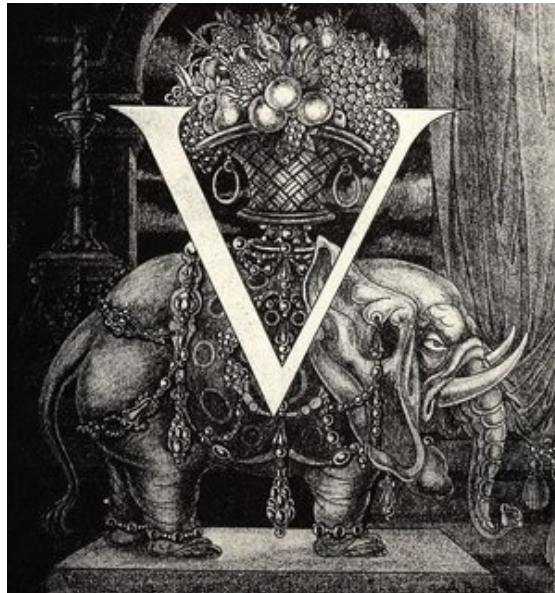


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INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF DECADENCE STUDIES

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Decadence and Performance

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**Goldsmiths**  
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON



Volume 4, Issue 2, December 2021

Decadence and Performance

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## Preface

This is our fourth pandemical issue, and Omicron (the disease not the trouble-shooting doctor in Trollope unfortunately) moves about the world causing misery and uncertainty. It's difficult to be upbeat about the state of things at the moment, but we hope that this special issue of *Volupté* reassures our readers that even in periods of cultural and political decline there is a pleasure to reading and constant invention. It was the original ambition of this journal to expand the field of decadence studies and to be a space for new voices, material, and interpretations. While it is true, as Adam Alston reminds us, that 'the field's interdisciplinary ambitions are yet to reach their full potential', this issue consolidates the 'diffusionist model' of decadence studies that was celebrated in the summer issue of 2021 and marks another exciting moment. The discussion of plays in this issue sits alongside considerations of choreography, scenography, aesthetics, and live art, proving as our Guest Editors state, that 'decadence is a practice that can be performed and embodied, that this practice is of significant cultural, aesthetic, and political interest'. Not only do the contributions push at the traditional literary boundaries of decadent studies to embrace internationalist and contemporary perspectives on decadent live art and performance but they reflect new research initiatives and look forward to what we can only hope will be an in-person scholar-fest at Goldsmiths, University of London, in the summer of 2022: an international conference on the theme of *Decadent Bodies*.

This issue is littered with bodies that parade, pose, and protest. All the world's a decadent stage it would seem. From the cabarets of Weimar Berlin to the dive bars of downtown New York to modern Ottoman theatre to the prosceniums of Paris and Tokyo to the staged paediatric hospital ward, we encounter a range of performances and embodiments that are informed by decadent tropes of decay, sickness, and decline, performances that involve ecclesiastical dressing-up, ornamental excess, doll dancing, and choreographed coughing. *Volupté* is nothing if not topical.

Our seasonal congratulations to our BADS Essay Prize winners. We publish three this year. Postgraduate Scholar Essay Prize winner Cherrie Kwok continues the dance theme with an essay entitled 'Symbolism, Empire, and the Dance: On Sarojini Naidu's "Eastern Dancers" and Arthur Symons's "Javanese Dancers"', which was praised for its 'welcome contribution to what has become an increasingly widening understanding of the many revisions decadent and symbolist literary strategies have undergone in the hands of non-European authors from colonized regions'. David Melville wins the Established Scholar Essay Prize and brings a little-known cinematic performance to light: Beni Montresor's *La Messe dorée* [*The Golden Mass*] (1975). Our judges declared it a 'thought-provoking, eloquent, and engrossing essay on [...] an obscure queer film that deserves attention. [...] contribut[ing] productively to the burgeoning niche field of decadent cinema within decadence studies'. And – drum roll – we announce with enormous pleasure a new BADS Translation Prize, supported by the Decadence and Translation Network, and inaugurated with Céline Brossillon's new French-to-English translation of Isabelle Eberhardt's 'Infernal: Sepulchral Pleasure' (1895). Alongside the BADS Essay Prizes, the winners of the BADS Translation Prize can expect their work to be published in winter issues of *Volupté*. An official announcement will be made in the New Year.

Thank you to our Guest Editors Adam Alston and Alexandra Bickley Trott, our BADS Essay Prize judges, and to Saya Sugawara and Frank Krause for their assistance with translation matters. The *Volupté* team wish you peace and health and a smooth transition to 2022.

Jane Desmarais  
Editor-in-Chief  
21 December 2021

# Carnal Acts: Decadence in Theatre, Performance and Live Art<sup>1</sup>

Adam Alston

Goldsmiths, University of London

Decadence is a promiscuous concept. For literature and film scholar David Weir, decadence

is hard to make sense of because the concept is attached to so many different ideas, attitudes, orientations, movements, histories, arts, artists, and so on. [...] Is it racial degeneration, historical decline, philosophical pessimism, personal immorality, physical entropy, artistic imperfection, artistic innovation, or all of the above? The fact that decadence has been studied using the analytical procedures of such disparate disciplines as eugenics, history, philosophy, psychology, physics, and aesthetics illustrates just how polyvalent the concept of decadence is.<sup>2</sup>

One of the few things that unites the various connotations that circle around decadence – and one of the most overlooked – is the fact that decadence is *performed*, particularly if we understand the word ‘perform’ in an archaic sense as an ‘alteration’ (*parfourmer*). Decadence alters something by changing its character, composition, or directionality. This might involve: beginning at the end; corrupting conventional beauty by imbuing it with autumnal or crepuscular qualities; understanding sickness as the ground of a preferred sensibility; displacing or distorting supposedly timeless moral standards; inverting gender roles; channelling desire away from monogamous heteronormative relationships; turning *à rebours*, as J.-K. Huysmans put it in his famous decadent urtext (1884); absconding from or striving to reverse techno-scientific or industrial progress; and revelling in the undoing of that which ruins. As a concept, decadence is also performed because it is ‘brought forth’ (*parfourmir*) and furnished with specific meanings in specific contexts (as Weir’s querying of the term goes some way toward illustrating). This makes decadence highly contingent on the contexts in which it is summoned as a concept, just as it makes it an excellent trope for examining the beliefs and prejudices of its interlocutors.

But decadence is also more than a concept. Decadence can refer to different practices in a variety of time periods and continents, not least performance practices. For instance, Oscar Wilde’s play *Salomé* (1891), which theatre and literature scholar Sos Eltis describes as the ‘dramatic epitome

of *fin-de-siècle* Decadence',<sup>3</sup> has travelled across diverse performance forms, bodies, and stages that include the likes of Aurélien Lugné-Poe's seminal production at the Théâtre de l'Œuvre in Paris in 1896, while Wilde was serving time in Reading Gaol for 'gross indecency'; a 1902 staging starring Gertrud Eysoldt at Max Reinhardt's 'Schall und Rauch' [Sound and Smoke] in Berlin;<sup>4</sup> the dances of Maud Allan and her 'Salomania' kin; Richard Strauss's opera *Salome* (1905); the New Negro Art Theater's *Salome* (1928), which starred Hemsley Winfield (the first African American modern dancer) in the titular role when the lead actress was ill; Mario Montez's (René Rivera) *Dance of the Seven Veils* (1966);<sup>5</sup> Lindsay Kemp's drag *Salomé* (1973), which drew liberally on a number of artworks and books associated with fin-de-siècle decadence; and Owen Parry's audio and cosplay performance *Salome baby! (Dance of the Infinite Veil)* (2014).

*Salomé's* lines of flight have been well documented, but if we look beyond the staging or adaptation of a given play text, especially a canonical text like Wilde's, then the extent to which decadence travels as a practice becomes yet more apparent. For instance, the very same Schall und Rauch that presented *Salomé* in 1902 hosted Anita Berber – 'the high priestess of choreographic decadence' – when the Weimar Republic was first finding its feet.<sup>6</sup> Also, in the North American context (among theatre scholars, at least), a word like 'decadence' is more likely to evoke the riotous excesses of a company like the Play-House of the Ridiculous: perhaps a show like Jackie Curtis' acid-inspired *Heaven Grand in Amber Orbit* (1969), in which the inimitable Penny Arcade (Susana Carmen Ventura) appears as a gold-painted Siamese triplet, and Ruby Lynn Reyner as Heaven Grand, 'the "star" of the pleasure house managed by Lady Galaxy, who finally [...] dies of syphilis'.<sup>7</sup> In Japan, attention might be drawn instead to its various Schools of Decadence associated with authors and playwrights like Mishima Yukio, whereas in the Nigerian context the word 'decadence' is more likely to conjure associations with the redundancy of the British Empire.<sup>8</sup> Alternatively, if you ask a live artist or a cabaret or neo-burlesque fan what they think of when they hear the word 'decadence', you may find yourself regaled with stories of sweaty clubs in our own century featuring shows by the likes of David Hoyle – the self-confessed 'patron saint of decadence

and nihilism<sup>9</sup> – or an offering from La Pocha Nostra somewhere near Mexico’s border with the United States, now home to a menagerie of ‘ethno-cyborgs’, ‘intelligent raves and art expos of Western apocalypse’.<sup>10</sup> And all this is to say nothing of the darker side of decadence: the side that found the gay and trans Eldorado club in Berlin being turned into the Nazis’ district headquarters in 1933, ‘as if a desecrated Nordic temple had been thoroughly cleansed of polluted influences’, stamping out the last vestiges of the Weimar Republic’s ‘cultural decadence’ (as Hitler put it);<sup>11</sup> or the side that found conservative commentators and politicians like Patrick Buchanan and Jesse Helms decrying ‘the death of the West’ and the saturation of American society with an ‘unmistakable decadence’ at the cusp of the twenty-first century, credited, in part and among others, to the transgressive performances of Ron Athey, Bob Flanagan, and Sheree Rose;<sup>12</sup> or the more sober (but nonetheless disarming) diagnosis of the 2020s as the dawn of a new societal decadence, as Ross Douthat advances in a recent critique of political sclerosis, economic stagnation, cultural exhaustion, and the fact that the West is not making enough babies (he is Catholic, after all).<sup>13</sup>

Decadence has rhetorical utility as a concept, then, and this utility (a strange phenomenon given decadence’s resistance to the very idea of instrumentality) has been harnessed at various times to frame and make sense of decadent practices, be they social, literary, behavioural, or related to performance and the visual arts. Decadence slips through the hands of those who use it, whatever their political persuasion, just as it plays across the bodies of those who dance, act, embody, or write it. In each case, decadence is transmogrified. So, while decadence has been used to demean and ostracize marginalized demographics and cultural practices as being in some way corrupt or degenerate, decadence has also been reclaimed and reimagined as that which finds refuge in marginality, which might revel in transgression, or which occupies cultural fringes in ways that shine a light on the exclusionary parameters and contingencies of virtue, virtuosity, taste, and decency.

This special issue of *Volupté* asserts that decadence is a practice that can be performed and embodied, that this practice is of significant cultural, aesthetic, and political interest, and that decadent practices spill beyond the European fin de siècle. Framing decadence as a practice that can be performed accounts for why discussion of plays sits alongside considerations of choreography, scenography, aesthetics, and live art. When space is made for the discussion of plays, the focus lands on the work of playwrights who lived and worked outside the European fin de siècle. You will find examples in Amano Ikuho's article on the Shōwa period playwright Mishima Yukio, Özen Nergis Dolcerocca's essay on decadent drama in the late Ottoman Empire, and Stephen Cedars's study of the queer theatre-maker and playwright Charles Ludlam, whose work spanned and helped to shape New York's counter-cultural scene between 1967 and his death from AIDS-related illness in 1987. This issue also makes space for space, which is to say, the scenographic. Hence, in Barbara Bessac's study of interior design and its impact on theatre-making in nineteenth-century London and Paris, the emphasis is not on text, but on decadence's material environments on and off stage. A focus on performance also enables us to consider a wider range of contexts than a focus on dramatic literature would otherwise permit. This includes dance – which, alongside Katharina Herold-Zanker's engagement with the work of Berber and Sebastian Droste (Willj Knobloch) in Weimar Berlin, includes Frankie Dytor's analysis of the early twentieth-century Renaissance dances of Alexander Sacharoff – as well as late twentieth- and twenty-first-century performance and live art in my own piece on the work of Bob Flanagan, Sheree Rose and Martin O'Brien, Phoebe Patey-Ferguson's review of Lucy McCormick's *Life: Live!* (2019), and Owen Parry's review of Jake Elwes' *The Zizi Show: A Deepfake Drag Cabaret* (2020).

This issue therefore aims to make several epistemological interventions, by taking an expansive approach to the study of decadent performance in ways that resist neatly bounded and exclusive taxonomies; looking beyond a European frame for examples of decadent performance; celebrating decadence as a form a 'perennial decay'<sup>14</sup> of persistent relevance to performance; and embracing an approach that cuts across literary studies (which has dominated the field to date),

and theatre and performance studies (which has largely occluded decadence from its lexicon and core conceptual frameworks).

### **Decadence and performance**

The dominance of literary studies in considerations of decadence, and the relative lack of engagement with decadence in theatre and performance scholarship, means that this issue traverses material that will be familiar to some, but new to others – particularly those for whom the term ‘decadent’ is not yet recognized as a critical concept or practice. Moreover, to borrow from performance theorist Diana Taylor, the challenge in drawing performance into dialogue with a field so deeply embedded in literary studies ‘is not to “translate” from an embodied expression into a linguistic one or vice versa but to recognize the strengths and limitations of each system’.<sup>15</sup> In other words, the challenge is to recognize the ways in which discourse and performance, text and practice, are intertwined.

‘Decadence studies’ can be traced back to attempts to map decadent literature in the late-nineteenth century, although literary-critical scholarship is generally understood to have begun with Richard Gilman’s *Decadence: The Strange Life of an Epithet* (1979). Interestingly enough, Gilman was a theatre critic, although theatre barely features in that particular book.<sup>16</sup> Gilman’s account of the term’s promiscuity and multiple valences provided an impetus for subsequent, less dismissive scholarship,<sup>17</sup> and decadence studies now boasts a thriving community of scholars primarily grounded in literary studies. In the year running from July 2018 to July 2019 in England, there were no fewer than five international conferences addressing decadent literature in addition to specialist panels held at discipline-wide annual conferences, several events arranged by the AHRC-funded Decadence and Translation Network, a one-day symposium on decadence and disease, and various lectures on decadence and the occult at venues like The Last Tuesday Society and Treadwell’s Books in London.<sup>18</sup> The British Association of Decadence Studies, along with this very journal, was also launched at Goldsmiths in 2018. In the United States, the Aestheticism and



Decadence Caucus of the North American Victorian Studies Association was formed less than a year earlier, in autumn 2017, and New York University played host to a one-day symposium on ‘Transnational Poetics, Aestheticism, and Decadence at the Fin de Siècle’, which included discussion about developing a transnational Aestheticism and Decadence Network. Decadence studies, in other words, is thriving.

However, the significant majority of attendees at each of the events flagged above came from literary studies and presented research on European – and especially English and French – literature of the fin de siècle. This is not particularly surprising given the traction that decadence has gained in the discipline, but the field’s interdisciplinary ambitions are yet to reach their full potential. This picture is starting to change, with several edited collections making clear efforts to put literary studies into dialogue with other art forms, including theatre and performance.<sup>19</sup> *Volupté* has also published two articles exploring decadence and the performing body,<sup>20</sup> and some compelling studies of dandyism and performativity have been undertaken,<sup>21</sup> although generally theatre and performance – as opposed to the study of written play texts – tend to be marginalized in decadence studies. There is no shortage of dramatic criticism, but discussion of decadence in relation to live performance is limited, and tends to relate to a small handful of plays by playwrights of the European fin de siècle, especially Wilde’s *Salomé* and the ‘Salomania’ it produced.<sup>22</sup> A historian of decadent verse dramas might put this down to their being ‘unactable’, but, as literature scholar Ana Parejo Vadillo reminds us, this is a rather dated perspective given the possibilities opened up by twenty-first-century stage production.<sup>23</sup>

What, then, does performance have to offer to how we think about and engage with decadence? Firstly, a consideration of decadence and performance invites us to move beyond the prevalence of the ‘antitheatrical prejudice’ among self-professed decadents in the late nineteenth century, as well as intellectual assumptions about the cultural status of the performing body.<sup>24</sup> The antitheatrical prejudice describes views that regard theatre and theatricality more generally as relating in some way to duplicity or untrustworthiness, as well as various forms of decline and

degeneracy, such as fears around the spreading of moral corruption. An example that comes most readily to mind is Ancient Rome's first actor-emperor, Nero, who was roundly castigated by chroniclers who held fast to the antitheatrical prejudice *avant la lettre*.<sup>25</sup> But in the context of fin-de-siècle decadence, the antitheatrical prejudice refers to a belief that the materiality of theatre debases an otherwise pure verse form. For instance, Anatole Baju was among those decadents who regarded theatre as a dying genre, the demise of which could not come soon enough.<sup>26</sup> But many decadent writers castigated the stage at the same time as they wrote for it, or fluctuated between condemnation of the dissimulation and egoism of performers and unabashed eulogizing of their charisma. For example, Octave Mirbeau viewed actors as being wrapped in a degenerative unreality, but he also wrote for the stage – albeit in a less decadent vein than his satirical novel *Le Jardin des supplices* [*Torture Garden*] (1899) – and paid hyperbolic tribute to the Divine Sarah Bernhardt (Henriette-Rosine Bernard).<sup>27</sup> More famously, Maurice Maeterlinck spurned the flesh-and-blood corporeality of the actor in favour of marionettes, although his plays were staged by Paul Fort with Maeterlinck's blessing. As theatre historian Jonas Barish ponders, in spite of initial doubts, Maeterlinck

nevertheless dreamed of creating, in the theater, the effects of charged silence and muted intensity to which his plays so palpably lend themselves. Perhaps he was ready to risk a measure of theatrical coarsening in order to arrive at a greater degree of theatrical delicacy.<sup>28</sup>

As demonstrated by the photograph of the Théâtre d'Art's own printed serial (fig. 1), Paul Verlaine, too, was actively supported by theatre makers, and also wrote works for the stage. While recognized primarily as a poet rather than a playwright, Verlaine both benefitted from and contributed to theatre-making of the Parisian fin de siècle. We even owe the term 'fin de siècle' to a 'Schnitzleresque but badly crafted' play by F. de Jouvenot and H. Micard titled *Fin de Siècle: Pièce en Quatre Actes*, which was first performed in Paris on 17 April 1888.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, among those writers who might be thought of as progenitors of decadence, we find a clear advocacy of theatricality. Charles Baudelaire built his corpus of poems around an inversion of the Platonic

critique of dissimulation, as does Huysmans's Jean Floressas des Esseintes in *À rebours*. 'The theatre' might not be front and centre in these works, but theatricality haunts the decadent imagination – from vaunting the dandy's feigned indifference, to waxing lyrical about makeup and artificial paradises. Several prominent aesthetes and decadents, such as Arthur Symons, also dedicated a substantive portion of their careers to the analysis not just of drama, but its realization in theatre and performance.<sup>30</sup>

Performance also enables encounters with decadence *in the flesh*. Decadence feeds nicely into sensory studies, with many illuminating essays and an instructive introduction gathered together in Jane Desmarais and Alice Condé's *Decadence and the Senses* (2017). However, while literary decadence in the nineteenth century is marked by an overriding concern with the sensual and corporeal, especially as the senses and the body pertain to rarefied or otherwise unconventional pleasures and pains, the medium of the page – however evocative the inscriptions, and however much, like Dorian Gray, we may find ourselves poisoned by a book – can only go so far in evoking the 'fleshiness' of a decadent sensibility.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, putting to one side the satiation of deliciously unreachable desires and whims, what might it mean to be physically immersed in the 'pulsing landscape that is sensual, gendered, dangerous, contaminating, and contaminated by the self through immersion and embodiment', as literature scholar Kostas Boyiopoulos so evocatively puts it?<sup>32</sup> What new issues and opportunities might this present? To pose such questions is not to dismiss the fact that literature can arouse deeply felt physiological responses in the reader; rather, it is merely to ask what live performances in a shared space have to offer to this interest in the fleshiness of decadence. As the articles in this issue demonstrate, theatre and performance lend themselves to exploring the sensorial, corporeal, and sartorial aspects of decadence. This demands that we acknowledge how encounters with decadent literature relate to the body, but it also invites us to think both with and beyond the literary and conceptual, opening out to considerations of theatre and performance as live art forms that may bear very little connection to a written 'text'.

THÉÂTRE D'ART

THÉÂTRE D'ART

DIRECTEUR : PAUL FORT  
 Secrétaire général : Jules MÉRY  
 Siège social : 60, rue Sainte-Placide, 60

Représentation mensuelle d'œuvres inédites

Prochainement le THÉÂTRE-D'ART donnera une représentation au bénéfice du poète Paul Verlaine et du peintre Paul Gauguin.

Cette soirée sera composée surtout d'œuvres symbolistes.

En voici le programme :

MAURICE MAETERLINCK. *L'Intruse*.  
 PAUL VERLAINE. . . . . *Les Uns et les Autres*.  
 CHARLES MORICE. . . . . *Chérubin*.

Puis le *Gugnon*, de Stéphane MALLARMÉ et plusieurs autres poèmes de divers écrivains nouveaux. Ces œuvres seront interprétées par des artistes de la Comédie-Française, de l'Odéon et des principaux théâtres.

CHEMINS DE FER DE L'ÉTAT

Fêtes de Pâques

AVIS

A l'occasion des fêtes de Pâques, l'Administration des Chemins de fer de l'Etat a décidé que les billets d'aller et retour délivrés de toute gare à toute gare pendant la période du mercredi 25 mars au samedi 4 avril, dont la validité expirerait avant le mardi 7 avril 1891, seront exceptionnellement valables, pour le retour, jusqu'au dernier train du mardi 7 avril inclusivement.

En ce qui concerne les billets d'aller et retour de ou pour Paris, cette prolongation de validité sera applicable quel que soit l'itinéraire par lequel les billets sont valables. (Toute voie Etat ou voies mixtes Etat-Orléans et Etat-Ouest.)

Chemin de fer de l'Est

VOYAGES CIRCULAIRES EN ITALIE

PAR LES LIGNES DE L'EST

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Au moyen de ces combinaisons, les voyageurs ont le choix entre un grand nombre d'excursions au nord des Alpes (parcours en dehors de l'Italie) et au sud des Alpes (parcours italiens), qu'ils peuvent effectuer avec deux billets dont l'un est valable pour les parcours Français, Suisses, Allemands ou Autrichiens, suivant l'itinéraire choisi, et l'autre pour les parcours italiens. La durée de validité pour les deux parcours réunis est de 60 jours.

Les prix et conditions sous lesquels ces billets sont délivrés à emprunter figurent dans un livret spécial des voyages circulaires qui est délivré à Paris (Gare de l'Est), et dans les bureaux succursales de la Compagnie.

Nota. — Les voyages circulaires et excursions, qu'ils soient commençés par la voie de Delle ou les lignes allemandes, peuvent être effectués sans passeport pour l'ALLEMAGNE, à la condition de ne pas séjourner en Alsace-Lorraine.

Chemin de fer de l'Est

FRANCE, SUISSE ET ITALIE

PAR LE SAINT-GOTHARD

Sans passeport

Les voyageurs peuvent se rendre de Paris à Milan par trains directs et rapides, via Troyes, Belfort, Delle, Porrentruy, Delémont, Bâle, Lucerne (Lac des 4 Cantons), le Saint-Gothard, (Lacs Majeur, de Lugano et de Côme).

Cet itinéraire dispense de la formalité du passeport. La durée du trajet est de 20 heures environ.

Des voitures directes de 1<sup>re</sup> classe effectuent le trajet entre Paris et Milan par le train partant de Paris à 8 h. 40 du soir et au retour par le train quittant Milan à 10 h. 15 du matin.

A Milan, les voyageurs trouvent des correspondances pour toute l'Italie.

Pour tous les autres renseignements, consulter les indicateurs, et s'adresser aux gares.

Chemins de fer de l'Ouest

BILLETS D'ALLER ET RETOUR

A PRIX RÉDUITS

La Compagnie des Chemins de fer de l'Ouest délivre de Paris à toutes les gares de son réseau situées au delà de Gisors, Mantès, Houdan et Rambouillet, et vice versa, des billets d'aller et retour, comportant une réduction de 25 o/o. La durée de validité de ces billets est fixée ainsi qu'il suit :

Jusqu'à 75 kil. inclus, 1 jour; de 76 à 125, 2 jours; de 126 à 250, 3 jours; de 251 à 500, 4 jours; au-dessus de 500, 5 jours.

Les délais indiqués ci-dessus ne comprennent pas les dimanches et jours de fête; la durée des billets est augmentée en conséquence.

Chemin de fer de l'Ouest

SERVICES QUOTIDIENS RAPIDES

ENTRE PARIS ET LONDRES, PAR DIEPPE ET NEWHAVEN

Les importants travaux exécutés dans les ports de Dieppe et de Newhaven, en donnant la facilité d'organiser, dans ces deux ports, des départs à heures fixes, quelle que soit l'heure de la marée, ont permis aux Compagnies de l'Ouest et de Brighton de réduire considérablement la durée du trajet entre Paris et Londres et de créer des services rapides qui fonctionnent tous les jours, sauf le cas de force majeure, aux heures indiquées ci-dessous :

DE PARIS A LONDRES :

1<sup>re</sup>, 2<sup>e</sup>, 3<sup>e</sup> Cl.

Départ de Paris (Saint-Lazare) . . . . . 8 h. 50 du soir.  
 Départ de Dieppe . . . . . 1 h. du matin.  
 Arrivée à Londres (London-Bridge) . . . . . 7 h. 40 matin.  
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 1<sup>re</sup> classe 41 fr. 25; 2<sup>e</sup> classe 30 fr.; 3<sup>e</sup> classe 21 fr. 25, plus 2 fr. par billet pour droits de port à Dieppe et à Newhaven.

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 1<sup>re</sup> classe 68 fr. 75; 2<sup>e</sup> classe 48 fr. 75; 3<sup>e</sup> classe 37 fr. 50, plus 4 fr. par billet pour droits de port à Dieppe et à Newhaven.

Ces billets donnent le droit de s'arrêter à Rouen, Dieppe, Newhaven et Brighton.

Paris. — Jules Méry, impr.-gérant.  
 14, rue Duperré.

Dans son indicible douleur, LE POÈTE-ROI jette la Lyre qui se brise en un lamentable sanglot et le cri des fibres est si déchirant que LA JEUNE FILLE tremblante d'effroi et d'amour revient vers le royal Désespéré, comme résignée aux flammes d'une imminente géhenne. Pendant qu'ils sont enlacés, UN CHOEUR D'ANGES, entendu jadis, effleure leurs oreilles extasiées.

Ecarte le conseil de tes mauvaises craintes.  
 Le Seigneur t'a rendu des mains pour les étreintes,  
 Fais à l'amant royal le don de ton orgueil,  
 Vais laisse le troupeau neigeux d'immaculés ;  
 Vers l'amorcelement des glaces recules,  
 Les rouges Kéroubim les repoussent du seuil.

Aimer-vous ! le blé mûr épars des Madelaines,  
 Epars sur les pieds nus avec les urnes pleines,  
 Brûle seul dans la sainte auréole de feu,  
 Dans le brasier de Christ, avivé de colères,  
 Vous foudriez, ô froides fleurs des soirs polaires,  
 Qui ne parfument pas les hommes avant Dieu.

Lorsque le Rédempteur brisé les statues  
 D'autrefois, parmi les colonnes abattues,  
 Il laissa reverter, seul d'entre les Maudits,  
 Eros, et lui donna pour royaume la Terre :  
 Immortelle, la soif des lèvres vous altère,  
 Et l'enfer des baisers vaut notre paradis.

