salomé in profile, speaking.
- 445 (00:59:25): LS of court from side, Salomé leaning toward Herod, Herodias crouched on chair, Herod turns head away, then looks back at Salomé.
- 446 (00:59:36): MS of Herod, horrified, then resolved, speaking:
- T94 (00:59:42): “Let her be given what she asks – of a truth she is her mother’s child!” (D79: p. 33/96)
- 447 (00:59:49): ELS of court, various characters reacting with alarm, including executioner in background.
- 448 (00:59:52): MS of Salomé, in profile, glowering at Herod, then turning, scowling in triumph.
- 449 (01:00:04): MS of Herodias, smiling approval.
- 450 (01:00:07): MCU of Salomé, looking smugly side to side.
- 451 (01:00:25): ELS of court, Jews, Nazarenes, etc., and courtiers at opposite sides of frame, executioner in rear between, nearer Jews, etc.; Salomé walks toward Jews and faces them, who bow and disperse.
- 452 (01:00:37): MCU of Salomé, looking intently at executioner.
- 453 (01:00:43): FS of executioner, turning away.
- 454 (01:00:45): ELS of court, Salomé looking at executioner, who shields his face and leans away; two child attendants and two servants in square costumes approach Salomé.
- 455 (01:00:56): MS of Herodias, looking SL.
- 456 (01:00:59): MS of Herod, face buried in crook of elbow.
- 457 (01:01:01): MS of Herodias, as before.

- 458 (01:01:04): ECU of Herod's hand with skull-and-cross-bones ring on index finger.
- 459 (01:01:07): MS of Herodias, reaching for ring and removing it.
- 460 (01:01:22): ELS of court, servants shielding Salomé part to let two child attendants walk toward Herodias.
- 461 (01:01:29): LS of child attendants before Herodias, who shows them the ring and points toward executioner.
- 462 (01:01:33): MCU of executioner responding.
- 463 (01:01:35): LS of child servant reaching for ring, who receives it and runs out of frame toward executioner with other child servant following.
- 464 (01:01:40): FS of executioner turning away as child servants enter frame, one with ring holding it up for executioner.
- 465 (01:01:54): MS of Herodias reacting gleefully.
- 466 (01:01:57): FS of executioner reaching for ring, taking it, walking SL out of frame (toward cistern).
- 467 (01:02:19): LS of court, Herod and Herodias still seated.
- 468 (01:02:22): FS of cistern, executioner entering frame from SR.
- 469 (01:02:29): LS of court; two servants in square costumes moving aside with train of cape to reveal Salomé now dressed in 'peacock skirt'.
- 470 (01:02:39): FS of executioner taking shield from guard, who then unlocks cistern gate; executioner looks back before he descends.
- 471 (01:03:06): MCU of Salomé, now with black fringe and turban.
- 472 (01:03:10): FS of executioner beginning his descent.
- 473 (01:03:13): MS of Herod, reacting.
- 474 (01:03:19): LS of executioner descending into cistern.
- 475 (01:03:24): MLS of Herod and Herodias seated.
- 476 (01:03:31): LS of Salomé from rear walking toward cistern and peering into it.
- 477 (01:03:37): FS of executioner and Jokanaan.
- 478 (01:03:44): MCU of Salomé in profile gazing down into cistern, then turning her head as if listening.

- 479 (01:03:51): FS of executioner and Jokanaan, Jokanaan raising his right arm.
- 480 (01:03:57): MCU of Salomé, listening.
- 481 (01:04:04): FS of executioner and Jokanaan with right arm upraised; executioner drops sword and crosses arms on chest, then kneels.
- 482 (01:04:14): MCU of Salomé in profile gazing down, then turning and showing anger.
- 483 (01:04:25): LS of Salomé flinging her arms apart and speaking.
- T95 (01:04:29): “He is a coward, this slave! Let soldiers be sent!” (D80: p. 34/96).
- 484 (01:04:34): LS of Salomé with two soldiers reacting on either side, turning away from her.
- 485 (01:04:38): ELS of court with Page walking toward Salomé.
- 486 (01:04:40): LS of Salomé with arms outstretched, as before, then closing cloak and walking SL out of frame.
- 487 (01:04:52): ELS of court with Salomé approaching Page; Salomé grabs him by the shoulders and speaks:
- T96 (01:04:55): “Thou wert the friend of him who is dead. I tell thee there are not dead men enough!” (D81: p. 34/96).
- 488 (01:05:05): MS of Salomé and Page, Salomé shaking Page by shoulders.
- 489 (01:05:08): ELS of court with Salomé holding Page by shoulders; she flings him aside and he stumbles out of frame SL.
- 490 (01:05:14): MS of Salomé with arms outstretched.
- 491 (01:05:20): ELS of court, Salomé with arms outstretched, looking at royal couple, then rushing forward, pointing at Herod.
- 492 (01:05:25): LS of Salomé standing beside Herod, gesturing toward cistern, speaking:
- T97 (01:05:28): “Command thy soldiers that they bring me the thing thou hast promised me! The thing that is mine!” (D82: pp. 34/96–97).
- 493 (01:05:37): MCU of Salomé, speaking.
- 494 (01:05:40): MS of Herod, shielding his face with his arm.
- 495 (01:05:43): MCU of Salomé, scowling.
- 496 (01:05:45): LS of court, Salomé still beside Herod, Salomé rushing toward swordsman behind Herod.
- 497 (01:05:49): MS of Salomé taking scimitar from swordsman.

- 498 (01:05:53): LS of Salomé walking away from proscenium, waving scimitar.
- 499 (01:56:56): AS of blood moon with clouds moving over it (red tint).
- 500 (01:06:00): ELS of court, Salomé at edge of proscenium with scimitar upraised; Salomé moves toward cistern SL (mauve tint)
- 501 (01:06:06): AS of clouds covering blood moon (red tint).
- 502 (01:06:10): ELS of court (mauve tint changes quickly to black and white), salver floats upward.
- 503 (01:06:25): FS of Salomé with scimitar upraised; she drops scimitar and walks slowly out of frame SL.
- 504 (01:07:07): ELS of court, some members dispersing, evidently fearful.
- 505 (01:07:13): LS of Salomé in front of cistern flanked by two guards, holding salver.
- 506 (01:07:27): MCU of Salomé, looking down at head, then up, speaking:
- T98 (01:07:51): “Thou wouldst have none of me, Jokanaan. Thou rejectedst me. Me, Salomé, Princess of Judea!” (D83: pp. 34–35/97).
- 507 (01:08:00): MCU of Salomé, turning her head about, speaking:
- T99 (01:08:14): “Thou wert the man that I loved alone among men. All other men were hateful to me. I saw thee, and I loved thee. Jokanaan – I love thee yet. I love only thee –” (D84: p. 35/98).
- 508 (01:08:31): MCU of Salomé.
- 509 (01:08:40): LS of court, now showing only Jews, royal couple, and swordsman – all looking away, save Herodias.
- 510 (01:08:43): MCU of Salomé.
- 511 (01:08:48): LS of Salomé holding salver before cistern, as before; she walks forward slightly, drops to knees, places salver on ground, covers it with cloak; her head disappears under the cloak.
- 512 (01:09:32): MS of Herod, who lowers his arm, looks and registers fear mixed with disgust.
- 513 (01:09:42): LS of Salomé, covered in cloak; movement underneath cloak.
- 514 (01:09:46): LS of court, Herod registering shock, stands up beside chair.
- 515 (01:10:00): MLS of Salomé, seated, lowering cloak, speaking:

T100 (01:10:21): “I have kissed thy mouth, Jokanaan – – Love hath a bitter taste – – But what matter? – What matter? –” (D85: pp. 36/98–99).

516 (01:10:31): MLS of Salomé, seated, as before.

517 (01:10:40): MCU of Herod.

518 (01:10:44): FS of Salomé, rising, raising her arms.

519 (01:11:02): MCU of Herod, raising fist, speaking:

T101 (01:11:09): “KILL THAT WOMAN!” (D86: p. 36/99).

520 (01:11:13): LS of court, Herodias rising from chair in alarm; swordsman steps forward, positions himself in front of Herodias.

521 (01:11:21): LS of Salomé, soldiers readying their spears to strike.

522 (01:11:23): ELS of soldiers with spears readied to strike Salomé, closing in around her, forming a circle about her.

523 (01:11:35): CU of Salomé speaking:

T102 (01:11:40): “THE MYSTERY OF LOVE IS GREATER THAN THE MYSTERY OF DEATH!” (D87: p. 36/98).

524 (01:11:46): CU of Salomé, beatific.

525 (01:11:51): LS of circle of soldiers, who plunge their spears.

526 (01:11:53): ELS of court, Herod running away SR, members of court following.

527 (01:11:58): LS of circle of soldiers, plunging their spears.

528 (01:12:01): FS of child servants, playing.

529 (01:12:06): ELS of terrace, guards with spears upraised, swordsman standing in front of Herodias.

T103 (01:12:12): THE END (N8)

[01:12:16: Restoration credits]

Appendix II: The Griggs-Moviedrome *Salome*

In addition to the restored version of Nazimova's six-reel 35mm *Salomé*, a second, three-reel 16mm version originally distributed by Griggs-Moviedrome is also in circulation, issued in 2012 in DVD format by Alpha Home Entertainment of Narberth, Pennsylvania. John Griggs (1908–1967) was an actor who did most of his work on radio, but he was also an avid collector of silent films. He organized a film club in New York City called the Sutton Cinema Society (named after his apartment on Sutton Place) where he screened his many treasures. *Salome* (without the acute accent) was one of the 16mm nitrate films in his collection that he copied onto safety stock for sale through his company, Griggs-Moviedrome. After his relatively early death (he was an alcoholic), his collection became the foundation for the Yale Film Study Center.¹ Griggs' name appears, in script, on the third title card for 'Titles', meaning that he drew the titles written 'from Oscar Wilde' by Jan Wahl (1931–2019) [fig. 1], better known as the author of numerous children's books. Wahl was also an ardent cinephile who, when he was studying at the University of Copenhagen on a Fulbright scholarship in 1954, had the good fortune to serve as a kind of unofficial assistant to the celebrated Danish director Carl Theodor Dreyer as he worked on *Ordet* (1955). He also became a great friend of the film star Louise Brooks, whose letters to him are collected as *Dear Stinkpot: Letters from Louise Brooks*.²

The Griggs-Moviedrome *Salome* consists of 418 shots, counting the 53 title cards, and runs 42:22 minutes, for an ASL of 6.08 seconds, compared to the 01:12:15 runtime and 6.86 ASL of the Nazimova *Salomé*. Hence the narrative might seem to move at a slightly faster pace than that of the restored version, but the action is often incoherent because so much of that action is unexplained. Of the 53 titles, three provide credits and forty dialogue, with ten offering narrative exposition (including the end title). The ten narrative cards are actually two more than in the Nazimova *Salomé*, but those in the Griggs-Moviedrome version are much sparer, often merely identifying characters, e.g., 'Naaman the executioner'. Narraboth and the Page are not identified

(although the name Narraboth does occur in one dialogue card), and some of the narrative cards identifying characters seem superfluous, e.g., ‘The ladies of the court’. No title cards explain the art shot of Salomé in the cloud of peacocks or the fantasy shot of the princess atop a mountain of jewels. Also, there are multiple shots of actors speaking but with no dialogue cards either preceding or following such shots.

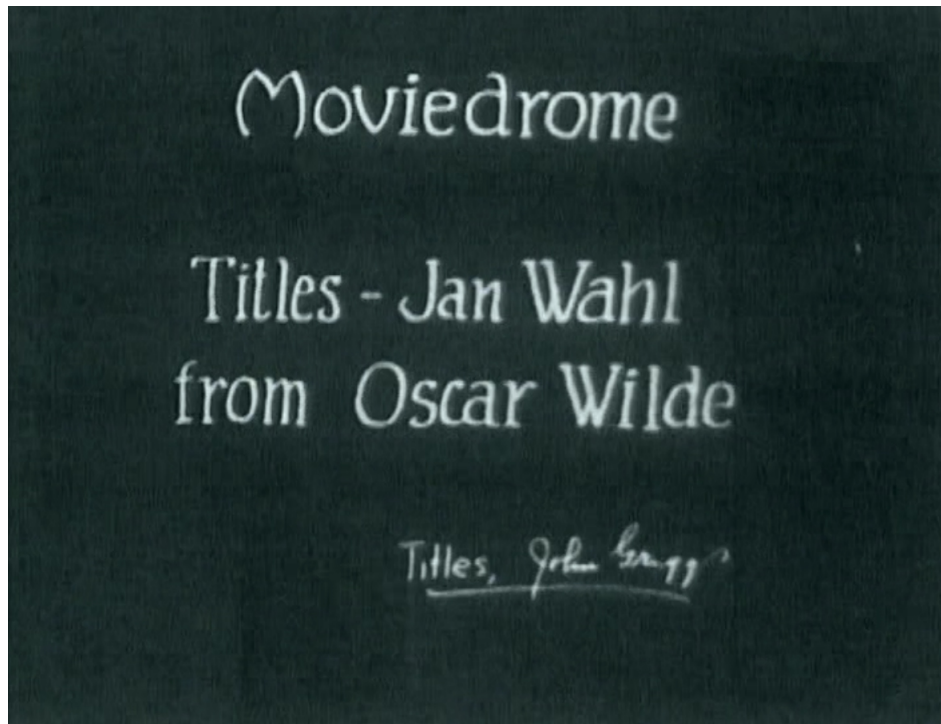


Fig. 1 (00:00:22): Title card from the Griggs-Moviedrome *Salomé* crediting Jan Wahl for writing the titles and John Griggs for drawing them.

The opening title, ‘Alla Nazimova in *Salomé*’, is the only acting credit in the film, while the second title, ‘A Pantomime After the Play by Oscar Wilde’, is perhaps a fairer description than Nazimova’s ‘Historical Phantasy’ because so much of the acting in the film is, in fact, pantomimic. The general scenario of Nazimova’s *Salomé* is more or less preserved, even though it is shortened and, again, frequently incoherent. On a few occasions the film has been radically recut. For example, where in Nazimova’s original *Salomé* Jokanaan does not put in an appearance until shot 108 (at 12:28, after 28 title cards and 79 regular cinematic shots), in the Griggs-Moviedrome version he appears at shot 11 (01:54), after the following title card:

John the Baptist
A holy Prophet
For having denounced Herod,
King of Judea, for taking
Herodias, his brother Phillip's
wife, in a cistern he has
been imprisoned.

Since Griggs probably added these title cards sometime in the 1960s, the inverted syntax might be an effort to imitate how he – or Wahl – thought a typical (badly-written) silent-era title card might read. But aside from this card and the one right before the end title, most are, in fact, 'After the Play by Oscar Wilde', and they represent the text of Wilde's play faithfully. Part of that fidelity to the text includes the removal of those shots in the restored version of the film suggesting that Salomé herself has somehow cut off the head of Jokanaan. For instance, we do not see Salomé take the scimitar from Herod's bodyguard, nor do we see her wave it about and drop it after the extreme long shot showing the salver mysteriously floating upward.

In sum, the Griggs-Moviedrome *Salome* is far less artful than the Nazimova original; in fact, there are only two art shots in the three-reeler version – the painted image of Salomé in the cloud of peacocks and an early shot of the moon (but it is not tinted blue). Being less artful, it is also more conventional. Nazimova's original can easily be interpreted in feminist terms, or even as an allegory of the female filmmaker in an industry dominated by men. At the end of the Nazimova version, Salomé, in full close-up, says, 'THE MYSTERY OF LOVE IS GREATER THAN THE MYSTERY OF DEATH', just before the soldiers plunge their spears into her body. At that same point in the Griggs-Moviedrome version, Salome says, 'I have kissed thy mouth, Jokanaan, I have kissed thy mouth'. In the end, the Griggs-Moviedrome *Salome* gives us little more than a

conventional femme fatale who gets what she deserves, as the bombastic closing title card makes clear:

And the moon was hid by a
great cloud
And the stars disappeared
And there was nothing in the world
So black as the name of
SALOME

¹ Anthony Slide, *Magnificent Obsession: The Outrageous History of Film Buffs, Collectors, Scholars, and Fanatics* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2018), p. 84.

