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Adam Alston, *Staging Decadence: Theatre, Performance, and the Ends of Capitalism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), 248 pp.
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Who among us, we dedicated decadents, have not read at least one of Gyles Brandreth's mystery novels in which Oscar Wilde, sometimes with an assist from his friend Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, is an amateur detective. The novels overall are harmless escapism for mystery lovers who also love arch, aesthetic dialogue. One of the more memorable aspects of the novels was Wilde's frequent refrain of *nomen est omen*, the Latin proverb used in Ancient Rome that translates as 'the name is the sign', that is, the idea that names are indicators of a person's character or destiny. This brief preamble is directed towards establishing the fact that in Adam Alston's fascinating new book, *Staging Decadence: Theatre, Performance, and the Ends of Capitalism*, the author shows admirable restraint; restraint that I do not share. Because one of the artists who Alston discusses in this Marxist approach to decadent theatre from around the globe is named Julia Bardsley. Bardsley! In a book about decadent art! But Alston does not go for the low-hanging fruit. I, on the other hand, am not so classy, and I want to point out that Alston's book elegantly, even urgently, given his concerns about capitalism (which will kill us all), establishes that Julia Bardsley is part of the lineage of decadent artists that includes gone-too-soon decadent illustrator Aubrey Beardsley. There! With that out of the way, I can begin the review in earnest.

Alston is very much concerned to show that the artists he identifies as staging decadence are anything but apolitical. Indeed Alston argues carefully and effectively throughout his text that the performances that he has chosen are not disinterested, as the aesthetes and decadents of the fin de siècle were accused of being, but rather deeply invested in the world in which they live, creating art that is informed by intersectionality, compassion, and an awareness of the destruction that capitalism has wrought, including the climate crisis in which we find ourselves. Alston could

have simply chosen performances and theatrical pieces that included a lot of shiny objects, a lot of pleasure, and a lot of excess, though he does not ignore this particular facet of decadence, pointing to the decadent 'love of *too much*' (14). If you hear echoes of Lord Alfred Douglas' famous line 'the love that dare not speak its name', then congratulations, you are a decadent! More to the point, Alston has chosen artworks (a term that I use broadly to encompass performance, plays, happenings, and everything in-between) that incorporate lots of shiny things but are also political. The book, then, is deliberately political, in that Alston is engaging critically with the neo-conservative discourses that, like Max Nordau in the 1890s, use the term 'decadent' as a blunt instrument to bludgeon anyone who does not fit into the safe category of white, straight, and cis. Nordau's straw man was of course Wilde. Neo-conservatives nowadays have any number of straw-people, including immigrants, people of colour, and LGBTQ2S+ individuals.

The greatest strength of Alston's book is that he illuminates why decadence as a framework for art is still relevant. Neo-conservatives, the Christian Right in the United States, and populists around the world, are using decadence, or related terms, to other, to pathologize, to punish. To employ decadence as a critical framework for art is decidedly political in a book that discusses not only queer artists, but queer artists of colour. This is, to my mind, the most important contribution that Alston makes to the literature on decadence. He shows how decadence is still used as a weapon of hatred, and in turn shows how decadence can be used as a weapon of compassion, solidarity, and progressiveness. Alston demonstrates that decadence is dangerous, but it is most dangerous to those who wish to make their countries white again. According to Alston, 'By studying the cultural politics of decadence in historical context, I argue that we will be better placed to respond to those moments when the arts and humanities are most threatened' (p. 23).

In his introduction, Alston identifies four core theses of his book that provide 'markers in the cultivation of a decadent sensibility' (p. 9). In brief they are: theatre is useless, theatre is wasteful, theatre is outmoded, and lastly 'For all of these reasons, and despite the influence of many of its commercially minded stakeholders, theatre has the capacity to resist forms of

productivity based on economic imperatives' (p. 10). In other words, rather than being negative traits, in Alston's view, uselessness, wastefulness, and outmodedness are strengths of theatre. Whether or not you're convinced that theatre is useless, it's important to know that one of Alston's key objectives in the text is to critique capitalism. Uselessness, for Alston, does not mean that theatre lacks inherent value. To the contrary, it is clear that Alston loves theatre and that he thinks it is one of the most important things in life. Rather, theatre is 'useless' in the realm of capitalist logic where human beings are cogs in the machine who are perceived as valuable only if they produce (or reproduce).

The book is divided into five chapters, in addition to the introduction and a conclusion in which Alston details a performance that took place on 29 July 2022. This is one of the book's major strengths, namely examining very recent artworks. In this case, the performance, *Fairy Boudoir*, was by Hasard Le Sin and it was staged at Iklectik Arts Lab in London. The performance checks many decadent boxes, including 'plush velvet drapes', a 'shimmering velvet cloak', a 'dandyish' artist with 'two fabric phalluses protruding from their groin, like the pistils of an orchid' (p. 141). So we have haptic pleasure in textiles (Alston refers to the 'crafting of abject costumes' [p. 146]), materiality, embodiment, queerness, and sexual deviance. As Alston observes:

> Decadence is an art of border crossing. Decadence relies on borders in order to breach them—for instance, by staging the undoing of gendered types and binaries… or by transgressing the mores that shape the horizons of social acceptability, especially where sexuality, taste, and demeanor are concerned. (p. 143)

In Alston's introduction, he provides a historiography of decadence, as well as an anti-capitalist critique of the current exploitative ethos of extractivism and productivism that permeates the UK, as well as the United States and Canada. Chapter 1 will be of particular interest for scholars of illness and disability, focusing as it does on British artist Martin O'Brien. The chapter, entitled 'Zombie Time: Sickness, Performance, and the Living Dead', discusses O'Brien's work that engages with, and showcases, his chronic illness, specifically cystic fibrosis. Alston grounds his discussion in the context of Covid-19, observing that 'O'Brien's invitation to consider what might

happen to desire in the kingdom of the sick has taken on fresh significance in the years since the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic' (p. 27). The artist's laboured performances – such as *The Last Breath Society* (2021) – point to the physical and affective labours that are expected of humans in the context of advanced capitalist economies (p. 32). While O'Brien does not explicitly frame his performances as decadent, Alston sees in them evidence of queer desire, queer temporalities, and a 'taste for the distasteful, which the decadence scholar David Weir identifies as a key feature of decadence' (p. 38).