PIERRE QUILLARD.

PROGRAMME

LES VEILLEUSES

pièce en 1 acte, en prose, de M. PAUL GABILLARD

La Folle . . . . . M<sup>lle</sup> Lemoré.  
 L'orpheline . . . . . M<sup>lle</sup> Camée.  
 La première vieille . . . . . M<sup>lle</sup> Suzanne Gay.  
 La deuxième vieille . . . . . M<sup>lle</sup> Dénac.  
 La religieuse . . . . . M<sup>lle</sup> Moret.  
 La jeune femme . . . . . M<sup>lle</sup> d'Épernay.  
 La jeune fille . . . . . M<sup>lle</sup> Maréchal.

LA FILLE AUX MAINS COUPÉES

mystère en 2 tableaux, en vers, de M. PIERRE QUILLARD,  
 décor de M. PAUL SÉRUSIER.

La jeune fille . . . . . M<sup>lle</sup> Camée.  
 Le père . . . . . M. Prad.  
 Le chœur d'anges . . . . . M. Paul Franck.  
 Le Poète-Roi . . . . . M. Beuve.  
 Le serviteur . . . . . M. Félix.  
 La résistante . . . . . M<sup>lle</sup> Suzanne Gay.

MADAME LA MORT

drame cérébral en 3 tabl., en prose, de M<sup>lle</sup> RACHIDE

Paul Dartigny . . . . . M. Paul Franck.  
 Jacques Durand . . . . . M. Félix.  
 Le docteur Godin . . . . . M. Prad.  
 Jean . . . . . M. Ricqmer.  
 Lucie . . . . . M<sup>lle</sup> Suzanne Gay.  
 La Mort . . . . . M<sup>lle</sup> Camée.

LE GUIGNON

poème de M. STÉPHANE MALLARMÉ, dit par M<sup>lle</sup> Camée.

LE SPHINX, OU LA FIN DE PIERROT

pantomime mystique en 1 acte, de M. PAUL HUGOINET,  
 musique de M. LETOURNEUX.

Pierrot . . . . . M. Félix.  
 Lord Punch . . . . . M. Prad.  
 Hermonthis . . . . . M<sup>lle</sup> Pelegrino.

PROSTITUÉE

scène NATURALISTE, en 2 tabl., de M. de CHIRAC

Germain . . . . . M. Prad.  
 Pauline . . . . . M<sup>lle</sup> Camée.  
 Un Monsieur . . . . . M. X.

Fig. 1: Théâtre d'art, printed serial [excerpt]. 20 March 1891.  
 Bibliothèque nationale de France, département de la Réserve des livres rares.

The text translates as: 'Soon the theatre will give a benefit performance for the poet Paul Verlaine and the painter Paul Gauguin', and the programme includes works by Maurice Maeterlinck (*L'Intruse*), Paul Verlaine (*Les Uns et les Autres*), and Charles Morice (*Chérubin*).

A focus on performance also invites us to reconsider how decadence relates to escapist individualism. This line of thought has been influenced by novelist and critic Paul Bourget's essay 'The Example of Baudelaire' (1881), which explores decadent literature in relation to the individual 'man of decadence', a social organism that 'succumbs to decadence', and a 'decadent style' characterized by a breakdown of the whole into smaller and smaller parts.<sup>33</sup> We can trace Bourget's influence through the work of contemporaries like Havelock Ellis and Friedrich Nietzsche, just as we can find it in twenty-first century reflections on decadence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>34</sup> However, much as the emphasis placed on individualism accords with the dominant narratives that derive, in part, from Bourget's study, decadent writers and artists tended to move in the same circles. They supported one another through patronage and paeans to one another's work, and formed direct and indirect communities of sense in what Matthew Potolsky has usefully described as an international and cosmopolitan 'mode of reception', or relationship to the culture and traditions that influenced them.<sup>35</sup> Here we might think not only of writers but also of performers as cases in point, especially the international tours of Bernhardt and Eleonora Duse, which prompted a flurry of articles, poems, and communal gatherings honouring their divergently decadent sensibilities. We might also think of the salons that brought together like-minded artists and writers. Rachilde and Jean Lorrain helped to cement their 'decadent' reputations by dressing in eccentric garb at events such as these (Rachilde was known to have dressed as an eighteenth-century marquise and a debonair man – which required a permit at the time – and Lorrain as a semi-nude wrestler).<sup>36</sup> This suggests that performing as a decadent subject contributed to the formation of a decadent style, establishing modes of behaviour in the process which could go on to influence behaviours and styles elsewhere.

Some of the most important writers associated with decadence were also avid supporters of theatre communities. For instance, Rachilde's advocacy and encouragement helped to launch the career of her friend Alfred Jarry, as well as Paul Fort's Théâtre d'Art (and to a lesser extent Lugné-Poe's Théâtre de l'Œuvre). Several of Rachilde's plays featured in the Théâtre d'Art's

programmes from the outset, her reputation ensuring a crowd, and she also pushed for the inclusion of work by lesser-known writers when she became part of the theatre's programming committee.<sup>37</sup> Wilde, too, served as one of the Théâtre d'Art's artistic advisors.<sup>38</sup> In other words, key progenitors of decadent literature and drama might well be credited with influencing one of the most important periods in west-European modernist theatre, although Rachilde's work as a playwright and impresario is largely ignored in favour of that of her male peers, which is especially frustrating given the clear overlap between decadence and what is more usually taxonomized under the rubric of Symbolism in undergraduate degrees and textbooks.<sup>39</sup>

In displacing narratives that emphasize the solipsism of decadence, asking instead how it is formed in the context of specific communities of sense, this issue also invites its readers to consider who decadence is for. Is it the preserve of wealthy aristocrats and bohemian elites? How else might decadence be imagined, and what might this do to its supposedly apolitical or reactionary associations? These questions are especially pertinent to the articles in this issue that focus on the queering of decadence as a pejorative term, as explored in Cedars's, Dytor's, Parry's, and my own contributions. Each raises a set of issues that are specific to the historical contexts addressed, but they also invite reflection on wider, more fundamental issues around what it means to engage with decadence in the twenty-first century, not least with regard to the baggage that decadence has accrued as both a concept and a practice, as the following section explores.

### **Owning everything: on decadence and privilege**

When I first encountered the word 'decadence' in a research context, I assumed it would relate in some way to indulgence and orgiastic excess, such as one might find depicted in paintings like Thomas Couture's *Romains de la décadence* (1847) or Lawrence Alma-Tadema's *The Roses of Heliogabalus* (1888). These paintings present an empire's swan song steeped in the aesthetics of opulence and luxury, and have a part to play in why decadence and subsidiary concepts are so frequently associated with the haves rather than the have-nots. The emphasis that is so often placed

on the value of uselessness in decadent art and literature – the belief that ‘the only things that are really beautiful are those which have no use’, as Théophile Gautier put it<sup>40</sup> – suggests that the pleasures of decadence may be contingent on a sublimation (or in some cases a fetishization) of the labour required to produce those pleasures, which would seem to make decadence the preserve of those who do not need to labour (or labour much) themselves.<sup>41</sup> How, then, might we think of decadence as something other than an aristocratic or elitist privilege?

‘Progressiveness’ would be antithetical to Gautier’s valorisation of the beautiful, just as ‘ethical sympathy’ was ‘an unpardonable mannerism of style’ for Wilde.<sup>42</sup> You will struggle to find much ‘ethical sympathy’ in Huysmans’s *À rebours* or Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). What you will find, though – as Bessac explores in her study of interior design and its influence on theatre staging – is a perversion of the relative frugality that tends to characterize the inheritance of class. Opulence is indulged in Huysmans’s and Wilde’s novels in ways that connect taste to inherited power and privilege, sometimes in ways that bring a similarly privileged public to the table, such as in the extravagant ‘black feast’ scene that opens *À rebours*, in which Des Esseintes mourns the loss of his virility, or in ways that align more closely with what Weir describes as an ‘uncommon sense’ that can be cultivated, expending the last of the aristocracy’s lavish resources on the refinement of exquisitely debauched pleasures.<sup>43</sup> Associations such as these might tempt us to assume that decadence necessitates being high class and wealthy, but – aristocrats like Robert de Montesquiou aside – the bohemianism or aristocratic dandyism of these writers was more often the product of a carefully-crafted and consciously-performed stance expressed through sartorial and corporeal self-fashioning.<sup>44</sup>

Gender non-conformity pertains to several of the articles in this issue, although Cedars’s, Dytor’s and Parry’s contributions especially invite reflection on the relationships between decadence, opulence, and privilege in the history of drag performance. The relationships between these themes are immortalized in Jennie Livingston’s landmark documentary *Paris is Burning* (1990), when Junior LaBeija encourages a congregation of disenfranchised black and Latinx drag



performers to be opulent, to ‘own everything’.<sup>45</sup> An aesthetic predicated on ‘owning everything’, in this context, is not connected to disposable income or wealth so much as the fantasies and modes of representation that surround such disposability. It is also connected to the *practising* of these fantasies, and the fostering of countercultural communities of the disenfranchised and the dispossessed. Hence, for opulence to have meaning, it needs to be recognized as being ‘opulent’ either by virtue of an inherited understanding of what constitutes and entitles one to its enjoyment, or an understanding produced within a particular culture of sense-making at odds with this entitlement – perhaps by way of its being contaminated or sullied and enjoyed for that very reason, as Cedars explores in his study of Charles Ludlam and his work with the Ridiculous Theatrical Company.

The issues at stake in this discussion of decadence, opulence, and privilege also pertain to race, as do the reactions of many who have been derogatorily accused of simulating the aesthetics of excess and luxury. For instance, in the words of the cultural theorist Stuart Hall, black diasporic subjects frequently turned to their body ‘as if it was, and it often was, the only cultural capital we had. We have worked on ourselves as the canvases of representation’.<sup>46</sup> It is clear to see how this insight relates to the Harlem ballroom scene and *The Zizi Show*, but it also resonates with the kinds of black and Latinx cultural production studied by the curator and scholar Jillian Hernandez in her book *Aesthetics of Excess: The Art and Politics of Black and Latina Embodiment* (2020) where such ‘cultural capital’ is prone to processes that consciously and deliberately augment the aesthetics and politics of excess. For Hernandez, the kinds of excess associated with the aesthetics of opulence in black and Latinx self-fashioning is akin to an embrace of abundance ‘where the political order would impose austerity upon the racialized poor and working class’.<sup>47</sup> Equally, the sartorial and corporeal augmentation explored in Parry’s review of *The Zizi Show* invites us to reflect on who decadence is for – or who it *could* be for – in ways that intersect as much with class and inherited wealth as race, gender and sexuality.

Along with the bohemian and the dandy, the *femme fatale* is another prominent character in nineteenth- and twentieth-century decadent literature and theatre. You will find her in the pages of Rachilde's *Monsieur Vénus* (1884) and Catulle Mendès' *Mephistophela* (1889), and in productions of Wilde's *Salomé* (1891) and Murayama Tomoyoshi's *A Nero in Skirts* (1927). Luxuriating in the demonization of women as *femmes fatales* might be seen as an attempt by men to deal with their own fears around the increasing access of 'New Women' to employment, education, and the public sphere, although prominent women writing decadence in their plays and novels make clear the extent to which the *femme fatale* was by no means limited to the male imagination.<sup>48</sup> Also, while some of these authors opposed feminist activism, as in Rachilde's case,<sup>49</sup> decadence has also been reclaimed as a basis for critical frameworks that are explicitly feminist. Visual cultures scholar Julia Skelly's *Radical Decadence: Excess in Contemporary Feminist Textiles and Craft* (2017) is an example, in which 'radical' decadence forms the basis of a feminist framework 'that transgresses gendered norms in relation to not only behaviours but also art-historical ideologies'.<sup>50</sup> In other words, although nineteenth-century decadence sometimes resulted in the production of misogynistic tropes, decadence is also ripe for reconsideration as a basis or point of departure for an explicitly feminist practice – be it literary or performance-based.

Decadence has always been radical, but Skelly's book invites us to consider the decadent *femme fatale* as an empowered subject who speaks to feminist cultural production in our own century, shifting the 'centers of origin and gravity' of decadence, as literature scholar Dennis Denisoff puts it, 'such that one can delineate women's decadence without naturalizing and reinscribing the familiar, canonical context'.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, the fact that the *femme fatale* can speak to us not just from the safe distance of a page, but in a shared performance space designed and choreographed by women, would seem as good a place as any to start. We might think here of artists like Lucy McCormick, as Patey-Ferguson explores in her review of McCormick's *Life: LIVE!*, Berber's dances of vice, horror and ecstasy, as Herold-Zanker sets out in her contribution, or indeed the work of artists like Lauren Barri Holstein, Ann Liv Young, Kembra Pfahler, Ivy

Monteiro, and The Uhuruverse. All of these artists demonstrate how the monstrous feminine has been re-tooled in ways that speak to the cultures and histories of decadence.<sup>52</sup>

The *femme fatale* also tended to figure in decadent literature and performance of the fin de siècle as an orientalised other appealing to the male gaze – an appeal that is much more evident, and pertinent, in performance contexts. Wilde’s *Salomé* is the most famous example, but we might look not to the play itself, but to a proliferation of dancing Salomes that graced the stages of cabarets and music halls across Europe and, later, North America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Maud Allan, Gertrude Hoffman, Lotta Faust, La Sylphe (Edith Lambelle Langerfeld), La Petite Adelaide (Mary Adelaide Dickey), Aida Overton Walker, and Eva Tanguay, among countless others, all built their careers off the back of ‘Salomania’ (which owed a debt to Loïe Fuller’s dance-pantomime *Salome*, performed in full in 1895),<sup>53</sup> but similarly all of them – from the clothes they wore to the gazes they solicited – subscribed to a fashion for orientalism. This fashion was in accordance with ‘the vast imperialist expansions of the latter part of the nineteenth century, and the concomitant fascination of all things Oriental’ in Europe, especially ‘those women perceived as living Salomes, the seductive, often veiled “*danseuses du ventre*” imported from the colonies’.<sup>54</sup> It was also in accordance with what literature scholar Hema Chari insightfully describes as a ‘double articulation, revealing simultaneously the colonizer’s deep fascination with, and paranoid anxiety about, the other’, while at the same time exposing decadence and orientalism as ‘interchangeable signifiers’<sup>55</sup> – that is, interchangeable on European terms at the exclusion of engaging with decadent art and literature in East Asia beyond a problematic penchant for *japonisme*, and for ‘the oriental’ more broadly (as Li Xiaorong has persuasively demonstrated, decadent poetry in China predates orientalist decadence of the European fin de siècle by at least three centuries).<sup>56</sup>

This issue of *Volupté* responds by presenting articles that address work composed by Japanese and late-Ottoman playwrights. For instance, as Amano points out in her article, Mishima’s *Madame de Sade* (1965) inverts the appropriative dyad by situating the Marquis de Sade (himself a progenitor of literary decadence)<sup>57</sup> in the context of a Japanese theatrical tradition.

Dolcerocca's consideration of work by Muallim Naci Heder and Rezaizade Mahmut Ekrem also challenges us to think differently about an assumed logic of equivalence between a west-European decadent 'centre' and its so-called 'peripheries' in a context where there was no comparable bourgeoisie to shock. Countless other artists and performance makers across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have also shown us how orientalism can be brought into sharp critical focus in ways that are deeply and evocatively 'decadent'. I am thinking, for instance, of Morimura Yasumasa's *Futago [Portrait]* (1988) and George Chakravarthi's *Olympia* (2003), both of which subject Édouard Manet's painting *Olympia* (1863) to a queerly appropriative *détournement* (appropriating Manet's own art-historical interventions).<sup>58</sup> Works like these make clear that decadent aesthetics, like so many cultural histories, have frequently referenced, re-contextualized or evinced orientalism, but they also suggest how these histories might be reimagined by reclaiming that 'one duty we owe to history' lauded by Wilde: to rewrite it.<sup>59</sup>

Alongside misogyny, orientalism, and various forms of inherited privilege, decadence has also been folded into nationalistic agendas. On the one hand, right-wing politicians and critics have made rhetorical use of decadence, sickness, and degeneracy in a number of attacks condemning queer art and performance, as I address in my own exploration of work by contemporary performance makers who embrace and stage queer sexual practices as a means of working through their own lived experience of chronic illness. On the other hand, a few authors and playwrights associated with decadence chose to align themselves with nationalism in various guises, ranging from the Italian playwright Gabriele d'Annunzio who went so far as to lead a rogue army in the invasion and occupation of Fiume (now Rijeka, in Croatia), to Mishima's nationalistic grandstanding. However, a lesser-known example can be found in the Late Ottoman Empire. As Dolcerocca explains, the so-called 'decadence controversy' was initiated by the morally conservative author Ahmet Midhat's article titled 'Dekadanlar' (1897), in which Midhat condemns 'over-westernized' novelists and dramatists associated with the journal *Servet-i Fünun [Wealth of Knowledge]*. For Midhat, their work was merely imitating decadent authors in Paris, which he also

believed to be at odds with a more cautious approach to modernizing Ottoman-Islamic identity (Midhat was not against engagement with western culture; only the extent of its influence).<sup>60</sup> There is also no shortage of disparaging references to decadence from the political Left, with twentieth-century Marxism serving up some of the most prominent examples that pertain to processes of state formation, such as G. V. Plekhanov's critique of 'decadent tendencies' in Russian art and literature, which he saw as a symptom of societal decline, and György Lukács's scathing condemnation of 'decadent bourgeois' intelligentsia and artistic and literary elites.<sup>61</sup> Anticolonial critiques of empire also targeted the 'decadence' of colonial power and its literary and artistic traditions as the basis for founding more politically and socially engaged cultural practices. Examples can be found in the work of Aimé Césaire, Derek Walcott, Chinua Achebe, and Wole Soyinka. For instance, in the stage directions set out in Scene 4 of his play *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975), Soyinka describes the opulence of a British Residency in colonial Nigeria as being 'redolent of the tawdry decadence of a far-flung but key imperial frontier', although, like Walcott, this did not stop him from appropriating 'the masks of decadence and aestheticism to satirize postcolonial civil society', as Robert Stilling points out.<sup>62</sup>

Decadence is shadowed by associations such as those explored in this section: at times orientalist, at times misogynist, or bound up with various kinds of inherited privilege. However, as the articles in this issue go some way toward demonstrating, this only tells a part of the story – a part that risks detracting from a much more interesting staging of decadence as an alteration or inversion of character, composition or directionality. Decadence, like queerness, lends itself to reclamation, and often those who do the reclaiming do so in ways that are emphatically queer, not least because of how decadence is performed as a mode of alteration. Decadence is a process (just like decay or decline are processes), and theatre and performance – as art forms that unfold through time in a shared space – lend themselves to exploring decadence as a process.

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In addressing why it is worth turning to decadence as a critical concept and practice in the 2020s, particularly in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, I am put in mind of debates about the value of the arts and humanities and the rationales put forward by governments in times of crisis to justify the erosion of support that would otherwise aid their continued viability. We can expect a familiar rhetoric to unfold, and familiar questions. Is funding for the arts – especially resource-intensive art forms like theatre and performance – a luxury we can ill afford in times of economic crisis, or a form of ‘middle-class decadence’?<sup>63</sup>

The articles included in this issue invite us to acknowledge decadence as a complex notion, not least when realized in practice. But that very complexity is also what makes it such a valuable frame for exposing the prejudices of those who deploy its rhetorical bite, as well as those who embrace the aesthetics and politics of decadence as a tactic of choice – informed by an ‘uncommon sense’, perhaps, and the reduction of things, people, and practices to their instrumental value and capacity to contribute ‘productively’ to society. This is pertinent in those contexts that undermine the value of the arts and humanities, and that position arts funding as a form of profligacy or wasteful expenditure. However, it is also pertinent in a much wider range of contexts, including within the very communities that have a stake in the poetics and aesthetics of decadence.

The conjunction of decadence and politics, or ethical sympathy, may well be ‘an unpardonable mannerism of style’ for some of its most important exponents, but that need not deter us from assessing what decadence reveals about the politics of its contexts, the policing of pleasure, the channelling of desire, the disciplining of the body and its draperies, and why utility and instrumentality seem so often to be drivers in the establishment of the worthwhile and the valuable. Decadent performance invites us to experience uncommon tastes and impulses and to catch a glimpse of where they might lead us: to decline, perhaps – perhaps the decline of that which ruins – or to a sensibility that recognizes desire as a wild thing that unsettles stultifying conventions, that is resistant to the forward march of techno-science and industry, and that recognizes the body as the ground of a transgressive or transformational sensibility. This is what

the articles that follow invite us to consider – subject, of course, to the disposition and taste of the reader.

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<sup>2</sup> David Weir, ‘Afterword: Decadent Taste’, in *Decadence and the Senses*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and Alice Condé (Cambridge: Legenda, 2017), pp. 219–28 (p. 219).

<sup>3</sup> Sos Eltis, ‘Theatre and Decadence’, in *Decadence: A Literary History*, ed. by Alex Murray (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 201–17 (p. 205). Due to the breadth of contexts addressed in this issue, the lower-case spelling of ‘decadence’ is used throughout. The capitalization of ‘Decadence’ is usually used to denote its manifestations in art and literature of the west-European fin de siècle. ‘Symbolism’ is capitalized throughout as it refers to a movement.

<sup>4</sup> As Yvonne Ivory points out, ‘[t]his was not the first time Wilde’s play had been performed for a German audience, although it is often referred to as such. *Salome* had been produced by the Munich Akademisch-dramatischer Verein [Academic-Dramatic Club] on 4 March 1901, with the Wiesbaden-based actress Jenny Rauch (1878-1904) in the title role; and by the Lobetheater in Breslau on 12 May 1901, where Marie Wendt (1876-1961) took on the role of *Salome*’. Yvonne Ivory, ‘Gertrud Eysoldt and the Persistence of Decadence on the German Avant-Garde Stage’, *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 2.1 (2019), 16–38 (p. 34, n5).

<sup>5</sup> Very little is known about Montez’s performance, although it does receive a tantalizing but cursory reference in David Kaufman’s biography of Charles Ludlam. See David Kaufman, *Ridiculous!: The Theatrical Life and Times of Charles Ludlam* (New York: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2002), p. 55.

<sup>6</sup> Mel Gordon, *Voluptuous Panic: The Erotic World of Weimar Berlin*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Port Townsend: Feral House, 2006), p. ix.

<sup>7</sup> Giulia Palladini, *The Scene of Foreplay: Theater, Labor, and Leisure in 1960s New York* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press), p. 76.

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Wole Soyinka, *Opera Wonyosi*, in *Wole Soyinka: Plays: 1* (London: Methuen, 1998), pp. 295–404 (p. 298). Also, note that Japanese name order has been used throughout this issue. What we call the surname or family name occurs first in a Japanese name with the first or given name second (although with Mishima Yukio you sometimes see both full names in Western order).

<sup>9</sup> David Hoyle, quoted in Ben Walters, ‘David Hoyle aka the Divine David’, *Time Out*, 3 July 2006, <[https://web.archive.org/web/20110607122141/http://www.timeout.com/london/gay/features/1626/David\\_Hoyle\\_aka\\_the\\_Divine\\_David.html](https://web.archive.org/web/20110607122141/http://www.timeout.com/london/gay/features/1626/David_Hoyle_aka_the_Divine_David.html)> [accessed 15 April 2021].

<sup>10</sup> ‘La Pocha Nostra is The Paseo Project’s 2019 Artist in Residence’, *The Paseo Project*, <<https://paseoproject.org/portfolio/la-pocha-nostra/>> [accessed 22 April 2021].

<sup>11</sup> Gordon, *Voluptuous Panic*, p. 129; Fritz Kaiser, *Degenerate Art: The Exhibition Guide in German and English*, trans. anon. (1937; NC: Ostara Publications, 2018), p. 66. Note that Hitler references Dadaism, Cubism, and Futurism, and not Weimar dance specifically. Note also that Ostara Publications is an alt-right publisher with links to the British National Party.

<sup>12</sup> Patrick Buchanan, *The Death of the West: How Dying Populations and Immigrant Invasions Imperil Our Country and Civilization* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2002). ‘Congressional Record: July 25, 1994’, 140 (98). <<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CREC-1994-07-25/html/CREC-1994-07-25-pt1-PgS17.htm>> [accessed 10 February 2020].

<sup>13</sup> Ross Douthat, *The Decadent Society: How We Became the Victims of Our Own Success* (New York: Avid Reader Press, 2020).

<sup>14</sup> Liz Constable, Dennis Denisoff, and Matthew Potolsky, eds, *Perennial Decay: On the Aesthetics and Politics of Decadence* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999). See also Diemo Landgraf, ed., *Decadence in Literature and Intellectual Debate since 1945* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

<sup>15</sup> Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 32.

<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, Arthur Symons, ‘The Decadent Movement in Literature’, *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, 87 (November 1893), 858–67. Gilman’s book also takes a more expansive approach to the study of decadence than now canonical works like Holbrook Jackson’s *The Eighteen Nineties* (1913) and Mario Praz’s *The Romantic Agony* (1933), which played important roles in establishing this period’s mythology in the early twentieth century.



<sup>17</sup> See, for instance John R. Reed's *Decadent Style* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1985); Jennifer Birkett, *The Sins of the Fathers: Decadence in France 1870-1914* (London: Quartet Books, 1986); Linda Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986); David Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995); Constable, Denisoff, and Potolsky, eds, *Perennial Decay*; Michael St. John, ed., *Romancing Decay: Ideas of Decadence in European Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999). St. John's *Romancing Decay* includes essays on Gabriele d'Annunzio and Pierre Quillard.

<sup>18</sup> 'Women Writing Decadence, 1880-1920', University of Oxford, 7–8 July 2018; 'Decadence, Magic(k) and the Occult', Goldsmiths, University of London, 19–20 July 2018; 'Exoticism, Colonialism and Decadence around the fin de siècle', University of Oxford, 25–26 September 2018; 'The Aesthetics of Decay: Ghost Stories and Mysteries', Birkbeck, University of London, 23 February 2019; 'Aesthetic Time, Decadent Archives', Goldsmiths, University of London, 18–19 July 2019; 'Patterns of Decadence', The British Association for Victorian Studies Annual Conference, University of Exeter, 30 August 2018; 'Decadence and Translation', University of Oxford, 2 November 2018; 'Publishing Decadence in Translation', Senate House, London, 12 February 2019; 'International Perspectives on Decadence in Translation', University of Strasbourg, 13–14 June 2019; Madeleine LeDespencer, 'Félicien Rops and Evil Women: Art of a Decadent Demoniac', Treadwell's Bookshop, London, 7 December 2018; 'La Maladie Fin de Siècle: Decadence and Disease', Birkbeck, University of London, 26 June 2019.

<sup>19</sup> Jane Desmarais and David Weir, eds, *Decadence and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Jane Desmarais and David Weir, eds, *The Oxford Handbook of Decadence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), <<https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190066956.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780190066956>> [accessed 19 December 2021]; Kristin Mahoney and Dustin Friedman, *Nineteenth-Century Literature in Transition: The 1890s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming). See also Constable, Denisoff, and Potolsky, eds, *Perennial Decay*; Landgraf, *Decadence in Literature*; Murray, *Decadence*. Kate Hext and Alex Murray's *Decadence in the Age of Modernism* (2019) touches on drama, although its primary focus is on literature. See Kate Hext and Alex Murray, eds, *Decadence in the Age of Modernism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019). For relevant cross-disciplinary collections adjacent to the study of decadence, see Mikuláš Teich and Roy Porter, eds, *Fin de Siècle and its Legacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Sally Ledger and Scott McCracken, eds, *Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Gail Marshall, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>20</sup> Leire Barrera-Medrano, "'Inarticulate cries': Arthur Symons and the Primitivist Modernity of Flamenco", *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 1.1 (2018), 1–18; Ivory, 'Gertrud Eysoldt'.