² See Jan Wahl, *Carl Theodor Dreyer and 'Ordet': My Summer with the Danish Filmmaker* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2012) and *Dear Stinkpot: Letters from Louise Brooks* ([Albany, NY]: Bearmanor Media, 2016).

Elliptical Thinking: Planetary Patterns of Thought in *De Profundis*

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In an 1881 letter asking a friend to meet his mother, Oscar Wilde writes: ‘all brilliant people should cross each other’s cycles, like some of the nicest planets’.¹ In comparing the people in his social circle to celestial bodies in orbit, Wilde sets forth an idea that will soon become literalized in images within and surrounding his works. An illustration in *Salomé* (1894) renders Wilde the actual ‘(wo)man in the moon’, through placing his distinguishing physiognomy – slightly drooping eyes and thick full lips – on a white circle [fig. 1], while many cartoons satirizing Wilde’s American lecture tour put his head at the centre of a plant that seems to be more sun than flower. An 1881 *Punch* cartoon by Edward Sambourne, ‘O.W.’, features Wilde’s head as the only visible centre of a sunflower, with crisp triangular petals extending outward so rigidly that they appear to emanate from his body [fig. 2]. Another cartoon appearing in *Judge* magazine, entitled ‘A Thing of Beauty Not a Joy Forever’, features a sunflower-adorned Wilde standing with his head and torso in the centre of an enormous shape of ambiguous identification [fig. 3]. A very large orange circle with small yellow triangles coming off it, the shape could either be an enormous sunflower or, given its absence of a stem and leaves, a sun. Be he the face of the sun or the man in the moon, Wilde is, in all three of these illustrations, combined with a celestial body.

In *De Profundis* (1897) Wilde writes: ‘[e]very single work of art is the fulfilment of a prophecy. For every work of art is the conversion of an idea into an image.’² These images, which place Wilde within and at the centre of a cosmic universe, simultaneously fulfil the prophecy provided in his 1881 letter comparing people to planets, and pre-emptively fulfil the prophecy contained in the scientific metaphors of *De Profundis*, which likewise blur the boundaries between human and planet, and describe Wilde as the sun-like centre of many orbits. Moving away from the language of degeneration and biological decay that predominate in Wilde’s other works, *De*

Profundis draws its dominant scientific metaphors from astronomy – Wilde asks ‘who can calculate the orbit of his own soul?’ (p. 1038) and tells his lover Lord Alfred Douglas that ‘you forced your way into a life too large for you, one whose orbit transcended your power of vision no less than your power of cyclic motion’ (p. 1051). *De Profundis* is constellated by astronomical figures that, with their concomitant notions of circular time and bodies in orbit, provide Wilde with a way to give shape to his constantly revolving thoughts and feelings. Rather than offering teleological notions of time and influence, as metaphors from the biological sciences do, these celestial analogies offer an understanding of time that is cyclical and regenerative, while also inviting us to think of the problem of influence not in terms of moral corruption, but in terms of an imbalance in size and scale.



Fig. 1: Aubrey Beardsley, ‘The Woman in the Moon’ (1894).

PUNCH'S FANCY PORTRAITS.—No. 37.



"O. W."

"O, I feel just as happy as a bright Sunflower!"
Lays of Christy Minstrelsy.

Æsthete of Æsthetes!
What's in a name?
The poet is WILDE,
But his poetry's tame.

Fig. 2: Edward Sambourne, 'Punch's Fancy Portraits. — No. 37', *Punch*, 80 (25 June 1881), p. 298.

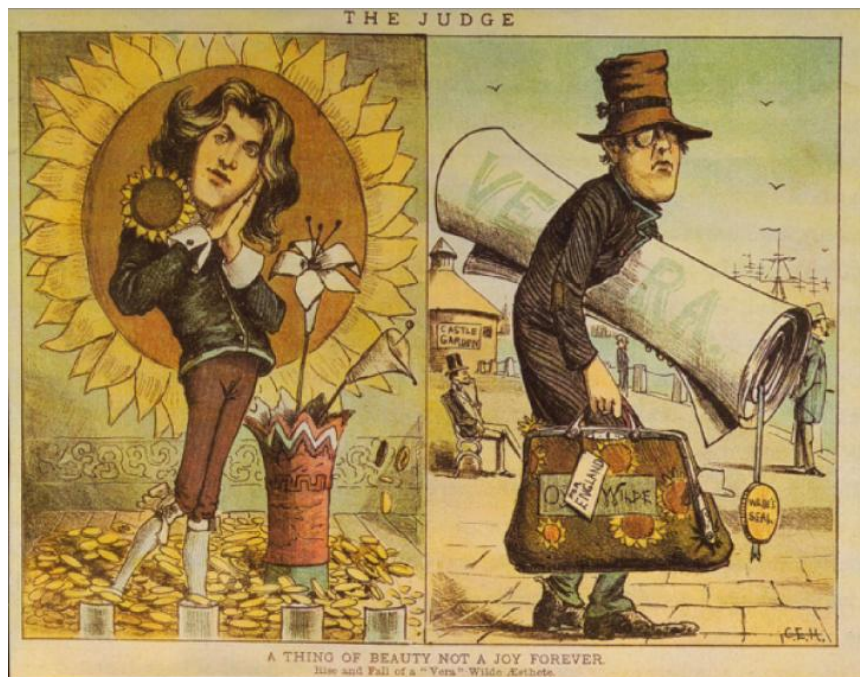


Fig. 3: James Albert Wales, 'A Thing of Beauty Not a Joy Forever', *Judge* (c. 1883).

Although Wilde's relationship to science has been a topic of increasing critical interest over the past two decades and given *De Profundis*' abundance of astronomical language, it is rather surprising that almost no one discusses his use of astronomy. Many essays about Wilde's relationship to science have discussed psychology (Heather Seagroatt), and more recent studies have focused on brain science (Elisha Cohn), biological metaphors of degeneration (Stephan Karschay), and evolution (George Lewis Levine and Michael Wainwright).³ Those that do discuss Wilde and astronomy tend to focus on mythological meaning, or to give astronomy no more than a passing mention *en route* to an argument about a different topic. For example, Joan Navarre reads *Salomé*'s moon as symbolizing three lunar goddesses,⁴ while Kathleen McDougall briefly acknowledges *De Profundis*' combining of planet and parasite metaphor, but only to demonstrate that Wilde's relationship with Douglas was described in scientific terms.⁵ Bruce Haley momentarily mentions astronomy so that he can point out that Wilde was not particularly interested in applying the laws of homogeneity and equilibrium to it.⁶ This critical oversight likely stems from the fact that Wilde's references to astronomy typically lack the depth and intellectual grounding characteristic of his engagement with other nineteenth-century scientific theories. When Wilde does mention astronomy in his work, it often operates at the level of decoration or symbol – for example, the sky that is 'cloudless, and pierced by one solitary star' in *Dorian Gray* (1890) or the moon that represents female chastity in *Salomé*.⁷ Neither of these texts deploy astronomical language in a systematic, scientifically-informed pattern of perceptible metaphor, as *De Profundis* does. Recognizing that Wilde's engagement with astronomy in *De Profundis* substantially departs from his use of it in other works compels us to ask: why is it this text that features patterns pulled from astronomy? Focusing upon Wilde's invocation of the astronomical concept of orbit can provide us with some answers. Though the word 'orbit' is only used twice in *De Profundis*, the text is imbued with the language and forms of these astronomical circles, which render perceptible the thought-processes of a man whose mind, by his own admission, could not stop 'going in [...] circles'.⁸

Written under great duress during Wilde's final months in prison, *De Profundis* has long defied generic classification, having been alternately deemed a love letter, elaboration of ethics,⁹ dramatic monologue, and spiritual autobiography,¹⁰ and duly dismissed as a text plagued by a disorganized, rambling structure.¹¹ Such criticisms arise in response to the fact that the text often moves in circles, doubling and tripling back to consider issues already discussed. This essay proposes that *De Profundis*' elliptical thinking is not an obstacle, but rather a key to understanding it, and further, that its elliptical quality is an intentional rhetorical strategy informed by Wilde's sophisticated understanding of astronomy. For the man trapped in prison with a mind moving in circles, astronomy offered forms, patterns, and structures for thinking through his life that were far more useful and pertinent than methods pulled from the biological sciences. Looking outward to help himself see inward, Wilde compares his lover to a satellite planet, calculates the orbit of his soul, and places himself, sun-like, in the centre of a solar-system of social circles.

Wilde's Knowledge of Astronomy

Wilde's journals and essays written during his time at Oxford indicate that he was familiar with the basic principles and mathematical underpinnings of astronomy, and he could very well have gained his knowledge of astronomy in the course of his classical studies. As Wilde aptly explains in his 1879 essay, 'The Rise of Historical Criticism', 'The study of Greek, it has been well said, implies the birth of criticism, comparison, and research [...] a fragment of Pythagorean astronomy set Copernicus thinking on that train of reasoning which has revolutionised the whole position of our planet in the universe.'¹² This statement demonstrates knowledge of the history of astronomy, and allows us to consider the possibility that the study of Greek provided a foundation and starting-point for Wilde's knowledge of astronomy, just as the study of Greek provided the foundation for Copernicus' investigations into the heavens. A reading of Wilde's Oxford notebooks reveals that he encountered the ideas of astronomy in sources other than the classics. His notebooks indicate that in addition to familiarity with the works of Pythagoras and Copernicus he was aware of the

works of William Kingdon Clifford, a mathematician known for his work in geometric algebra.¹³ In one notation discussing geometry, Wilde writes ‘Abstract Sciences (as Logic Geometry) give us the forms of phenomena’.¹⁴ Wilde’s early readings in geometry provided a crucial foundation for the relationship between astronomical language and textual form that *De Profundis* would later trace; in particular, for its explicit and implicit references to ‘orbits’, which are themselves geometric forms – circles and ellipses.

Apparently continuing his reading in the sciences after his Oxford education, Wilde’s adult library contained both Herbert Spencer’s *First Principles* (1867) and Clifford’s *Lectures and Essays* (1879).¹⁵ The latter contains many discussions of astronomy, some of which connect it to geometry, such as:

[The geometer] knows, indeed, that the laws assumed by Euclid are true with an accuracy that no direct experiment can approach, not only in this place where we are, but in places at a distance from us that no astronomer has conceived; [...] So, you see, there is a real parallel between the work of Copernicus and his successors on the one hand, and the work of Lobatcheswky and his successors on the other.¹⁶

Although it is not clear to what extent Wilde read Clifford’s text, recognizing that its linking together of astronomy and geometry predates *De Profundis* allows us to consider the possibility that *De Profundis*’ own imbricating of astronomical and geometrical concepts was influenced by Clifford’s work.

Circular Thinking and Cyclical Time

While in prison, Wilde wrote a letter to his friend More Adey describing his purpose for writing, in which he lamented ‘I cling to my notebook: it helps me: before I had it my brain was going in very evil circles.’¹⁷ When we realize that *De Profundis* was written to ease a mind that could not stop moving in circles, it makes more sense that the text is densely imbricated with many scientific circles of its own – specifically, the astronomical concept of orbit. The first time Wilde buttresses his circular thinking with direct astronomical metaphor occurs when he asks: ‘Who can calculate the orbit of his own soul?’ (p. 1038) Through saying that the plight of the human soul has an

incalculable orbit, Wilde is also asserting that the soul, like a planet, is constantly in orbit, on a sort of elliptical continuum. The idea of a soul being ‘in orbit’ allows us to think of it not as something that is either steadily progressing towards good or regressing towards evil, but rather, as something that is moving around in circles. The ambiguous morality suggested by the image of a soul-in-orbit both aligns with and challenges the conceptions of morality in Wilde’s other works. On the one hand, the idea of an orbiting soul does seem to suggest that morality is equivocal, a sentiment indicated many places in Wilde’s work. But on the other hand, a soul in orbit is not obviously progressing or degenerating in a linear fashion, as, for example, the soul of Dorian Gray seems to. The presence of an orbit metaphor attunes a reader to the importance of circular patterns and renders us better able to locate moments evincing Wilde’s circular thought processes in the text.

Beyond giving form to Wilde’s ceaseless circular thinking, the astronomical language in *De Profundis* also articulates a cyclical understanding of time that is markedly different from the linear temporality of devolution and degeneration that we typically find in Wilde’s works. In *De Profundis*, Wilde observes that ‘with us time itself does not progress. It revolves. It seems to circle round one centre of pain’ (p. 1009). Here we have an understanding of time and its movement articulated in language that is quite astronomical; like a planet in orbit, time ‘revolves’ and ‘circles’ around one person, akin to the sun or star at the centre of a solar system. This celestial conception of circularly moving time finds its most apt articulation in the conclusion to *De Profundis*, where Wilde writes: ‘What lies before me is my past. I have got to make myself look on that with different eyes [...]. It is only to be done fully by accepting it as an inevitable part of the evolution of my life and character’ (p. 1059). Wilde uses ‘evolution’ here not only in its biological, but also in its revolutionary sense.¹⁸ In placing his past before him rather than behind him, Wilde constructs the story of his life not as a timeline, but rather as a time-circle. Like a planet always in orbit, he looks ahead to see his past is progressing along a circular path, in which his history is always coming up ahead in his future. In its dual evolutionary and revolutionary senses, his cyclical version of time proves to be a positive, regenerative one. This idea finds fuller expression when he writes: ‘while

for the first year of my imprisonment I did nothing else [...] but wring my hands in impotent despair, and say “What an ending! What an appalling ending!”; now I try to say to myself [...] “What a beginning! What a wonderful beginning!” (p. 1038) In conceiving of his ending as a new beginning, Wilde evinces a formulation of time that is circular rather than end-oriented. Just as any point in a circle can be a beginning and an ending simultaneously, at this point in his life the beginning and the ending are the same.

Recognizing that the image of a soul in orbit and a sense of cyclical time are present in *De Profundis* enables us to see that there are scientifically-informed, non-biologically-based ways in which Wilde understood morality and human progress. If we return to the paragraph where Wilde first uses the image of a soul in orbit, we discover a complex constellation of planetary metaphors, whose purpose goes well beyond the mere literalization of thinking in circles. Wilde writes: “[t]he final mystery is oneself. When one has weighed the sun in a balance, and measured the steps of the moon, and mapped out the seven heavens star by star, there still remains oneself” (p. 1038). In these lines, Wilde specifically associates the practice of astronomy with the performing of evaluative measurements, as the heavens are to be weighed, quantified, mapped out, and calculated. This linking of astronomy with the process of measuring enables us to consider the possibility that *De Profundis*’ astronomical metaphors are deployed in attempt to ‘measure out’ or evaluate aspects of Wilde’s life.

Bodies in Orbit

When we turn to the language Wilde uses to describe his relationship with Douglas, we find him using ideas from astronomy to evaluate their relationship – orbits, cyclical motion, and the gravitational powers exerted by larger and smaller bodies of influence. This becomes particularly apparent when he attempts to figure out what went wrong between them. Wilde again employs the astronomical metaphor of human beings in orbit, but this time, he adds something new: a consideration of size. He writes:

There was the one great psychological error of our friendship, its entire want of proportion. You forced your way into a life too large for you, one whose orbit transcended your power of vision no less than your power of cyclic motion, one whose thoughts, passions and actions were of intense import, of wide interest, and fraught, too heavily indeed, with wonderful or awful consequence. Your little life of little whims and moods was admirable in its own little sphere. [...] It should have continued in its own sphere after you left Oxford. (p. 1051. Emphasis in the original.)

In describing himself as a being with a large orbit and claiming that Douglas has an orbit-like ‘cyclic motion’ that is transcended by his own, Wilde appears to be comparing himself and Douglas to large extra-terrestrial objects. But Wilde adds something to the person-as-planet metaphor that extends beyond being simply a clever demonstration of how he sits, sun-like, at the centre of many social circles. These astronomy metaphors come coupled with considerations of size and gravitational force. In a playful literalizing, Wilde uses knowledge of the gravity exerted by extra-terrestrial bodies to describe the gravity of the situation with Douglas and suggests that he was the massive influencing body – the gravity-exuding force – in his and Douglas’ relationship. In an argument that boils down to ‘I’m big, and you’re small. Too small to handle me’, Wilde seems to suggest that the forces between them were imbalanced. Continuing to assert that he is ‘large and in charge’, Wilde proceeds in the rest of the astronomy-laden paragraph to ‘shrink’ Douglas down to size, using ‘little’ three times to describe him. More specifically, in describing Douglas’ life as contained within a ‘little sphere’, Wilde associates Douglas with a small spherical planet that forces its way, unwelcome, into a larger planet’s orbit.