Chapter 2, 'Para-sites and Wired Bodies: Decadence, Scenography, and the Performing Body' examines the work of British multimedia artist Julia Bardsley and Marcel·lí Antúnez Roca, a Spanish artist who transgresses the skin boundary with tubes and technology, creating machine-human hybrids. Bardsley's work will be of interest to scholars of textiles and fashion, as well as feminist scholars concerned with monstrosity and embodiment. As Alston remarks: 'All three parts of [Bardsley's] "Divine Trilogy" explore transgression, transformation, and transcendence… and the relationship of patriarchy and capitalism to the meatiness of human, animal and monstrous bodies' (p. 47). Later in that chapter, Alston observes that 'By embracing monstrousness as an engine of desire, desire is brought back to the body' (p. 52), and he acknowledge the important work of feminist film theorist Barbara Creed and her theoretical framework of the 'monstrous-feminine' (p. 53).

Chapter 3, 'Alien Nation: Afropessimism, Afrofuturism, and the Decadent Society', is a crucial contribution to decadence scholarship in broadening the scope of the artists (read: white artists) who are usually discussed. Alston investigates the work of jaamil olawale koko, a non-binary Nigerian American theatre maker, poet, and teacher, and The Uhuruverse, a Black non-binary musician and live artist. According to Alston:

> If philosophical pessimism served as the outlook favoured by European decadents in the nineteenth century, then Afropessimism may well have something important to offer to our understanding of decadence in performance today, and in the wider sociocultural field. Equally, Afrofuturism—as a philosophy as much as an aesthetic—would seem to be at odds with the supposedly reactionary or apolitical turnings of fin-de-siècle decadence. But

> if we accept that decadence can be mobilized in contexts that bear little connection to the European fin de siècle, then Afropessimist and Afrofuturist performance have the potential to shift how we approach and come to understand decadence as a political concern, especially by engaging with the friction between them, enabling us to appreciate the cultural politics of decadence afresh. (p. 67)

Again, a major strength of Alston's book is showing the political potential of decadence as a critical framework for art.

Chapter 4, 'Frenetic Standstill: Decadence, Capitalism, and Excess on the Japanese Stage', takes decadence global. Alston discusses the work of Toshika Okada in terms of 'unstoppable motility' (p. 91) and describes Toco Nikaido's work as 'theatre as explosion' (p. 96). This is the only chapter in which I thought that Alston was, perhaps, stretching his decadent framework a bit uncomfortably in order to encompass these two performers. He writes:

> I will be arguing that the work of Okada and Nikaido lends themselves to decadence, but not simply because they stage excess (too fast, too slow, too much, too little). Decadence is not synonymous with excess, although bodies, things and actions that are in a state of excess can be attuned to decadence. […] I will be reading contemporary Japanese theatre and popular culture in light of a protracted economic crisis that followed the bursting of Japan's asset bubble in 1991. (p. 90)

Alston concludes that 'These historical factors are what allow us to understand Okada's and Nikaido's work as "decadent", as they offer a frame for understanding the cultural politics of uselessness, wastefulness, and forms of productivity that run counter to productivist enterprise' (p. 90). While I'm not wholly convinced that these two artists lend themselves to decadence, their work is certainly interesting from an anti-capitalist perspective.

It is in Chapter 5, entitled "'A Dangerous Form of Decadence": Decadence, Performance, and the Culture Wars', in which Alston really shows the urgency of issues related to art and decadence. It is significant and appropriate that Alston would discuss queer American performance artist Ron Athey in this chapter, as Athey was one of the key figures in the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s, along with Robert Mapplethorpe (1946-1989) and David Wojnarowicz (1954-1992), both of whom created artworks concerned with HIV/AIDS that created fear and loathing among the Christian Right and led many conservatives to call for the National Endowment for

the Arts to stop funding artists who created political art. Jennifer Doyle discusses Athey's work in her book *Hold it Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (2013). One of her arguments in that book is that people on the left, including curators and academics, should not use the defence 'It's only art' in the face of threats of censorship. To his credit, Alston does not fall into this trap. Rather, despite his suggestion that theatre is 'useless' according to capitalist logic, he insists throughout his book that art has the potential to be radical, transgressive, and thus world-changing, or at the very least, life-changing.

There are so many great passages that I would like to quote, but I'll conclude with this one, which is in Alston's conclusion:

> What I do want to encourage […] is recognition of the desirability of art, literature, theatre, and performance *as* luxuries, provided these luxuries are not foreclosed to those who stand to gain most from their pleasures. I have hope for luxury yet: hope for the redistribution of bounty by means of its anticipation and manifestation in public spectacles; hope for the magic of unconventional glamour conjured by dissident bodies who refuse to conform with a culture that is not made for them; and hope for the radical potential of pleasure and its capacity to shift how we come to see particular things and activities as important or unimportant. There is a case to be made for the apparently frivolous, as frivolity can point towards things of great importance. (p. 151)

This passage strikes me as a rallying cry to those of us lucky enough to be working in the arts. As someone who was told (by a female TA, no less) to stop shoving my politics down people's throats in my (feminist!) art history classes, Alston's book, which combines abjection, excess, and glamour with progressive, compassionate politics, was intensely restorative, even consoling.