<sup>21</sup> See, for instance, Rhonda K. Garelick, *Rising Star: Dandyism, Gender and Performance in the Fin de Siècle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); Dennis Denisoff, 'Posing a Threat: Queensberry, Wilde, and the Portrayal of Decadence', in *Perennial Decay*, pp. 83–100.

<sup>22</sup> See, for instance, Rhonda K. Garelick, *Electric Salome: Loie Fuller's Performance of Modernism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Petra Dierkes–Thrun, *Salome's Modernity: Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetics of Transgression* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014); John Stokes, 'The Legend of Duse', in *Decadence and the 1890s*, ed. by Ian Fletcher (New York: Holmes and Meier Publishers, Inc., 1979), pp. 151–71; Lucia Re, 'D'Annunzio, Duse, Wilde, Bernhardt: Author and Actress Between Decadence and Modernity', in *Italian Modernism: Italian Culture Between Decadentism and Avant-Garde*, ed. by Luca Somigli and Mario Moroni (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2004), pp. 86–129. Joseph Bristow's scholarship on and around the work and legacy of Oscar Wilde is also noteworthy. See Joseph Bristow, ed., *Oscar Wilde and Modern Culture: The Making of a Legend* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2008).

<sup>23</sup> Ana Parejo Vadillo, 'Another Renaissance: The Decadent Poetic Drama of A. C. Swinburne and Michael Field', in *Decadent Poetics: Literature and Form at the British Fin de Siècle*, ed. by Jason Hall and Alex Murray (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 116–140 (pp. 136–37). For an example, see Angeliki Papoulia's 2019 production of Vernon Lee's *The Ballet of the Nations. A Present-Day Morality* (1915) presented at the Villa il Palmerino in Florence (Lee's home at the time). It was produced by Federica Parretti and directed by Papoulia with the assistance of Sally Blackburn-Daniels. See Elisa Bizzotto, 'Vernon Lee, Walter Pater, and the Revival of Medieval Theatre', *Staging Decadence Blog*, 12 April 2021, <<https://www.stagingdecadence.com/blog/vernon-lee-walter-pater-and-the-revival-of-medieval-theatre>> [accessed 23 July 2021].

<sup>24</sup> See Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981). Barish includes commentary on playwrights associated with Symbolism and decadence in this totemic volume. For more on these 'intellectual assumptions', see Catherine Hindson, *Female performance practice on the fin-de-siècle popular stages of London and Paris: Experiment and advertisement* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 43.

<sup>25</sup> See Shushma Malik, 'Nero, or Rome's first actor-emperor', *Staging Decadence Blog*, 7 July 2021, <<https://www.stagingdecadence.com/blog/nero-or-romes-first-actor-emperor>> [accessed 23 July 2021].

<sup>26</sup> See Frantisek Deak's brief commentary on Baju's *L'École décadente* [*School of Decadence*] (1887). Frantisek Deak, *Symbolist Theater: The Formation of an Avant-Garde* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), pp. 22–23.

<sup>27</sup> Octave Mirbeau, *Gens de theatre* (Paris: Ernest Flammarion, 1924), pp. 110–17; see also Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*, pp. 340–41.

<sup>28</sup> Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*, p. 340.

- <sup>29</sup> Mikuláš Teich and Roy Porter, 'Introduction', in *Fin de Siècle*, ed. by Teich and Porter, pp. 1–9, pp. 1–2.
- <sup>30</sup> Arthur Symons, *Studies in Seven Arts* (London: Archibald Constable and Co., 1906); Arthur Symons, *Plays, Acting and Music: A Book of Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1903).
- <sup>31</sup> There are some extreme cases in which the 'fleshiness' of books was demanded of entrepreneurial book binders by dandies. See, for instance, Holbrook Jackson's writing on books bound in human skin in *The Anatomy of Bibliomania* (London: Faber and Faber, 1950), p. 402.
- <sup>32</sup> Kostas Boyiopoulos, "Use my body like the pages of a book": Decadence and the Eroticized Text', in *Decadence and the Senses*, ed. by Desmarais and Condé, pp. 101–20 (p. 101).
- <sup>33</sup> Paul Bourget, 'The Example of Baudelaire', trans. by Nancy O'Connor, *New England Review*, 30.2 (2009), no pagination. Available at <<http://cat.middlebury.edu/~nereview/30-2/Bourget.htm>> [accessed 20 April 2021].
- <sup>34</sup> See, for instance, Regenia Gagnier, *Individualism, Decadence and Globalization: On the Relationship of Part to Whole, 1859-1920* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
- <sup>35</sup> Matthew Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics, and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardesley* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), p. 1.
- <sup>36</sup> Frazer Lively, 'Introduction', in Rachilde, *Madame La Mort and Other Plays*, trans. and ed. by Kiki Gounaridou and Frazer Lively (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), pp. 3–53 (pp. 7–8).
- <sup>37</sup> Lively, 'Introduction', p. 46.
- <sup>38</sup> Eltis, 'Theatre and Decadence', p. 203.
- <sup>39</sup> There is no shortage of scholarship addressing the close intersections between Symbolism and decadence. See especially the section titled 'Displacements' in Vincent Sherry, *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 4–14. If a distinction is to be made between decadence and Symbolism, it is that Symbolism was primarily concerned with idealism, essences and the metaphysical, whereas decadence was focused more on the materialistic, ornamental, and corporeal. Where literary prose and especially poetry lend themselves to the former, I contend that theatre and performance lend themselves most readily to the latter.
- <sup>40</sup> Théophile Gautier, 'Preface', *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, trans. by Helen Constantine (London: Penguin, 2005), pp. 3–37 (p. 23).
- <sup>41</sup> See Dave Beech, *Art and Postcapitalism: Aesthetic Labour, Automation and Value Production* (London: Pluto Press, 2019), pp. 86–88.
- <sup>42</sup> Oscar Wilde, 'The Picture of Dorian Gray: Preface', in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, 3 vols (London: Heron, 1966), I, p. 17.
- <sup>43</sup> Weir, 'Afterword', p. 221.
- <sup>44</sup> See Kirsten MacLeod, *Fictions of British Decadence: High Art, Popular Writing, and the Fin de Siècle* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 12–13.
- <sup>45</sup> Jennie Livingston (dir.), *Paris is Burning*, Off White Productions/Academy Entertainment (1990). My thinking here was inspired by Natalie Wynne. See ContraPoints, 'Opulence', *YouTube*, 12 October 2019, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jD-PbF3ywGo>> [accessed 14 April 2021].
- <sup>46</sup> Stuart Hall, 'What is this "Black" in Black Popular Culture?', in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. by David Morley and Kwan-Hsing Chen (New York: Autonomedia, 1996), p. 473.
- <sup>47</sup> Jillian Hernandez, *Aesthetics of Excess: The Art and Politics of Black and Latina Embodiment* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020), p. 11. See also José Esteban Muñoz's influential writing on 'disidentification' in *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 31.
- <sup>48</sup> Katharina Herold and Leire Barrera-Medrano, eds, 'Women Writing Decadence', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 2.1 (Spring 2019).
- <sup>49</sup> Rachilde, *Pourquoi je ne suis pas féministe* (Paris: Éditions de France, 1928).
- <sup>50</sup> Julia Skelly, *Radical Decadence: Excess in Contemporary Feminist Textiles and Craft* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 101. Skelly's work might be seen as a feminist re-reading of what John R. Reed has described elsewhere as 'decadent style'. See Reed, *Decadent Style*.
- <sup>51</sup> Dennis Denisoff, 'Feminist global decadence', *Feminist Modernist Studies*, 4.2 (2021), 137–45 (p. 142).
- <sup>52</sup> For more on the 'decadence' of work by McCormick, Young, and Holstein, see Adam Alston, "'Burn the witch": Decadence and the occult in contemporary feminist performance', *Theatre Research International*, 46.3 (2021), 285–302.
- <sup>53</sup> Garelick, *Electric Salome*, p. 103. See also Megan Girdwood's recently published *Modernism and the Choreographic Imagination: Salome's Dance After 1890* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021).
- <sup>54</sup> Garelick, *Electric Salome*, p. 92.
- <sup>55</sup> Hema Chari, 'Imperial Dependency, Addiction, and the Decadent Body', in *Perennial Decay*, pp. 215–32 (p. 216).
- <sup>56</sup> Li Xiaorong, "'I sliced my flesh into paper, and ground my liver into ink": Wang Cihui's (1593-1642) sensualist poetry as an alternative route to self-realization', *Ming Studies*, 67 (2013), 30–53. See also Gagnier, *Individualism, Decadence and Globalization*; Gagnier, 'The Global Circulation of the Literatures of Decadence', *Literature Compass*, 10.1 (2013), 70–81.
- <sup>57</sup> A. E. Carter argues that 'the whole theory of decadence' and '[m]ost subsequent developments' can be traced to the work of the Marquis de Sade. A. E. Carter, *The Idea of Decadence in French Literature, 1830-1900* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1958), p. 5.

<sup>58</sup> Manet's painting was itself a subversive re-working and melding of Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (1534), Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres' *Odalisque with Slave* (1839), and Francisco Goya's *La maja desnuda* [*The Nude Maja*] (1797-1800).

<sup>59</sup> Wilde, 'The Critic as Artist', in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, 3 vols (London: Heron Books, 1966), III, pp. 301–51 (p. 315).

<sup>60</sup> See also Özen Nergis Dolcerocca, 'Ottoman Tanzimat and the Decadence of Empire', in *The Oxford Handbook of Decadence*, <<https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190066956.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780190066956>>.

<sup>61</sup> G. V. Plekhanov, 'Art and Social Life', trans. by Eleanor Fox, in *Art and Social Life* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1957), pp. 166–228 (pp. 223–24); György Lukács, *Writer and Critic and Other Essays*, ed. and trans. by Arthur Kahn (London: Merlin Press, 1978), p. 7.

<sup>62</sup> Wole Soyinka, *Death and the King's Horseman*, ed. by Simon Gikandi (New York: Norton, 2003), p. 37; Robert Stilling, *Beginning at the End: Decadence, Modernism, and Postcolonial Poetry* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2018), p. 141.

<sup>63</sup> Assed Baig, 'During Times of Austerity Art is Just Middle-Class Decadence', *Huffington Post*, 20 February 2013, <[https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/assed-baig/during-times-of-austerity\\_b\\_2349132.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/assed-baig/during-times-of-austerity_b_2349132.html)> [accessed 22 July 2021].

# Wasted Youth and Reunion in Death: Imperial Decline and Decadent Aesthetics in Fin-de-Siècle Ottoman Culture<sup>1</sup>

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The one and only play of Ottoman writer, translator, and critic Muallim Naci (1850-1893), *Heder* [*Loss*], was published in 1909.<sup>2</sup> Alternating between prose and verse, it makes significant use of Naci's signature refined poetics and combines polished, classical Ottoman poetic forms with a melancholy aesthetic. The play concerns the pessimistic and sensitive protagonist Hazım, an idealist poet who works as a clerk in a courthouse, gradually loses his will to live, and suffers an emotional breakdown. Throughout, the play conveys a sense of crisis and rapidly approaching demise. Although it begins at a dinner party among inebriated guests, the lively opening scene is contrasted with the morbid conversation between Hazım and his family friend Kamil, and is laden with uncanny metaphors that involve cold-blooded murderers, patricide, gravediggers, and doomsday. Hazım's father has been unjustly exiled from Istanbul to a remote Anatolian town for speaking against corruption in public administration. With a pervasive sense of resentment against society and its moral decay, we – along with his grieving mother – watch this young and passionate man grow more and more depressed, fraught, passive, and physically ill. As the title *Heder* suggests, upon hearing the news of his father's death, Hazım passes away. Despite the undertones of social melodrama, the play has noteworthy decadent elements, including elevated and overrefined language, the romantic image of an idealist failed artist, a dead father, a mother-in-mourning, intoxication, resentment, and lyric death.

When *Heder* was published, the Ottoman Empire had been enduring a profound political and financial crisis for fifty years. The nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire saw military coups, frequent changes of monarchs and grand viziers, economic subjugation by Western powers with the establishment of the Ottoman Public Debt Administration, and pervasive corruption at all levels of the imperial administration. Conflict between the ruling class of the imperial system and

the rising class in support of a nation-state had come to a head with Sultan Abdülhamid's period of autocracy (1878-1908). Although the constitution was re-established in 1908 with much enthusiasm and hope, it did not prevent the rapid dissolution of the empire. The optimism was immediately crushed under further uprisings, wars, and financial ruin. Thus, at the turn of the century, the Ottoman Empire was withstanding a massive systemic crisis on an unprecedented scale.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast to the political upheavals, the Ottoman cultural scene had never been as dynamic and prolific as in the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> It saw the burgeoning of modern theatre and performance culture initiated by the Armenian community; a rapid increase in the number of literary periodicals and newspapers; and a vibrant intellectual scene that gave rise to key cultural debates including the famous 'decadence controversy' (1897-1900). For the first time, *tebaa* [subjects] of the empire – evidently those who had the privilege of literacy – produced, translated, and read literature in many languages, among which were Turkish, Greek, Armenian, Arabic, Hebrew, Persian, and Bulgarian. Within this cultural scene and in the face of imperial decline, modernist and decadent tendencies emerge.<sup>5</sup> During the last years of the Ottoman Empire, a form of decadent culture developed, particularly inspired by French Symbolists and Parnassians. Most of these writers, including Recâizâde Mahmut Ekrem (1847-1914), Tevfik Fikret (1867-1915) and Halid Ziya (1866-1945), gathered around the literary journal *Servet-i Fünun* [*The Riches of Science*]. These authors developed an excessively elaborate language and featured fin-de-siècle decadent motifs, styles, and themes in their works.

### **Ottoman decadence: a methodological predicament**

While the *Servet-i Fünun* group employed decadent themes and techniques, these intellectuals never identified with or subscribed to a well-articulated movement or programme of decadence. In fact, when accused of being 'degenerates' during the decadence controversy, many shied away from identifying with the term.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, most of their works (though not all) lacked many defining

avant-garde aspects, such as an exploration of the abnormal, extreme eroticism, or anarchic individualism. The question thus arises: how decadent were these Ottoman writers? Given the self-professed belief of Naci's protagonist in an ideal Ottoman-Turkish society, could we really consider *Heder* a decadent play? These are part of larger methodological questions in comparative literature and cultural history which I will not examine in detail in this article. However, it is important to point out two potential fallacies in methodology about understanding peripheral aesthetics on the one hand, and the politics of aestheticism on the other. The first fallacy is an assumed logic of resemblance or equivalence between the centre (as in the core canon of decadence) and the periphery as a basis of comparison. To put it simply, this perspective would produce such problematic research questions as 'who is the Oscar Wilde of Ottoman literature?' The second issue is what I term the dissociation bias: the preconception that aestheticism implies total dissociation from political, economic, or social matters. That is, any aberration from extreme individualism, or sign of political commitment, would disqualify a work from being categorized as decadent. This last point has of course been rightly challenged by many scholars of decadence.<sup>7</sup> It is nonetheless still relevant to peripheral aesthetics, particularly to the Ottoman-Turkish literary field, where a belated social process of individualization is commonly taken as a sign of inauthenticity in modern literature.<sup>8</sup>

Despite recent scholarly efforts to overcome them, these methodological predicaments still trouble our understanding of literary history. To explore decadence in Ottoman modern theatre, which is the main subject of this article, we need to treat decadence as an aesthetic historical category and historicize it within the Ottoman-Turkish context. As Matei Calinescu suggests, 'the concept of decadence should be used very cautiously and only in very precisely defined and circumscribed cases, any generalization being potentially misleading and harmful'.<sup>9</sup> Following Adam Alston and Alexandra Bickley Trott's transnational approach in this volume, Jane Desmarais and David Weir's current effort to expand decadence studies geographically, and the recent edited volume on 'Global Decadence' in *Feminist Modernist Studies*,<sup>10</sup> I will discuss decadent elements in

Ottoman theatre, focusing particularly on Naci's *Heder* and Rezaizade Mahmut Ekrem's *Vuslat* (1874).<sup>11</sup> Instead of narrowing decadence down to a strictly limited time period and geography (i.e., the late Victorian period and fin-de-siècle France), I suggest that we regard Ottoman decadence as the expression of a precise historical moment at the turn of the century, right before the fall of the empire.

### ***Dekadanlar*: A fin-de-siècle malady**

Decadent aesthetics capture the melancholy spirit of Ottoman intelligentsia, especially following the great losses suffered in the Russo-Turkish war (1877-1878), Abdülhamid's despotic reign, and the quick disintegration of the 1908 revolution. Many historians trace the roots of this crisis back to the seventeenth century.<sup>12</sup> So, by the turn of the century, the imperial tradition had already been in gradual 'decline' for almost three centuries. Yet the sense of urgency in the empire's rapidly approaching end was most felt in the 1890s. The pervasive effects of imperial decadence included: the revocation of social and political ideals of the empire; loss of loyalty of its subjects; the waning legitimacy of the sultanate, patrimonial rule, and state authority; failure of reformation efforts; and widespread corruption both in administrative and social relations.<sup>13</sup> There is of course no simple correspondence between these historical factors and art. I would argue that the relation is instead mediated, which is particularly visible in two aspects. First, the literary and artistic field responded to the historical crisis with restlessness and a need for self-examination regarding its own identity. Authors discussed Western and Eastern elements in literature at length, considering how to synthesize them, and how to achieve an authentic national or imperial identity. The decadence question in the Ottoman Empire thereby became a common ground for intellectual debate about language, style, form, translation, and authenticity. Secondly, decadence found artistic expression in aestheticism, with inspiration from French Symbolists, decadents, and Parnassians, on one side, and elevated classical Ottoman poetic forms, on the other. Many works engaged with its signature elements such as consciousness of crisis, resentment, exhaustion, morbidity, ennui, and malaise.



While many authors who employed these strategies were part of the *Edebiyat-ı Cedide* [New Literature] movement, there were others, like Naci, who had fundamental disagreements with this group in his early career and pursued an aestheticism closer to classical Ottoman literature in his poetry.<sup>14</sup>

What later came to be known as the *Dekadanlar Tartışması* [Decadence Controversy] was sparked by the most prolific author and translator of the era, Ahmet Midhat (1844-1912). In his 1897 article titled ‘Dekadanlar’, Midhat attacked *Edebiyat-ı Cedide* authors for writing in an extremely ornate language and artificial style that alienated its readers, and he accused them of imitating the French decadents.<sup>15</sup> The debate lasted for over two years, with several actors involved, and it became an effective ground for theoretical and critical discussions on literary language and identity. Decadence sparked a heated debate concerning authenticity in the Ottoman literary field due to the inspiration *Edebiyat-ı Cedide* authors drew from French decadents, which led to concerns about foreign influences and the ‘cult of artificiality’ that lies at the heart of decadent poetics. The first concern, which we may call an ‘anxiety of influence’ – exemplified in Midhat’s accusation of imitation – has been a common thread in Ottoman-Turkish criticism as well as in fiction. Let me give a widely-discussed example: Ottoman intellectuals’ anxiety about originality found expression in the figure of the *züppe* [dandy] – the over-Westernized, arrogant, wastrel character ridiculed by all. Many authors, spearheaded by Midhat, mocked those inspired by the West for expressing imitated desires, copied attitudes, decadent sensibilities, or derivative plots. The genuine, original *milli* [native]<sup>16</sup> thought was described only with respect to this strawman called *züppe*.

*Edebiyat-ı Cedide* writers, however, were alert to this fallacy, which brings us to the second aspect of decadence that attracted these intellectuals: the ‘cult of artificiality’. Instead of giving in to easy binaries between East vs. West, local vs. foreign, original vs. copy, these writers renounced such idealist notions as authenticity (as in achieving an authentic local/national literature) and originality. Decadent aesthetics, in this context, offered expressive possibilities for pushing the boundaries of speech and aesthetic conventions while embracing elusiveness, contradictions, and

deflections. Ekrem's novel *Araba Sevdası* [*Carriage Affair*] (1898) is a good example for such a reading of *dandyisme*. As many critics have pointed out, Ekrem's text is a unique work among Tanzimat novels.<sup>17</sup> It stages the failure of any attempt at authenticity and communicability of the artwork, through and together with its protagonist Bihruz, the over-Westernized and failed author-translator dandy. Nergis Ertürk argues that 'it is with *Araba Sevdası* that Ottoman Turkish literature takes as its task not the fabrication of national representations but the figuration of a non-identitarian social *despite and with* modern alienated self-consciousness'.<sup>18</sup> While traditionalist writers used the figure of the dandy to caricature those influenced by the West, such as Midhat in his novel *Felâtnun Bey ile Râkım Efendi* [*Felâtnun Bey and Râkım Efendi*] (1875), Ekrem turned it against itself, negating the ideal of authenticity implied in such caricaturizing.

Although it is Midhat who initiated the decadence controversy, the debate originates in a dispute between Naci and Ekrem, the two authors addressed in this article.<sup>19</sup> Reading Ekrem alongside Naci within the context of literary decadence might therefore surprise some of those familiar with Turkish literary history. Naci, who was well-versed both in Divan and Persian poetic tradition, and in modern French literature, came under attack for being a traditionalist, hostile to linguistic modernization. As A. H. Tanpınar argues in his history of nineteenth-century Turkish literature, most of these claims about Naci's orthodoxy and conservatism were unjustified.<sup>20</sup> Naci in fact sought innovation within traditional forms. The Ekrem-Naci debate is not within the scope of this study, but it is important to point out that, despite their professed difference over poetic innovation, both writers engaged with an aesthetics of decadence in different ways. However, before going into the discussion of Ekrem's *Vuslat* and Naci's *Heder*, let us briefly look at theatre during the Tanzimat era in the capital of the Ottoman Empire.

### **Modern drama in the Tanzimat era**

Modern drama, or European-style theatre, in the Ottoman cultural scene dates back to the eighteenth century, when non-Muslim communities formed amateur groups and European

troupes that regularly visited Istanbul.<sup>21</sup> The early nineteenth century saw many theatrical experiments in the European style spearheaded by Armenian groups.<sup>22</sup> With major modernizing reform attempts known as *Tanzimat* [reorganization], just as we observe in the literary and print culture, theatre in the imperial capital flourished with many production companies, actors, playwrights, and critics. However, this vibrant theatre culture went largely unnoticed by scholars, as Hülya Adak and Rüstem Ertuğ Altınay demonstrate in their special issue of *Comparative Drama* on performance in Turkey:

Turkey's complicated relationship with Europe has resulted in its exclusion from studies of European theatre. In many cases, Turkey is also ignored in studies on Middle Eastern theatre, which is dominated by works on Arab, Israeli, and Iranian theatre and performance cultures.<sup>23</sup>

While there have been recent studies on this subject in Turkish, particularly on the Ottoman Armenian theatre, the dramatic scene of the Tanzimat period still needs scholarly attention.

After the declaration of the Gülhane edict (1839), historian Metin And reports that four theatres opened in the city, which established a lively performance scene with hundreds of plays, both original and in translation, produced mainly in Armenian and in Ottoman Turkish.<sup>24</sup> It is important to note that theatre in its non-Western form had always been an important part of Ottoman culture. Different genres such as *meddah*, *ortaoyunu*, *Karagöz*, and puppetry were regularly performed in public spaces practically all over the empire.<sup>25</sup> In the nineteenth century, these traditional forms, known as *halk tiyatrosu* [popular people's theatre] and *köy oyunları* [village plays], met European style drama: an encounter which produced its own particular, yet productive, tensions, negotiations, and syntheses. This synthesis would become extremely useful during Abdülhamid's autocracy (1878-1908), when state oppression and censorship, as well as ongoing wars, disrupted the theatre scene. In the middle of the century, actors developed a new genre called *tuluat*, which brought together traditional *ortaoyunu* style improvisation and European style subjects. By performing *tuluat*, many troupes avoided official concessions (granted to Güllü Agop by the Porte) and censorship. Luckily for the playwrights and actors of the time, and sadly for literary

historians, *tuluat* plays went unpublished, partly due to their improvisatory nature, and partly to avoid censorship.<sup>26</sup>

The 1908 revolution, which ended Abdülhamid's autocracy by re-establishing constitutional monarchy, resuscitated the literary scene. A great number of periodicals and publishing houses were established, with an unprecedented number of published materials made available to the reading public. Many theatrical groups were formed at the same time. The theatre scene in the empire had never seen as much dynamism as in its final decades. Leading intellectuals established drama clubs and written plays for them to perform. A National Theatre and a Conservatory of Music were established six years later in 1914.

Political and intellectual currents following this period saw fundamental controversies between modernizers, conservatives in support of an Islamic-imperial identity, and nationalists arguing for establishing a nation-state. The predominant issues discussed among these groups were the causes of the imperial decline; Western civilization and the scope for Westernization in the reforms; the quest for a revolutionary change; institutional reforms concerning the state, religion, family, economy, and education; and, finally, modernization of the literary and cultural field, with emphases on language, script, literature, and art.<sup>27</sup> Theatre was also a dominant subject in these debates: what should modern theatre look like? What was its function? Was it just entertainment or could it be used to educate the public? Modern theatre was a new cultural experience. For the first time, performance required a specific venue, instead of coffeeshops or public squares; it required its own theatrical building; and the theatre became professional and institutionalized.<sup>28</sup> It also demanded a certain type of etiquette from its audience, who mostly consisted of urbanites (predominantly in Istanbul, but also in Izmir and Bursa) adapting to a new modern lifestyle. Critics and playwrights discussed this new cultural experience in periodicals and in the introductions to their own plays. They were well versed in '*La querelle du théâtre*' of eighteenth-century France, including Denis Diderot's moral theory of the theatre, Louis-Sébastien Mercier's arguments on its didactic function, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's violent criticism.<sup>29</sup>

The leading writer and political activist of the time, Namık Kemal, wrote extensively on European-style theatre and authored several plays, including *Vatan Yahud Silistre* [*The Motherland, or Silistra*] (1873). Many critics consider the eventful performance of this play in 1873 as a milestone in Ottoman theatre due to the police raid and an ensuing censorship on theatre that was to last until 1908.<sup>30</sup> In this regard, Ekrem's *Vuslat* and Naci's *Heder* need to be considered as products of two different eras: published in 1874, *Vuslat* partially follows Kemal's dramatic understanding that combines romanticism with social melodrama. It is an early example of dark and sentimental domestic drama that brings together the traditional theme of an impossible unity between lovers, and elements of European-style drama with a female protagonist, who is a slave and an artist in conflict with social norms. Naci's *Heder*, published posthumously in 1909 – right after the revolution that ended Abdulhamit's autocracy – was part of a more liberal political and cultural atmosphere. Debilitated with a sense of hopelessness, *Heder's* protagonist is consumed in his resentment against corrupt society. The play openly discusses the imperial degeneration through the noble alienation of the artist from the crowd.

Reflections of imperial decline in Ottoman theatre took different forms. On the one hand, many playwrights wrote what And classifies as romantic dramas.<sup>31</sup> Some took up mythological or historical narratives, such as Ahmet Midhat's *Siyavuş yahut Fırs-i Kadîmde Bir Facia* [*Siyavush or a Tragedy in Ancient Persia*] (1883) and Kemal's *Celâleddin Harzemşah* (1876); while others explored love and passion with symbolism and complex and excessive imagery, such as Abdülhak Hamit's *Finten* (1916) and *Zeyneb* (1909).<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, writers who were interested in exploring the human psyche and the relationship between individual and society wrote domestic family dramas. Ekrem's *Vuslat* and Halid Ziya's *Kabus* [*Nightmare*] (1918) are among the most notable examples of the genre, along with Naci's *Heder*. Despite the fact that Naci was a vocal critic of Ekrem and *Servet-i Fünun*, all three writers favoured refined artistic forms in different manners. They were concerned with problems of technique and style, and they employed dramatic form in search of a new poetic language. If he had been alive, Naci probably would have been scandalized to be considered within

the historical and aesthetic context of decadence. Nevertheless, these writers' professed alliances and identifications do not alter the fact that their works converge around fin-de-siècle pessimism and decadent aesthetics. Unlike the romantic-revolutionary dramas of Kemal, the entertaining and didactic plays of Midhat, or the straightforward melodramas of Mehmet Rifat, plays with decadent elements were marked by their over-refined language, idealistic aspirations, gloomy perspectives, melancholy, and death.