In comparing himself to a planet around which Douglas orbits, Wilde yet again provides the prophecy that was to be fulfilled a few years later in another image of him – this time, a satirical caricature by Max Beerbohm, ‘Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas’ (1914), in which a very large, very round Wilde sits across the table from a tiny Douglas, who seems to be his satellite [fig. 4]. The vast difference in size between these two men underscores the way in which the Wilde of *De Profundis* uses celestial language to emphasize that he is (like the Wilde in this illustration) the gravitational centre of the universe he creates. When Wilde uses astronomy to demonstrate that the problem in his relationship with Douglas was its ‘entire want of proportion,’ he gives a

framework with which to understand the problematic influence that differs substantially from the suggestions of corruption that were implied during the questioning at his trials. Namely, rather than being a morally corrupting influence, Wilde was an ‘outsize influence’. The problem in his relationship with Douglas was not that he corrupted Douglas, but rather, that his life was too large for Douglas to handle.

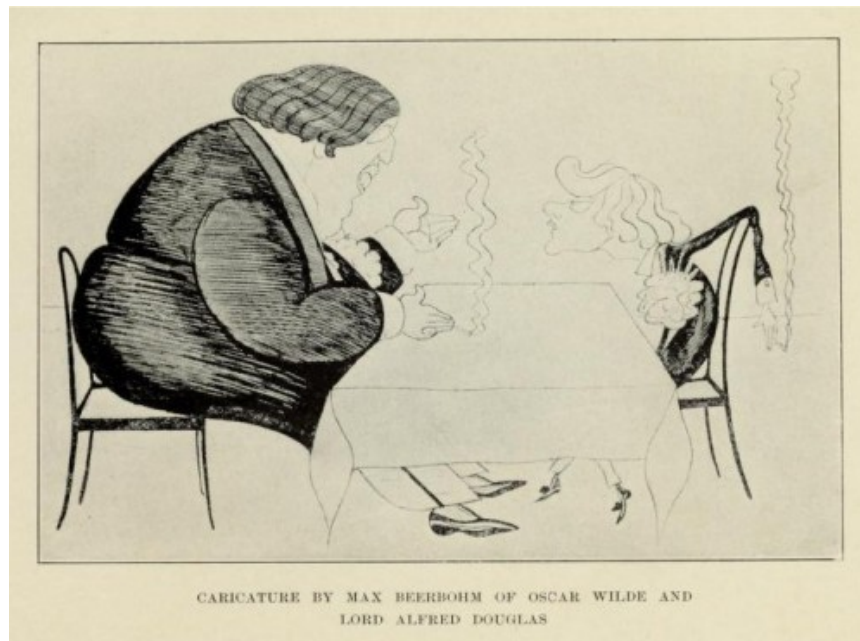


Fig. 4: Max Beerbohm, ‘Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas’ (1914).

In his *Commonplace Book*, Wilde notes that ‘modern science has shown us that both ethics and motion are results of molecular action: motion in one direction may be an ellipse, in the other a moral sentiment.’¹⁹ This early recording’s linking together of elliptical motion with morality and modern science aptly speaks to *De Profundis*’ method of invoking the astronomical metaphor of orbit in order to describe the progress of the soul and problems of influence – when the soul is in orbit, morality becomes not a question of straight linear progress, but rather, a continuous, elliptical concept; when Douglas forces himself into a life ‘whose orbit transcend[s] [...his] power of cyclic motion’, influence becomes not a question of moral corruption, but rather, a question of outsize influence (p. 1051). Rather than motion in one direction being an ellipse or moral sentiment, the

elliptical motions Wilde constructs and goes through in *De Profundis* become the text's moral sentiment. Moreover, this notion of an 'ellipse' can aid us in articulating exactly what formal properties of *De Profundis* make it such an elliptical read. Rather than offering us witty, pointedly paradoxical statements as he did in other works, Wilde offers a text of elliptical reasoning, in which ideas, emotions, and astronomical motifs constantly cycle in and out of play. Wilde notes this elliptical, ever-changing quality of his writing at *De Profundis*' end: 'How far I am away from the true temper of soul, this letter in its changing, uncertain moods, its scorn and bitterness, its aspirations and its failure to realise those aspirations, shows you quite clearly' (p. 1059). The strategic overlapping of literal and figurative ellipses in the text bespeaks that same artistic quality that Max Beerbohm noted, upon saying that *De Profundis* is 'the artistic essay of an artist' in which 'he was still playing with ideas, playing with emotions.'²⁰

Generic Possibilities

Reflecting upon his writing in *De Profundis*, Wilde notes that 'whatever is first in feeling comes always last in form' (p. 1051). In tracing *De Profundis*' patterns of astronomical language, we learn how densely layered circular forms helped Wilde give shape to his constantly revolving thoughts and emotions. If we recall from geometry that circles are considered a 'special case' of the ellipse, then we might categorize *De Profundis*' distinguishing formal characteristic to be its elliptical thinking – in both the semantic and geometric sense. Thus, the astronomical metaphors which help give perceptible form to these elliptical patterns of thought are, in the end, the most apt scientific metaphors through which Wilde could give shape to his thoughts. More broadly, recognizing that *De Profundis* is constellated with celestial patterns enables us to better answer the question of genre that it raises: beyond being a love letter, theological exposition, or personal essay, it can also be understood as a star chart, of sorts, made by a man looking outward beyond the borders of his earthly prison to the structures of the skies, which aid him in tracing the paths of the most influential bodies in his life and help him to make sense of what happened when his

worlds collided and then fell apart. In keeping with the abundance of circular patterns that are constructed in *De Profundis*, astrological charts typically feature a round circle, which contains symbols for astrological signs and explanations of the signs. Wilde may have seen such a chart during his lifetime, given that he asked a friend in 1885 ‘Will you cast the child’s horoscope for us? [...] My wife is very anxious to know its fate, and has begged me to ask you to search the stars.’²¹ Moreover, the more scientifically-rigorous astronomical charts of the nineteenth century were often bounded by a circular border, and featured a map of the cycles of stars and planets as they rotated through the sky. The astronomical chart provides a fitting generic classification, then, for a text characterized by thinking in circles, in which a man tries to make sense of the planet- and star-like people who come into his orbit. In some sense, *De Profundis* was Wilde’s attempt to ‘search the stars’ that crossed his life, as he spent his time in prison not only with a mind which could not stop moving in circles, but which was also in ceaseless contemplation of the many circles of which he had been a part; his wider social circle, his intimate inner circle, his circles of influence, and the way in which his life had ‘come full circle’ since the publication of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. This chart of orbits provides a map of Wilde’s universe, with Wilde at its centre. Despite asserting that it cannot be done, in *De Profundis* Wilde tries to ‘calculate the orbit’ of his own soul and chart a course for his future.

¹ Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (New York: Henry Holt, 2000), p. 116.

² Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis*, in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 2003), pp. 980–1059 (p. 1032). Further references are cited parenthetically in the text.

³ See Heather Seagroatt, ‘Hard Science, Soft Psychology, and Amorphous Art in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*’, *Studies in English Literature*, 38.4 (1998), 741–59; Elisha Cohn, “‘One single ivory cell’: Oscar Wilde and the Brain”, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 17.2 (2012), 183–205; Stephan Karschay, ‘Normalising the Degenerate: Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Marie Corelli’s *The Sorrows of Satan*’, in *Degeneration, Normativity and the Gothic at the Fin De Siècle* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 168–208; George Lewis Levine, ‘Darwinian Mind and Wildean Paradox’, in *Darwin the Writer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 149–85; and Michael Wainwright, ‘Oscar Wilde, the Science of Heredity, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*’, *English Literature in Transition*, 54.4 (2011), 494–522.

⁴ Joan Navarre, ‘The Moon as Symbol in *Salome*: Oscar Wilde’s Invocation of the Triple White Goddess’, in *Refiguring Oscar Wilde’s Salome*, ed. by Michael Y. Bennett (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), pp. 71–86.

⁵ Kathleen McDougall, ‘Oscar Wilde: Sexuality and Creativity in the Social Organism’, *Victorian Review*, 23.2 (1997), 212–26 (p. 221).

⁶ Bruce Haley, ‘Wilde’s “Decadence” and the Positivist Tradition’, *Victorian Studies*, 28.2 (1985), 215–29 (pp. 217–18).

- ⁷ Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, pp. 17–159 (p. 96).
- ⁸ Wilde, letter to More Adey (25 September 1896), in *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, p. 666.
- ⁹ Michael Doylen reads *De Profundis* as ‘an elaboration of an ethics’ which enables Wilde to ‘resist the medical-juridical classification of himself as a sexual deviant; Jonathan Dollimore argues that *De Profundis* evinces ‘conscious renunciation of [Wilde’s] transgressive aesthetic’; and Regenia Gagnier suggests that *De Profundis* is a text in which Wilde ‘deplore[s] his materialism and sensuality as a weakness’. See Michael R. Doylen, ‘Oscar Wilde’s *De Profundis*: Homosexual Self-Fashioning on the Other Side of Scandal’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 27.2 (1999), 547–66 (pp. 561–62); Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 95; and Regenia Gagnier, ‘Wilde and the Victorians’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Peter Raby (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 18–33 (p. 20).
- ¹⁰ William Buckler, for one, argues that it is a ‘spiritual autobiography’ allowing for ‘the imaginative illustration of [Wilde’s] aesthetic of the self’. See William E. Buckler, ‘Oscar Wilde’s Aesthetic of the Self: Art as Imaginative Self-Realization in *De Profundis*’, *Biography*, 12.2 (1989), 95–115 (p. 95).
- ¹¹ Richard Ellmann suggests that *De Profundis* is plagued by a ‘disjointed structure’ and Philippe Jullian disparages *De Profundis* as a ‘venomous dossier’. See Richard Ellman, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Knopf, 1988), p. 515, and Philippe Jullian, *Oscar Wilde*, trans. by Violet Wyndham (New York: Viking Press, 1969), p. 350.
- ¹² Wilde, ‘The Rise of Historical Criticism’, in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, pp. 1198–241 (p. 1240).
- ¹³ Wilde, *Commonplace Book*, in *Oscar Wilde’s Oxford Notebooks: A Portrait of Mind in the Making*, ed. by Philip E. Smith II and Michael S. Helfand (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 203, 207; and Wilde, *Notebook kept at Oxford*, in *Oscar Wilde’s Oxford Notebooks*, ed. by Philip E. Smith II and Michael S. Helfand, pp. 15, 86.
- ¹⁴ Wilde, *Commonplace Book*, p. 13. Emphasis in the original.
- ¹⁵ See Wainwright, ‘Oscar Wilde, the Science of Heredity, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*’, p. 496.
- ¹⁶ William Kingdon Clifford, *Lectures and Essays*, 2 vols, ed. by Leslie Stephen and Frederick Pollock (London: Macmillan and Co., 1879), I, p. 300.
- ¹⁷ Wilde, letter to More Adey, p. 666.
- ¹⁸ The *Oxford English Dictionary* also gives the less common definition of ‘evolution’ as ‘wheeling, twisting, or turning’.
- ¹⁹ Wilde, *Commonplace Book*, in *Oscar Wilde’s Oxford Notebooks*, ed. by Philip E. Smith II and Michael S. Helfand, p. 125.
- ²⁰ Max Beerbohm, *A Peep into the Past and Other Prose Pieces*, ed. by Rupert Hart-Davis (Brattleboro: The Stephen Greene Press, 1972), p. 38. *Internet Archive*.
- ²¹ *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis, p. 262. See also Wilde, *Notebook kept at Oxford*, in *Oscar Wilde’s Oxford Notebooks*, ed. by Philip E. Smith II and Michael S. Helfand, which contains two more references to astrology. One quotation suggests that it ‘appears also in astrology which Comte says is the first systematic attempt to frame a philosophy of history’ (p. 8). The other suggests ‘astrology and alchemy mark the time before poetry and science had been differentiated’ (p. 22).

Apuleius and the Esoteric Revival: An Ancient Decadent in Modern Times

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This article seeks to excavate a noteworthy source of inspiration for the interlocking decadent and esoteric movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: the classical Latin writer Apuleius. Apuleius' life and works brought together decadent literature, magic, witchcraft and the esoteric strand in pagan religion – the same conjunction that later manifested itself in Britain and France in the late Victorian era. Apuleius is sometimes referred to in the academic literature as an influence on modern decadence and the occult revival, but no sustained study of his role in this regard has yet been produced. This essay will proceed in the following way. First, we will undertake an overview of Apuleius and his novel *The Golden Ass*. Second, we will locate the position that Apuleius occupied in the literary context of the nineteenth century, with particular reference to the decadent tradition. Third, we will survey his influence on the modern esoteric revival in general. Finally, we will examine specifically his influence on revived goddess-worship.

Apuleius and *The Golden Ass*

Apuleius was born around the mid-120s CE in Madauros in modern Algeria.¹ We do not know what his full name was. His ancestry was north African, and his father was a prominent local figure. His education took him to Carthage and Athens; he subsequently spent time in Rome, where he acquired something of a literary reputation. In 155 CE, he decided to journey to Egypt, but due to illness he stopped at Oea in modern Libya. There, he lodged with a former student friend of his named Pontianus and ended up marrying Pontianus' mother, who was a wealthy widow. By his own account, he entered into this marriage at Pontianus' instigation, but her family believed that the union had been brought about through sorcery. Apuleius was

accordingly tried for witchcraft in 158/9 CE. A published version of his defence speech – the *Apologia* – still survives. We may presume that he was acquitted, as conviction would have meant death. In the succeeding years, Apuleius lived in Carthage as an honoured figure and served as a priest of the imperial cult. His date of death is unknown: it might have been any time after the late 160s.

Intellectually speaking, Apuleius was a Middle Platonist, although modern scholars' views differ on the quality of his philosophical thought.² Attempts have been made to argue that he drew on ideas from the Gnostic and Hermetic currents.³ A number of surviving works are attributed to him (in some cases spuriously), and these include several rhetorical and philosophical texts. His best-known work, however, is *The Golden Ass*, more properly called the *Metamorphoses*, the only complete Latin novel that has come down to us from classical times. It is based on an earlier Greek story (*Lucius, or The Ass*) but it seems that Apuleius introduced autobiographical elements into the novel, and its two most memorable parts appear to be largely original compositions. One of these is Book 11, which deals with the hero Lucius' conversion and salvation. The other is the fable of Cupid and Psyche, a fantastic story about a beautiful princess who marries a god, falls from his presence, and then undergoes several trials before she is reunited with him.

A brief summary of the novel's plot is in order. The narrator lodges in a house where the wife of the family is a witch, and he begins an affair with a slave-girl called Photis. In an attempt to emulate the wife's witchcraft, and in collaboration with Photis, he accidentally turns himself into a donkey. In this guise, he passes through the hands of a series of abusive owners, including robbers and effeminate priests of the Syrian Goddess. He is sold to a baker; the baker anally rapes a man who cuckolds him, and the baker's wife induces a witch to attack her husband supernaturally. Lucius is subsequently sold to a market gardener whom he gets killed, and he ends up in the possession of a wealthy man who teaches him tricks and allows him to have sex with a human woman. He is scheduled to engage in another copulation with a condemned

criminal, but he manages to escape. In the final part of the novel, Book 11, Lucius receives an epiphany from the goddess Isis (we may call this the Visitation of Isis). The spell which turned him into a donkey can be reversed if he eats roses. So, at Isis' direction, he attends a festival of the goddess and eats a bunch of roses carried by a priest. He is subsequently initiated into Isis' private mystery cult. Afterwards, he journeys to Rome at the behest of the goddess, where he undergoes two further initiations into the cult of Osiris. There the novel ends.