### **Wasted youth and reunion in death: *Heder and Vuslat***

The full title of Ekrem's 1874 play is *Vuslat yahut Süreksiz Sevinç* [Reunion or Ephemeral Joy]. The title comes from the protagonist's name Vuslat, a name derived from Persian, meaning unity, union, or reunion with one's beloved. The title clearly refers to the tradition of mystic romance, in which the union of love signifies union with the divine. The plot is quite straightforward: Vuslat is a *halayık* – a domestic slave bought off at an early age – who falls in love with the son of her owners. Her love is reciprocated, and the lovers compose poems and songs for each other. Vuslat is then sold to a merchant who moves to Cyprus, after which both lovers fall sick with a mysterious illness. When they finally reunite on their death beds in Istanbul, they die hand in hand. The audience was certainly no stranger to this romantic plot, not only thanks to Divan and mystic love epic traditions, but also to Ekrem's intertextual references to Kemal's *Zavallı Çocuk* [Poor Child] (1873).<sup>33</sup> However, beyond its 'love lost to death' trope, the formal, stylistic, and thematic elements of Ekrem's play require closer examination.

Ekrem's first plays, which were European-style dramas titled *Afife Anjelik* (1870) and *Atala* (1873), were heavily criticized for imitating French literature. The former is loosely based on the medieval legend of 'Geneviève de Brabant', which Ekrem certainly knew from Jacques Offenbach's operetta first performed in Paris in 1859, and from its 1868 translation into Ottoman Turkish by Memduh Paşa titled *Tercüme-i Hikaye-i Jeneviev*.<sup>34</sup> The latter, *Atala*, was directly based on Chateaubriand's novel with the same title, which Ekrem translated into Ottoman Turkish in 1871.

Ekrem, an early literary modernist, did not seem to mind these attacks, as we can see in his tongue-in-cheek introduction to *Vuslat*.<sup>35</sup> He notes that he suddenly had the urge to write a *milli* play, that is, a story that takes place in the Ottoman Empire and involves local characters. *Vuslat* takes place in an upper-class Istanbul household and the melancholy love story between *Vuslat* and *Muhsin* unfolds against a backdrop of social issues regarding Istanbul nobility, domestic slavery, and the status of women in Ottoman society.

The play opens with *Naime Hanım*'s appraisal for her domestic slave, who would soon be sold and married off to a rich suitor. She discusses in detail with her older *azatlı cariye* [freed slave] how much she should ask for *Vuslat*. The first act consists of this business trade, in which the so-called suitor's mother assesses *Vuslat*'s worth, while *Vuslat* performs her reading, writing, and singing skills. The act establishes the hypocrisy of the slave-owning family who claims that *Vuslat* is 'like a daughter' to them, and yet quickly sell her off to a total stranger. *Vuslat* is clearly Ekrem's response to contemporary debates on slavery and the slave trade.<sup>36</sup> Like many other Tanzimat writers, including *Midhat*, he supports abolition. Moreover, Ekrem places a drama of sensibility and domestic tragedy within the ideological world of the fin-de-siècle empire. *Vuslat* has unusual traits for a dramatic protagonist: a woman, a domestic slave, a desiring subject, and an artist. She composes music, reads extensively, and writes letters. The play within the play in the first act shows us *Vuslat* reluctantly performing her skills in front of slave-traders (her mistress and the suitor's mother). This performance estranges us – the play's audience – from the audience within the play, while we empathize with the slave girl. In Act Two, we get to know *Vuslat* more intimately, while she cries and reads her letters in her bedroom.

*Vuslat* is pictured as an individual, a desiring subject who is exposed to brutal and violent threats: taken from her mother as a toddler and sold off as a slave, only to be sold off again to further domestic (and possibly sexual) slavery. A desiring subject implies dynamism and transformation, which is also present in the subtitle 'ephemeral joy'. As opposed to the static state of the traditional Ottoman society, in which the idea of self-determination is beyond the bounds

of possibility for a woman or a slave, Vuslat, as a creative individual with passions, implies novelty and social change. However, Ekrem's decadent imagination negates this dynamism (joy) and turns it toward destruction and death. The lovers can only metaphysically unite in a collectively created artwork: Vuslat composes a song and Muhsin completes it with lyrics, which Vuslat performs to her traders. This creative force that finds expression in Vuslat and Muhsin's reunion is sublimated at the end of the play. The word *süreksiz* in the subtitle signifies negation (with the affix *-siz* meaning *sans* and the stem *süre+k* meaning continuance, duration). Once the lovers' health gradually deteriorates and they eventually pass away, the dynamic force (joy) of the desiring subjects is negated and transformed into a static and infinite being. 'Vuslat' – as lovers' reunion, as a creative possibility of an artwork, and as an ideal of beauty – has no duration; it instantly decays and disintegrates starting from the moment of its conception. This metaphysical dimension in *Vuslat* can also be read as a reflection of the historical moment. It marks the rapid decline of the empire, uncertainty in the face of wars, economic ruin, and fears for the future.

In Ekrem's play, a traditional romantic love tale, which the title *Vuslat* clearly evokes, meets modern drama and decadent aesthetics. Dialogues of passionate confessions between lovers, Vuslat's soliloquies, her soul-searching reflections, and lyrical interludes reminiscent of mystic love narratives, fully converge with the decadent elevation of creativity and imagination against instrumental reason; obsessive passions turning into madness; and longing for a higher life that is more beautiful and more profound. Vuslat is a melancholy character who seems to take delight in her misery and pain: 'Şerh şu letafetiyle şu hazinliğiyle ebedi devam etse. Ben de şuracıkta Muhsin'imi düşünüp ebedi ağlasam!!' [If only dawn could continue forever with its grace and tristesse. If only I could dream about my Muhsin and cry forever!].<sup>37</sup> In a lyric passage she passionately recites with tears in her eyes, love is described in conflicting terms, both a *helecan* [thrill] and an *ızdırab* [affliction]; *zevk u sefâ* [blissful joy] and *büzün ü melâl* [absolute sorrow].<sup>38</sup> Love understood as masochistic pleasure also leads to obsession with one's own death. Vuslat, even before being sent away, refers to herself as *zulmet* [darkness], *na-muradlık* [disillusionment], *mihnet*



[distress], *teşrih* [a corpse], and *ölüm* [death].<sup>39</sup> When she is sent off to her new owner, Vuslat reports that ‘mezar gibi karanlık, mezar gibi soğuk, mezar gibi dehşetli bir yer idi’ [it was dark like a grave, cold like a grave, dreadful like a grave].<sup>40</sup> The image of the dead bride in a coffin also evokes the trauma of slave experience and its non-narratability.

One final significant element in Ekrem’s play is the aesthetics of decadence specific to the Ottoman dark romance. As opposed to the late Victorian and French canon of decadent literature, in the Ottoman Turkish scene we hardly encounter excessive eroticism, voluptuousness, immoralism, or amoralism. While this is partly due to a set of moral standards in society and print culture, it also has to do with historical circumstances surrounding decadent aesthetics. Although traditional Ottoman Turkish romance abounds in sensuality, voluptuousness, and homosexual imagery, representation of such themes could hardly penetrate narrative verisimilitude, which became prevalent in the nineteenth century. I will not dwell on the sublimation of eroticism in Ottoman literary history here. The important aspect in this absence in Ottoman decadence, for the purposes of this article, lies in the function of decadent theatre. In reaction to the bourgeois theatre that ostensibly resolves social contradictions to create a sense of harmony, decadents used performance art to shock and scandalize a respectable bourgeoisie. In the Ottoman-Turkish literary field, we can hardly talk about a bourgeois theatre. Although Ottoman decadents did aim to scandalize their readers, the false harmony against which they wrote had to do with the patrimonial rule, rather than the ruling bourgeoisie. Some Ottomanist reformist authors, spearheaded by Midhat, aimed at smoothing over social, ethnic, and religious contradictions and conflicts under an imagined imperial Ottoman identity. *Edebiyat-ı Cedide* writers challenged any cultural or political ideal of this sort. And, in the absence of bourgeois theatre, decadent aesthetics in Ottoman Turkish drama found expression in aestheticism, pessimism and withdrawal from life.

The aesthetic presentation of suffering in both *Vuslat* and *Heder* appears in the form of physical and psychological distress. In both plays the main characters die of consumption, a pervasive trope in nineteenth-century sentimental fiction. As Susan Sontag demonstrates in *Illness*

as *Metaphor*, the romantic allure of consumption lies in its association with the inner identity of the sufferers.<sup>41</sup> It is a symbol of beauty, artistic creativity, and refined sentiments. Together with the sufferer's emaciated body, flushed cheeks, and pale skin, consumption becomes the physical manifestation of decadence. It is not clear how the characters die, as at this point the dramatic narrative abandons verisimilitude. Death comes in the form of an inexplicable and merciless power, a reflection of ideological pessimism in the face of a collapsing and arbitrary political system. Yet, it is aestheticized and feminized: Hazım's servant in *Heder* admires the beauty of his master's dead body: 'Nasıl da güzel! Yanakları al al olmuş!' [how beautiful he is! His cheeks are red!].<sup>42</sup>

The thirty years that separate Ekrem's *Vuslat* and Naci's *Heder* span the Hamidian regime. If Ekrem's play bears witness to the cultural and political climate of the first years of his reign, Naci's reflects the damage it left behind: exhaustion, total loss of economic independence, and decades of oppression and censorship. *Heder* fits in perfectly with Calinescu's idea of the deceptive spirit of decadence.<sup>43</sup> The protagonist Hazım is an idealist poet; he envisions a world of truth and *hakikat* [authenticity] and settles for no less. Set against truth, which he and his exiled father stand for, are *sabtelik* [artificiality] and *şarlatanlık* [charlatanism, fraud] spread across every institution and area of life. Yet, Hazım remains paralyzed; unable and unwilling to act. He masquerades his hatred of life as admiration of a higher life, with refined sensibilities, beauty, and truth. He presents himself as a *matemzede* [person inflicted with mourning] who wants to die but cannot.<sup>44</sup> Being alive is a torment; his body is only a source of *vücut ıbtılası* [agony]. In his eyes, the world is divided into two opposites: the 'heder olmakla mahkumlar' [ones who are doomed to perish], and opportunist hypocrites.<sup>45</sup> 'Bakin içinde bulunduğumuz hal hâdim-i ağrâz olanlara nasıl fırsat-ı galebe veriyor' [The state we are in today hurts and destroys those of us who serve the truth] Hazım tells his friend Kamil.<sup>46</sup> He passively accepts being hurt and remains entirely resigned, except for writing a satirical poem against his director at the office. Süreyya, a corrupt colleague, calls him *müteriz* [unbending, dissident] and *zâmane ukalası* [present-day know-it-all].<sup>47</sup> While Hazım takes pride in his ethical and

aesthetic superiority, just as we see in Calinescu's analysis, he makes 'weakness look like force, exhaustion like fulfillment and cowardice like courage'.<sup>48</sup>

To a certain extent, the play could be portrayed as sensationalist and melodramatic. The opposition of virtue and vice, innocent hero and corrupt society, leads to a highly romanticized vision of suffering and pathos. It inevitably ends with the degradation and death of the fallen hero, as the title *Heder* suggests. The noun *heder* signifies loss, and the wasting of something worthy that is misused and thrown away. Hazım's youth, idealism, creativity, and ethical superiority are all wasted due to the decadence and corruption that pervade Ottoman society. Naci's text encourages such readings based on social criticism. After all, the play is populated with social commentaries, political opinions, and aesthetic judgements.

A social romanticist narrative though it may be, *Heder* dramatizes a vision of the young artist trope that goes well beyond sentimental imagination. Overburdened by consciousness of his own alienation as an artist, Hazım, a fin-de-siècle intellectual, has abandoned any hope for the future. After the death of his father, an image associated with paradise lost, melancholy is his only comfort. Despite his idealist speeches, which are delivered either when he is drunk or in tears, he gradually adopts a nihilistic attitude, asserting the senselessness and aimlessness of existence. Hazım, quite like Vuslat, is fascinated with his own destruction. In an extremely dramatic scene, he cries in his mother's arms on the bed of his dead father. Naci's unmistakable invocation of Hamlet is undercut by Hazım's stasis. Even his close, homoerotic friendship with Nuri, also a poet and a clerk, would not be enough to save Hazım from his neurosis.

Ömer Seyfeddin (1884-1920), a prominent and prolific author and critic at the time, wrote a disparaging review of *Heder* in the journal *Yeni Lisan* [*The New Language*], calling it 'disgusting and immoral'.<sup>49</sup> Seyfeddin was part of the group of authors committed to forming a new national literature. As the journal title suggests, these authors championed a new national language, based on the Istanbul vernacular, and cleared of its Arabic and Persian elements. Seyfeddin's attack against *Heder* had to do with its elevated language that 'possibly no one understands', written in

‘Eastern’ poetics, full of ‘Alas-es!, Oh-s!, Ghazals and tears’.<sup>50</sup> He implies that the play is degenerate and erotic. Naci’s *Heder*, in this historical context, showcases the empire’s final decade, in which the artist sees no future within reach, nor any possibility for rebirth or redemption. Seyfeddin’s criticism of the play is emblematic of the transformation of the intellectual climate from pessimism in the face of imperial decline, to the dynamism of a quest for a national identity.

## Conclusion

The decadence question in the Ottoman Empire, as this study has demonstrated, became a common ground for intellectual debates about language, translation, and authenticity at the turn of the century. It was part of the manifold translational processes among French, high Ottoman, and the rising Ottoman vernacular, as well as the unexpected circulations of literary movements and genres in the Ottoman literary field. The decadents and the conservative modernizers – who were all cosmopolitan author-translators – negotiated and transformed Eurocentric norms of literariness and, by using local forms, introduced new genres and styles into the emergent field of modern Ottoman-Turkish literature. Recontextualizing Ekrem’s *Vuslat* and Naci’s *Heder* within the literary history of decadent aesthetics primarily allows us to revisit Ottoman literary historiography, which follows Midhat’s view on decadence as degeneration and over-Westernization – and therefore does not sufficiently discuss aesthetic decadence in Ottoman Turkish literature. It reorients Naci’s work within innovative currents and offers a uniquely nuanced reading of both Ekrem and Naci’s plays. Finally, this study introduces decadent performance of the late Ottoman Empire to global decadence studies, underlying its inner social, political, and aesthetic dynamics.

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Zeynep Hazal Sevinç for her assistance in the archives at Boğaziçi University in Istanbul.

<sup>2</sup> Muallim Naci, *Heder* (Dersaadet: Kanaat Kitaphanesi, 1326 [1908-1909]).

<sup>3</sup> For more information on economic and political crises at the turn of the century, see Niyazi Berkes, *Türkiye’de Çağdaşlaşma* (Istanbul: YKY, 2002), pp. 309–428.

<sup>4</sup> See Mehmet F. Uslu and Fatih Altuğ, eds, *Tanzimat ve Edebiyat: Osmanlı İstanbul’unda Modern Edebi Kültür* (İstanbul:

Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2014), p. vii.

<sup>5</sup> For more information on the subject, see Özen Nergis Dolcerocca, ‘Ottoman Tanzimat and the Decadence of Empire’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Decadence*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and David Weir (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), <<https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190066956.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780190066956>> [accessed 19 December 2021].

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed analysis of the debate, see Fazıl Gökçek, *Bir Tartışmanın Hikayesi Dekadanlar* (İstanbul: Dergah Yayınları, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> See Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987); David Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996); and Vincent Sherry, *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> For a compelling discussion of this problem in Turkish literary criticism, see Nurdan Gürbilek’s introduction to her article ‘Dandies and Originals: Authenticity, Belatedness, and the Turkish Novel’, *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 102.2 (2003), 599–628.

<sup>9</sup> Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, p. 206.

<sup>10</sup> Jane Desmarais and David Weir, eds, *The Oxford Handbook of Decadence*; Dennis Denisoff, ed., *Feminist Modernist Studies*, 4.2 (2021), full issue.

<sup>11</sup> Rezaizade Mahmut Ekrem, *Vuslat Yahud Süreksiz Sevinç: Üç Fasil Üç Perde Tiyatro Oyunu* (İstanbul: Şark Matbaası, 1291 [1874]). Translated as ‘Vuslat Yahud Süreksiz Sevinç’ in *Piyaslar*, ed. by Hakan Sazyek et al. (Kocaeli: Umuttepe Yayınları, 2020). Subsequent page references to *Vuslat* use the translated edition.

<sup>12</sup> See Niyazi Berkes, *Türkiye İktisat Tarihi* (İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2013); Fatma Müge Göçek, *Rise of the Bourgeoisie, Demise of Empire: Ottoman Westernization and Social Change* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Halil İnalcik, *The Ottoman Empire: The Classical Age, 1300-1600* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973); and Reşat Kasaba, *The Ottoman Empire and the World Economy: The Nineteenth Century* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988).

<sup>13</sup> See Niyazi Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey* (London: Hurst & Company, 1998), pp. 253–88.

<sup>14</sup> Naci used poetic forms from Divan Literature, including gazelle and kaside. While he pursued novelty in prose language, in his early career he became the pioneer of traditional Ottoman poetry in the periodical *Tercuman-ı Hakikat* (A. H. Tanpınar, *XIX. Asır Türk Edebiyatı Tarihi* (İstanbul: Çağlayan Basımevi, 1988), p. 598). For detailed information on Muallim Naci’s poetics see Abdullah Uçman, *Muallim Naci* (İstanbul: Toker Yayınları, 1998). For Gökay Durmuş’ introduction to a recent edition in Latin alphabet, see Muallim Naci, *Heder*, ed. by Gökay Durmuş (İstanbul: Ekin Yayınları, 2017).

<sup>15</sup> Ahmet Midhat Efendi, ‘Dekadanlar’, *Sabah*, 2628, 22 March 1897, pp. 2–3.

<sup>16</sup> Before gaining its contemporary meaning ‘national’, the adjective *milli* in the late Ottoman Empire was used to convey the meaning native, indigenous, and original, without foreign influence. For a study on the transformation of the concept, see Elif Daldeniz, ‘From an Empire to a Nation State: Importing the Concept of Nation into Ottoman/Turkish Thinking’, *Meta*, 59.1 (2014), 72–96.

<sup>17</sup> For compelling analyses of Ekrem’s novel, see Jale Parla, *Babalar ve Oğullar: Tanzimat Romanının Epistemolojik Temelleri* (İstanbul: İletişim, 1990); Gürbilek, ‘Dandies and Originals’, and Nergis Ertürk, *Grammatology and Literary Modernity in Turkey* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). Much has been written on the figure of the dandy in late-Ottoman literature, and as it is not directly related to the subject of this study, I limit my discussion of *zıpppe* to the imitation vs. aestheticism axis in question.

<sup>18</sup> Ertürk, *Grammatology and Literary Modernity in Turkey*, p. 58. Italics in original.

<sup>19</sup> For an analysis of the Naci and Ekrem debate, see Fevzite Abdullah, ‘Muallim Naci ile Rezaizade Ekrem Arasındaki Münakaşalar ve Bu Münakaşaların Sebep Olduğu Edebi Hadiseler’, *Türkiyat Mecmuası*, 10 (2010), 159–200.

<sup>20</sup> See A. H. Tanpınar’s analysis of Muallim Naci’s efforts in finding a new poetic voice in *XIX. Asır Türk Edebiyatı Tarihi*, p. 599.

<sup>21</sup> For a history of theatre during the Tanzimat era, see Metin And, *Tanzimat ve İstibdat Doneminde Türk Tiyatrosu (1839-1908)* (Ankara: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 1972).

<sup>22</sup> For detailed analyses of the history of Armenian theatre groups in the Ottoman Empire, see Lewon Zekiyan, *Venedik’ten İstanbul’a Modern Ermeni Tiyatrosunun İlk Adımları: Ermeni Rönesansı ve Mukhtarıstlerin Tiyatro Faaliyetleri*, trans. by Boğos Çalgıcioğlu (İstanbul: Bgst yayınları, 2013), and Fırat Güllü, *Vartonyan Kumpanyası ve Yeni Osmanlılar* (İstanbul: Bgst yayınları, 2008).

<sup>23</sup> Hülya Adak and Rüstem Ertuğ Altınay, ‘Introduction: Theatre and Politics in Turkey and Its Diasporas’, *Comparative Drama*, 52.3 (2018), 185–214 (p. 187).

<sup>24</sup> Metin And, *Başlangıcından 1983’e Türk Tiyatro Tarihi* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2011), pp. 67–68.

<sup>25</sup> In traditional Ottoman theatre, *meddah* is a public storyteller who entertains audience with stories, animations, and impersonations. *Ortaoyunu* refers to improvisational theatre, commonly performed in squares or coffeehouses for public entertainment. *Karagöz* is a specific shadow play with stock characters in satirical mode and vulgar diction.

<sup>26</sup> And, *Tanzimat ve İstibdat Doneminde Türk Tiyatrosu*, p. 283.

- <sup>27</sup> See ‘Three Proposed Roads to Reconstruction’, in Niyazi Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey* (London: Hurst & Company, 1998).
- <sup>28</sup> For the changing venues of performance art, see Nazlı Ümit, ‘Çadırlardan Saraylara, Türk Tiyatrosunun Sahneleri (Venues of Turkish Theatre; From Tents to Palaces)’, *Art-Sanat Dergisi*, 1 (2014), 47–72.
- <sup>29</sup> Metin And, *Başlangıcından 1983’e Türk Tiyatro Tarihi*, p. 73.
- <sup>30</sup> See Metin And, *Tanzimat ve İstibdat Doneminde Türk Tiyatrosu (1839-1908)* and Refik Ahmet Sevengil, *Türk Tiyatrosu Tarihi* (Istanbul: Alfa Yayıncılık, 2015).
- <sup>31</sup> Some critics in Turkey do not agree with And’s classifications, finding them too broad. I will use And’s historiography, which is the most detailed account written on Ottoman theatre, as the classification question does not relate to the issues dealt with in this study.
- <sup>32</sup> Both *Zeyneb* and *Finten* were reportedly written in the 1880s but were published in 1909 and 1916 respectively, after the Young Turk Revolution in 1908. Tanpınar, *XIX. Asır Türk Edebiyatı Tarihi*, p. 507.
- <sup>33</sup> Namık Kemal’s *Zavallı Çocuk* had great influence on many playwrights of the period. Recaizade Mahmut Ekrem’s *Vuslat* and Abdülhak Hamid’s *İçli Kız* [*Sensitive Girl*] (1874) are among the plays that were directly influenced by *Zavallı Çocuk*. See And, *Başlangıcından 1983’e Türk Tiyatro Tarihi*, p. 112; and Mehmet Fatih Uslu, ‘Melodram ve Komedi: Osmanlı’da Türkçe Ve Ermenice Modern Dramatik Edebiyatlar’ [Melodrama and Comedy: Turkish and Armenian Modern Dramatic Literatures in The Ottoman Empire] (unpublished dissertation [PhD], Bilkent University, 2011), pp. 103–15.
- <sup>34</sup> Alphonse de Lamartine, *Tercüme-i Hikâye-i Jönivev*, trans. by Memduh Paşa (İstanbul: Tatyos Divitciyan Matbaası, 1285 [1868]).
- <sup>35</sup> Recaizade Mahmut Ekrem, ‘Mukaddeme’, in *Vuslat*, pp. 2–5.
- <sup>36</sup> See İsmail Parlatır, *Tanzimat Edebiyatında Kölelik* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1987).
- <sup>37</sup> Recaizade Mahmut Ekrem, *Bütün Eserleri 4, Piyeler*, ed. by Betül Solmaz, Hakan Sazyek, and Esra Sazyek (Kocaeli: Umutepe Yayınları, 2020), p. 112. All translations of Ekrem’s and Naci’s plays are my own.
- <sup>38</sup> Ekrem, *Bütün Eserleri 4, Piyeler*, p. 104.
- <sup>39</sup> Ekrem, *Bütün Eserleri 4, Piyeler*, p. 111.
- <sup>40</sup> Ekrem, *Bütün Eserleri 4, Piyeler*, p. 121.
- <sup>41</sup> Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Picador, 2005).
- <sup>42</sup> Muallim Naci, *Heder*, ed. by Gökay Durmuş (Istanbul: Ekin Yayınları, 2017), p. 94.
- <sup>43</sup> Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, p. 180.
- <sup>44</sup> Naci, *Heder*, p. 79.
- <sup>45</sup> Naci, *Heder*, p. 90.
- <sup>46</sup> Naci, *Heder*, p. 77.
- <sup>47</sup> Naci, *Heder*, pp. 79–87.
- <sup>48</sup> Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, p. 180.
- <sup>49</sup> Reported in İnci Enginün and Zeynep Kerman, *Yeni Türk Edebiyatı Metinleri 3* (İstanbul: Dergah Yayınları, 2011), p. 1014.
- <sup>50</sup> Enginün and Kerman, p. 1014.

Women, Morality, and Materiality:  
Performing Transgression through Dress and Décor in Fin-de-Siècle Theatre

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C'est aux époques de décadence, telle la nôtre, que la mode prend une très grande importance, non seulement dans le vêtement, mais dans toutes les manifestations de la vie sociale.

[It is in the periods of decadence, such as ours, that fashion takes on a great importance, not only in clothing, but in all manifestations of social life.]<sup>1</sup>

In his 1910 essay *La Théâtromanie* [*Theatremania*], Léon Legavre established a direct link between the decay of his time and the obsession with fashion, the presence of which was tangible in all aspects of society. But, as the title of his essay suggests, he largely condemned the main entertainment of the second half of the nineteenth century: the world of theatre. According to him, theatres were spoilt spaces where the exhibition of fashionable dresses and hats in front of ‘des milliers d’yeux attentifs’ [thousands of attentive eyes] perverted the audience with the vain pleasures of materialistic bedazzlement and consumption.<sup>2</sup> Sporting those gaudy costumes, interacting with the modish furniture on stage, female characters were at the very core of the spectacularization of consumption, and the characters associated with this idea of excessive fashion were portrayed as indecent, dishonest, self-interested, and immoral women. Blending with their material environment, heavily ornamented and fashionable, women’s performance of debauchery was taken as a sign of a society in decay.

There is a strong resemblance between the representations of women on stage and in decadent literature. As Elaine Showalter argues in the opening of *Daughters of Decadence*:

in decadent writing, women are seen as bound to Nature and the material world because they are more physical than men, more body than spirit, they appear as objects of value only when they are aestheticized as corpses or phallicized as femmes fatales.<sup>3</sup>

This connection to the material world was similarly emphasized on the late nineteenth-century stage, where women were represented both as consumables and consumers. Morality and materiality were thus intertwined around the performance of women embodying decadence.

While Legavre observed the entertainment world as a sign of his society's disintegration, the idea of decadence in theatre was not new at the turn of the twentieth century. As Pascale Goetschel has shown, in France the discourse around the condition of contemporary theatre has been dominated by the metaphor of decadence since the middle of the eighteenth century.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, around 1900, the aspects of materialism and encouragement of overconsumption were added to the causes of the decay of drama, often allocating the responsibility for this to women, both as characters and actresses. The links between decadence and theatre can therefore be examined beyond the literary. Artistic theatrical experiments, such as Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* (1891), did depict decadent women expressing themselves through their pomp: the luxurious aspect of the Palace of Herod, overloaded with clothes, cloaks, jewels, mirrors, gold and silver, emphasized the theatrically decorative environment of the text.<sup>5</sup> However, in what follows I will be focusing on the world of mainstream theatre and the representation of contemporary domestic interiors, in order to argue that deviant women were embodying decadence prior to and then alongside the chief works of decadent literature. Decadence is here understood through a broad definition as a degradation of mores, morale and decency, and a general state of social decrepitude.

Taking the association of women, materiality, and morality as its focus, this article explores the connections between theatrical plots involving immoral women, especially *demi-mondaines* and courtesans, and the scenery crafted around them. From the divorcees and *parvenues* of Alexandre Dumas fils's *Le Demi-monde* (1855) to Marcel Prévost's *Les Demi-vierges* (1894), particular attention is paid to how aesthetic forms and decorative styles were chosen to depict deviant women, and were used to demonstrate their lack of social legitimacy and debauched lifestyle. From the fussy and disordered *rocaille* of the neo-Louis XV style to the swirling and luxuriant *modern style*, lustful and scheming women on stage merged with the materiality around them: they wore lavish dresses and



performed on sets crowded with furniture, ornaments, and ostentatious objects.<sup>6</sup> According to the contemporary taste for the staging of finely detailed and faithful material environments, the scenery chosen to depict the *demi-mondaines*, the *parvenues*, the courtesans, or *demi-vierges*, aimed to be as realistic as possible, all within a style as abundant as it was fashionable. Through examining performances as created domestic environments, I argue that the break-up of the seemingly decorum of social gender roles was materialized through flashy interiors representing the latest excessive fashion, while moral decadence was materialized in the degeneration of ornament.

### **Coding/decoding deviant women through scenery**

If feminine transgression could take many forms, deviant women, unmarried or unfaithful, were mostly portrayed as distancing themselves from marriage and therefore from the household. Between the seemingly moral woman and the *femme fatale*, a multitude of female characters flirted with decadence by refusing social norms.<sup>7</sup> There was also an underlying implication about their sexuality, used as a tool to deceive and manipulate men.<sup>8</sup> The characters of the adventuress, prostitute, or fallen woman were depicting ‘immoral’ women not only as a menace to the stability of households and to the established family, but as a social threat: deviant women representing a decadent civilization. Consumer or consumable, the figures of the kleptomaniac and the prostitute were the most common depictions of the deviant woman in fiction. Those two profiles embodied broader anxieties about how unbridled economic growth and consumerism would disrupt social and gender hierarchies.<sup>9</sup> But many women living outside of the traditional framework of marriage – single mothers, divorcees, widows, or unmarried women – existed in a social void. Some lost their social position, others made their way up from the lower classes. This constellation of categories was often represented in French plays of the 1850s and 1860s, and inspired playwrights across the Channel, including Wilde.<sup>10</sup> For instance, the character of the *parvenue*, problematized in this article, combines the excessive consumer and the prostitute: she seduces wealthy men in order to buy status. She embodies many of the characteristics of a ‘decadent woman’ as described, for example, through the

character of Léonora d'Este by Joséphin Péladan in his novel *Le Vice suprême* (1883): 'Elle aime les chastes pour les corrompre; les forts pour les asservir; les indépendants pour les avilir' [She loves chaste men to corrupt them; strong men to enslave them; the independents to degrade them].<sup>11</sup> Her affection for material things is inherent in the way she is represented. The fallen woman was, in fact, often depicted as isolated from the material environment, lost in urban crowds, on the street, far from the safe domestic world to which she was previously accustomed.<sup>12</sup> But kept women or courtesans were inseparable from their domestic interiors: these were the proof and condition of their social success.

As early as Molière's *Les Précieuses ridicules* [*The Pretentious Young Ladies*] (1653), male playwrights were exploring the comedic potential of women aspiring to exist beyond the social frame to which they were assigned. Nineteenth-century comedies were fond of these liminal women and often portrayed them as such – for example, by using the attribute 'demi', representing these 'half' women: *demi-mondaines*, or *demi-vierges*. Dumas' comedy *Le Demi-monde* was so successful that the term entered common parlance. The *demi-monde* was 'le monde équivoque' [the equivocal world], as a contemporary critic wrote, 'c'est la société qui tient à la bonne compagnie par le luxe, à la mauvaise par les mœurs' [it is society judging social worth by luxury, rather than behaviour].<sup>13</sup> It was composed of deviant women from various backgrounds: either they came from a lower social class and ascended by immoral means – being kept by rich men – and wanted to show off their new possessions, or they had descended from high society after a divorce or the death of their husband, and were clinging on to the remaining items indicative of their previous social status. Representing the *demi-mondaines* demonstrated their fight for legitimacy, and the social performance of presenting as someone one is not: a classic theatrical *mise en abîme*.

According to theatre director Adolphe Montigny, who revolutionized stage direction through his use of furniture to regulate actors' movements and interactions on stage, scenery and accessories enabled an exaggerated lustre and splendour, and the materialization of a 'peinture du vice élégant' [picture of elegant debauchery], as described by contemporary critic Edmond About.<sup>14</sup>

As well as creating a realistic material environment for the characters, the excessive furniture highlighted the depraved and spoilt behaviour of these women. As a more deviant form of the *demi-mondaine*, the term *demi-vierge* appeared in the 1880s, referring to women who would openly seduce men by pretending to be virgins in order to get married. Prévost's novel *Les Demi-vierges* inspired two theatrical adaptations, in 1895 and 1900. Like *Le Demi-monde*, *Les Demi-vierges* tells the story of self-interested women trying to find a good match by marrying a rich and naive man. Such female characters were recurrent in vaudeville and comedies, reaching a pinnacle in *Décadence* (1904), a comedy by Albert Guinon depicting a 'decadent' couple, and encompassing both antisemitism and misogyny. Censored in 1901, it received its first staging in 1904. The play depicts a Jewish man only interested in money and social status, and his self-interested wife who marries him just so she can live an extravagant life, while having an affair with an even richer marquis.

These women rely on material assets in order to fulfil themselves and access the social status and acceptance they are otherwise largely denied. In these comedies, they are caricatured as materialistic and heavy spenders. However, the need to acquire certain objects, and the art of arranging them in an interior, was a concern not just for *parvenues*, but for all women. In order to understand how *parvenues* could be identified through their belongings, it is necessary to acknowledge how domestic interiors could be validated as fitting moral and social expectations. The 'decadent interior' was therefore recognized in contrast to 'suitable interiors'. Leora Auslander argues that for bourgeois women, interior arrangements such as furnishing were 'necessary for representing and constituting the family's social position'.<sup>15</sup> The materiality around women was indeed highly codified, especially through handbooks regulating decoration habits and the distribution of rooms in the house depending on gender (husband or wife) and position (owners or employees). These books, covering all aspects of so-called 'domestic economy' – recipes, furnishing, decoration, maintenance, cleaning, childcare, and so on – tended to normalize gendered identities within households.<sup>16</sup> Furnishing the house had to be the preserve of women, as unlike men they were spending most of their time indoors.<sup>17</sup> The fact that middle- and upper-class families were socially

defined by their objects, furniture, and decor played a significant role in strengthening bourgeois identity in Western Europe.<sup>18</sup> Deviating from these spatial norms accentuated the impression of unconventional behaviour. As the press evolved, private interiors became more and more public: actors or writers progressively opened their doors to the press, and their material milieu was assumed to reflect their true nature.<sup>19</sup>

The increasing association of persons with their interiors was even stronger for women, to whom responsibility for the interior was primarily assigned. In *Entartung* [*Degeneration*] (1892), Max Nordau portrays the ‘degenerate’ woman in detail, first through her outfits, then through her domestic interior:

Daylight filters in through painted glass, where lean saints kneel in rapture. In the drawing-room the walls are either hung with worm-eaten Gobelin tapestry, discoloured by the sun of two centuries or covered with Morris draperies, on which strange birds flit amongst crazily ramping branches, and blowzy flowers coquet with vain butterflies. Amongst armchairs and padded seats, such as the cockered bodies of our contemporaries know and expect, there are Renaissance stools, the heart or shell-shaped bottoms of which would attract none but the toughened hide of a rough hero of the jousting lists.<sup>20</sup>

Deviant women were still defined by their domestic space, although instead of presenting it as a safe and appropriate environment to raise a family, the *parvenues* exhibited it as a demonstration of their wealth and possessions. For instance, the *parvenu* baroness of *Le Demi-monde*, Suzanne d’Ange, was associated with her interior space by critics, who reported that when she appeared ‘dans un salon tendu de damas jaune, elle a pris un titre assorti à son ameublement’ [in a living room covered with yellow damask, she chose a title matching her furniture].<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, Olivier de Jalin’s domestic interior is wealthy but sober, fitting the norms of decorum, which is mocked by the *demi-mondaines* who compare it with their new fashionable apartments in the richest streets of Paris.<sup>22</sup> The widowed viscountess lives in a sumptuous apartment where ‘[l]’or ruisselle sur les tables’ [gold flows on the tables].<sup>23</sup> Her living room is richly furnished in the style of Louis XV, and saturated with decorative objects and flower arrangements. Objects on stage contribute to the acknowledgement of a prestigious environment, but their abundance and nonconformity to the rules of interior furnishing betray vulgarity and bad taste. Moreover, the dazzlingly overdressed women interact with

the proliferating objects of their *nouveau riche* interiors, invading rooms that are not usually open to them: living rooms, lounges, smoking rooms. Their social involvement was thereby spoofed, caricatured, and reduced to a failed attempt to mimic the upper classes and the men who had rejected them.

This idea of counterfeiting a social position was also revealed through their noticeable but cheap ornaments. Nordau described the possessions displayed in the interiors he associated with degeneration, emphasizing both the senseless heterogeneousness of the objects and the fact that they were not authentic:

On all the tables and in all the cabinets is a display of antiquities or articles of vertu, big or small, and for the most part warranted not genuine; a figure of Tanagra near a broken jade snuff-box, a Limoges plate beside a long-necked Persian waterpot of brass, a bonbonniere between a breviary bound in carved ivory, and snuffers of chiselled copper.<sup>24</sup>

As Christophe Genin argues, a material object may reveal a failed attempt by the bourgeois classes to copy the aristocratic *œuvre*. While original works of art reference the creative spirit of the artist, the manufactured objects reference production, consumption, and are perishable products.<sup>25</sup> The artifice of these bourgeois interiors thus reflects the duplicity of the deviant women occupying them.

A 'decadent scenery' associated with deviant female characters often emphasized the idea of excess, while most of the housekeeping books advised on a certain moderation in the practice of decorating spaces, although the basic furniture they recommended was already significant. Women's duty, as household managers, was to find the right balance, oscillating between hosting dinners in an interior not so empty as to suggest deficiency or a low social rank, yet restrained enough that the dining rooms were not crowded with too many ostentatious ornaments which would indicate bad taste and eccentricity. While many handbooks suggested that decorating one's interior should not solely be a privilege of the upper class, wealthier households were recommended not to display their wealth.<sup>26</sup> 'Frugality and economy are home virtues', Isabella Beeton wrote, 'without which a household cannot prosper'.<sup>27</sup> The sobriety was often a byword for virtuousness and synonym for good taste and restraint because it implied the idea that a virtuous woman was not a spendthrift.

‘[L]e vrai bon goût’ [The real good taste], wrote Mme Pariset in the introduction to her book on etiquette, ‘consiste à choisir les choses utiles, commodes, durables, qui surtout ont entre elles un rapport bien établi’ [consists in choosing useful, convenient, lasting things, which have an entrenched connection between them].<sup>28</sup> Etiquette books, newspaper illustrations, and advertising images contribute to creating an iconographic memento of the ideal interior. The standardized ‘good taste’ defined by those books is precisely the norm against which indecency, excess, and decadence – what Nordau describes as ‘degeneration’ – can be judged. Interior decoration that displayed a departure from these well-known reference points was therefore a sign of social deviation. However, in addition to deviating from the norms, ‘decadent interiors’ could also be identified by their own aesthetic characteristics, showing the association of a decadent lifestyle with certain types of decoration.

### **From Rococo to Art Nouveau: staging the decadent interior**

The identification of deviant women on stage was not only facilitated by the excessive quantity of their belongings, but also by the immoderate use of certain fashionable styles of ornaments. In his description of ‘degenerate interiors’, Nordau resorted to exhaustive references to the mixture of ancient and foreign styles: ‘startling is the effect of a gilt-painted couch between buhl-work cabinets and a puckered Chinese table, next an inlaid writing-table of graceful rococo’.<sup>29</sup> Henry Havard wrote in the 1890s, that ‘étudier les Styles, [...] c’est étudier la vie morale et intellectuelle des peuples’ [Studying styles, [...] is studying the moral and intellectual life of people].<sup>30</sup> The art historian claimed that the values and morals of a group of people could be discerned from the architectural and decorative aesthetics they chose or invented. Therefore ‘rudes et austères’ [harsh and austere] styles were inherent to people ‘vivant uniquement pour la guerre’ [living only for war]. More developed and thorough styles were needed in civilised nations ‘où règne une communication constante non seulement des deux sexes mais de personnes de tous les états’ [where there is constant communication between the sexes, between all kinds and manner of person].<sup>31</sup> In this more complex

society, the artist, according to Havard, had to vary their creation depending on the social rank, gender, age, and position of the persons for whom they catered.

The nineteenth century gave rise to many debates about identity and styles. Despite the apparent decorative chaos and the recycling of styles from all eras and cultures into a motley combination, a certain unity was advised in decoration, affiliating to each room a specific style and era.<sup>32</sup> However, on the theatrical stage, the *parvenues* and courtesans were often pictured amongst a profusion of decoration in a neo-Louis XV style. In Havard's analysis, the different styles between the reign of Louis XIV and Louis XVI – *Régence*, *rocaille*, Pompadour – were all imbued with femininity and pleasure. Havard describes these styles as the direct consequence of an economic, political, and social crisis, revealing the “passion de briller” pour la nouvelle “classe riche” [‘passion to shine’ of the newly ‘rich class’], their ‘manifestation du désir et de la volonté de s’enrichir [demonstration of a desire and will to get rich]. It was also the ornamental demonstration of a new ‘classe de femmes intelligentes, actives, remuantes et sans grands scrupules’ [class of clever women, active, restless and without scruples].<sup>33</sup> Havard also associates the idea of comfort with a concern for luxury.<sup>34</sup> Such a definition of the Louis XV style was not new in the 1890s: the expanding fashion of *rocaille* in Parisian domestic interiors was condemned by contemporaries in the eighteenth century for being a counterfeiting culture, an attempt of the *tiers état* to imitate the taste of the aristocracy.<sup>35</sup> Such persisting stereotypes conveyed by the Louis XV style made it an obvious aesthetic out of which to compose the material environment of a woman-ruled society where seduction led to success.<sup>36</sup>

The ability of spectators to understand such stylistic differences can be explained by the fact that ancient styles were class indicators for the bourgeoisie or the aristocrats. Amongst London's upper classes, the taste for furniture tended towards the styles of eighteenth-century France. But in terms of wealth and ostentation, the Louis XV style strongly contrasted with the simplicity and sobriety praised by the instruction manuals as examples of decorum. In a long history of scorn for the *rocaille* ornaments associated with excess and lust, many etiquette books condemned the use of

this style. In the cyclical conception of taste – going through three phases: primitive, classical, decadent – authors placed the Louis XV style as a degeneration of more seemingly past aesthetics. In *The Art of Decoration* (1881), Mary Haweis celebrates Louis XIV style as the most elegant and scientific, whereas she considers Louis XV as grotesque and vulgar.<sup>37</sup> In 1883, Rococo style was described by W. G. Collingwood as possessing these demeaning traits:

Out of the taste for grotesque [...] was developed Rococo, the ‘Rock-cockle’ style, I suppose one might say, – ‘*rocaille coquille*.’ The object of this is picturesqueness, quaintness, gaudiness, and glitter; it has no grace, but broken, crooked grotesque lines to catch the light; and a crumpled surface to represent rock, or rather rockeries; which were fashionable then, before anybody had heard about geology, though now tolerated only by the uneducated.<sup>38</sup>

The perception of the Rococo aesthetic in the nineteenth century was therefore quite contradictory: it conjured up a lack of education and degenerative aesthetics, but at the time of *Le Demi-monde*, it was a very fashionable style with the expanding bourgeoisie, as its revival was popularized in France under the Second Empire, at the instigation of the Empress Eugénie.<sup>39</sup> The aesthetic practice of re-using or reinterpreting eighteenth-century décor was frequent in the imperial couple’s residences. Like Napoléon III and Eugénie seeking legitimacy and affiliation to the royal tradition of France through the decoration of their interiors, resorting to references from the *Ancien Régime* was, for the *nouveau riche*, a strategy of affiliation with the most noble parts of society.<sup>40</sup> In *Le Demi-monde*, in order to create the environment of the *demi-mondaines*, contemporaries claimed that the stage directions of Adolphe Lemoine (known as Montigny) demanded interiors entirely decorated with *rocaille*.<sup>41</sup> But, in trying to be as faithful as possible, interiors on stage followed the fashions of interiors off-stage. When *japonisme* became the trending taste, it proliferated in the theatres, and was naturally exaggerated when the performance involved self-interested women with superficial tastes. Victorien Sardou’s *Marquise!* (1889) staged the story of Lydie Garousse, a lower-class woman who gained access to the elite of society by being a successful cantatrice, but who, despite her best efforts, could never be officially given the title of marchioness and escape her status of *nouveau riche*. For her interior, decorator Amable created a Japanese lobby crowded with ornaments including two-metre-high bronze vases, opening onto a



garden with a large round window.<sup>42</sup> Each of her accessories was more extravagant than the last, from the pink gown made of Japanese fabric adorned with ostrich feathers, to her enormous conspicuous diamond crown.

More than a feminine and ‘debilitating’ aesthetic, Rococo was also associated with foreign lifestyles. On the fin-de-siècle London stage, plays based in France, and Paris in particular, made perennial reference to Madame de Pompadour, Louis XV, and Rococo. The ability to recognize ‘national styles’ can be partly explained by the culture created by furnishing brands in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. In London, department stores offered French sections, most often composed of antiques and reproductions of Louis XIV, Louis XV, and Louis XVI styles.<sup>43</sup> To represent a French interior, department store collections were exhibited on stage, as seen at the Prince of Wales theatre’s pantomime *L’Enfant prodigue* [*The Prodigal Son*] (1891). This Pierrot pantomime, imported from Paris, was performed with scenery quite different from its original version. The plot involves an immoral and self-interested woman, Phrynette, who seduces Pierrot to make him steal from his own parents so she can decorate her boudoir in a showy Louis XV style. Unlike the French version, performed with very simple scenery, the British adaptation insisted on decoration that would follow the progression of characters in the evolution of their virtue. The second act, in Phrynette’s new boudoir, took place on a stage covered with precious cloths and saturated with furniture and ornaments. It was entirely furnished by the Oetzmann & Co. department store, and was advertised as such in the playbill. In the following act, as Pierrot realizes he has been fooled, he returns to his parents to ask their forgiveness, and the scenery changes into a very sober and modest interior, materializing the moral of the story into the scenery.

Towards the end of the century, on French stages, Louis XV interiors were replaced by the more fashionable *modern style*, designated by the press as originating from England, although the term was invented in France.<sup>44</sup> In 1898, an article in *Le Temps* observed that contemporary fashion had ‘abandonné les meubles Louis XV et Louis XVI, le style Renaissance ou Empire [...] pour adopter les meubles élégants et si confortables dont les Anglais furent les créateurs et que les

amateurs ont baptisé modern style’ [abandoned Louis XV and Louis XVI furniture, Renaissance or Empire style [...] to adopt the elegant and comfortable furniture that the English have created and that connoisseurs called modern style].<sup>45</sup> However, the terms used to describe and characterize *modern style* were very similar to the attributes of *rocaille*: inspired by nature, flexible, whirling, comfortable, pleasurable, but also unbalanced, corrupted, exaggerated, feminine, counterfeited luxury, and a certain association with promiscuous life. The ‘formes tourmentées et tarabiscotées’ [tormented and convoluted shapes] of Louis XV style described as Havard are easily found in so called *modern style* or Art Nouveau.<sup>46</sup> It was even described as an English version of the French eighteenth-century style.<sup>47</sup> As *demi-mondaines* blended in with their Rococo décor, *modern style* was used as an adjective to describe a material environment as well as a lifestyle or a personality.

In a review of *La Princesse Bébé* (1902) by Pierre Decourcelle and Georges Berr, a journalist from the feminist newspaper *La Fronde* described the scene as ‘une garçonnière vraiment moderne style, rien n’y manque: telephone, fleurs apportées trop vite, maîtresses diverses’ [a really modern style bachelor flat, it is all there in full: telephone, flowers brought too fast, diverse mistresses].<sup>48</sup> This shift in fashion could also be used to identify women from different generations. In Fabrice Carré and Paul Bilhaud’s *Ma Bru!*, performed at the Odéon in 1899, stage designers played on the contrast between the mother-in-law’s interior, in an austere eighteenth-century style with boule furniture, and the daughter-in-law’s living room, entirely in *modern style*. Following the tradition of mid-century handbooks, the fashion press advised women to match their outfits to their interiors, blending fabric like black or cream satin with the furniture in order to ‘habiter les salons moderne style [inhabit the modern-style living-rooms].<sup>49</sup> While blending women and their clothing with the interior around them, the *modern style* scenery also stresses the idea of deviant women being obsessed with their appearance and the latest fashion.

The 1900 version of *Les Demi-vierges* opened on luxuriant *modern style* interiors, furnished by Maison Soubrier, a brand operating as both a retailer and a theatre scene designer. The play stages the story of Maud, a young woman testing the limits of innocent flirting while waiting to marry

well. She is surrounded by women behaving likewise, creating a type that Prévost encompassed in the term *demi-vierge*. Choosing this style for the play was not insignificant; if *modern style* was perceived as a liberated style from overseas, so were the *demi-vierges* themselves, considered as a decadent import from the other side of the Channel. Just as the overloaded Rococo style was associated with France on the English stage, the decadent *modern style* embodied the lack of decency of foreign mores: ‘la demi-vierge est un type bien plus répandu à l’étranger qu’en France’ [the *demi-vierge* is a type more pervasive abroad than in France], Prévost wrote in the foreword of the 1894 edition of the novel, implying that flirting originated from overseas.<sup>50</sup> Later articles maintained the association of *demi-vierges* with a foreign fad, explaining how French young women from the bourgeoisie followed the example of their Anglo-Saxon counterparts as to how to live their life before getting married.<sup>51</sup> Therefore, their association with such interiors was perceived by the audience as one more indication of their rejection of tradition, showcasing their rich dresses alongside ‘des meubles du dernier genre anglais’ [furniture of the latest English fashion].<sup>52</sup> The association of Art Nouveau or *modern style* with the idea of a pervasive growth of decadence from overseas was mutual on both sides of the Channel and, as Cyril Barde argues, it used the lexicon of deformity, diseases and viruses.<sup>53</sup>

Another aspect of the scenery of *Les Demi-vierges* caught the attention of the contemporary audience: the colours. Unfortunately, these cannot be experienced nowadays through photographic representations of the play. The interiors were ‘implacablement bleus’ [implacably blue], according to the critic of the *Journal amusant*, a colour associated with ‘un moderne et très libre style’ [a very modern and free style], and immaculate white lilies bedecked walls in friezes. The white of the flowers matched the white of the dresses of the characters. Dressing the *demi-vierges* in white dresses sprinkled with lilies, in a blue interior, was inevitably understood as a deliberate contrast to their virtue. It is as if ‘une pièce vouée au bleu et au blanc, et pourtant...’ [the play was dedicated to blue and white, and yet...].<sup>54</sup> The floral associations surrounding female virginity were thus projected onto the scenery and costumes, materializing the heart of the play as

a clear allegory, facilitated by the sinuous and blossomy aesthetics of Art Nouveau. The blue and white association, evoking Chinese porcelain, was one of the hallmarks of Aestheticism; they were two colours Oscar Wilde was very fond of, as Qi Chen argues.<sup>55</sup> Collecting blue and white porcelain was very fashionable among the fin-de-siècle middle and upper classes. In addition, the colour blue, and more specifically blue-green, was omnipresent in decadent literature, notably in descriptions of interiors in the novels of Jean Lorrain, where decadent heroes are all bathed in a blue-green light, as Phillip Winn remarks.<sup>56</sup>

## Conclusion

To conclude, the dichotomy between the material and the spiritual in the late nineteenth-century imagination led to the notion that possessing objects for pleasure and not necessity indicated a lack of virtue, and, towards the end of the century, was a true sign of decadence. Women, more than men, were associated with the idea of impulsive buying, defenceless against commercial strategies. From the eighteenth century onward, theories linking women to irrational consumption began to circulate, and women's interest in luxury goods was considered as an innate characteristic of feminine psychology.<sup>57</sup> The role of the ornament and the practice of stage furnishing varies in plays involving immoral or deviant women at the turn of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, the scenery always complemented the play. Its fashionable look emphasized the appearance of modernity and it identified women with the materiality around them. The extravagant and garish interiors of the corrupted *demi-mondaines*, *demi-vierges*, adulterous women or courtesans played a major part in the entertainment provided by mainstream comedies. 'Les soirées du demi-monde ont un attrait irrésistible pour nous' [The evenings of the *demi-monde* had an irresistible attraction for us], a commentator wrote in *La Patrie*; the attraction is attributed to luxury and elegance, topped with the zest of debauchery.<sup>58</sup> The character of the *parvenue* was pictured as an excessive consumer living in overloaded interiors, but the fin-de-siècle audience was also eager for bedazzlement.

Therein lies the main paradox of the representation of deviant women on stage: supposedly repulsive and distasteful, ‘immoral’ women were above all made appealing and desirable. This can be explained by the evolution of the relationship between entertainment and consumption. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, most plays staged in commercial theatres exploited the material environment provided by scenery to seduce audiences fond of realism. In this context, decadent female characters also played a major part in product placement. From the 1890s, collaborations between theatres and commercial companies were widespread. By lending furniture on deposit to theatres, shops took over the role of the property masters and their assistants. In both London and Paris, commercial theatres, shops, and department stores were brought closer together through urban development. This created an ideal opportunity for both institutions to work together: theatres could solve their space problems by reducing their own stock and avoid the expenses of building or buying disposable scenery for each performance; brands could benefit from efficient advertisement, through mentions in playbills and reviews, taking advantage of the high attendance levels at theatres at the end of the century and their influence on potential clients. The role of actresses in this type of advertisement was fundamental.<sup>59</sup> Jules Claretie wrote in 1911, that fashion, like theatre, is one of ‘des grosses préoccupations de la vie courante, l’actrice en vedette devient tout aussitôt comme l’arbitre du goût, la lanceuse attitrée des chapeaux et des robes’ [the main preoccupations of the modern life, thereby the actress in the limelight immediately becomes the arbiter of taste, the official trend launcher for hats and dresses].<sup>60</sup> Actresses’ choices in interior design interested the audience to the extent that books about their apartments were published, such as Louis Germont’s *Loges d’artistes* (1889), listing actresses and describing their possessions. The similarity between these interiors and those depicted on stage can most readily be seen in a description of actress Rosa Bruck’s apartment:

Le salon est une merveille où s’entassent les étoffes précieuses, les satins aux broderies d’or fantastiques venant du Japon, les bibelots rares, les statues de marbre, les bronzes, les ivoires [...]. Et toutes ces choses sont disposées, arrangées, pour la plus grande joie des yeux, avec un goût parfait.