It will be apparent even from this brief summary why *The Golden Ass* has been treated as a significant source-text for ancient religion and magic. By his own account, Apuleius was an initiate of a number of mystery cults;⁴ and he seems to have deployed some of his specialist knowledge in the novel. Alison Butler has written of Book 11:

This is the earliest account of a mystery religion initiation and its discernible components are those to which later initiatory esoteric societies, such as the Freemasons, the pseudo-Rosicrucians and their offshoots, remain true.⁵

We must not forget, of course, that *The Golden Ass* is a ribald work of fiction; and its religious elements can accordingly be seen as ironic, exotic literary confections. Yet “sceptical” readings of the novel ultimately fail to convince.⁶ It has been noted, for example, that Book 11 exhibits the anthropologically authentic features of a religious conversion.⁷ In any event, it is sufficient to note for our purposes that nineteenth-century writers seem to have taken Apuleius' religious knowledge and sincerity for granted.

The novel is of particular interest for its treatment of the mystery religion of Isis, one of the principal goddesses of ancient Egypt. By Hellenistic times, she had become the focus of a quasi-monotheistic initiatory cult which spread through different parts of the Graeco-Roman cultural world. Our knowledge of the Isis cult before Apuleius' time is limited, but we do have one source of information in the form of aretalogies, or ‘pronouncement[s] by the goddess Isis in which her deeds and qualities are set forth in the first person’.⁸ In the Visitation of Isis, the goddess delivers a famous aretalogy, which seems to draw on authentic older Egyptian and Greek traditions.⁹ The Visitation is precipitated by a prayer made by Lucius to the goddess, in

which he calls on her under several different divine names and identities, eliding her with other goddesses of the ancient Mediterranean. Isis duly manifests herself from out of the sea. We may quote from William Adlington's classic translation of the aretology in which she asserts her supreme divine status:

I am she that is the naturall mother of all things, mistresse and governesse of all the Elements, the initiall progeny of worlds, chiefe of powers divine, Queene of heaven, the principall of the Gods celestiall, the light of the goddesses: at my will the planets of the ayre, the wholesome winds of the Seas, and the silences of hell be disposed [...] the Phrygians call me the mother of the Gods: the Athenians, Minerva: the Cyprians, Venus: the Candians, Diana: the Sicilians, Proserpina: the Eleusians, Ceres: some Juno, other Bellona, other Hecate [...].¹⁰

The Visitation scene, while striking, is not unique in Apuleius' writings. In the Cupid and Psyche story, for example, he identifies Venus as 'the primaeval mother of the universe, the first source of the elements'.¹¹ Venus perhaps plays an analogous role in that episode to the role of Isis in *The Golden Ass* as a whole. At any event, Apuleius' monotheising conception of a single Great Goddess is consistent both with what we know of the historical Isis cult and with his own intellectual inheritance from Platonic philosophy, which posits that disparate entities – including, it seems, even goddesses – can be seen as partaking in a higher unity.¹² It does, however, merit noting that Osiris seems to quietly take over from Isis as the supreme deity in the course of Book 11. Additionally, in several other writings attributed to him, Apuleius seems to indicate that he believes in a quasi-monotheistic male god.¹³ Osiris might be seen as the ultimate supreme Platonic divine entity, while Isis is a little lower in the metaphysical hierarchy.¹⁴

So much for Apuleius' novel and the religious influences on it. We will see presently how Apuleius came to act as a conduit into mystery religion and goddess-worship for a selection of nineteenth-century figures who made it their business to take an interest in such things. First, however, we must look at another, related group of modern figures who drew influence from Apuleius: the decadent artists and writers of the late nineteenth century.

Apuleius and Decadence

Apuleius was a presence in English letters throughout the nineteenth century. It is perhaps unsurprising that he struck a chord with the early Romantic poets, given their leanings towards Platonist philosophy and religious transgression. One of John Keats's best known pieces, the 'Ode to Psyche', was influenced by the tale of Cupid and Psyche; and the Visitation of Isis may have inspired a passage in *Endymion*.¹⁵ For his part, Percy Shelley wrote in 1817 that 'the splendour of Apuleius eclipses all that I have read for the last year'.¹⁶ One of his poems – 'Sweet Child, thou star of love and beauty bright' – was directly inspired by an epigram of Plato that was cited by Apuleius.¹⁷ We may also note that Apuleius was a main source for the Anglo-Irish poet Mary Tighe's epic *Psyche, or the Legend of Love* (1805).

Apuleius' influence grew in later years. While he was never really central to English literature, there do seem to have been a disproportionate number of published translations of *The Golden Ass*, or parts of it, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – that is, in the period commonly associated with the aesthetic and decadent movements.¹⁸ Special mention may be made here of some contemporary translations of the Cupid and Psyche episode. William Morris, a figure of major significance for aestheticism, penned a version of the story in 1865, which was published as part of his *Earthly Paradise* (1868–1870). Walter Pater included his own translation of the story in his novel *Marius the Epicurean* (1885).¹⁹ William Adlington's Elizabethan translation of the episode was republished in 1897 by Vale Press (Ballantyne Press), a publishing house run by Charles Ricketts and Charles Shannon (who also worked with the Oscar Wilde, Aubrey Beardsley, and John Gray). Finally, there was Edward Carpenter's translation of the story, which was published in London by Sonnenschein in 1900; Carpenter was a homosexual socialist with Neo-Pagan sympathies.

It has repeatedly been noted that artistic aestheticism and decadence in the late Victorian and Edwardian periods had a close relationship with occultism and Neo-Paganism, as well as with socially transgressive behaviour such as homosexuality.²⁰ Apuleius' writings formed part of

this conjunction. As one unsympathetic contemporary observer, the Catholic theologian William Francis Barry, wrote:

It must be well understood that disciples of the school known as Decadent, though by no means classic in a noble sense, are unquestionably Pagan, deriving their inspiration from Catullus, Apuleius of the 'Golden Ass', Petronius Arbiter, and the host of Greek lyrical singers whom Cicero could never, as he observes, find leisure to read.²¹

That the shade of Apuleius hung over these Pagan, decadent *littérateurs* is not a new observation, although it is one whose ramifications have been under-explored. The popular occult writer Montague Summers wrote that *The Golden Ass* 'has a fascination, perverse and baroque as it may often be, which is equalled by few books of any literature. Unbroken is the spell which that decadent mystic has cast upon the ages.'²² D. H. Lawrence described Apuleius as 'decadent and sensuous', containing 'the last throb of the old way of sensuality, Babylon, Tyre, Carthage'.²³ C. S. Lewis, who wrote his own iteration of the Cupid and Psyche story in *Till We Have Faces* (1956), described *The Golden Ass* as a 'strange compound of picaresque novel, horror comic, mystagogue's tract, pornography, and stylistic experiment'.²⁴

Part of the appeal of *The Golden Ass* for decadent writers was its form. Apuleius was a member of a literary movement known as the Second Sophistic, which focused on cultivating the art of rhetorical declamation. Apuleius accordingly manifests a rich, exuberant style. *The Golden Ass* is written in an idiosyncratic, poetic form of Latin with a large, obscure vocabulary and an elaborate syntax. The novel's prose style was repeatedly condemned as degenerate and debased from the Renaissance onwards,²⁵ but it was viewed rather differently by the decadents. The novel also employs a series of carefully crafted stories-within-the-story, which tend to have perverse and magical themes. The most famous of these is the tale of Cupid and Psyche, which is probably a Platonist allegory of the soul's fall into matter and subsequent reunion with the divine.²⁶ Other such stories are less edifying. One involves transvestitism, and several involve adultery. A man is killed by two witches who urinate on his face. A dead man is called back to life and another man is mutilated by witches. There is the tale of Charite, which tells of a love

triangle that ends in murder and suicide. There is a story involving the death of a father and his three sons, and a story of multiple poisonings. All this is of a piece with the novel as a whole, which presents the reader with unrelenting violence, scatology, and taboo-breaking sex. The sex is perhaps the most significant element, encompassing as it does everything up to and including homosexuality, adultery, and bestiality. As Keith Bradley notes, in Apuleius, ‘sex is a predominantly dangerous, and sometimes violent, force that jeopardizes and erodes all the various boundaries and bonds that normally order and regulate society’.²⁷ He thus had more to offer to fin-de-siècle decadents than theologizing about Isis.

As to specific contemporary writers who were influenced by *The Golden Ass*, we have already mentioned Walter Pater (1839-1894). In Pater’s *Marius the Epicurean*, the eponymous young hero attends a festival of Isis, just as Lucius does, and Apuleius makes a personal appearance as a foppish philosopher who talks about daemonology. The way in which Pater introduces *The Golden Ass* into the narrative is particularly interesting. The book makes its appearance as a luxury physical object, a gift given by Marius to an older youth named Flavian:

What they were intent on was, indeed, the book of books, the ‘golden’ book of that day, a gift to Flavian, as was shown by the purple writing on the handsome yellow wrapper following the title [...]. It was perfumed with oil of sandal-wood, and decorated with carved and gilt ivory bosses at each end of the roller.

And the inside was something not less dainty and fine, full of the archaisms and curious felicities in which that age delighted, quaint terms and images picked fresh from the early dramatists, the life-like phrases of some lost poet preserved by an old grammarian, racy morsels of the vernacular and studied prettinesses ...²⁸

What we have here is an example of a broader trope from decadent culture: what Linda Dowling called ‘the fatal book’, which has the ‘power decisively to change an individual life’.²⁹ This motif is best known, of course, from Oscar Wilde: the mysterious “yellow book” that corrupts Dorian Gray. In real life, Wilde claimed that his personal “golden book” was Pater’s own *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*.³⁰ Wilde seems to have drawn this term both from the passage of *Marius* quoted above and from Algernon Swinburne.³¹ That Apuleius formed part of this web of decadent intertextuality is clearly significant. Dorian Gray’s “yellow book” is

generally thought to be Joris-Karl Huysmans's (1848-1907) *À rebours* [*Against Nature*] (1884). In this novel, the protagonist, Des Esseintes, is a convinced admirer of Apuleius and owns a copy of the 1469 Roman *editio princeps* of his works.³² He does not care for the standard authors like Virgil and Cicero, but he has a soft spot for later, supposedly degenerate writers. This recalls what we have said about Apuleius' allegedly deficient prose style. We have here a boldly perverse rejection of the traditional French admiration for the disciplined perfection of Ciceronian Latin: a small but significant decadent act of rebellion against narrowness and pedantry.

Apuleius also made his way into the decadent visual arts. When Aubrey Beardsley depicted *The Toilette of Salome* in 1894, he drew her as the stereotype of the 'modern society woman on whose bookshelf festered unread copies of Apuleius, Baudelaire and de Sade'.³³ By this time, the German Symbolist artist Max Klinger had also portrayed the story of *Amor und Psyche* (1880) in a series of prints. Perhaps the last sighting of Apuleius among the decadents came in the mystically inclined Welsh writer Arthur Machen's novel *The Hill of Dreams* (1907). The book's hero is named Lucian Taylor, an obvious reference to Apuleius' Lucius, and Machen recounts the young Welshman seeing visions of ancient performances of classical stories, including from Apuleius' novel.³⁴ *The Hill of Dreams* was semi-autobiographical, and it comes as little surprise that Machen himself later recalled, in an explicitly autobiographical work, that he had consciously modelled the construction of his stories on Apuleius.³⁵

Apuleius and the esoteric revival

Scholars have shown limited interest in investigating the link between Apuleius and the revived Paganism and esotericism of nineteenth-century decadence, even though that link was expressly remarked upon at the time. Anatole France had already noticed the connection by 1890.³⁶ I quoted in the last section the judgement of the Catholic scholar William Barry. During World War I, the prominent Anglican cleric Dean Inge compared Apuleius to the 'decadent ritualists [of] our own time', and commented that 'spirits and ghosts, sacraments and oracles, white magic

and divination, make up the larger part of his religion' (Inge, a leading modernist theologian, was fighting his own battles with the Anglo-Catholics in his church and their particular brand of perverse exoticism).³⁷

Pausing there for a moment, it is curious and significant that a link between literary artistry in the decadent style on the one hand and esoteric religion on the other is already found in the life and work of Apuleius. This has implications for the way in which we seek to explain the reappearance of the link in the late nineteenth century. It makes it more difficult for us to attribute it purely to time-bound considerations: we cannot simply say that the hegemonic Christianity of the Victorian era led decadent writers to reach opportunistically for occult and Neo-Pagan themes *pour épater les bourgeois*. There may be some inherent psychological link between the mannered transgressiveness of form and content that we find in decadent writing and an interest in the magical and mystical forms of religious praxis.

Historically speaking, Apuleius' influence on the occult revival did not come out of nowhere. Already in the early part of the nineteenth century, he was well known to esoteric writers. One of these was Francis Barrett, who included Apuleius in his work *The Magus*.³⁸ Another was the well-known Platonist philosopher and Neo-Pagan Thomas Taylor, who published a translation of the Cupid and Psyche story in 1795 and a further translation of *The Golden Ass* and other works in 1822.³⁹ Taylor was one of those who interpreted the story of Cupid and Psyche as an allegory of the soul's descent into matter. Another English adaptation of the Cupid and Psyche story, by Hudson Gurney, was published and republished in several editions around the turn of the nineteenth century. Gurney informed readers that 'APULEIUS was a Platonist and a Mystic, and [...] he is perpetually recurring to the rites and cabbala of the many religious fraternities into which he had been initiated'.⁴⁰ This highlights a key point. Apuleius seems to have been characterized by a series of nineteenth-century writers as an initiate of the mysteries: a kind of ancient Freemason.⁴¹ Indeed, the reception of Apuleius by contemporary Freemasons was crucial to his influence on the occult revival. He caught the

interest of a series of Masonic writers who combined their Freemasonry with an interest in ancient mystery religion.⁴² Apuleius' activities in the Isis cult were connected with the modern Craft by several significant figures in the occult revival, including Kenneth Mackenzie (1833-1886) and John Yarker (1833-1913). In his *Royal Masonic Cyclopaedia*, Mackenzie offered an allegorical reading of the novel relating to wisdom and divine providence. He concluded with the words: "The whole romance abounds with allusions of an interesting kind to the Freemason, and should be studied by every true Brother of the Mystic Tie."⁴³

It is not difficult to find further evidence of Apuleius' influence on leading figures of the occult revival. Éliphas Lévi and Madame Blavatsky were both familiar with his work;⁴⁴ and his legacy can be seen in and around the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, the pioneering magical order which was founded *circa* 1888 (and whose rituals are a fairly good example of decadent performance art). William Wynn Westcott (1848-1925), the order's principal founder, wrote of *The Golden Ass*: "This story should be studied by all Freemasons and Rosicrucians".⁴⁵ Other prominent members of the Golden Dawn who did just that included Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers (1854-1918), who later founded his own cult of Isis around the turn of the twentieth century in Paris,⁴⁶ and W. B. Yeats (1865-1939), who liked the theme of the individual on a quest for spiritual truth and incorporated it into his personal mythology.⁴⁷ In addition, we must mention here the most notorious Golden Dawn magician of all, Aleister Crowley (1875-1947). Crowley's play *Tannhäuser* (1902) includes two speeches concerning Isis that seem to recall the Visitation. The Great Beast also put *The Golden Ass* on his reading list for his students, and elsewhere included Apuleius in a list of strange and sensationalist writers alongside Huysmans and Machen.⁴⁸

Apuleius and goddess-worship

Finally, we may consider a more specific aspect of Apuleius' influence on the Golden Dawn and other actors in the esoteric revival – that of goddess-worship. Apuleius appears to have given

significant impetus to the religious idea that the divine takes the form of a syncretistic Great Goddess: an idea which is expressed powerfully and memorably in the Visitation of Isis. Interestingly, the leanings towards male quasi-monotheism that are also found in Apuleius' writings do not seem to have been pursued by decadent-era esotericists. They presumably struck them as too conventional.

In the field of Pagan Studies, Apuleius is freely recognized as a source of modern goddess-worship.⁴⁹ Yet this remains an under-researched point. In his seminal history of Neo-Pagan witchcraft, *The Triumph of the Moon*, Ronald Hutton traces how the idea of a syncretistic Great Goddess acquired a place in post-Enlightenment British culture.⁵⁰ His research indicates that the idea entered the cultural bloodstream by two principal routes: Romantic poetry, going back to the time of Keats and Shelley, and the work of academic classicists. Hutton's narrative is expertly crafted, but it is not entirely complete. It leaves out some parts of the story, including the reception of *The Golden Ass* and the Visitation of Isis, which formed in effect a third source for the Great Goddess idea.

Consistently with what we have seen, the first mentions of the Visitation of Isis among nineteenth-century esotericists seem to occur in the works of writers on Freemasonry (several of whom were Americans). The philo-Masonic writer John Fellows made reference to the Visitation and declared that Isis was 'the universal nature, or the first cause, the object of all the mysteries'.⁵¹ The Masonic grandee Albert Pike made specific mention of the Visitation in his work.⁵² The well-known Masonic encyclopaedist Albert Mackey compared Isis in the Visitation to the Whore of Babylon in the Book of Revelation.⁵³ Evidently, the pagan associations of Apuleius were not necessarily positive even in esoteric circles. By the twentieth century, the Visitation of Isis had become the common property of esotericists, Masonic and otherwise. The American occultist Manly P. Hall quoted the Visitation in his 1928 work *The Secret Teachings of All Ages*;⁵⁴ Dion Fortune took the idea that all goddesses are one from Apuleius' work;⁵⁵ and Robert Graves quoted the Visitation at length in his eccentric classic *The White Goddess*.⁵⁶ More

interestingly for our purposes, the Visitation had by this time undergone another development: it had passed into the domain of Neo-Pagan liturgy.

How exactly did this happen? A clear view of developments in this area has been obscured by the myth of the Cambridge coven. It is sometimes said that in the nineteenth century a group of students at Cambridge University used Apuleius as a source-text for Neo-Pagan rituals. This notion has been current both among practising Neo-Pagans and in academic circles.⁵⁷ The story is, however, very likely to be false. Its ultimate source seems to be Montague Summers, who reported an alleged rumour that Francis Barrett ‘founded a small sodality of students’ which studied ‘dark and deep mysteries’, and which ‘perhaps persists even today’.⁵⁸ Barrett’s biographer, Francis King, was prepared to take this claim seriously.⁵⁹ But Summers is not a trustworthy source, and scepticism is the better option. The Cambridge coven story was subsequently taken up by E. W. (Bill) Liddell, the author of a body of material which sought to claim that the Essex cunning man George Pickingill (1816–1909) was a major influence on the development of modern esotericism and witchcraft. Nine witch covens that were allegedly founded by Pickingill were said to have used the Visitation of Isis in their rituals. Pickingill supposedly got this idea from the Cambridge group, which had used the ancient classics (along with Keats and Shelley) as a source for their activities.⁶⁰ Liddell’s writings are generally regarded as spurious, and there is no reason at all to believe that they are accurate on this point.⁶¹

In truth, the first appearance of Isis as a universal goddess in Neo-Pagan magical ritual came with the Golden Dawn, which incorporated a distinct strand of goddess-worship into its system. Isis in particular – the ‘Great goddess of the forces of nature’⁶² – was mentioned repeatedly in the order’s rites.⁶³ As early as his initiation into the second grade of “Theoricus”, the Golden Dawn magus was informed of a female divine figure who was simultaneously Isis, the kabbalistic Queen of the Canticles, the angel Sandalphon and the bride of the Book of Revelation (an interesting inversion of Mackey’s disapproving use of Biblical imagery).⁶⁴ Another example of Isiac worship in the Golden Dawn tradition comes in the “Ritual for

'Transformation'', which seems to have been composed somewhat later than most of the other rituals. This rite also refers to Revelation, and contains an invocation of Isis which culminates in the following passionate rhetoric:

O mother, O archetype eternal of maternity and love, O mother, the flower of all mothers [...]. O Isis, great queen of heaven, supernal splendour [...]. Hail unto thee, O thou mighty mother, Isis, unveil thou, O soul of nature, giving life and energy to the universe.⁶⁵

Some Golden Dawn members even believed that they had been favoured with their own visitation from the goddess. Florence Farr and Elaine Simpson had a trance vision on 10 November 1892 in which they saw a figure who claimed to be 'the mighty Mother Isis; most powerful of all the world'.⁶⁶ The Golden Dawn's ideas about the divine feminine undoubtedly had more than one source (including in particular the Kabbalah) and they cannot be ascribed solely to influence from Apuleius. Nevertheless, it is strongly plausible that the order's syncretic, quasi-monotheistic conception of Isis was mediated through the Visitation. This would be probable even if it were not already clear from other sources that the fin-de-siècle esotericists who operated in and around the Golden Dawn had read their Apuleius.

The best known modern expression of the Visitation of Isis is a piece of liturgy used by Wiccan witches which is known as the "Charge of the Goddess". Gerald Gardner, the founder of Wicca, wrote the Charge in the 1940s; the original version was entitled "Leviter Veslis". Gardner was a well-read man and we know something about the content of his reading from a combination of his published "non-fictional" books on witchcraft (*Witchcraft Today* (1954) and *The Meaning of Witchcraft* (1959)) and a list of books that the Wiccan Church of Canada purchased from his estate. This evidence attests that he was familiar with Apuleius, as well as with Apuleius' modern admirers Dion Fortune and Robert Graves. The text of the Charge does not directly quote the Visitation of Isis.⁶⁷ But the general resemblance of the Charge to the Visitation – both texts being dramatic self-revelations by universal goddesses – is too great to dismiss.⁶⁸ Moreover, the Charge begins with a list of historical goddesses,⁶⁹ which clearly recalls

the syncretic conception of the Great Goddess found in the Visitation. In Gardner's original "Leviter Veslis", the passage in question ran as follows:

Listen to the words of the Great mother, who of old was also called among men Artemis, Astarte, Dione, Melusine, Aphrodite, Cerridwen, Diana, Arianrhod, Bride, and by many other names.⁷⁰

We may also note that Gardner remarked of the Charge that 'a similar charge was a feature of the ancient mysteries' and it is difficult to know what he can have meant by this if not the Visitation.⁷¹ The Visitation was essentially replaced and supplanted by the Charge in Wiccan circles, and perhaps in Neo-Pagan circles more generally. Wiccans still read Apuleius (as well as Graves and Fortune) but if they want to construct a ritual text for the epiphany of a divine figure, it would seem that they tend to adapt Gardner's Charge or one of the variants on it. To this extent, we might say that the Visitation of Isis has perished by absorption.

Like many of the men and women of the decadent and esoteric currents, Apuleius came from a comfortable background and yet ended up cutting something of a marginal figure in his own culture. His apparent interest in and knowledge of magic, the supernatural and initiatory religion made him an unusually attractive source for nineteenth- and twentieth-century occultists, and the fact that he wrote on transgressive themes in a decadent style served only to increase his appeal. Yet he has not to date received the attention that he deserves in accounts of decadence and the esoteric revival. It may be hoped that this article will go some way towards remedying this deficiency.

¹ On Apuleius' biography and self-presentation, see Julia Haig Gaisser, *The Fortunes of Apuleius & the Golden Ass* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 1–20.

² See, for example, Friedemann Drews, 'Asinus Philosophans: Allegory's Fate and Isis' Providence in the *Metamorphoses*', in *Aspects of Apuleius' Golden Ass, Volume III*, ed. by W. Keulen and U. Egelhaaf-Gaiser (Leiden: Brill, 2012), pp. 107–31 (pp. 110–12).

³ See Jean-Pierre Mahé, 'Quelques remarques sur la religion des Métamorphoses d'Apulée et les doctrines gnostiques contemporaines', *Revue des sciences religieuses*, 46 (1972), 1–19, and Hans Münstermann, *Apuleius: Metamorphosen literarischer Vorlagen* (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1995), pp. 195–211.

⁴ See Apuleius, *The Apologia and Florida of Apuleius of Madaura*, trans. by H. E. Butler, pp. 55–56.

⁵ Alison Butler, *Victorian Occultism and the Making of Modern Magic: Invoking Tradition* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 94.

⁶ On the interpretation of the novel as a whole, and of the Cupid and Psyche episode and Book 11 in particular, see

- E. J. Kenney, ed., *Apuleius: Cupid & Psyche* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 6–17; P. G. Walsh, ed., *Apuleius: The Golden Ass* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), pp. xxiii–xliii; Stavros Frangoulidis, *Witches, Isis and Narrative* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008), pp. 175–76, 200–02; Claudio Moreschini, *Apuleius and the Metamorphoses of Platonism* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015), pp. 59–69, 81–83, 87–115.
- ⁷ See Nancy Shumate, *Crisis and Conversion in Apuleius' Metamorphoses* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), pp. 310–28. Shumate herself thinks that Apuleius was not a true believer, but rather an acute observer who understood the psychology of true belief.
- ⁸ Matthew E. Gordley, *The Colossian Hymn in Context* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), p. 147; see generally pp. 147–51.
- ⁹ See J. Gwyn Griffiths, *Apuleius of Madauros: The Isis-Book* (Leiden: Brill, 1975), pp. 138–40, and Mareile Haase, 'Epithets of Isis', in *Brill's New Pauly*, ed. by Hubert Cancik and Helmuth Schneider, 6 vols (Leiden: Brill, 2005), VI, p. 967.
- ¹⁰ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass of Lucius Apuleius*, trans. by William Adlington (London: Chapman and Dodd, 1922), p. 219. The passage is *The Golden Ass*, 11.5.
- ¹¹ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, 4.30.
- ¹² See Friedemann Drews, 'A Platonic Reading of the Isis Book', in *Apuleius Madaurensis Metamorphoses: Book XI: The Isis Book*, ed. by W. H. Keulen et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2015), pp. 517–28 (p. 519).
- ¹³ See *On the Heavens*, 37; *On Plato and his Doctrine*, 1.5; *On the God of Socrates*, 3; and *Apologia*, 64.
- ¹⁴ See Stefan Tilg, *Apuleius' Metamorphoses: A Study in Roman Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 80–82, and Drews, 'A Platonic Reading', pp. 519–20, 524.
- ¹⁵ Keats cited Apuleius as a source for the 'Ode': see Horace E. Scudder, ed., *The Complete Poetical Works and Letters of John Keats* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1899), pp. 142, 370–01. On *Endymion*, see Jennifer N. Wunder, *Keats, Hermeticism, and the Secret Societies* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 134–35.
- ¹⁶ See Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Poems of Shelley: Volume Four: 1820–1821*, ed. by Michael Rossington, Jack Donovan, and Kelvin Everest (London: Routledge, 2014), p. 301.
- ¹⁷ See Kathleen Raine, *Blake and the New Age* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), pp. 101–03.
- ¹⁸ In England, such translations were reprinted at least ten times by George Bell and Sons (originally Bell and Daldy) between 1872 and 1914. Other popular editions were published by David Nutt (London, 1893), Alexander Moring (London, 1904), Imperial Press (London, 1904), and Clarendon Press (Oxford, 1910).
- ¹⁹ The translation is creative in nature, being moulded by Pater's aestheticism: see Eugene J. Brzenk, 'Pater and Apuleius', *Comparative Literature*, 10 (1958), 55–60.
- ²⁰ See Jennifer Rachel Hallett, 'Paganism in England 1885–1914', unpublished PhD thesis (University of Bristol, 2006), Chapter 4; Kelly Anne Reid, 'The Love Which Dare Not Speak its Name', *The Pomegranate*, 10 (2008), 130–41; and G. J. Wheeler, 'Discourses of Paganism in the British and Irish Press During the Early Pagan Revival', *The Pomegranate*, 19 (2017), 5–24.
- ²¹ William Barry, *Heralds of Revolt* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1904), p. 295.
- ²² Montague Summers, *The Vampire in Europe* (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 42.
- ²³ D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 167.
- ²⁴ C. S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1956), p. 313.
- ²⁵ For an historical perspective on this issue, see S. J. Harrison, *Framing the Ass* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 17–24, 28–31 and 40–41, and Silvia Mattiacci, 'Apuleius and Africitas', in *Apuleius and Africa*, ed. by Benjamin Todd Lee, Ellen Finkelpearl, and Luca Graverini (New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 87–111.
- ²⁶ For reflections on the origins of this story, and its links with the Platonist and Gnostic currents, see Chiara O. Tommasi Moreschini, 'Gnostic Variations on the Tale of Cupid and Psyche', in *Intende, Lector*, ed. by Marília P. Futre Pinheiro, Anton Bierl, and Roger Beck (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), pp. 123–44.
- ²⁷ Keith Bradley, *Apuleius and Antonine Rome* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), p. 230.
- ²⁸ Walter Pater, *Marius the Epicurean* (London: Macmillan, 1885), pp. 40–41. Note also that Pater compares Apuleius to Théophile Gautier at p. 44.
- ²⁹ Linda Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 164.
- ³⁰ William H. O'Donnell and Douglas N. Archibald, eds., *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats: Autobiographies* (New York: Scribner, 1999), p. 124.
- ³¹ See Matthew Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), p. 93.
- ³² Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature*, trans. by Robert Baldick (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 31.
- ³³ Neil Bartlett, *Who Was That Man?: A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1988), p. 39.
- ³⁴ Arthur Machen, *The Hill of Dreams* (London: Martin Secker, 1924), pp. 145–47.
- ³⁵ Arthur Machen, *Things Near and Far* (London: Martin Secker, 1923), p. 104.
- ³⁶ See Mircea Eliade, *Occultism, Witchcraft, and Cultural Fashions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 51.
- ³⁷ William Ralph Inge, *The Philosophy of Plotinus*, 3rd edn, 2 vols (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003), I, p. 93.
- ³⁸ Francis Barrett, *The Magus* (London: Lackington, Allen, and Co., 1801), pp. 143, 158–61. In these places, Barrett

was plagiarizing Pierre Bayle's *Dictionary Historical and Critical* (s.vv. 'Apuleius' and 'Zoroaster'), but he changed Bayle's text where the latter's sceptical outlook differed from his own.

³⁹ Thomas Taylor, *The Fable of Cupid and Psyche* (London: Leigh and Sotheby, 1795), and Thomas Taylor, *The Metamorphosis, or Golden Ass, and Philosophical Works, of Apuleius* (London: Robert Triphook and Thomas Rodd, 1822).

⁴⁰ Hudson Gurney, *Cupid and Psyche: A Mythological Tale from the Golden Ass of Apuleius*, 3rd edn (London: J. Wright, 1801), [first page, not numbered].

⁴¹ Wunder makes a similar point to this, although without furnishing contemporary evidence. See *Keats*, p. 63.

⁴² See Hyppolito Joseph da Costa, *Sketch for the History of the Dionysian Artificers* (London: Sherwood, Neely, and Jones, 1820), pp. 15, 17; Theodore A. Buckley, 'The Golden Ass of Apuleius', *The Freemasons' Quarterly Magazine*, 1 (1853), 39–47; "X", 'The Ancient Mysteries', *Freemasons Magazine and Masonic Mirror*, 4 (1858), 881–87 (pp. 884–85); A. F. A. Woodford, ed., *Kenning's Masonic Cyclopaedia* (London: George Kenning, 1878), pp. 37, 343–44; and, from a somewhat later period, W. L. Wilmshurst, *The Meaning of Masonry* (London: William Rider and Son, 1922), Chapter 5.

⁴³ Kenneth R. H. Mackenzie, *The Royal Masonic Cyclopaedia of History, Rites, Symbolism, and Biography* (London: John Hogg, 1877), p. 276. For Yarker's views, see *The Arcane Schools* (Belfast: William Tait, 1909), pp. 107, 112, 136–37.

⁴⁴ See Éliphas Lévi, *The History of Magic*, 2nd edn (London: William Rider and Son, 1922), pp. 204–06, and H. P. Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled*, 2 vols (Pasadena: Theosophical University Press, [n.d.]), II, pp. 108, 146, 362–63.

⁴⁵ R. A. Gilbert, ed., *The Magical Mason* (Wellingborough: Aquarian, 1983), p. 275.

⁴⁶ It would seem that Mathers' endeavours in this regard were indebted to Apuleius. See Caroline Tully, 'Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers and Isis', in *Ten Years of Triumph of the Moon*, ed. by Dave Evans and Dave Green (Harpندن: Hidden Publishing, 2009), pp. 62–74.