The living-room is a marvel where precious cloth, fantastic gold-embroidered satin from Japan, rare ornaments, marble statues, bronzes, ivories are piling up [...]. All those things are arranged for the greatest joy of the eyes, with a perfect taste.<sup>61</sup>

There is a thin line between the characters and the actresses playing them: the women depicted on stage could also be a reflection of those sitting in the audience. The show was also taking place on the other side of the proscenium. ‘La moitié du demi-monde de Paris assistait de la galerie et du balcon à la représentation du *Demi-Monde*, qu’on jouait sur la scène’ [Half of the *demi-monde* of Paris attended from the gallery to the upper balcony to the performance of the *demi-monde* that was acted on stage], a critic reported.<sup>62</sup> If emancipated women were watching their kindred spirits on stage, the mirror metaphor could also be applied to the actors themselves. ‘Grande dame, synonymie de grande comédienne’ [Great lady, synonym for great actor], Péladan wrote in *Le Vice suprême*: the worlds of actresses and courtesans being deeply intertwined, some actresses were performing in the same costumes they would wear outside the theatre and in interiors mimicking their own.<sup>63</sup> As Mary Louise Roberts argues, ‘the worlds of journalism and theatre, which lay at the heart of commodity culture in this period, enabled these women literally to act out the instability of gender identity, and thus to refashion themselves as women’.<sup>64</sup>

Albeit different, deviant or immoral, women flirting with decadence were linked to their domestic interior and even blended into it. Exaggerated decoration, excess, and lack of harmony operated as signifiers of the unavoidable fate of those outsiders, who despite their accumulation of wealth, would never succeed in accessing the social acceptance they sought amongst ‘polite’ society.

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<sup>1</sup> Léon Legavre, *La Théâtromanie* (Paris: Marcel Rivière, 1910), p. 132. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

<sup>2</sup> Legavre, *La Théâtromanie*, p. 129.

<sup>3</sup> Elaine Showalter, ‘Introduction’, in *Daughters of Decadence: Women Writers of the Fin-de-Siècle*, ed. by Elaine Showalter (London: Virago, 1993), pp. vii–xix (p. x).

<sup>4</sup> See Pascale Goetschel, *Une autre histoire du théâtre, discours de crise et pratiques spectaculaires* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2020), pp. 7–19.

To provide a few examples of this discourse: Louis Charpentier, *Causes de la décadence du goût sur le théâtre* (Paris: Dufour, 1768); Jean-François Cailhava, *Les Causes de la décadence du théâtre* (Paris: Moronval, 1807); J.-P. Vallier, *Recherches sur les causes de la décadence des théâtres et de l’art dramatique en France* (Paris: A. Appert, 1841); Emile Montégut,

'De la décadence des théâtres', *La Revue des Deux Mondes*, 27.2 (1860); and Jean-Louis Dubut de Laforest, "Notre théâtre à sauver", *Le Progrès artistique*, 30 January 1880, pp. 2–3.

<sup>5</sup> Chad Bennett argues that the play focused on 'embodiment through ornament'. See Chad Bennett, 'Oscar Wilde's *Salome*: Décor, Des Corps, Desire', *ELH*, 77.2 (2010), 297–323 (p. 301).

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed discussion of *modern style*, see Sophie Basch, 'Le "modern style": un intraduisible dans les arts décoratifs', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 3.2 (2020), 46–63.

<sup>7</sup> As described by George Ross Ridge, the 'decadent *femme fatale*' is harmful and disruptive, using falsehood, deceit and even physical violence to achieve her ends. See George Ross Ridge, 'The "Femme Fatale" in French Decadence', *The French Review*, 34.4 (1961), 352–60 (p. 353).

<sup>8</sup> As Sarah Parker argues, 'female sexuality is often depicted as threatening in Decadent literature', an observation she backs up with many examples from Joris-Karl Huysmans's *À rebours* and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. See Sarah Parker, 'The New Woman and Decadent Gender Politics', in *Decadence: A Literary History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 118–36 (p. 120).

<sup>9</sup> Mary Louise Roberts, 'Gender, Consumption and Commodity Culture', *The American Historical Review*, 103.3 (1998), 817–44 (p. 818).

<sup>10</sup> Ignacio Ramos Gay, 'From Dumas fils's *Étrangère* to Wilde's *Aventurière*: French Theatrical Forerunners of the Wildean Female Dandy', *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens*, 72 (2010), 83–98.

<sup>11</sup> Joséphin Péladan, *Le Vice suprême* (1884; Paris: Editions du Monde moderne, 1926), p. 122.

<sup>12</sup> Nina Auerbach, 'The Rise of the Fallen Woman', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 35.1 (1980), 29–52 (p. 33).

<sup>13</sup> Darthenay, 'Programme des spectacles', *Vert-vert*, 23 March 1855, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> Edmond About, 'THEATRES. Le Demi-Monde, comédie de M. Alexandre Dumas fils', *Revue des Deux Mondes*, 10, 31 March 1855, p. 208.

<sup>15</sup> Leora Auslander, 'The Gendering of Consumer Practices in Nineteenth-Century France', in *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective*, ed. by Victoria De Grazia and Ellen Furlough (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 79–112 (p. 83).

<sup>16</sup> Louise d'Alq, *Le Maître et la maîtresse de maison* (Paris: Bureaux des 'Causeries familiaires', 1887).

<sup>17</sup> The division of domestic space into rooms materialized social habits and gendered division according to what Jean Baudrillard described as the 'patriarchal order' governing the typical bourgeois interior. Stemming from royal architecture, bourgeois interior design appointed rooms for feminine use, which were also the more private ones – bedrooms, boudoirs, etc. – whereas masculine rooms corresponded to representational and social performance spaces such as living rooms, dining rooms, and smoking rooms. Jean Baudrillard, *Le Système des objets* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), p. 21. See also Hilde Heynen, 'L'inscription du genre dans l'architecture', *Perspective*, 4 (2007), 693–708.

<sup>18</sup> Rachel Rich, 'Designing the Dinner Party: Advice on Dining and Décor in London and Paris, 1860-1914', *Journal of Design History*, 16.1 (2003), 49–61 (p. 51). See also Jonas Frykman and Orvar Löfgren, *Culture Builders: A Historical Anthropology of Middle-class Life* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987).

<sup>19</sup> Marie-Clémence Régnier, 'Le spectacle de l'homme de lettres au quotidien: de l'intérieur bourgeois à l'intérieur artiste (1840-1903)', *Romantisme*, 168.2 (2015), 71–80 (p. 75).

<sup>20</sup> Max Nordau, *Degeneration*, translated from the second edition of the German work (London: William Heinemann, 1895), p. 10.

<sup>21</sup> Edmond About, 'Chronique de la quinzaine – Histoire Politique et Littéraire', *Revue des Deux Mondes*, 10, 31 March 1855, p. 207.

<sup>22</sup> Alexandre Dumas fils, *Le Demi-monde, comédie en 5 actes en prose* (Paris: M. Lévy, 1855), p. 11.

<sup>23</sup> 'Théâtres', *La Patrie*, 26 March 1855, p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> Nordau, *Degeneration*, p. 10.

<sup>25</sup> Christophe Genin, 'Le kitsch: une histoire de parvenus', *Actes Sémiotiques* (2007), <<https://www.unilim.fr/actes-semiotiques/3268>> [accessed 9 December 2021].

<sup>26</sup> See Eliza Warren's books insisting on saving money: *How I Managed My House On Two Hundred Pounds A Year* (1864), *Comfort for Small Incomes* (1866), or *A House And Its Furnishings; How To Choose A House And Furnish It At A Small Expense* (1869).

<sup>27</sup> Isabella Mary Beeton, *The Book of Household Management, etc.* (London: S.O. Beeton, 1861), p. 2.

<sup>28</sup> Mme Pariset, Marie Armande Jeanne Gacon-Dufour & Elisabeth Celnart, *Nouveau manuel complet de la maîtresse de maison; ou, Lettres sur l'économie domestique* (Paris: Librairie encyclopédique de Roret, 1852), p.10.

This asceticism was also associated with England, through the concept of 'comfortable', an English word that made its way into the French language during the nineteenth century, described as such by Mme Pariset: *Je crois que cette concordance fait partie essentielle de ce que les Anglais expriment par le mot *comfortable*. Elle plaît à l'œil, elle donne une sorte de repos à l'esprit, et constitue en grande partie ce bien-être duquel je vous parlais il y a quelques jours. Je l'ai rencontrée bien souvent chez les gens de fortune médiocre ; souvent aussi je l'ai cherchée en vain dans les maisons opulentes.* [I think this harmony is an essential part of what the English express through the word *comfortable*. It pleases the eye, rests the spirit, and constitute that well-being I was talking about. I often came across it from modest people; often I looked for it in vain in opulent houses.] (p. 10).

<sup>29</sup> Nordau, *Degeneration*, p. 10.

<sup>30</sup> Henry Havard, *Les Arts de l'ameublement. Les styles* (Paris: C. Delagrave, 1891-97), p. 3.

<sup>31</sup> Havard, p. 4.

<sup>32</sup> See for instance H. J. Hennings's recommendations in 1902: 'For the dining room, you may have it Italian Renaissance, François Premier, Elizabethan, Jacobean, eighteenth-century English, or modern English Renaissance. French styles may be put on one side for an English dining room; so may the Gothique Anglais [...]. For the drawing-room there are available the whole range of French styles, from Louis XIV to the Empire, also the English Chippendale to Adam period, and, if these give not scope enough, the English Renaissance as practised by the English school'. H. J. Jennings, *Our homes, and how to beautify them* (London: Harrison, 1902), pp. 73–74.

<sup>33</sup> Havard, p. 140.

<sup>34</sup> Havard, p. 141.

<sup>35</sup> Maxine Berg, 'From Imitation to Invention: Creating Commodities in Eighteenth-Century Britain', *The Economic History Review*, 55.1 (2002), 1–30; Katie Scott, *The Rococo Interior: Decoration and Social Spaces in Early Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); and Stefan Muthesius, 'L'histoire de l'architecture et du design au XIXe siècle: avant et après l'authenticité', in *Repenser les limites: l'architecture à travers l'espace, le temps et les disciplines* (Paris: INHA (Actes de colloques), 2005).

<sup>36</sup> Research on gendered consumption has shown the importance of the eighteenth century as a starting point for the lasting association of women with objects of consumption. David Kutcha argues that luxury was perceived both as a vice and a political threat in eighteenth-century aristocratic culture, and represented 'the debased, debauched, and debilitating form of consumption that effeminated and impoverished England'. See David Kutcha, 'The Making of the Self-Made Man: Class, Clothing, and English Masculinity, 1688-1832', in *The Sex of Things*, ed. by Victoria de Grazia and Ellen Furlough, pp. 55–62 (p. 63).

<sup>37</sup> See Mary Eliza Haweis, *The Art of Decoration* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1881); Mrs Loftie, *The Dining-room* (London: Macmillan, 1878); and Judy Neiswander, *The Cosmopolitan Interior: Liberalism and the British Home 1870-1914* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2008), p. 58.

<sup>38</sup> W. G. Collingwood, 'The Philosophy of Ornament: Eight Lectures on the History of Decorative Art', given at University College, Liverpool (Orpington: George Allen, 1883).

<sup>39</sup> Margaret Barlow, 'Rococo Revival', in *Oxford Art Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), <<https://www.oxfordartonline.com/groveart/groveart/view/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.001.0001/oa0-9781884446054-e-7000072560>> [accessed 9 December 2021].

<sup>40</sup> The imperial taste was exhibited to an international audience. For example, Le musée rétrospectif de la Reine, displaying the possessions of Marie-Antoinette, at the Petit Trianon during the Exposition universelle of 1867. Christophe Pincemaille, 'L'Impératrice Eugénie et Marie-Antoinette autour de l'exposition rétrospective des souvenirs de la Reine au Petit Trianon en 1867', *Versalia. Revue de la Société des Amis de Versailles*, 6.1 (2003), 124–34; Mathieu Caron, 'Les appartements de l'impératrice Eugénie aux Tuileries: le XVIIIe siècle retrouvé?', *Bulletin du Centre de recherche du château de Versailles* (Centre de recherche du château de Versailles, 2015), <<https://journals.openedition.org/crcv/13316>> [accessed 9 December 2021].

<sup>41</sup> See Léo Lespès's anecdote in *Le Figaro*, in which the stage manager is summoned by M. Montgny and questioned as to why, in the second act of *Demi-Monde*, the clock in the 'genre rocaille, appropriée selon vos ordres, à l'ameublement' [rocaille style, matching the furniture, as you ordered] is 'retardait de dix minutes avec l'horloge de la Bourse' [running behind the clock of the Bourse by ten minutes]. Léo Lespès, 'Les accessoires au théâtre. Anecdotes et souvenirs de foyer', *Le Figaro*, 28 December 1856, p. 4.

<sup>42</sup> Un Monsieur du balcon, 'La Soirée théâtrale', *Le Figaro*, 13 February 1889, p. 6.

<sup>43</sup> See for instance the Oetzmann & Co. Catalogue of 1879 and its section 'Finest Old French Furniture', *Guide to house furnishing, Oetzmann and Co.*, 1879, cote W715, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, pp. 104–105. See also the London exhibition of French art in 1888, focused on Louis XIV and Louis XV art. Charlotte Robinson, 'Home decoration', *The Queen*, 3 November 1888, pp. 63–64. The success of the neo-Louis styles in England calls into question our current understanding of cultural nationalism and consumption habits. See also Adriana Turpin, 'Appropriation as a Form of Nationalism? Collecting French Furniture in the Nineteenth Century', in *Art Crossing Borders*, ed. by Jan Dirk Baetens and Dries Lyna (Leiden: BRILL, 2019), p. 225.

<sup>44</sup> See Sophie Basch, *Rastaquarium: Marcel Proust et le 'modern style': arts décoratifs et politique dans 'À la recherche du temps perdu'* (Turnhout, Brepols, 2014).

<sup>45</sup> Anon., 'L'Art nouveau à la campagne', *Le Temps Supplément*, 7 June 1898, pp. 8–9. (p. 9).

<sup>46</sup> Havard, p. 138.

<sup>47</sup> See Santillane, 'La Vie Parisienne. L'Hôtel Ritz', *Gil Blas*, 2 June 1898, p. 1, and Lucien Descaves, *Le Mot d'ordre*, 4 December 1898, p. 3.

<sup>48</sup> Berthe Mendès, "Soirée Parisienne", *La Fronde*, 16 April 1902, p. 3.

<sup>49</sup> Baronne Staff, 'Notes mondaines', *Les Annales politiques et littéraires*, 24 December 1899, p. 13.

<sup>50</sup> Marcel Prévost, *Les Demi-vierges* (Paris: A. Lemerre, 1894), p. iv.

<sup>51</sup> '[À] l'exemple de ses soeurs anglo-saxonnes, la jeune fille de la bourgeoisie française tâche à vivre sa vie avant le mariage, si souvent tardif, dès lors nous trouvons dans le roman, au théâtre, d'exquises figures de jeunes filles qui



ne sont plus que ces ‘demi-Vierges’, vicieuses et corrompues, à qui le talent d’un romancier heureux a fait une éphémère célébrité’ [Following the example of their anglosaxon counterparts, the young bourgeoisie French woman tries to live her life before marriage, often late; therefore we find in the novel, at the theatre, exquisite young women figures that are now nothing else than those ‘demi-Vierges’, vicious and corrupted, to whom the talent of a pleased novelist gave an ephemeral celebrity]. Ida R. Sée, ‘Jeunes Filles Hier et Aujourd’hui’, *La Fronde*, 8 May 1902, p. 1.

<sup>52</sup> Th. Avonde, ‘Théâtres’, *La Liberté*, 1 October 1900, p. 3.

<sup>53</sup> See Cyril Barde, ‘Courbes névrosées, lignes asthmatiques: usages de la métaphore médicale dans la réception de l’Art Nouveau’, in *Medicine and Maladies: Representing affliction in nineteenth-century France*, ed. by Sophie Leroy (Leyde: Brill, 2018). On the English side, French decadence was, for instance, considered as ‘an exotic growth unsuited to British soil’. Hugh E. M. Stutfield, ‘Tommyrotics’, *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, 157 (1895), 833–45 (p. 834).

<sup>54</sup> Le Moucheur de Chandelles, *Le Journal amusant*, 13 October 1900, p.12.

<sup>55</sup> Qi Chen, ‘Aristocracy for the Common People: Chinese Commodities in Oscar Wilde’s Aestheticism’, *Victorian Network*, 1.1 (2009), 39–54 (p. 43).

<sup>56</sup> Phillip Winn, *Sexualités décadentes chez Jean Lorrain: le héros fin de sexe* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997), p. 165.

<sup>57</sup> See for instance philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who wrote in 1762 that ‘little girls love everything visual, mirrors, jewels, cloth’, quoted in Jennifer Jones, ‘Coquettes and Grisettes: Women Buying and Selling in Ancien Regime Paris,’ in *The Sex of Things*, ed. by De Grazia and Furlough, pp. 25–53 (p. 36).

<sup>58</sup> Jules de Premaray, ‘Théâtres’, *La Patrie*, 26 March 1855, pp. 1–2 (p. 1).

<sup>59</sup> See Joël H. Kaplan and Sheila Stowell, *Theatre and Fashion: Oscar Wilde to the Suffragettes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>60</sup> Jules Claretie, ‘La Vie de Paris dans le temps de la semaine passée’, *Comoedia illustré*, 1 November 1911, quoted in Pascale Goetschel, *Une autre histoire du théâtre, discours de crise et pratiques spectaculaires* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2020), p. 285.

<sup>61</sup> Louis Germont, *Loges d’actrices* (Paris: E. Dentu, 1889), p. 78.

<sup>62</sup> Amédée Achard, ‘Lettres parisiennes’, *L’Assemblée nationale*, 25 March 1855, p. 1–2. (p. 1).

<sup>63</sup> Péladan, p. 122.

<sup>64</sup> Mary Louise Roberts, ‘Gender, Consumption and Commodity Culture’, *The American Historical Review*, 103.3 (1998), 817–44 (p. 843).

## Decadent Historicism on Stage: Trans History and Alexander Sacharoff's Renaissance Dances

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In June 1910, Alexander Sacharoff made his debut performance at the Odeon in Munich. It was a small but well-attended event, mainly populated by the city's artists and creatives, some of whom had already seen versions of the performance at private gatherings. The dancer, who had first trained as an artist at the prestigious Académie Julien in Paris, stepped forward onto the stage, draped in a long piece of silk. Accompanied by the sounds of Palestrina and Orlando di Lasso, Sacharoff dropped the fabric and performed a series of dance studies in ecclesiastical robes inspired by the 'Meistern der italienischen Frührenaissance' [Masters of the Italian early Renaissance].<sup>1</sup> The performances caused uproar. Some observers were wildly enthusiastic about the show, standing up to clap and cheer.<sup>2</sup> Others were disgusted, describing the dancer as a 'leidenden Hermaphroditen' [ailing hermaphrodite].<sup>3</sup> For these latter spectators, Sacharoff epitomized a move towards degeneracy and decadence that signalled the slow decline of traditional, masculine values. A male dancer performing alone on stage was a rare sight. A male dancer in make-up using languid motions and dressed in highly ornamental costume raised problematic questions about the fixity of gender and racial order.

This article is interested in the uses of the Renaissance in Sacharoff's performances. Borrowing the phrase 'decadent historicism' from Joseph Bristow, I examine the role historical and art historical references played in the reception of Sacharoff's work.<sup>4</sup> Bristow describes decadent historicism as a concern with historical authority and an interest in 'perverse personas from the past', offering gender non-conforming writers the possibility of articulating queer and trans selfhoods.<sup>5</sup> This article looks at the Renaissance as a site of historical authority for one trans figure from the past, following the precedent of Dominic Janes' *Prefiguring Oscar Wilde* (2016) in

reasserting the significance of visual production in the fashioning of queer and trans identities, whilst moving beyond Janes' study in asserting their plurality of expression.<sup>6</sup> The article asks how and why the Italian Renaissance served as a historical 'locale' for the expression of genders outside of the binary paradigm.<sup>7</sup> If this has been partially established for decadent and aesthetic texts, most notably for Walter Pater's seminal work *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), the afterlife of this decadent reinvention of the Renaissance remains unclear.<sup>8</sup> I am interested in how the idea of a decadent Renaissance offered both critics and proponents of Sacharoff's performance a structuring framework around which to express their discontent and pleasure with the dancer, in ways that testify to the tacit acknowledgement of trans life in the period. In this, the article follows the work of Yvonne Ivory's monograph *The Homosexual Revival of Renaissance Style* (2009), Patricia Pulham's work on the use of artwork analogies to articulate non-conforming sexualities, and Will Fisher's article on the sexual politics of Renaissance historiography.<sup>9</sup> As Fisher explains in relation to constructions of queer identity in nineteenth-century Britain, 'allusions' to historic male homoeroticism provided a crucial means for the expression of non-normative sexualities. This article reconsiders Fisher's work on the making of the queer Renaissance through two re-adjustments: it shifts focus from sexuality to gender, and it places emphasis on the performing body as its own form of textual practice.

In 1913, three years after his debut, Sacharoff met the dancer Clotilde von Derp, a German-born aristocrat who had been favourably received into Munich's cultural circles a few years previously.<sup>10</sup> The pair began performing together and eventually married in 1919, probably to assuage the doubts of the conservative press in the United States, where they were due to start touring. From a critical perspective, the partnership was a success, since with the introduction of von Derp's dances – including a number of Renaissance-inspired performances such as *Frühlingspoem* [*Spring Poem*] (1917), *Danse Sainte* [*Holy Dance*] (1921), and *Danse de la Joie d'un Mystère du XV<sup>e</sup> siècle* [*Dance of Joy from a Fifteenth-Century Mystery*] (1936) – the hostility faced by Sacharoff in the pre-war years abated.<sup>11</sup> Most importantly here, the shock of Sacharoff's performances seems

to have diminished following his partnership with von Derp. Even if his performances still incited claims about gender transgression, these were largely limited to issues of style on stage, with little to say about the state of gender relations more broadly. Indeed, gender ambiguity even became an enjoyable conceit for many spectators, and the luxury of Sacharoff's performances appeared as merely eccentric, rather than threatening, in comparison with the minimal productions of leading practitioners like Mary Wigman and Rudolf Laban or the bombastic experiments of Weimar cabaret culture.<sup>12</sup>

This article builds on the work of performance scholars such as Patrizia Veroli, Claudia Jeschke, Rainer Stamm and Frank-Manuel Peter who have re-established the significance of Sacharoff and von Derp for the history of modern dance.<sup>13</sup> Despite their popularity in Germany and France, particularly in the interwar years during which they were championed by leading critics such as Émile Vuillermoz, with appearances in high fashion magazines such as *Vogue*, Sacharoff and von Derp quickly faded from view.<sup>14</sup> Lucia Ruprecht has pointed to the 'untimeliness of their aesthetic', using this anachronism to resituate Sacharoff's 'gestural drag' as a key part of his queer performance.<sup>15</sup> Ruprecht focuses on Sacharoff's Baroque performances while I direct attention to his understudied Renaissance works, though like Ruprecht I am similarly interested in uses of the past that troubled the gender order and created affective performances in which it appeared as if the past was embodied in the dancer. I am particularly interested in the forms of historical knowledge engendered by this embodiment, and how this might productively help us to think through questions of 'trans\*historicity' that have preoccupied trans studies.<sup>16</sup> The first half of the article is concerned with locating a Renaissance in criticism, suggesting that this Renaissance, a product of decadent thought from the end of the nineteenth century, offered a historical locale of non-conformity. The second half of the article moves to the murkier territory of historical experience, considering the trans-human possibilities generated by Sacharoff's historicism. I suggest that Sacharoff's work not only speaks to the archival body theorized by performance studies, but also offers an alternative paradigm for a more expansive understanding of historical

genders, that centres performance as an important site for negotiating gender. Ultimately, I argue, this underlines the centrality of material pasts and historical styles for transgendered embodiment in Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>17</sup>

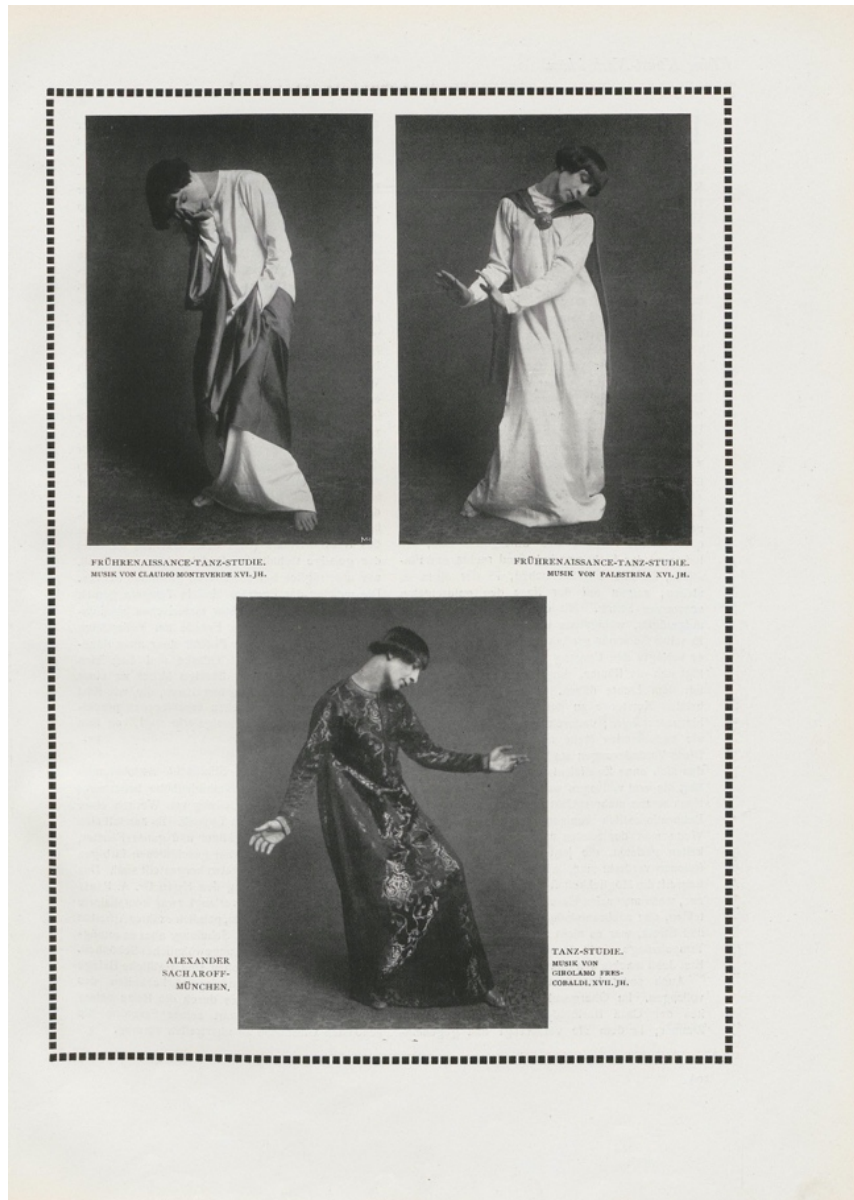


Fig. 1: Hans Hoffmann, *Frührenaissance-Tanz-Studie* [Early Renaissance Dance Study], photograph, 1912. From Gerhard Amunsen, 'Alexander Sacharoff und sein Tanz', *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration: illustr. Monatshefte für modern Malerei, Plastik, Architektur, Wohnungskultur u. künstlerisches Frauen-Arbeiten*, 30 (1912), 204–05 (p. 205). ©Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg.



Fig. 2: Gilbert René, *Alexandre Sakharoff dans Visione del Quattrocento* [*Alexander Sacharoff in 'Vision of the Fifteenth Century'*], photograph, from *Clotilde & Alexandre Sakharoff* (Brunoff: Paris, 1922).  
 ©Fonds médiathèque du Centre nationale de la danse.