⁴⁷ See P. Th. M. G. Liebrechts, *Centaurs in the Twilight* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993), p. 95, and Brian Arkins, 'The Roman Novel in Irish writers', *Irish University Review*, 32 (2002), 215–24 (p. 222).

⁴⁸ See 'A ∴ A ∴ Curriculum', *The Equinox*, 3.1 (1919), 18–37 (p. 23); *Magick in Theory and Practice* (1924), Appendix I; and *Magick Without Tears* (1943), Chapter LXXIV.

⁴⁹ See Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 33; Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*, rev. edn (New York: Penguin Compass, 1986), p. 536; and Barbara Jane Davy, *Introduction to Pagan Studies* (Lanham: AltaMira, 2007), p. 119.

⁵⁰ See Hutton, 'Finding a Goddess', in *The Triumph of the Moon*, pp. 33–44.

⁵¹ John Fellows, *The Mysteries of Freemasonry* (London: Reeves and Turner, 1860), p. 133.

⁵² Albert Pike, *Morals and Dogma of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry* (Charleston: Supreme Council of the Thirty-Third Degree, 1871), p. 80.

⁵³ Albert G. Mackey, *An Encyclopedia of Freemasonry and Its Kindred Sciences* (Philadelphia: Moss, 1879), p. 80. This passage was derivative of George Stanley Faber's *The Origin of Pagan Idolatry*, 3 vols (London: F. C. and J. Rivington, 1816), III, p. 642. Faber was not a Freemason, but he had a similar agenda of interpreting the Book of Revelation as connected with ancient mystery religion.

⁵⁴ Manly P. Hall, *The Secret Teachings of All Ages* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2003), pp. 121–27.

⁵⁵ See Robert Laynton, *Behind the Masks of God*, 2nd edn (Stoke-on-Trent: Companion Guides, 2016), p. 65. See also Ben Gruagach, *The Wiccan Mystic* (Eden Prairie, MN: WitchGrotto, 2007), p. 243.

⁵⁶ Robert Graves, *The White Goddess*, 4th edn (Manchester: Carcanet, 1999), pp. 65–68.

⁵⁷ See J. Phillips, 'A History of Wicca in England: 1939 to Present Day', paper given at 1991 Wiccan Conference in Canberra (revised 2004), available online at http://geraldgardner.com/History_of_Wicca_Revised.pdf [accessed 18 December 2019], and Chas S. Clifton and Graham Harvey, eds., *The Paganism Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 16.

⁵⁸ Montague Summers, *Witchcraft and Black Magic* (London: Rider and Co., 1946), pp. 161–62.

⁵⁹ Francis X. King, *The Flying Sorcerer* (Oxford: Mandrake, 1992), pp. 25–26; see also p. 35 n.8.

⁶⁰ E. W. Liddell, 'Secrets of the Nine Covens', *The Cauldron*, [February 1984]. Available online at <http://www.the-cauldron.org.uk/Resources/Secrets%20Nine%20Covens.pdf> [accessed 18 December 2019].

⁶¹ See Hutton, *Triumph*, pp. 298–307.

⁶² See Israel Regardie, *The Golden Dawn*, 7th edn (Woodbury: Llewellyn, 2015), p. 386.

⁶³ On Isis in the Golden Dawn, see Hallett, 'Paganism', pp. 191–92.

⁶⁴ See Regardie, *The Golden Dawn*, pp. 194–95. Perhaps surprisingly, the Virgin Mary is missing from this list, although we might note that in the same period Sir James Frazer referenced Apuleius in a memorable passage linking Isis to Mary: see *The Golden Bough*, 3rd edn, 12 vols (London: Macmillan and Co., 1914), VI, pp. 118–19.

⁶⁵ Regardie, *The Golden Dawn*, pp. 549–50.

⁶⁶ Lynne Hume and Nevill Drury, *The Varieties of Magical Experience* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2013), p. 181.

⁶⁷ Its direct sources comprise principally Crowley and the American anthropologist Charles Leland. See Ceisiwr Serith, 'The Sources of the Charge of the Goddess', <http://www.ceisiwrserith.com/wicca/charge.htm> [accessed 18 December 2019], and Ronald Hutton, 'Crowley and Wicca', in *Aleister Crowley and Western Esotericism*, ed. by Henrik Bogdan and Martin P. Starr (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 285–306.

⁶⁸ The link between the two is acknowledged in Sorita D'Este and David Rankine, *Wicca: Magical Beginnings*, 2nd edn

(London: Avalonia, 2008), p. 142, and Sorita d'Este, 'The Charge of the Goddess: Listen to the Words of Leland and Crowley' (1 January 2012), http://www.witchvox.com/va/dt_va.html?a=ukgb2&cc=words&id=14895 [accessed 18 December 2019].

⁶⁹ And Mélusine, a mediaeval supernatural character whom Gardner would have met in Aleister Crowley's *The Law of Liberty* (1919).

⁷⁰ See Serith, 'The Sources of the Charge of the Goddess'.

⁷¹ Gerald B. Gardner, *Witchcraft Today* (New York: Citadel, 2004), p. 42.

Kate Hext and Alex Murray (eds), *Decadence in the Age of Modernism*
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The broad premise of *Decadence in the Age of Modernism* – that the relationship between decadence and modernism is not so much contiguous as continuous – is one that has been steadily gaining traction in recent years. This collection of essays offers a series of fascinating examples that illuminate the nuances of this relationship and, crucially, collectively draw attention to the plurality of both traditions in a period too often dominated by the high modernist canon.

The opening chapter, by Kristin Mahoney, goes straight to the heart of the decadence-modernism conundrum. Ada Levenson is shown as occupying two middle grounds: one as an 1890s decadent inhabiting the new century; and another between decadence and feminism. As a means to counter a masculine conception of modernism, the decadent aesthetic becomes the basis for an indirect type of feminism but Mahoney is rightly sensitive to the complexities of a feminist writer's engagement with a tradition that was, itself, not without misogyny. She illustrates Levenson's use of parody to disrupt patriarchal structures, adapting fin-de-siècle methods to modern, feminist purposes in a problematic but ultimately fruitfully progressive relationship.

Ellen Crowell takes a different approach, examining the legacy of an 1890s text, Wilde's *Salomé*, in early twentieth-century productions. Crowell proposes that using the severed head of John the Baptist as a prop sets in motion a generic tension by juxtaposing a Naturalist object with an otherwise Symbolist *mise en scène*. By refusing to reconcile these two aesthetic modes, *Salomé* makes irreconcilability itself a meta-aesthetic critique: the play's subversion lies in its exploitation of the irritation the audience feels when genres collide, using aesthetic failure as a trigger for new generic forms. Crowell's is a unique and convincing reading of the play's performance history, although francophone readers will find the misgendered nouns jarring.

The volume's third chapter takes a broader stance. Nick Freeman argues that the early twentieth-century conservative press sought to confine infectious decadence to the 1890s but that its flexibility allowed decadence to resist being 'cured'. Identifying a 'semantic slippage' around the term 'decadence', whereby it became associated more with a lifestyle than an aesthetic, Freeman examines several ways in which decadence persisted into the twentieth century: Edmund John's Pre-Raphaelite imitations enact a new decadence; Max Beerbohm, a product of the 1890s, satirizes his own past but risks obscuring the radical experimentation encouraged by decadence; and Hector Hugh Munro (writing as Saki) uses humour to evade any moral outcry his homoerotic writing might provoke. In a wide-ranging essay, Freeman demonstrates how, divorced from explicit immorality and designating a mode of behaviour rather than an aesthetic purism, twentieth-century decadence slipped into the mainstream in disguise.

In the fourth chapter, Joseph Bristow shines a light on Margaret Sackville, who was among the most visible female poets of the era but was regarded as limited by her gender. An activist for women's rights and poetry's cultural influence, Sackville railed against the narcissism and male-domination amplified by decadence and called for women to develop their own art forms, no longer as muses but as voices in their own right. War disrupted her endeavours and she struggled to translate her pacifist and socialist activism into the disciplined, decorous poetic form she sought. Ultimately, Bristow shows that Sackville considered it a crisis of war that women failed to intervene against modernistic militarism and stayed silent to please men. This chapter weaves together a biographical emphasis with snatches of text-based criticism to illuminate an important female figure who explicitly grappled with gender politics within a decadent-modernist framework.

Ellis Hanson's essay on Ronald Firbank, which takes drifting as its central concept, is an unexpected highlight, giving space to a writer who has often been neglected within modernist studies. Hanson explains that Firbank exemplifies the way decadence bled into modernism, but this alienated him from the brand of modernism that eschewed decadence. Seen as too decadent and too queer, too Wildean in an era that disavowed Wilde, Firbank has not been canonized.

Nevertheless, his various ways of drifting – his nomadic, disorientating plots and syntax, his comic approach, his use of Creole as an aesthetic flourish – allow him to transgress ethnic and sexual boundaries. Elaborating on Derridean ‘destinérance’ and Barthesian ‘dérive’, Hanson argues that Firbank’s stylistic drift is productively disruptive and enables queering in his novels. As a study in drifting attention, this chapter ironically succeeds in holding its reader captivated.

Sarah Parker’s chapter on Edna St Vincent Millay chimes nicely with the earlier chapters on Levenson and Sackville, again showing the potential for twentieth-century decadence to foreground female writers. In Parker’s reading, Millay has been excluded from the modernist canon for resisting modernism’s cult of impersonality and formal experimentation. However, Parker shows that Millay reworks decadent forms and themes to offer an alternative to modernism. The most interesting aspect of this essay is the argument that Millay ‘ventriloquizes’ Charles Baudelaire, a figure to whom both decadence and modernism have laid claim. Millay’s translations adapt Baudelaire’s work to her own purpose, out-fetishizing the male poetic tradition embodied in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, and injecting a light, modern irony that scrutinizes Baudelaire’s sexual violence and misogynistic legacy. This important essay demonstrates that female modernism embraces intertextuality for the purpose of redressing the gender balance.

A latent irony underpins the relationship between decadence and modernism, which few chapters in this book address explicitly. Decadence is initially the product of a sense of decline from which stems the paradoxical drive for renewal that is its lifeblood – a fact which must necessarily influence its relationship to modernism. It is therefore a relief when Vincent Sherry’s essay foregrounds this point, emphasizing the temporality of the terms ‘decadence’ and ‘modernism’. In a two-part essay, Sherry first discusses Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, two heavyweight modernists who draw on decadence by exploring imperial decline: for Woolf, the decline of empire enables interrogation the historical erasure of women; while, for Joyce, linguistic decay is linked to the declining British Empire in the context of Irish nationalism. The second, more substantial part of the essay, examines decadence in the work of Djuna Barnes and Samuel

Beckett. In an illuminating turn, Sherry argues that Barnes and Beckett produced self-consciously decadent prose but used the genre of mechanical comedy to update decadence and apply the notion of decay to language itself. This is an essay brimming with material – it could easily have constituted two separate chapters – which offers a refreshing take on the central premise of *Decadence in the Age of Modernism*.

Howard J. Booth traces a direct modernist inheritance from decadence, showing that D. H. Lawrence took a decadent model – in this case, Swinburne’s writing – and opened up its existing forms to reach a new understanding of modernity. Booth charts the way Swinburne’s anti-Cartesianism and mythopoeia evolve in Lawrence’s writing, focusing on the depiction of Pan to explore the relationship between the self and the natural world, and between the mind and body. Booth concludes that while Swinburne broaches these themes within the controlled context of tight versification and established tropes, Lawrence opens up form in order to seek answers to the damage wrought by modernity. Although the essay would have benefitted from more textual examples, particularly from Lawrence’s novels, it is a concise argument that examines how a parallel between the two writers allowed Lawrence to propose decadence as an answer to modernism in a reversal of the usual narrative.

Douglas Mao’s chapter on Donald Evans, Gertrude Stein, and ‘naughtiness’, is as charming as the phenomenon it describes. Mao notes that the publications of Evans’s Claire Marie press were largely an early twentieth-century incarnation of 1890s decadence, and that Stein’s futuristic *Tender Buttons* was anomalous. However, Mao acknowledges similarities between Evans and Stein, notably that both writers were accused of posing, a result of their willingness to shock in order to further the artistic cause. Mao introduces the notion of ‘naughtiness’: these writers deliberately provoke in a charming manner, confident that readers will be won over by the amusement their rule breaking generates. Naughtiness is employed by both decadence and modernism to reform artistic standards because, while it initially repels the reader, it is ultimately inviting and tameable.

In other words, it aims to be assimilated so as to effect disruption. Mao's case for naughtiness is delightfully provocative and convincing – which is precisely the point.

Kirsten MacLeod's essay on Carl Van Vechten's queerness aligns well with Hanson's contribution on Firbank. MacLeod puts Van Vechten at the centre of new decadence as a resistance to the cultural authority of modernism. This resistance allowed him to explore queerness as a form of anti-essentialism and an interrogation of the paradigms of sexuality and gender. MacLeod argues that Van Vechten coloured the features of old decadence with new camp aesthetics of artifice, extravagance, transgression, and irreverence. By playing with the distinction between surface and depth, and between foreground and background, Van Vechten uses new decadence to facilitate the expression of queer identity. This essay intelligently and deftly exposes the way twentieth-century decadence became a platform for marginalized voices and employed camp as a mode of resistance.

The book closes with another spotlight on a marginalized figure: Michèle Mendelssohn explores Richard Bruce Nugent's place in the history of queer black modernity. Situating Nugent within the Harlem Renaissance tradition, Mendelssohn shows that he refused to compromise his identity, becoming an important voice for both African American and gay communities in the first half of the twentieth century. Mendelssohn compares J.-K. Huysmans's *À rebours* with Nugent's story 'Smoke, Lilies and Jade' and draws on the notion of autobiografiction to argue that Nugent repurposed decadence to make visible his queer black identity. Unlike his friend, Wallace Thurman, Nugent transforms the decadent anxiety around homosexuality into modern queer-positivity. This essay demonstrates that Nugent's avant-garde dream of homosexual, interracial desire owes a debt to the 1890s but has cast off the shame of that era and is out and proud. Mendelssohn ensures that the volume ends on a high note, showcasing a writer who takes the best of decadence and fashions it into a bold new modernity for a more liberated era.

This is a wide-ranging and compelling volume which offers new insights into both decadence and modernism as mutually influential movements. As the editors Kate Hext and Alex

Murray acknowledge in their detailed and insightful introduction, this is not the first study to question the notion of an established dichotomy between the two movements. But the strength of this collection is that it allows for, and celebrates, the diversity of decadence and modernism without attempting to reduce either movement to a single definition. As a result, the essays work best when viewed collectively, offering a platform for communities who were marginalized on the basis of gender, race, or sexuality.

Relevant to each of the essays is the concern that modernism and decadence studies, as discrete disciplines, have been complicit in the amplification of the ‘make it new’ doctrine and the erasure or dismissal of less severely demarcated histories of the turn of the twentieth century. The fact that the term ‘decadence’ necessarily implies a heterogeneity of style and politics that characterizes the essence of the tradition, allows the writers of these essays to demonstrate in diverse ways that decadence was a vehicle for an alternative form of modernism to that which was practised and preached by the high modernists who have dominated the canon. The result is a refreshing exploration of writing on the periphery, which ultimately acknowledges that both decadence and modernism sought to challenge tradition and, in this respect, the reciprocally revealing relationship between them comes as no surprise at all.

Gregory Mackie, *Beautiful Untrue Things: Forging Oscar Wilde's Extraordinary Afterlife*
(Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019), 287 pp.
ISBN 9781487502904

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One hand at his hip, the other touching the side of a knowing smile, a Beardsleyan portrait of a confident Oscar Wilde graces the cover of Gregory Mackie's book. Like the many representations of Wilde that Mackie details within, the portrait is a counterfeit. In his study of Wilde's earliest biographers, impersonators, forgers, and mediums, Mackie explores various efforts at appropriating and re-forging Wilde's legacy.

Portraiture, real and faked, is an apt recurring metaphor for the efforts to recast Wilde in a desired role. Mackie commences his investigation by recounting the story of the doubly-forged portrait of 'Willie Hughes', the fictional lover of Shakespeare within Wilde's 'The Portrait of Mr. W. H.', a story centered around questions of authenticity and aesthetic interpretation. When Charles Ricketts painted an artificially-aged portrait to accompany the story, Wilde treated it as a real artifact and called it an 'authentic Clouet' to match its description within his fiction (p. 20). Thus, Mackie's study begins with Wilde himself rewriting history to match his own aesthetic designs. As Mackie notes throughout his study, Wilde's aesthetic philosophy often privileges the artificial over the real and consequently seems to invite forgeries of his work. After the portrait was lost following the Tite Street sale, there were a flurry of attempts to recover it resulting in Ricketts making a sketch of the lost painting. This re-forged portrait, created after Wilde's death, is emblematic of the manner Wilde's 'fans' picked up where Wilde himself left off in artificially creating and recreating his legacy, while entangling themselves in a fraternity of Wilde worship often fraught with conflict.

Following the introduction, the chapters – themselves re-forged titles of Wilde's works – are organized around particular methods of creating posthumous legacy. The first chapter, 'The

Importance of Being Authentic', deals with the efforts of Robert Ross, Christopher Millard, and Walter Ledger to form an accurate and authoritative literary canon. Engaging in what Mackie labels 'restorative biography', this 'queer circle' of Wilde's defenders sought to recover and legitimize Wilde's literary legacy by correcting misinformation, releasing and defending an expurgated version of *De Profundis*, purging spurious works such as *The Priest and the Acolyte*, painstakingly reconstructing biographical information, and writing an authoritative *Collected Works* and *Bibliography*. In a book that otherwise deals with forgeries, this chapter on these champions of authenticity may, at first, seem an illogical starting point; however, Mackie soundly justifies this inclusion by noting that 'forgery has no meaning without authenticity' (p. 32). Ultimately, the book's organization is ingenious as this pairing of authentic and inauthentic allows the reader to see how Wilde's early biographers attempted to police his legacy while at the same time providing forgers with the very material that would be used to create convincing fakes.

Chapter Two, 'The Picture of Dorian Hope', deals primarily with a composite and forged persona that engaged in appropriation and 'queering the Wilde archive' that Ross, Millard, and Ledger had worked so hard to stabilize and legitimize, though often at the cost of downplaying Wilde's homosexual identity (pp. 70–71). Dorian Hope emerged first as the purported author of *Pearls and Pomegranates*, a volume of poetry that referenced Wilde's work in its title and dedication but was otherwise plagiarized from a number of other poets. Later, the name was also associated with the drag performances of Brett Holland (no relation to Constance's family who took on the name Holland after Wilde's trials) and forged letters and manuscripts that fooled several collectors. Though long thought to be Arthur Cravan (born Fabian Lloyd), Wilde's nephew by marriage, Mackie theorizes that Dorian Hope was likely the product of a circle of forgers primarily including Brett Holland. The Dorian Hope forgeries are notable in Mackie's study for being more than simply fraudulent copies. Instead, they fabricate an alternate reality, playfully inserting additional homoerotic trysts and other scenarios that even involve the personage 'Dorian Hope' receiving

Wilde's endorsement. Mackie interprets these creative efforts as 'myth-making' by a community of Wilde fans (p. 117).

Mackie builds upon of this idea of the forgery as fan fiction in Chapter 3, 'Pen, Pencil, and Planchette', which explores how mediums and spiritualists in the 1920s attempted to become the author's literal 'ghostwriters'. Using automatic writing and Ouija boards, Hester Travers Smith and Geraldine Cummins produced many conversations with Oscar Wilde's spirit as well as a play supposedly written by him. The play's title, 'Is it a Forgery?', supposedly justified by Wilde's ghost stating that 'the author himself is debating the question', is also an appropriation of a line from 'The Portrait of Mr. W. H.' (p. 154). The doubt introduced by the title corresponds well with the fact that the mediums were put in the problematic situation of arguing for both the originality and the authenticity of 'their Wilde' in comparison to that of their rivals. Ultimately, Mackie concludes that the play achieved more originality than authenticity in that the forgeries reflect much more of the mediums' desires than Wilde's own character.

In Chapter 4, 'The Devoted Fraud', Mackie reaches the culmination of his titular 'beautiful untrue things' produced by a fanatic desire to write oneself into Wilde's legacy with Mrs Chan-Toon's forged 'fairy play', *For Love of the King*. Like Dorian Hope, Mrs Chan-Toon acted the role of decadent successor to Wilde's 'life as art' persona as well as attempting to write herself into Wilde's history through an imagined friendship. The play, which Mrs Chan-Toon claimed was a wedding present from Wilde, was written in a decadent style inspired by *Salomé* and *The Sphinx*, and set in Burma. Mackie interprets this play as a work of 'biofictional allegory' which blends reality and fiction by placing the biography of a real person at the centre of the work. Mackie reads the central character – who undergoes a magical transformation into a peacock – as an amalgamation of both Wilde and Mrs Chan-Toon. The sex- and species-change from woman to male peacock becomes representative of Mrs Chan-Toon's efforts to embody Wilde through forgery (p. 182).

In his conclusion, Mackie reiterates his thesis that many of these Wilde forgeries can be understood as forms of fan fiction. Additionally, he returns to the idea that Wilde himself

encouraged such forgeries by noting that Wilde supervised some of the earliest forgeries of his work by having Maurice Gilbert (a loyal friend and possible lover at the end of Wilde's life) forge Wilde's signature on some of the 'author's editions' of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. Again privileging the artificial over the authentic, Wilde joked to his publisher that the forged signatures would fetch a better price since they were more skilfully written. Comparing previous examples to Gilbert's fraudulent act of signing Wilde's name, Mackie sees these fan fictions as a mode of 'performing' Wilde. In closing, Mackie offers one final 'note' on Mitchell Kennerley's edition of *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* which was recently discovered by Ian Small to have potentially been subject to editorial tampering. Mackie suggestively leaves this example as an open question deserving of further study.

Mackie's application of the modern concept of 'fan fiction' to Wilde forgeries provides a useful framework that lends some measure of legitimacy to the study of works often labelled 'spurious'. Mackie's readings of 'Is it a Forgery?' and *For Love of the King* offer a starting point for further work in reception studies. One potential target of criticism might be the omission of *Teleny*, the collaborative work of homoerotic fiction often attributed to Wilde, which is often treated with some prominence among Wilde apocrypha. Of course, Mackie is under no obligation to be exhaustive in his coverage of Wildean forgeries and it is quite possible this work would not neatly fit with Mackie's model of forgery as fan fiction. Overall, however, scholars would be hard-pressed to find a more fascinating book of literary curiosities, and those interested in Oscar Wilde, in particular, will find Mackie's work a treasure-trove of under-studied Wildeana.

‘Gluttony, Decadence, and Resistance, Embodied’
Cinema Rediscovered, Watershed, Bristol
25–28 July 2019

Tara Judah

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In the final scene in Vera Chytilová’s *Daisies* (1966), its two plucky protagonists, Marie I (Jitka Cerhová) and Marie II (Ivana Karbanová), enter a banquet room where excess – of nourishment and provision – leads to an elaborate and entertaining act of destruction. The scene is spectacular and vulgar; its grand depictions of food waste were responsible for the former Czechoslovakia’s ban on both the film and its maker. Chytilová was held accountable for her supposed lack of a positive attitude towards socialism.¹ Apparently irony is not welcome when its execution involves waste. The paradox inherent in both Chytilová’s film and the very concept of social decline is that it must be enacted in order to be made visible: the food we watch Marie I and Marie II eat, throw, dance on, and destroy is food that will never make it into the mouths of the hungry.

In 2018, I programmed *Daisies* as part of a three-film taster selection from the wider national touring programme, ‘Revolt, She Said: Women and Film after ’68’.² As the months wore on, I continued to think about how the scene revealed social hypocrisy through its ornate style, the characters’ appalling actions and their delight in the act of destruction. Chytilová, working collaboratively with co-writer Ester Krumbachová and cinematographer Jaroslav Kucera, had captured on film a physical and violent act of social decay. It was both incredible and awesome to watch. It led me to another two films from the Czech New Wave, which would serve as the cornerstone for a new film programme as part of 2019’s *Cinema Rediscovered*, the UK’s dedicated film festival for the rediscovery of classic, archive, and repertory film.³ The full programme, consisting of seven films, was titled, ‘Gluttony, Decadence, and Resistance’. Each of the films, screened in a repertory context under such a charged and inherently political banner, becomes an act of cultural materialism. Furthermore, like the ‘Revolt, She Said’ season, ‘Gluttony, Decadence,

and Resistance' aimed to look at historical context whilst speaking directly to the contemporary climate in which it was curated.

Beginning, then, with the Czech New Wave, this programme opened with an aesthetic of excess. Working with New Wave filmmakers such as Chytilová and *enfant terrible*, Jan Němec, among others, Ester Krumbachová, who was prolific in her collaborations as a writer and as a production and costume designer, created many of the intricate and ornate backdrops against which political protest could play out. But Krumbachová only ever directed one film. *The Murder of Mr Devil* (also known as *Killing the Devil*, 1970) was written as an unofficial sequel to *Daisies*, and starts its critique where *Daisies* left off, centred squarely on food and the lusty appetites that create and maintain systemic social inequity and decline. Like the banquet scene in *Daisies*, *Mr Devil* uses excess to elicit affect – namely shock or disgust – in order to draw attention to social ills. Its protagonist, Ona – which translates as 'She' (Jirina Bohdallová) – is alone and desperate. She calls upon an old suitor, someone she remembers as attractive. However, the proverbial Mr Devil (Bohous Cert) who turns up is obese, with behaviour to match.

Ona cooks for Bohous, but no matter how much food she prepares for him, it is never enough. His appetite cannot be satiated because it is lustful, gluttonous. In its fittingly Christian connotation, the devil's gluttony is not only the act of overeating but is in the very desire for abundance. Abundance can never be satisfied because it defies limitation. In my programme notes for the season, I wrote,

Gluttony, then, is a perfect match for capitalism and social systems where class, gender and other hierarchies mean too much for some at the expense of others. It is an inherently disgusting desire and its manifestation, each of these films reveals, is physical grotesquery.⁴

What I hope to highlight here is how the three overarching concepts of this film programme – Gluttony, Decadence, and Resistance – are entwined through an aesthetic of excess, itself a physical manifestation of the mechanism of inequity at the heart of capitalism. These films all offer physical grotesquery as a means through which to explore the wider politics of their time precisely because gluttony, decadence, and resistance are concepts that embody wider social and

psychological anxieties, and cinema is itself an artform that offers its audience an embodied experience.

In the wake of the Prague Spring and after their collaboration on *Daises*, Chytilová and Krumbachová teamed up again to examine how bodies have historically worn the weight of this capitalist and gluttonous desire for abundance. In what could act as an unofficial backstory to Marie I and Marie II's coquettish bad behaviour in *Daises*, *Fruit of Paradise* (1970) goes back to its supposed origins, using the Christian concept of Original Sin and the story of Adam and Eve as a narrative experiment in allegory. An example of betrayed freedom, the story is a reflection of the invasion of Prague by Soviet forces in 1968 but it is also a way of pointing to the subsequent seven deadly sins as manifestations of just one central sin: the desire for more. Be it knowledge, food, love, sex or any other tangible or intangible thing, desire is, as Chytilová and Krumbachová reveal, both an embodied experience and a danger to the body. By virtue of association, capitalism in this context is not just an ideological threat, due to its inherent promotion of capital gain, abundance and excess, it is also an embodied experience and a danger to the bodies that live under its ideology.

I decided to programme these two Czech New Wave films and, as their theoretical frameworks were rooted in a Christian understanding of gluttony, I then wanted to look at other films where appetites were instrumental in instances of social decline. This is where decadence takes on an edge of despair as both suicide and cannibalism manifest in a thirsty search for more. Although *La grande bouffe* [*The Big Feast*] (1973) stands alone as the only one of the remaining five films in the programme that does not deal with humans eating humans, it is perhaps the most shocking and disgusting of them all. Aligning food and sex as grotesque sensory indulgences – again, a Christian sentiment – *La grande bouffe* features four middle-aged men, on a weekend away, determined to gorge themselves to death. They feast until freed of their desires through impotence, wind, defecation and orgasm. All four men are dead by the end of the film. A satire on consumerism and the empty yet voracious appetites of the bourgeoisie, this film probably embodies decadence better than any other. It is pure degeneracy, social critique made in

deliberately bad taste. Equally as splendid as its characters' demise are the stories that surround its reception. As an artefact of cultural materialism it is a chief example of embodied ideology, offering its viewers visceral affect as social and cultural commentary.

As the story goes, the film's outrageous affect began at its première at Cannes, where it supposedly caused Jury President, Ingrid Bergman, to vomit after the screening, whilst others spat at director Marco Ferreri.⁵ In his theatrical review, Roger Ebert also discusses the film's controversial reception: it provoked fist fights on the Champs-Élysées as well as causing a rift between one of the film's stars, Marcello Mastroianni, and his then girlfriend, actress Catherine Deneuve.⁶ Ebert cites these extreme responses to make a point about how the film communicates through bodies. It may have been 'not so much excited as exhausted', but it was, nevertheless, embodied. For Ebert, the film 'hammers your sensibilities. It's decadent, self-loathing, cynical and frequently obscene.'⁷ I would argue, however, that Ferreri has extended decadence beyond the scope of an artistic sensibility to create a visceral understanding of its social and political implications. Here, decadence is not only about degeneracy and corruption, it is about the affect of social decline and the implications of despair in the face of lost decorum. The implications are manifested in the audience's responses: vomit, violence, silence, and exhaustion.

This preoccupation with physical and embodied responses to gluttonous desire and decadent social decline also led me to think about the self-perpetuating nature of such degeneracy and decay and how, in some instances, resistance only serves to feed the machine. In both Richard Fleischer's *Soylent Green* (1973) and Rachel Maclean's *Make Me Up* (2018), the terrifying reveal is that the scarce but heavily processed food source turns out to be made of people. Frightened by the ideological and embodied prospects of both society eating itself and them potentially eating people, the protagonists who uncover these salacious secrets – *Soylent Green*'s Detective Thorn (Charlton Heston) and *Make Me Up*'s Siri (Christina Gordon) – embark upon journeys of resistance. As film historian and curator Peter Walsh writes in the programme notes for *Soylent Green*:

As with so much great science-fiction, the film says a lot about the era from which it emerged, specifically the point at which the optimism of post-war America was starting to sour after years of failure in Vietnam, while also being on the cusp of the Watergate scandal. Yet, much as the film is woven into dreams of what the future looked like in 1973, the social and environmental issues at the heart of the film have never felt more urgent, and the warnings it sends are more troubling than ever before. As a viewer in 2019, the film constantly challenges us to ask how far we have come, how close we are to this bleak vision, and what we can do to stop this grim dystopia becoming reality.⁸

Walsh points out how cultural anxieties are played out as contrasting aesthetics. The film depicts a pea-soup coloured haze of the polluted and over-heated real world juxtaposed with the brightly coloured, dazzling interiors of the new aristocracy. Though both represent the future in this science fiction these two distinct visions operate as present and future in terms of decadence and social commentary: the pea-soup is the nightmare imaginary of the contemporary (Vietnam, Watergate) while the aristocratic interiors suggest future aesthetic possibilities (despite resembling the fashions of the 1970s, as Walsh notes). Through visual contrast and narrative cohesion, Fleischer unites ornate style and social critique to craft a decadent sensibility.

The very premise of moving-image artist Maclean's *Make Me Up* is decadent: representing suffrage through a contemporary lens, Maclean references Mary Richardson's attack on the Rokeby Venus at the National Gallery in London.⁹ Updated, here, to a cyber world where art and art history are regurgitated as attainable and consumable aesthetics, eating one's competitors becomes an act of decadence. Siri, whose plight we follow, must defeat other women in a series of pointless, exploitative and sexist challenges in order to sustain her own existence, achievable only through the act of unwittingly devouring her subordinates. Maclean's critique of capitalism as both a systemic and aesthetic problem is acerbic and on point. As with *Soylent Green*, Maclean evokes both the past and the present in order to bolster the affect of her decadent nightmare. Instead of regarding the issues of inequity through an historical lens, Maclean invites the viewer to understand body politics as a contemporary issue, and their body, by extension, as a decadent object, unwittingly playing the master game of consumerism.