### The Renaissance as historical locale

A cross-examination of programmes held at the Deutsches Tanzarchiv Köln [German Dance Archive Cologne], studio photographs, and contemporary descriptions, suggests that Sacharoff's Renaissance dances preceding his partnership with von Derp can be roughly split into two groups: *Tanzstudien nach den Meistern der italienischen Frührenaissance* [*Dance Studies after the Masters of the Early Italian Renaissance*], with music by Palestrina, Orlando di Lasso and Claudio Monteverdi, and *Tanz im Stile 'Renaissance'* [*Dance in the 'Renaissance' Style*] with music by Girolamo Frescobaldi (fig. 1).<sup>18</sup>

Both made use of heavy, highly brocaded costume, a feature that would be brought into sharper focus with the introduction of *Visione del Quattrocento* (fig. 2), which predominated in programmes from 1921.<sup>19</sup> As Jeschke has shown, however, in the case of these Renaissance dances, it is difficult to precisely map the photographs against specific titles and musical scores, with the net result that Sacharoff's Renaissance works will be considered together as a group.<sup>20</sup>



Fig. 3: Isadora Duncan in 'Primavera' ['Spring'], Paris, 1900, photographic negative. Jerome Robbins, Dance Collection, New York Public Library.

Sacharoff was not the only dancer to make use of Renaissance artworks in the early decades of the twentieth century. As Gabriele Brandstetter has shown, pre-eminent performers such as Isadora Duncan and Vaslav Nijinsky looked to the Florentine cantorias of Luca della Robbia, whilst Duncan also centred Botticelli's *Primavera* in a number of dances such as *Florentine Spring*

(1900) (fig. 3), and in writings including *Der Tanz der Zukunft* (1903), translated and popularized as *The Dance of the Future*.<sup>21</sup> Ann Daly has argued that Duncan relied on strategies of cultural and intellectual exclusion, such as the comparison with antiquity and the Renaissance, in order to distinguish her work from dancehall culture.<sup>22</sup> *The Dance* places the Italian Renaissance within a gestural genealogy that begins with the ancient Greeks, ending with the provocative claim that the dancer of the future would surpass all ancient dancers, ‘more beautiful than the Egyptian, than the Greek, than the early Italian’.<sup>23</sup> The Italian Renaissance, in other words, was suggested to be another antiquity, using Donatello’s *Cupid* as an example of the perfect interconnection between form and movement. Likewise, in Duncan’s dance school in Grünewald, Berlin, copies of Donatello and Luca della Robbia were placed alongside antique ones in the teaching rooms.<sup>24</sup> Sacharoff’s presentation of the Renaissance was evidently a far cry from Duncan’s, which had been carefully legitimated through a series of publications that allied the forms of the Renaissance with the emergent culture of *Lebensreform* [life reform]. Duncan placed stress on the natural and healthy body, using depictions of children and women to imagine a reproductive future of dance. This fertile Renaissance of cherubs and nymphs was nowhere to be found in Sacharoff’s dance, which instead raised questions of ornamentality and artifice for almost all spectators. Hans Brandenburg, one of Munich’s pre-eminent cultural critics, still remembered the shock of Sacharoff’s debut many decades later,

der Tänzer schritt langsam und feierlich in Gewändern der Frührenaissance, sogar in dem eines Mönches, der betend die Hände zusammen, einen Lilienstrauß im Arme [...] ich nur ein narzißhaftes Ephebentum und einen widerwärtigen Feminismus zu sehen meinte

[the dancer stepped forward slowly and majestically in fine clothing from the early Renaissance, and even in a monk’s habit with his hands folded together in prayer and a bouquet of lilies in his arms [...] I felt I was only witnessing the cavorting of a narcissistic ephebe and a disgusting show of femininity].<sup>25</sup>

Brandenburg’s commentary points to an interconnected anxiety between forms of the Renaissance and a feminization of the male body. This had been raised from the outset of Sacharoff’s career through Brandenburg’s important publication *Der moderne Tanz* [*Modern Dance*]



(1913), which ran into several editions. Comparing the ostensibly similar referential framework of Sacharoff and Duncan – by then established as the pioneer of modern dance – Brandenburg suggested that whilst Duncan’s reworking of antiquity and the Renaissance was nothing more than harmless intellectual dilettantism, Sacharoff’s dance was, revoltingly, a ‘Schauspieler für die Decadenz-Witterer!’ [spectacle for those sniffing out decadence!]<sup>26</sup> Although Sacharoff’s antique-inspired dances, such as that depicted on the cover of the Folkwang Museum programme, suggested an increasingly familiar athletic and muscular rhetoric, even the Greek works were tempered by the unexpected application of white powder across the arms, legs, and face.<sup>27</sup> The Renaissance dances took this ornamentation of the body one step further, obstructing the body underneath so entirely that, as one commentator observed, Sacharoff appeared to be ‘emprisonné’ [imprisoned] under the weight of the fabric.<sup>28</sup> Through his highly elaborate costuming, Sacharoff called attention to the surface of the body, thus inviting the troubling thought that the male body might be decorative, a status typically reserved for feminized and colonized subjects.<sup>29</sup> A number of commentators explained this through anti-Semitic reference to Sacharoff’s Jewish heritage, confusingly pointing to the presence of Roman Catholic ecclesiastical robes as proof of Jewish effeminacy and archaism, whilst also repeating a by-then common trope of decadent Catholicism.<sup>30</sup> Several observers turned to a longer tradition of decadent revisionism to articulate their discomfort, in particular through reference to the work of British artist Aubrey Beardsley. Alfred Lichtwark complained about ‘[Sacharoff], der mich lebhaft an die kranke Kunst Aubrey Beardsleys erinnerte’ [Sacharoff, who reminded me of an incantation of Aubrey Beardsley’s sick art], whilst the critic Rudolf von Delius suggested his dances were like ‘Rokoko-Illustrationen Beardsleys’ [Rococo illustrations by Beardsley].<sup>31</sup> The allusion to Beardsley is suggestive of the entanglement between decadence and the Renaissance by this period in Germany. Sacharoff’s page-boy haircut, predating the fashionable *Bubikopf* style of the 1920s, was more like a reincarnation of the Renaissance of Beardsley in images such as *Sandro Botticelli* (1893).<sup>32</sup> It was precisely this decadent iteration of the Renaissance that German theorists of cultural decline fixated on. In *Entartung*

[*Degeneration*] (1892), for instance, Max Nordau counted amongst the symptoms of degeneration women who wore their hair ‘nach der Mode des fünfzehnten Jahrhunderts, wie man sie bei Gentile Bellini, bei Botticelli, bei Mantegna an den Köpfen von Pagen und jungen Rittern dargestellt sieht’ [after the fashion of the fifteenth century, such as one sees depicted on the pages and young knights of Gentile Bellini, Botticelli and Mantegna].<sup>33</sup> In a similar manner documented in contemporary Russia by Sasha Dovzhyk, the reference to Beardsley at once formed a model of decadent masculinity at the same time as it rejected it.<sup>34</sup>

In 1922, Sacharoff wrote that he had learnt from two masters: The Louvre and Sarah Bernhardt.<sup>35</sup> The turn to the museum was a common feature of many accounts of modern dance.<sup>36</sup> The reference to Bernhardt, however, offers a new route through which to place Sacharoff’s gender variance, and one that highlights the centrality of material historicism in the fashioning of queer and trans selfhoods. Bernhardt, an icon of late nineteenth-century theatre, had achieved notoriety for her *en travesti* performances.<sup>37</sup> While this was already an established practice well before Bernhardt, it became something of a signature look for the actor not only through her celebrated appearances as Hamlet among others, but also as a sculptor in trousers posing in her studio. A number of Bernhardt’s *en travesti* performances took place within a Renaissance framework, such as the Pre-Raphaelite *Pelleas and Mélisande* (1905) or the sixteenth-century Florentine setting of *Lorenzaccio* (1896), in which Bernhardt appeared in brocaded doublets and, in the case of *Le Passant* (1869) and *Jeanne d’Arc* (1890), page-boy outfits. Bernhardt set the stage for a wave of cross-dressing through Renaissance pageantry, from Olive Custance in Britain through to Natalie Barney in France. In Germany, likewise, the page-boy was a popular *en travesti* role by the first decade of the twentieth century: Rita Sacchetto, for instance, with whom Sacharoff toured with after his debut in Munich, adopted Renaissance costume and page-boy outfits for her infamous *Tanzbilder*.<sup>38</sup> Critics, Brandenburg reported, found an inversion played out in their double dance, as ‘der weibliche Part männlich und der männliche weiblich wirken’ [the feminine part seemed masculine and the masculine feminine].<sup>39</sup>

Despite evidence that Renaissance cross-dressing imagined a new gender order on stage, Sacharoff's attraction to Bernhardt has been limply justified through his homosexuality. This error relies on a misreading of queer theory, documented by a number of trans scholars, which positions gender non-conformity as a simple descriptor of sexuality.<sup>40</sup> Consider, for instance, the claim by Veroli, whose pioneering work has otherwise uncovered much of the Sacharoff archive, that the dancer was drawn to Bernhardt 'for her introduction of a masculine, albeit effeminate, character [...] to which the homosexual Sacharoff felt a strong psychical and psychological attraction'.<sup>41</sup> Recent work has uncovered a more complex picture for the intricately entangled histories of gender and sexuality at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>42</sup> The German 'invention of homosexuality', for instance, is now understood to be bound up with attempts to articulate a more expansive gender order, with a clutch of related terms that enfolded both sexuality and gender identity such as *Dritte Geschlecht* [third sex] and *sexuelle Zwischenstufen* [intermediate sexual types].<sup>43</sup> Little attention, however, has been paid to performance's capacity to embody such types, beyond a queer (cis-normative) modernist paradigm.<sup>44</sup>

Sacharoff, in fact, had outlined his own theory of the sexes in dance in a commentary accompanying his second public performance:

Es scheint mir nämlich, dass für den Tanz als reine und eigene Kunst weder der reife Mann noch das Weib vorzüglich geeignet sind, sondern der Jüngling als ein Wesen, das noch zwischen den beiden steht und noch gleichsam die Möglichkeiten der beiden Geschlechter in sich vereinigt.

[It appears to me, namely, that for the dance to be a pure and individual art neither the mature man nor the woman is especially suited, but rather the adolescent as a being that still stands between both and combines in himself the possibility of both sexes].<sup>45</sup>

Sacharoff's description of dual sexuality nominally refers to antiquity in order to justify and historicize its claim, a move familiar both to sexual reform campaigners and dancers in the period.<sup>46</sup> Critics added their own terms to describe Sacharoff's gendered identity, such as 'Zweigeschlechtikeit' [roughly 'bisexuality', or what we would now call intersexuality] or 'Doppelgeschlechtsgefühle' [roughly 'feeling of double sex'].<sup>47</sup> In German-speaking nations,

bisexuality was a live topic, stemming from the twin discoveries in the nineteenth century of belated sexual determination in foetal development, and the prevalence of neuter sexes in a number of species.<sup>48</sup> Theories of the mind were likewise increasingly turning towards an acceptance of bisexuality in infantile development.<sup>49</sup> Otto Weininger famously promoted a theory of bisexuality in his widely read text *Geschlecht und Charakter* [*Sex and Character*] (1903), reworking previous sexological theories of the three sexes (male, female, intermediate) by suggesting that sex was a spectrum.<sup>50</sup> This was in turn echoed by Magnus Hirschfeld, who introduced the term ‘Transvestite’ in 1910 and published a text the same year on the subject.<sup>51</sup> Whilst I am not uncomplicatedly placing Sacharoff within a history of self-identified ‘transvestites’ in Wilhelmine Germany, I would like to enlarge discussion on the third sex and androgyne raised by Sacharoff’s texts and performances to include a consideration of trans embodiment, that is a gendered self at odds with its biopolitical setting, undoing the experiential and visible markers of normative sex.<sup>52</sup>

Sacharoff importantly formed his early dances as part of the *Neue Künstlervereinigung München* [New Artist’s Association, Munich], an avant-garde group consisting of artists including Wassily Kandinsky, Marianne Werefkin, and Alexej von Jawlensky. Sacharoff was used as a model for several portraits, which show the dancer with the whitened face and elongated features that many critics noted to be a particularly disconcerting aspect of the dancer’s appearance. Jawlensky’s portrait ambiguously genders Sacharoff’s body, curving at the breast, in a dress with contemporary ruching and neckline, whitened face and kohl rimmed eyes (fig. 4). Sacharoff, who Veroli reports as having ‘cross-dressed’ for parties in Schwabing, wore women’s dresses and posed as a woman in a number of Werefkin’s paintings, such as *Sacharoff in Frauenkleiden* [*Sacharoff in Women’s Clothes*] (1909) and *The Dancer Alexander Sacharoff* (1909) (fig. 5).<sup>53</sup> Ivory has shown how gender non-conformity was a lived reality for many artists and creatives in Munich at the time, and a number of publications explored the theme of the *Dritte Geschlecht* or the androgyne, such as Stanisław Przybyszewski’s *Androgyne* (1906) or Aimée Duc’s *Sind es Frauen? Roman Über das Dritte Geschlecht* [*Are they Women? A Novel Concerning the Third Sex*] (1901).<sup>54</sup> Sacharoff’s circle was generally interested

in the double-soul (a variation on bisexuality) and discussed contemporary ideas on the androgyne, a figure that has been often been relegated as a cipher for queer sexuality.<sup>55</sup> Werefkin, for instance, explained that ‘I am neither man nor woman – I am I.’<sup>56</sup> Sketches from this time suggest how closely Sacharoff matched Werefkin’s ideal type of the androgyne, as his face appears multiple times to stand in for *the* image of the androgyne.<sup>57</sup> Sacharoff’s performances embodied such alternate gender orders on stage. Stepping through a series of slow poses, sometimes holding flowers such as lilies, Sacharoff’s dance brought to life the dream of the androgyne painted by Werefkin.



Fig. 4: Alexej Jawlensky, *Portrait of the Dancer Alexander Sacharoff*, 1909. Oil on paper  
Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus und Kunstbau, Munich.



Fig. 5: Marianne von Werefkin, *The Dancer Alexander Sacharoff*, c. 1909. Tempera on board. Fondazione Werefkin, Museo Comunale d'Arte Moderna, Ascona, Switzerland.

The city was, however, politically and culturally dominated by conservative Roman Catholic factions in the grip of what John Fout has called ‘the male gender crisis’.<sup>58</sup> Edward Ross Dickinson has aptly shown the ramifications of this for performers.<sup>59</sup> Critics were certainly quick to link Sacharoff’s performances to a broader culture of gender upheaval. In 1910 the national newspaper *Münchener Neuste Nachrichten* melodramatically cried for its readers to ‘Furcht für uns’ [fear for us] as it decried Sacharoff’s dance – including its costuming ‘im Gewander der Frührenaissance’ [in garments of the early Renaissance] – to be symptomatic of a decaying culture and ‘Weltschmerz’ [world weariness] that threatened to undermine and even overthrow masculinity.<sup>60</sup> One writer wondered whether this ‘Dualismus’ [dualism] was ‘wie Mißtrauen gegen

das andere Geschlecht, ist es wie Furcht vor sich selber' [like a mistrust towards the other sex, is it like a fear towards oneself], whilst the *Münchener Neueste Nachrichten* grumbled again two years later that Sacharoff's performances provoked 'das Verlangen nach einer Kultur des männlichen Tanzes' [the longing for a culture of masculine dance].<sup>61</sup> The report even included the apparently authoritative observation of a female spectator that 'er tanzt hübsch wie eine Dame' [he dances prettily like a woman].<sup>62</sup> Sacharoff evidently provoked considerable anxiety in critics.<sup>63</sup> In many ways, their anxiety replays the crisis set out by Weininger in *Geschlecht und Charakter*, by pitting male against the female, and, in a number of instances, pure German culture against Jewish dissolution.<sup>64</sup> The agency afforded these pre-war performances is striking. Friedrich Huebner, in an especially overwrought text, worried in 1914 that Sacharoff 'öffnet die Schleusentore des Anarchischen' [opens the flood gates of anarchism] since he seemed to destroy the boundaries between the sexes in his dance, a move which implicated the viewer just as much as the performer.<sup>65</sup> For Huebner, performance was a confrontation: with oneself, with gender and all of its 'Maskierungen' [disguises].<sup>66</sup> As we shall see, this notion of confrontation would be revised through the artwork analogy, as Sacharoff's dances were seen to elicit an uncomfortable form of historical experience. Writing in the *Neue Hamburger Zeitung* in 1912, Anton Linder described that watching Sacharoff was like seeing the contents of the Musée Gustave Moreau come to life, a museum which contained an important collection of early Italian art in addition to works of symbolist artists.<sup>67</sup> Linder's comment, furthermore, points to the transhuman possibilities raised by Sacharoff's performances.

### **Historical experience**

The turn to the Renaissance was, in other words, instrumental in shaping a form of historical experience that many spectators experienced as an uncanny blurring of the human-artwork boundary. Rather than just posing as copies of Renaissance works, Sacharoff appeared to bring these artworks to life. Karl Wirth remembered a performance in 1911:

It was captivating to watch his appearance on stage, dressed in a long, flowing brocaded Renaissance costume, just standing here for a while in spellbound immobile repose, until his body, as if slowly awakening, would begin to move, to stir and turn, and his arms would lift and unfold in gestures of dance-like trance. It was like a conjuring magic spell that evoked sensations as if a statue of icon-like image of immaterial beauty had been awakened to life.<sup>68</sup>

Building on the work of Marion Thain, who has highlighted the significance of embodied cognition in decadent poetics, this section of the article maps the ways in which critics read Sacharoff's dancing body as a site of embodied history.<sup>69</sup> For the performances, costume was key to the transhistorical experience of the observer, as Sacharoff explained that 'ainsi le spectateur se trouve être immédiatement transporté dans l'atmosphère de chaque danse' [thus the spectator finds themselves to be immediately transported into the atmosphere of each dance].<sup>70</sup> In the same way, documented by Timothy Campbell, costuming offered historical engagement in the form of 'remnancy', a material hotline to the past that bypassed issues of authenticity and authority.<sup>71</sup> Even a hostile critic such as Brandenburg recognized this significance of costume, 'ein schweres barockes Brokatgewand ist ihm eine Welt für sich' [a heavy baroque brocaded robe is a world in itself].<sup>72</sup> This necessarily placed primacy on sensory feeling, as Sacharoff explained in the unpublished article, 'How I arrange my dances':

Now, I should like to say a few words concerning style and period. Learn all about the periods, see all the pictures you can and then – forget them and try and imagine you are living in one of these periods. If it be desired to depict a dance of a certain period, one should strive to create the right atmosphere of that epoch – the main object is not which steps you do, but that in the mind of your audience, you conjure up a living person of a particular age, with all its details, its mannerisms and even its thoughts.<sup>73</sup>

Sacharoff's performance practice, therefore, although informed by sustained periods of research, was on the surface less concerned with accurate historical reconstruction than with crafting the elusive impression of a period, in which the dancer acted as a kind of magician 'conjur[ing]' up a living version of the past. While critics struggled to place the precise monument or artwork evoked by Sacharoff's dance, sketchbooks and photographic reproductions of artworks held at the DTK and Lenbachhaus museum in Munich testify to his close engagement with individual works of



art.<sup>74</sup> Sacharoff's process instead ran close to aestheticist approaches to history in which, as Carolyn Williams has shown, the past could become legible through historicist intervention.<sup>75</sup>

This had important precedent in the kinaesthetic experiments conducted by Sacharoff during his early years in Munich, in which Kandinsky would paint a watercolour, the composer Thomas Hartmann (who composed several works for Sacharoff's dances) would translate the artwork into music, whilst Sacharoff finally converted the composition into a performance piece.<sup>76</sup> This transformation of substance suggests a model of appreciation akin to the form of embodied cognition described by Thain, which 'argues not only that mind is materially brain-based, but its functions take place across the whole body'.<sup>77</sup> Sacharoff expanded on this process of translation in an article late in his career, 'Réflexions sur la danse et la musique' [Reflections on dance and music], in which he pointed to two singular moments of historical experience that defined his subsequent practice.<sup>78</sup> The first moment was in front of Botticelli's *Primavera*, in which he lost control of his formal capacities and heard sound: 'Jusqu'à ce moment, je n'avais pas la moindre conscience que ce qui provoquait mon extase était de la peinture. Quelle étrange mélodie m'avait transpercé le cœur...?' [Until that moment, I didn't have the least idea that that which had caused my ecstasy was painting. What strange melody had transported my heart...?]<sup>79</sup> The second was on travelling to Rome and entering the Forum, when he had the experience of venturing into the ancient world: 'J'éprouvai une émotion qui ressemblait à un vertige [...]. Tout le parfum, tout le sens du monde ancien avaient pénétré dans mon cœur en un clin d'œil et comme un dard aiguisé' [I experienced an emotion which was like vertigo [...]. All the perfume, all the meaning of the ancient world had penetrated my heart in the blink of an eye, like a sharpened sting].<sup>80</sup> Sacharoff's encounter with artworks and monuments of the past took place at an affective level, reliant on the communication of non-verbal knowledge through sensorial means.<sup>81</sup> This primacy placed on the individual and their capacity for determining the form and significance of this knowledge has clear affinities to the work of trans scholarship.<sup>82</sup> Nevertheless, it also disturbingly relied on the presumption that non-white subjects were unconsciously more generative of historical knowledge

than their white counterparts, a point clearly demonstrated in Sacharoff's description of 'the ways of women in the East [...] simple steps and movements which however reveal the culture of thousands of years'.<sup>83</sup> Harnessed correctly by the dancer, individual movements could distil a historical period into single poses, as the dancer slowly moved in the 'dance-like trance' as suggested by Wirth.<sup>84</sup>

Not all spectators were enthusiastic, however. Linder, for instance, after listing all the artworks evoked by Sacharoff's performances – 'Giotto, Cimabue, Taddeo, Gaddi, Piero della Francesca, Perugino, Francia, Bianchi [...] Jan van Eyck, Roger van der Weyden, Hugo van der Goes' – concluded that his dance was 'nur wie Museumskunst [...] Sie [...] läßt kalt' [mere museum art [...] it leaves one cold].<sup>85</sup> Nevertheless, his description of Sacharoff's performance in the *Curiohause* made such extensive use of the artwork analogy it is hard to take his claim at face value:

Man sah einen terrakotabraunen Orpheus [...] einen pompejanisch-roten Dionysospriester [...]. Ein bleichgeschminktes Gesichtsoval [...] ließ an die Jünglingsköpfe aus Athen (Akropolis) oder aus Herculaneum denken. Im ersten Augenblick fiel mir der Hermaphrodit des Louvremuseums ein. Diese Impression hielt als Gesamt-Eindruck an.

[One saw a terracotta Orpheus [...] a Pompeian-red priest of Dionysus [...]. A pale made up oval face [...] makes one think of the young boys' heads from Athens or from Herculaneum. In the first moment I thought of the Hermaphrodite of the Louvre Museum. This impression remained the total impression].<sup>86</sup>

As mistrustful as Linder is of this 'mageren Jünglinge' [emaciated young man], the analogies suggest an appreciation, even if a furtive one, of the dancer.<sup>87</sup> The same year Thomas Mann published *Der Tod in Venedig* [*Death in Venice*] (1912) in which the illicit beauty of the youthful Tadzio is likewise referenced in terms between nature and art, as he 'erinnerte an griechische Bildwerke aus edelster Zeit' [reminded one of Greek artworks from the most noble time].<sup>88</sup> A similar logic is apparent in Karl Osthaus' praise of Sacharoff the year previously, when 'sein schönes Profil von scharf orientalischem Schnitt, gleich dem eines praxitelischen Epheben' [his beautiful profile of sharply oriental features, seems like that of an Ephebe of Praxiteles].<sup>89</sup> As Rainer Stamm has shown, Osthaus revered Sacharoff as if a living artwork, or, as Karl Wirth described it, 'lebendige Plastik' [living sculpture].<sup>90</sup> As founder of the Museum Folkwang in Hagen,

Osthaus' perception of Sacharoff in particular highlights the found affinities between artworks and dancers in the period.

Antiquity, like the Renaissance, could also be invoked to code gender non-conformity, here through the reference to the 'Hermaphrodite' in Lindner's description and the 'Ephebe of Praxiteles' by Osthaus.<sup>91</sup> Following Sacharoff's partnership with von Derp, many felt that this hermaphroditism, or bisexuality, had found embodied reality, summed up in the suggestion that 'these dancers combine the beauty of the male body with inconspicuous and simple female characteristics'.<sup>92</sup> Despite programmes consisting largely of separate dances, critics increasingly presented the dancers as an indissoluble union following their marriage in 1919; French newspapers in particular stressed the poetics of this, with claims such as 'ces deux êtres s'incorporent alors en un seul' [these two beings then blend into one], turning Sacharoff's theory of embodiment into an aesthetic problem ('phénomène d'hermaphroditisme esthétique' [phenomenon of aesthetic hermaphroditism]).<sup>93</sup> Many additionally felt that von Derp suffered from the partnership, describing in racialized terms how her natural grace had been 'contaminé' [contaminated] by the 'préciosité' [preciousness] of Sacharoff.<sup>94</sup> Whilst von Derp's cross-dressing was understood to be part of her artistic conceit, merely an 'élégant travesti' [elegant travesty] in the words of Vuillermoz, Sacharoff's cross-dressing was not just performative masquerade for these critics, since he 'n'est jamais homme tout à fait' [is never entirely a man].<sup>95</sup> Such comments, despite their pejorative intentions, signal an implicit recognition of transgendered embodiment on and beyond the stage.

Ruprecht has shown how accusations of effeminacy and preciousness again came to the fore with the introduction of Sacharoff's Baroque dances, *Pavane Royale* (also known as *Au Temps du Grand Siècle*) in 1919 (fig. 6).<sup>96</sup> She points to the sense of untimeliness raised by a number of critics, or more particularly their discomfort at seeing the past rendered material in the historicizing performance: 'he came to Berlin to show us that for being fully up-to-date, we are far too little decadent and hermaphrodite'.<sup>97</sup> Critics such as Rudolf von Delius and Brandenburg stressed

Sacharoff's subjective interpretation of the period, the former claiming a dandy-like irony, the latter that the Baroque was 'niemals Historie' [never history] for the performer, but something experienced or lived.<sup>98</sup> These descriptions run close to the discussions of *Stimmung* (loosely translated as atmosphere) popular in Munich's phenomenological circles at the time.<sup>99</sup> More particularly, they suggest a form of historical intervention based on an empathetic engagement with the past; or, as Ruprecht describes it, a re-enactment rather than reconstruction of the Baroque.



Fig. 6: Alexander Sacharoff, 'Pavane Royale/Au Temps du Grand Siècle', photograph, n.d., from the music scrapbook of Sophie Braslau.  
Jerome Robbins, Dance Collection, New York Public Library.

German and French critics certainly suggested that watching Sacharoff on stage was like witnessing the recovery of a past age. In 1924 Edmond Locard explained this in relation to both *Visione del Quattrocento* and *Au Temps du Grand Roi*, ‘il tend à exprimer par des attitudes le sens général d’une époque ou d’une psychologie’ [by these poses, he seeks to express the general sense of an epoch or of a psychology].<sup>100</sup> Sacharoff appeared to be able to evoke the spirit of the past with tangible reality, as in *Les Visions de la Renaissance* ‘où le grand style de Bach est rendu presque visible par ces marches’ [where the grand style of Bach is made almost visible by these steps].<sup>101</sup> Another critic, accompanying an image of Sacharoff in ecclesiastical costuming, likewise characterized the dance as ‘ein lebensvolle Bild der Renaissance’ [an animated image of the Renaissance].<sup>102</sup> In a pamphlet dating from 1926, one author wrote that the appearance of historical veracity was so convincing that the couple even appeared to break the boundary between human and artwork:

Ils ressemblent ainsi à des figures accomplies, détachées d’un tableau, d’une fresque [...]. Voici passer un bel ange, une Madone, des jeunes filles enlacées sur un fond d’église gothique, de palais florentins ou de bois d’oranges; voici la Niké de Délos, le page du XV<sup>me</sup> siècle.