Brian Yuzna's *Society* and Peter Greenaway's *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife & Her Lover* (both 1989), also examine the breakdown of social decorum and the degeneracy hiding among the elite. *Society* and *The Cook* are the most explicit and violently embodied of all the films. Exploring how the ornate styling of the bourgeoisie serves as a sort of carapace for bad taste and immorality, both drench the screen in the body's most universal colour: blood red. Each of the films curated in this programme sensorially assault their audiences and examine the politics of desire through gluttony, of social decay through the aesthetics of decadence, and suggest ways in which resistance operates both thematically and stylistically. My hope, in curating these films, was to propose a question around how gluttony, decadence, and resistance interact with audiences to create affect and meaning. Perhaps, then, the final word on the programme's affect should go to a viewer from *Cinema Rediscovered*, who commented, 'What sadist thought it would be a good idea to put *La Grande Bouffe* on right before lunch?'¹⁰

¹ Dylan Rainforth, 'This Film's Going Bad: Collaborative Cutting in *Daisies*', *Senses of Cinema*, 44, August 2007, <http://sensesofcinema.com/2007/cteq/daisies/> [accessed 15 December 2019].

² 'Revolt, She Said, Women and Film After '68' was curated and co-ordinated by Club des Femmes in partnership with the Independent Cinema Office.

³ <https://www.watershed.co.uk/cinema-rediscovered-2019> [accessed 15 December 2019].

⁴ Tara Judah, 'Politically potent unpleasant appetites', *Watershed*, 19 June 2019, <https://www.watershed.co.uk/articles/politically-potent-unpleasant-appetites> [accessed 15 December 2019].

⁵ Jacqueline Louise Dutton, 'C'est dégueulasse!: Matters of Taste and "La Grande bouffe" (1973)', *M/C Journal*, 17.1 (2014), <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/rt/prINTERfriendly/763/0> [accessed 15 December 2019].

⁶ Roger Ebert, 'La Grande Bouffe', 30 September 1973, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/la-grande-bouffe-1973> [accessed 15 December 2019].

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Peter Walsh, 'From "soylent steak" to Soylent Green', *Watershed*, 7 June 2019, <https://www.watershed.co.uk/articles/from-soylent-steak-to-soylent-green> [accessed 15 December 2019].

⁹ Katie Goh, 'The dystopian satire tackling sexism in the social media age', *Huck*, 15 October 2018, <https://www.huckmag.com/art-and-culture/film-2/rachel-maclean-make-me-up-film/> [accessed 15 December 2019].

¹⁰ Tweet by Peter Walsh, 28 July 2019, https://twitter.com/soylent_grey/status/1155096471643021312 [accessed 15 December 2019].

Photo Credits

Necrocinephilia, or, The Death of Cinema and the Love of Film: An Introduction by the Guest Editor

The two images related to Roderick La Rocque in the Wallace Smith presentation copy of Ben Hecht's *Fantazius Mallare: A Mysterious Oath* (Chicago: Covici-McGee, 1922) are taken from the book in the collection of Alice Condé and Jessica Gossling. The still from *Mocny człowiek* (1929), directed by Henryk Szaro, is taken from a DVD produced and distributed by Rarefilmsandmore.com, P.O. Box 366, Avondale, AZ 85323.



Acting Aestheticism, Performing Decadence: The Cinematic Fusion of Art and Life

The photograph of Lyda Borelli as Salomé is by Mario Nunes Vais. Stills from the 1913 silent film *Ma l'amor mio non muore!* (known in English as *Love Everlasting*), directed by Mario Caserini, are taken from the DVD of the restoration by the Fondazione Cineteca di Bologna in collaboration with the Museo Nazionale del Cinema di Torino and the Fondazione Cineteca Italiana di Milano, and with the participation of the Cineteca Nazionale and the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, Rome, Italy; 2013. The photo of Colette is taken from Wikimedia Commons. The still from *Thaïs* (1917), a Novissima-Film production directed by Anton Giulio Bragaglia and Riccardo Cassano, is courtesy of the George Eastman Museum, Rochester, NY. *Ma l'amor mio non muore!* can be watched online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4mVpUumZxuY>.



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

Stills from Albert Lewin's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* were captured from a DVD of the film issued in 2008 by Warner Home Video. The two images from Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) are taken from the DVD copyrighted 2012 by Universal Studios. Stills from Hitchcock's *The Lodger* (1927)

are taken from the restored version of the film by BFI National Restoration Archive in association with ITV Studios Global Entertainment, Network Releasing, and Park Circus Films. *The Lodger* can be watched online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2qFiw5VtmyI>.



**In the Name of the Father:
Paul Czinner's *Fräulein Else* and the Fate of the *Neue Frau***

Images from Paul Czinner's *Fräulein Else* (1928) come from the DVD restoration done by the Cineteca del Comune di Bologna in collaboration with ARTE in 2004 and published by CG Home Video S.R.L. in Florence, Italy. The opera-card photograph of the tenor Ernst Van Dyke as the Abbé Des Grieux and Marie Renard as Manon in an 1890 performance of Jules Massenet's *Manon* (1884) is available from the Lady de Grey Photographic Collection of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London, WC2E 9DD. *Fräulein Else* can be watched online at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oN4G1_tUl_s.



***The Powerful Man:*
Young-Poland Decadence in a Film by Henryk Szaro**

Stills from Szaro's *Mocny człowiek* (1929) are taken from the DVD produced and distributed by Rarefilmsandmore.com. *Mocny człowiek* can be watched online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n3dgc9ZUrOk>.



**Wrestling with Decadence:
The Touchables (1968) and Swinging London Cinema of the 1960s**

Stills from the 1968 film *The Touchables*, directed by Richard Freeman, originally produced and distributed by Twentieth Century Fox, are taken from a DVD distributed by Modcinema.com of Los Angeles, CA. The image of the poster advertising the film is reproduced from the original in the collection of David Weir. *The Touchables* can be watched online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1eBz2eaqtNY>.



**In the Shambles of Hollywood:
The Decadent Trans Feminine Allegory in *Myra Breckinridge***

Stills from the Twentieth Century Fox production of *Myra Breckinridge* (1970), directed by Michael Sarne, are taken from the DVD issued in 2003 by Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment.



**Decadence and the Necrophilic Intertext of Film Noir:
Nikos Nikolaidis' *Singapore Sling***

Screenshots from Nikos Nikolaidis' *Singapore Sling* (1990) are taken from the DVD issued in 2015 by Bildstörung, Baiersdörfer & Beneke GbR, Koblenzer Str. 11, 50968 Köln, Germany. The still from Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) is taken from the DVD issued in 2002 by Paramount Pictures. The screenshot from *Laura* (1944), directed and produced by Otto Preminger, comes from the DVD issued in 2004 by Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment. *Singapore Sling*, with English subtitles, can be watched online at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sfs9x0Yxyw0>.



Alla Nazimova's *Salomé*: Shot-by-Shot

Stills from Alla Nazimova's *Salomé* were taken from the version of the film restored by The Library of Congress and Lobster Films, a film restoration company located in Paris, from a nitrate print preserved by Film Preservation Associates, whose offices are in Burbank, California. This version is available in DVD format distributed by Image Entertainment, 20525 Nordhoff Street, Suite 200, Chatsworth, CA 91311. The screenshot of the title card from the Griggs-Moviedrome *Salome* is taken from the DVD issued in 2012 by Alpha Home Entertainment of Narberth, Pennsylvania. Nazimova's *Salomé* can be watched online at:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BkMq_Cs3OU&feature=emb_rel_pause.

Notes on Contributors

Alcide Bava is an independent scholar who lives and works in New York City. He is currently writing a biography of Edward VII.

Kostas Boyiopoulos is Teaching Associate in English Studies at Durham University. He has published essays on Oscar Wilde, Arthur Machen, and others. He is the author of *The Decadent Image: The Poetry of Wilde, Symonds, and Dowson* (Edinburgh University Press, 2015), partly funded by the Friends of Princeton University Library. He has co-edited the essay collection *Decadent Romanticism: 1780–1914* (Ashgate, 2015) and *The Decadent Short Story: An Annotated Anthology* (Edinburgh University Press, 2014). His most recent works are the co-edited volumes *Literary and Cultural Alternatives to Modernism: Unsettling Presences* (Routledge, 2019) and *Aphoristic Modernity: 1880 to the Present* (Brill/Rodopi, 2019).

Richard Farmer has taught at University College London and at the University of East Anglia, where he worked on the *Transformation and Tradition in 1960s British Cinema* project and co-authored the project book. He is the author of two other monographs: *The Food Companions: Cinema and Consumption in Wartime Britain, 1939–45* (Manchester University Press, 2011) and *Cinemas and Cinemagoing in Wartime Britain, 1939–45: The Utility Dream Palace* (Manchester University Press, 2016).

Kate Hext is Senior Lecturer in English at the University of Exeter. She is co-editor, with Alex Murray, of *Decadence in the Age of Modernism* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019) and is completing a monograph on how the Decadent Movement influenced Hollywood between the 1910s and 1950s.

Tara Judah is Cinema Producer at Watershed, a curator for *Cinema Rediscovered* and a freelance film critic. Tara has written for *Senses of Cinema*, *Desist Film*, *Monocle* and *Sight & Sound* and talked all things film across Australian and UK airwaves on Monocle24, BBC World Service, Triple R, ABC RN and JOY FM.

Sandra M. Leonard is Assistant Professor of English at Kutztown University of Pennsylvania, where she teaches composition, literature, and linguistics. She has an MA in Literary Linguistics from University of Nottingham and a PhD in Literature and Criticism from Indiana University of Pennsylvania. She researches intertextual literary devices and nineteenth-century transgressive authorship. Her recent articles on Oscar Wilde and plagiaristic authorship have appeared in *The Journal of Narrative Theory* and *English Literature in Transition, 1880–1920*. Currently, she is working on a monograph about Oscar Wilde and the aesthetic potential of plagiarism.

Natasha Ryan is currently based at the Faculty of Medieval and Modern Languages, University of Oxford, where she works as the Schools Liaison and Outreach Officer. She completed a D. Phil. in 2017 on the topic ‘The Poetics of Glass in France, 1860–1900’.

Michael Subialka is Assistant Professor of Comparative Literature and Italian in the Department of Comparative Literature at University of California, Davis. His work focuses on the rich interplay of literature and philosophy – how philosophy informs and shapes literature and how literary form in turn shapes philosophy. He is working on a book that examines this relationship during the fin de siècle and the early twentieth century, *Modernist Idealism: Italian Literary Culture and the Legacies of German Idealism*. He also works on modern performance and film studies, focusing especially on the avant-garde period of the early twentieth century in Italy.

Weronika Szulik is a graduate student at the Institute of Polish Literature and the Institute of Polish Culture at the University of Warsaw. She has published several essays on Polish silent cinema, including: 'Adaptowanie nowoczesności: powieści filmowe Leo Belmonta i Zofii Dromlewiczowej' [Adapting Modernity: Film Novels by Leo Belmont and Zofia Dromlewiczowa], *Pleograf* [online] (2019); 'Byłem raz w kinie Karol Irzykowski wobec kina popularnego w latach 20. XX wieku' [Once I Went to the Cinema...: Karol Irzykowski and Popular Film in the 1920s], *Teksty Drugie* (2018); 'Dziesiąta Muza (impresje) – felietony Andrzeja Własta na tle myśli filmowej dwudziestolecia międzywojennego' [Dziesiąta Muza (impresje) – feuilletons by Andrzej Włast and the film culture in interwar Poland], *Pleograf* (2017). Her research interests also include Polish modernism at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and its connections with popular culture.

Ainslie Templeton is a recent graduate of the Comparative Literature and Criticism MA programme at Goldsmiths, University of London. She received her BA from the University of Melbourne in 2015. Her background is in visual art, and she has published creatively in *Un Magazine* and *Cordite*. Most recently she wrote a catalogue text with Vincent Silk for Auto Italia South East as part of the exhibition *Tender Rip* (2019), curated by Spence Messih and Anna McMahon.

Melanie Williams is Reader in Film and Television Studies at the University of East Anglia, UK. She was co-investigator on the AHRC-funded project *Transformation and Tradition in 1960s British Cinema* which resulted in a book of the same name. Other books include *Female Stars of British Cinema: The Women in Question* (Edinburgh University Press, 2017) and *David Lean* (Manchester University Press, 2017).

BADS ESSAY PRIZE WINNERS

Amelia Hall is a PhD candidate at Cornell University, specializing in British literature of the long nineteenth century. Her dissertation, 'Epigraphic Encounters and the Origins of the English Novel', examines the role that chapter epigraphs played in the evolution of the British novel's form and develops a new theory for reading this structurally significant paratext. An article based on this research is forthcoming in *Studies in English Literature (SEL)*. Her second research project explores the relationship between scientific forms and innovative literary forms of the fin de siècle.

Graham John Wheeler is an independent scholar based in London. His background is in Classics, and he pursued undergraduate and postgraduate studies in that subject at Cambridge University. He has since been engaged in publishing a series of articles on the revival of ancient forms of religion in modern times, and he is seeking to pursue a further postgraduate qualification in this area.

GUEST EDITOR

David Weir is Research Fellow in the Decadence Research Unit at Goldsmiths and Professor Emeritus of Comparative Literature at The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art in New York City, where he taught literature, linguistics, and cinema. He has published books on Jean Vigo, James Joyce, William Blake, orientalism, and anarchism, as well as three books on decadence. Those books have had a major role in the development of decadence as an academic field of study, beginning with *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (1995), *Decadent Culture in the United States* (2007), and, most recently, *Decadence: A Very Short Introduction* (2018). He is co-editor with Jane Desmarais of *Decadence and Literature* (2019), a volume in the Cambridge Critical Concepts series and is currently working on the *Oxford Handbook of Decadence* (co-edited with Jane Desmarais).

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EDITORIAL

Jane Desmarais (Editor-in-Chief) is Professor of English and Director of the Decadence Research Unit in the Department of English and Comparative Literature at Goldsmiths, University of London. She has written numerous essays on the theme of decadence and has co-edited several works, including *Decadence: An Annotated Anthology* (with Chris Baldick, Manchester University Press, 2012), *Arthur Symons: Selected Early Poems* (with Chris Baldick, MHRA, 2017), and *Decadence and the Senses* (with Alice Condé, Legenda, 2017). She is co-editor with David Weir of *Decadence and Literature* (2019), a volume in the Cambridge Critical Concepts series, and is currently co-editing with David Weir the *Oxford Handbook of Decadence* (forthcoming in 2021). Her monograph, *Monsters Under Glass: A Cultural History of Hothouse Flowers, 1850 to the Present*, was published by Reaktion in 2018. She is a core member of the AHRC Network: Decadence and Translation and is currently working on the vogue for Decadent song literature in the early twentieth century.

Alice Condé (Deputy Editor) is Associate Lecturer in the Department of English and Comparative Literature at Goldsmiths, University of London. She is co-editor of *Decadence and the Senses* (with Jane Desmarais, Legenda, 2017) and *In Cynara's Shadow: Collected Essays on Ernest Dowson* (with Jessica Gossling, Peter Lang, 2019). Her essay on 'Decadence and Popular Culture' has been published in Jane Desmarais and David Weir's volume *Decadence and Literature* for the Cambridge Critical Concepts series, and she is currently working on decadence and its contemporary contexts.

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Robert Pruett (Reviews Editor) is a DPhil student in French at St Cross College, Oxford, where he is preparing a thesis on eros and idealism in the work of Remy de Gourmont. Alongside the Cercle des Amateurs de Remy de Gourmont (CARGO), he co-organized the *Fin de Siècle Symposium* (Balliol College, Oxford, 2016). In 2018, he co-organized *Decadence, Magic(k), and the Occult* at Goldsmiths College, University of London. His chapter on 'Dowson, France, and the Catholic Image' appears in *In Cynara's Shadow: Collected Essays on Ernest Dowson* (ed. by Alice Condé and Jessica Gossling, Peter Lang, 2019).