[They thus resemble finished works, detached from a tableau, from a fresco, from a bas-relief [...]. Here passes a beautiful angel, a Madonna, entwined girls from the back of a gothic church, Florentine palaces or a wood of orange trees; here is the Nike of Delos, the page from the fifteenth century].<sup>103</sup>

Sacharoff, it seemed, not only troubled the boundaries between sexes, but overstepped the human-object boundary, and even questioned the status of singular personhood through his partnership with von Derp. Such critics engaged with Sacharoff’s performances on an affective level, as if they could feel slippages in time and selfhood as they watched Sacharoff on stage. The artwork comparison offered a stable ground on which to articulate this sensation, whether it be a troubling transgression of established gender norms or a pleasurable surpassing of the boundaries of the human. Historicity, in this sense, was conceived as experiential and corporeal. Decadent historicism as conceived by Sacharoff and his critics opened up a capacity of the body to be an archive, drawing the viewer into a frequently disconcerting confrontation with the living past.

This archival body not only helps us to address the strange histories of embodied knowledge present in performance practice at the beginning of the twentieth century but offers a route through which to situate trans histories in relation to historical style. The example of Sacharoff helps us to recognize the historical contingency of trans expression, allowing us to historicize the forms of its expression at the same time as pointing to its existence beyond a legal, medical or psychiatric framework. Sacharoff did not turn to these latter institutions for self-identity; he found instead personal and social recognition through the cultural imaginary of the Renaissance, a locale heavy with the cultural accretion of previous decades. This decadent Renaissance offered both Sacharoff and his critics a route through which to articulate an embodied and situated knowledge of gender beyond the binary. By paying attention to the forms of self-knowledge engendered in performance, we can conceptualize a form of historical personhood centred around an individual's capacity to self-determine, whilst remaining aware of its necessary conjunction with historically situated forms of cultural legibility. Sacharoff therefore offers a starting point through which to uncover trans histories of the decadent Renaissance.

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<sup>1</sup> F.[riedrich] M.[öhl], 'Tanzabend Alexander Sacharoff', *Münchener Neueste Nachrichten*, 4 June 1910, p. 2, Deutsches Tanzarchiv (DTK)-TIS-83; N. N., 'Tanzabend der Sacharoff', *Münchener Zeitung*, 6 June 1910, p. 4, DTK-TIS-83. See also account by Hans Brandenburg, *Der Moderne Tanz* (Munich: Georg Müller, 1921), p. 124. In addition to the Renaissance dances, Sacharoff danced a set of antique works to the compositions of Thomas von Hartmann. My thanks to the archivists at the DTK, the Lenbachhaus, the New York Public Library, and the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF) for their assistance in navigating the collections. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

<sup>2</sup> For instance, in a diary entry on 21 June 1910: 'Abends fahren wir zum Tanzabend von Alexander Sacharoff [...] Das ist ja die Personifikation von Kunst!' [In the evening we went to the dance recital of Alexander Sacharoff [...] Truly the personification of art!]. Grete Gulbransson, *Der grüne Vogel des Äthers. Tagebücher*, vol. 1, ed. by Ulrike Lang, (Frankfurt am Main: Stroemfeld, 1998), p. 307. See also the reactions in Hans Brandenburg, *München leuchtete: Jugenderinnerungen* (Munich: Herbert Neuner, 1953), p. 433.

<sup>3</sup> F. M., 'Tanzabend', p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Bristow, 'Decadent Historicism', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 3.1 (2020), 1–27.

<sup>5</sup> Bristow, p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Dominic Janes, *Prefiguring Oscar Wilde: Queer Fashioning and British Caricature, 1750-1900* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016). See also Dustin Friedman, *Before Queer Theory: Victorian Aestheticism and the Self* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2019), esp. p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> For use of 'locale' see Janes, p. 93, p. 208, and pp. 223–24.

<sup>8</sup> For the German-specific notion of 'Renaissancismus' see Gerd Uekermann, *Renaissancismus und Fin-de-Siècle* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1985), especially pp. 3–41 and pp. 127–73. On Pater see Hilary Fraser, 'British Decadence and Renaissance Italy', in *Decadence: A Literary History*, ed. by Alex Murray (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 47–64. For an example on the afterlife of decadence see Kristin Mahoney, *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> Yvonne Ivory, *The Homosexual Revival of Renaissance Style, 1850-1930* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Patricia Pulham, *The Sculptural Body in Victorian Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020); and Will Fisher, 'The Sexual Politics of Victorian Historiographical Writing about the "Renaissance"', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 14.1 (2008), 41–67.

<sup>10</sup> For an overview of their career together, see Nina Hümpfel, 'Die Sacharoffs', in *Ausdruckstanz: Eine mitteleuropäische Bewegung der ersten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts*, ed. by Gunhild Oberzaucher-Schüller (Wilhelmshaven: Florian Noetzel Verlag, 1992), pp. 377–82.

<sup>11</sup> An unpublished manuscript makes it clear that Sacharoff's choreography for von Derp's spring dance was based on Botticelli's treatment of the same subject: as in 'Alexander Sacharoff: Clotilde', in *Die Sacharoffs: Zwei Tänzer aus dem Umkreis des Blauen Reiters*, ed. by Frank-Manuel Peter and Rainer Stamm (Cologne: Wienand, 2002), pp. 153–55 (p. 153).

<sup>12</sup> For an overview of development of *Ausdruckstanz*, see *Jeder Mensch ist ein Tänzer: Ausdruckstanz in Deutschland zwischen 1900 und 1945*, ed. by Hedwig Müller and Patricia Stöckmann (Giessen: Anabas, 1993). On Weimar dance culture see Kate Elswit, *Watching Weimar Dance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), and Yvonne Hardt, *Politische Körper: Ausdruckstanz, Choreographien des Protests und die Arbeiterkulturbewegung in der Weimarer Republik* (Münster: Lit, 2004).

<sup>13</sup> See Patrizia Veroli, *Clotilde e Alexandre Sakharoff, un mito della danza fra teatro e avanguardie artistiche* (Bologna: Bora, 1991); Claudia Jeschke, 'Anverwandlungen und Übergänge – Die Sacharoffs', in *Kaleidoskope des Tanzes. Tanz & Archiv: Forschungsreisen* (Munich: epodium, 2017), pp. 58–75; and *Die Sacharoffs*, ed. by Peter and Stamm.

<sup>14</sup> For instance, Émile Vuillermoz, *Clotilde et Alexandre Sakharoff* (Lausanne: Éditions Centrales, 1933), and J. L., 'Clotilde et Alexandre Sakharoff viennent de donner à Paris avec succès', *Vogue*, 1 March 1928, p. 27.

<sup>15</sup> Lucia Ruprecht, 'Gestural Drag', in *Gestural Imaginaries: Dance and Cultural Theory in the Early Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 169–92. See also the concept of temporal drag in Elisabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), esp. pp. 61–65.

<sup>16</sup> See the special issue of *Transgender Studies Quarterly* on this subject, which uses the asterix to hinge 'trans' and 'historicity' together at the same time as opening a space for its interrogation: in particular Leah DeVun and Zeb Tortici, 'Trans, Time and History' and M. W. Bychowski et al., 'Trans\*historicités: A Roundtable Discussion', *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 5 (2018), 518–39 and 658–85.

<sup>17</sup> See especially Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003) and Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Re-enactment* (London: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>18</sup> On 24 March 1911, Sacharoff performed 'Zwei Tanzstudien nach den Meistern der italienischen Frührenaissance. Musik von Palestrina u. Orlando di Lasso' and 'Tanzstudie nach den Meistern der italienischen Frührenaissance. Musik von Cl. Monteverdi' at Museum Folkwang, Haagen. The next year, on 26 March 1912, he performed 'Drei Tanzstudien nach dem Meistern der Italienischen Frührenaissance. Palestrina, Orlando di Lasso, Cl. Monteverdi' and 'Tanz im Stile "Renaissance". Frescobaldi' at the same location. Deutsches Tanzarchiv DTK-TIS-83.

<sup>19</sup> This had appeared in various forms from the outset of Sacharoff's career. A 1913 photograph by the Gilbert René studio depicts Sacharoff in 'Vision aus dem 15. Jahrhundert': see Stamm, 'Alexander Sacharoff - Bildende Kunst und Tanz', in *Die Sacharoffs*, ed. by Peter and Stamm, pp. 11–45 (pp. 42–43). Stamm, 'Alexander Sacharoff - Bildende Kunst und Tanz', pp. 42–43. In 1917, 'Vision de Renaissance' appears on a programme for a performance in Basel, then as 'Vision von der Renaissance' in 1919 for another performance in Basel, then in Paris in 1921 finally as 'Visione del Quattrocento', appearing in this form regularly until the 1930s.

<sup>20</sup> Jeschke and Rainer Krenstetter, 'Intermedialitäten. Alexander Sacharoff in Bild und Bewegung', in *Tanzfotografie: Historiografische Reflexionen der Moderne*, ed. by Tessa Jahn, Eike Wittrock and Isa Wortelkamp (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2016), pp. 124–25. This is reflected in the Sacharoffs' writings, for instance Clotilde's grouping of the sacred dances: 'il y a ainsi des danse saintes [...] *La Mort de Saint Sébastien*, dans *Visione del Quattrocento*': Clotilde von Derp, 'Ce que la danse est pour nous' in *Conferencia*, 33.16 (1938), 220. Deutsches Tanzarchiv DTK-TIS-83.

<sup>21</sup> Isadora Duncan, *Der Tanz der Zukunft* (Leipzig: Eugen Diederichs, 1903), and Gabriele Brandstetter, 'Dance in the Museum', in *Poetics of Dance: Body, Image, and Space in the Historical Avant-Garde*, trans. by Elena Polzer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 32–65. On Botticelli in Duncan, see Ann Daly, *Done into Dance: Isadora Duncan in America* (Wesleyan ed. Middletown Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), pp. 92–96.

<sup>22</sup> Daly, 'Isadora Duncan and the Distinction of Dance', *American Studies*, 35.1 (1994), 5–23; and Daly, 'Isadora Duncan's Dance Theory', *Dance Research Journal*, 26.2 (1994), 24–31.

<sup>23</sup> Isadora Duncan, *The Dance* [1903] (Berkeley: University of California, 1989), p. 21.

<sup>24</sup> Duncan, *My Life* [1927] (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2013), pp. 150–51. See also *Isadora & Elizabeth Duncan in Deutschland*, ed. by Frank-Manuel Peter (Cologne: Wienand, 2000).

<sup>25</sup> Brandenburg, *München leuchtete*, p. 433; as cited and translated in Stamm, 'Alexander Sacharoff - Bildende Kunst und Tanz', p. 28.

<sup>26</sup> Brandenburg, *Der moderne Tanz* (Munich, 1913), <[https://www.sk-kultur.de/tanz/sacharoff/seiten/text\\_3.html](https://www.sk-kultur.de/tanz/sacharoff/seiten/text_3.html)> [accessed 14 December 2021]. This is repeated in later revised editions, such as Brandenburg, *Der moderne Tanz* (Munich: Georg Müller, 1921), p. 150.

<sup>27</sup> Brandenburg, *Der moderne Tanz*, p. 150.

- <sup>28</sup> '[E]mprisonné dans sa robe trop lourde' [imprisoned in his overly heavily robe]. Vuillemoz, *Clotilde et Alexandre Sakharoff*, p. 60.
- <sup>29</sup> See especially Sander Gilman, 'Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Nineteenth Century Art, Medicine, and Literature', *Critical Inquiry*, 12.1 (1985), 204–42, and Robin Mitchell, *Vénus Noire: Black Women and Colonial Fantasies in Nineteenth-Century France* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2020).
- <sup>30</sup> On anti-Semitism in reception of Sacharoff, particularly prevalent in the criticism of Brandenburg, see Ross Dickinson, 'Blood and Make-Believe: Race, Identity and Performance', *Dancing in the Blood: Modern Dance and European Culture on the Eve of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), <<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108164573>> [accessed 14 December 2021]. On the idea of Jewish decadence see Jonathan Freedman, *The Jewish Decadence: Jews and the Aesthetics of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021). On the idea of Catholic decadence see Martin Lockerd, *Decadent Catholicism and the Making of Modernism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021).
- <sup>31</sup> Alfred Lichtwark, letter dated 24 May 1913, as cited in Stamm, 'Alexander Sacharoff - Bildende Kunst und Tanz', p. 35; Rudolf von Delius, 'Alexander Sacharoff (1913)', in *Mary Wigman* (Dresden: Reissner, 1925), p. 16.
- <sup>32</sup> On this see Jeremy Melius, 'Art History and the Invention of Botticelli' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of California, 2010), pp. 143–46.
- <sup>33</sup> Max Nordau, *Entartung* [1892] (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2013), p. 19. See Hans-Peter Söder, 'Disease and Health as Contexts of Modernity: Max Nordau as a Critic of fin-de-siècle Modernism', *German Studies Review*, 14.3 (1991), 473–87, and Florian Krobb, 'Die Kunst der Väter tödtet das Leben der Enkel': Decadence and Crisis in Fin-de-Siècle German and Austrian Discourse', *New Literary History*, 35.4 (2004), 547–62.
- <sup>34</sup> Sasha Dovzhyk, 'Beardsley Men in Early Twentieth-Century Russia: Modernising Decadent Masculinity', *Modernist Cultures*, 16.2 (2021), 191–215.
- <sup>35</sup> 'Sarah Bernhardt et le Musée Louvre ont été mes premier maîtres'. Alexander Sacharoff, 'Mes Maîtres', in *Clotilde et Alexandre Sakharoff* (Paris: Brunoff, 1922), n.p.
- <sup>36</sup> This was an important feature of Duncan's career from the outset: 'To dance as I dance [...] you must have studied the art galleries of the Old World': as quoted in 'Philosophy in the Dance', *New York Times*, 17 April 1898, p. 14. For a discussion of the significance of museal dance see Brandstetter, *Poetics of Dance*, pp. 32–87.
- <sup>37</sup> Lenard R. Berlanstein, 'Breeches and Breaches: Cross-Dress Theater and the Culture of Gender Ambiguity in Modern France', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 38.2 (1996), 338–68, and Carol Ockman, 'Was She Magnificent?', in *Sarah Bernhardt: The Art of High Drama*, ed. by Ockman and Kenneth E. Silver (London: Yale University Press, 2005), pp. 23–74 (pp. 39–51).
- <sup>38</sup> 'Rita Sacchetto und Alexander Sacharoff', *Allgemeine Zeitung*, 27 June 1912, p. 553. On Sacchetto see Mary Simonson, 'Dancing Pictures: Rita Sacchetto's *Tanz-Bilder*' in *Body Knowledge: Performance, Intermediality, and American Entertainment at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 106–33.
- <sup>39</sup> Brandenburg, *Der moderne Tanz*, pp. 147–48.
- <sup>40</sup> On this, see Susan Stryker, 'Transgender Studies: Queer Theory's Evil Twin', *GLQ*, 10.2 (2004), 212–15 and Caél M. Keegan, 'Against Queer Theory', *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 7.3 (2020), 349–43.
- <sup>41</sup> Patrizia Veroli, 'Alexander Sacharoff as Symbolist Dancer', *Experiment*, 2.1 (1996), 48–49.
- <sup>42</sup> Heike Bauer, for instance, has charted the 'making of a gendered sexual theory'. Heike Bauer, 'Theorizing Female Inversion: Sexology, Discipline and Gender at the Fin de Siècle', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 18.1 (2009), 84–102 (p. 85). See also Emily Rutherford's summary of this turn in 'Review of Female Husbands: A Trans History, by Jen Manion', *The English Historical Review* (2021), <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ehr/ceab221>> [accessed 14 December 2021].
- <sup>43</sup> See Robert Beachy, 'The German Invention of Homosexuality', *The Journal of Modern History*, 82.4 (2010), 801–38; Gert Hekma, 'A Female Soul in a Male Body: Sexual Inversion as Gender Inversion in Nineteenth-Century Sexology', in *Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History* (New York: Zone Books, 2005), pp. 213–40; and Katie Sutton, *The Masculine Woman in Weimar Germany* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011).
- <sup>44</sup> On the latter, see especially Penny Farfan, *Performing Queer Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
- <sup>45</sup> Alexander Sacharoff, 'Bemerkungen über den Tanz', Concert Programme, Munich, 21 June 1910, <[https://www.sk-kultur.de/tanz/sacharoff/seiten/text\\_1.html](https://www.sk-kultur.de/tanz/sacharoff/seiten/text_1.html)> [accessed 14 December 2021].
- <sup>46</sup> On sexual reformers turning to antiquity see for instance Havelock Ellis and J. A. Symonds, *Conträre Geschlechtsgefühl* (Leipzig: Georg H. Wigand Verlag, 1896). On antiquity and dance see *The Ancient Dancer in the Modern World: Responses to Greek and Roman Dance*, ed. by Fiona Macintosh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), and Samuel Dorf, *Performing Antiquity: Ancient Greek Music and Dance from Paris to Delphi* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).
- <sup>47</sup> Hans Brandenburg, 'Alexander Sacharoff (1913)', <[https://www.sk-kultur.de/tanz/sacharoff/seiten/text\\_3.html](https://www.sk-kultur.de/tanz/sacharoff/seiten/text_3.html)> [accessed 14 December 2021] and Francis Markus Huebner, 'Alexander Sacharoff', *Phoebus: Monatschrift für Ästhetik und Kritik des Theaters*, 1.3 (1914), 101–04, <[https://www.sk-kultur.de/tanz/sacharoff/seiten/text\\_4.html](https://www.sk-kultur.de/tanz/sacharoff/seiten/text_4.html)> [accessed 14 December 2021]. See Jules Gill-Peterson's discussion of the 'slippery diagnostic matrix that attempted to manage the relations that linked homosexuality, sexual inversion,



hermaphroditism, and transvestism'. Jules Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), p. 60.

<sup>48</sup> See Ross Brooks, 'Transforming Sexuality: The Medical Sources of Karl Heinrich Ulrichs (1825-95) and the Origins of the Theory of Bisexuality', *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, 67.2 (2012), 176–216.

<sup>49</sup> Most famously Sigmund Freud's description of primary bisexuality in *Three Essays on Sexuality* (1905): see Esther Rapoport, 'Bisexuality in Psychoanalytic Theory: Interpreting the Resistance', *Journal of Bisexuality*, 9.3-4 (2009), 279–95. Sutton has shown that the 'transvestite case' emerged as a central site for the competing scientific legitimation of psychoanalysis and sexology in this period. Katie Sutton, 'The Case of the Transvestite', *Sex Between Body and Mind: Psychoanalysis and Sexology in the German-speaking World, 1890s-1930s* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019), pp. 173-201.

<sup>50</sup> Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 22–26.

<sup>51</sup> Magnus Hirschfeld, *Die Transvestiten: eine Untersuchung über den erotischen Verkleidungstrieb mit umfangreichem casuistischen und historischen Material* (1910). See also Hirschfeld's anonymously published text *Was Soll das Volk vom dritten Geschlecht wissen?* (1901) as well as his *Berlins Dritte Geschlecht* (1904). On the early history of trans legal and social recognition in Germany see Sutton, "'We too deserve a place in the sun': The Politics of Transvestite Identity in Weimar Germany", *German Studies Review*, 35.2 (2012), 335–54.

<sup>52</sup> The term 'embodiment' holds a central place in trans studies. See especially Gayle Salamon, *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); Hil Malatino, 'Nomad Science', *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 1.1-2 (2014), 138–40; and Eliza Steinbock, *Shimmering Images: Trans Cinema, Embodiment, and the Aesthetics of Change* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

<sup>53</sup> Veroli, 'Mirror and the Hieroglyph', in *Die Sacharoffs*, ed. by Peter and Stamm, pp. 169–217 (p. 190); 'als Modell saß ihm oft der Tänzer Sacharoff, den er zu diesem Zweck als Frau und Spanierin mit Fächer und Mantilla verkleidete' [the dancer Sacharoff sat often for him as a model, dressed for this purpose as a woman and as a Spanish girl with fans and mantilla]. Elisabeth Erdmann-Macke, *Erinnerungen an August Macke* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1987), pp. 140–41.

<sup>54</sup> Yvonne Ivory, 'Gertrud Eysoldt and the Persistence of Decadence on the German Avant-Garde Stage', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 2.1 (2019), 16–38. On the latter text's reworking of German sexological categories, see Claudia Breger, 'Feminine Masculinities: Scientific and Literary Representations of "Female Inversion" at the Turn of the Twentieth Century', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 14.1-2 (2005), 76–106.

<sup>55</sup> See Marina Dmitrieva, 'Transcending Gender: Cross-Dressing as a Performative Practice of Women Artists of the Avant-Garde', in *Marianne Werefkin and the Women Artists in Her Circle*, ed. by Tanja Malycheva and Isabel Wünsche (Boston: Brill, 2016), pp. 123–36; and Natalia Budanova, 'Utopian Sex: the metamorphosis of androgynous imagery in Russian art of the pre- and post-revolutionary period', in *Utopian Reality: Reconstructing Culture in Revolutionary Russia and Beyond*, ed. by Christina Lodder, Maria Kokkri and Maria Mileeva (Brill: Leiden, 2013), pp. 25–41.

<sup>56</sup> As in Shulamith Behr, 'Performing the Wom/Man: The "Interplay" between Marianne Werefkin and Else Lasker-Schüler', in *Marianne Werefkin and the Women Artists in Her Circle*, ed. by Malycheva and Wünsche, pp. 92–105 (p. 99). See also Behr, 'The Dynamics of Gendered and Artistic Identity and Creativity', in *German Expressionism: Der Blaue Reiter and its Legacies*, ed. by Dorothy Price (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021), pp. 34–50 (pp. 39–40).

<sup>57</sup> See reproduction of sketches in Behr, 'Veiling Venus: Gender and Painterly Abstraction in Early German Modernism', in *Manifestations of Venus: Art and Sexuality*, ed. by Caroline Arscott and Katie Scott (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 126–42 (pp. 138–41).

<sup>58</sup> John C. Fout, 'Sexual Politics in Wilhelmine Germany: The Male Gender Crisis, Moral Purity, and Homophobia', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 2.3 (1992), 388–421. See also Peter Jalevich, 'Munich as Cultural Center: Politics and the Arts', in *Kandinsky in Munich, 1896-1944* (New York: Solomon Guggenheim Foundation, 1982), pp. 17–26.

<sup>59</sup> Edward Ross Dickinson, "'Must we dance naked?": Art, Beauty, and Law in Munich and Paris, 1911–1913', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 20.1 (2011), 95–131.

<sup>60</sup> A. M., 'Tanzabend Alexander Sacharoff', *Münchener Neuste Nachrichten*, 4 June 2010, p. 2.

<sup>61</sup> Huebner, 'Alexander Sacharoff', <[https://www.sk-kultur.de/tanz/sacharoff/seiten/text\\_4.html](https://www.sk-kultur.de/tanz/sacharoff/seiten/text_4.html)> [accessed 14 December 2021]; *Münchener Neuste Nachrichten*, 2 July 1912. Deutsches Tanzarchiv DTK-TIS-83.

<sup>62</sup> Huebner, 'Alexander Sacharoff'.

<sup>63</sup> Many had never even seen a male solo dancer before: see Ramsay Burt, *The Male Dancer: Bodies, Spectacle and Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1995), esp. pp. 11–15.

<sup>64</sup> On this see Christine Achinger, 'Allegories of Destruction: "Woman" and "the Jew" in Otto Weininger's *Sex and Character*', *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory*, 88.2 (2013), 121–49.

<sup>65</sup> Huebner, 'Alexander Sacharoff'.

<sup>66</sup> 'Tanzaufritte besuchen heißt, sich dem Geschlecht gegenüberzustellen' [Attending dance performances means confronting gender]. Huebner, 'Alexander Sacharoff'.

<sup>67</sup> Anton Linder, 'Der tanzende Russe', *Neue Hamburger Zeitung*, 1 April 1912, p. 1.

<sup>68</sup> Karl Wirth, *Autobiography of Ideas*, ed. by Roland Jaeger (Berlin, 1997), pp. 48–49, as cited and translated in Stamm, p. 32.

- <sup>69</sup> Marion Thain, 'Arthur Symons's Impressionist Epistemology: Decadence and Embodied Cognition', *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 63.1 (2020), 48–72.
- <sup>70</sup> Sacharoff, 'Quelques mots sur le costume', Concert Programme, Lausanne, 1926, p. 1. Deutsches Tanzarchiv DTK-TIS-83.
- <sup>71</sup> Timothy Campbell, *Historical Style: Fashion and the New Mode of History 1740-1830* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), p. 281.
- <sup>72</sup> Brandenburg, *Der Moderne Tanz*, pp. 151–52.
- <sup>73</sup> Sacharoff, 'How I arrange my dances', undated manuscript, after 1920s, p. 4. Deutsches Tanzarchiv DTK-TIS.83.
- <sup>74</sup> See, for instance, reproductions of sketchbooks with notations transposing Renaissance artworks into dance in Stamm, 'Alexander Sacharoff – Bildende Kunst und Tanz', pp. 14–15.
- <sup>75</sup> Carolyn Williams, *Transfigured World: Walter Pater's Aesthetic Historicism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), esp. pp. 68–72. This is evocative of Raphael Samuel's claim that 'aesthetes rather than historians are responsible for constituting our notions of "period"'. Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London: Verso, 2012), p. 41.
- <sup>76</sup> Arnold Schoenberg, *Wassily Kandinsky: Letters, Pictures and Documents*, ed. by Jelena Hahl-Koch, trans. by John C. Crawford (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), p. 149. Kandinsky uses Sacharoff as his exemplar for the modern dancer: Wassily Kandinsky, *Punkt und Linie zu Fläche: Ein Beitrag zur Analyse der malerischen Elemente* (Munich: Bauhaus Bücher, 1928), p. 94.
- <sup>77</sup> Thain, p. 56.
- <sup>78</sup> Sacharoff, *Réflexions sur la Danse et la Musique* (Buenos Aires, 1943). Deutsches Tanzarchiv DTK-TIS-83.
- <sup>79</sup> Sacharoff, *Réflexions*, p. 40.
- <sup>80</sup> Sacharoff, *Réflexions*, p. 41.
- <sup>81</sup> This is typically decadent. See Catherine Maxwell, *Scents and Sensibility: Perfume in Victorian Literary Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), and Jane Desmarais and Alice Condé, 'Introduction', in *Decadence and the Senses*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and Alice Condé (Cambridge: Legenda, 2017), p. 1.
- <sup>82</sup> For conceptualization of trans agency as distinct to other theorizations of agency, see Troy Kilgannon, 'Arts of Survival: Alternative Historiographies of Trans Agency' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Sussex, 2021), esp. pp. 16–18.
- <sup>83</sup> Sacharoff, 'How I arrange my dances', p. 3. For development of this notion of 'racial capital' see Kyla Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex and Science in the Nineteenth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), esp. p. 12.
- <sup>84</sup> On Sacharoff's choreography and extant notation, see Rose Breuss, Julia Mach, and Ursula Brandstätter, 'Auf den Spuren der Pavane Royale von Alexander Sacharoff', in *Klänge in Bewegung: Spurensuchen in Choreografie und Performance*, ed. by Sabine Karoß and Stephanie Schroedter (Bielefeld: transcript-Verlag, 2017), pp. 45–64. See also reconstructions of individual dances by Jeschke in Stella Tinsberg's documentary film *Poeten des Tanzes – Die Sacharoffs* (2012), <<https://tanzfonds.de/en/project/documentation-2012/sacharoff-research-project/>> [accessed 14 December 2021]. Veroli describes *Visione del Quattrocento* as 'a slow walk, or rather slide, around the stage, a series of poses': Veroli, 'The Mirror and the Hieroglyph' p. 186.
- <sup>85</sup> Anton Linder, 'Der tanzende Russe', *Neue Hamburger Zeitung*, 1 April 1912, pp. 1–2 (p. 2).
- <sup>86</sup> Linder, 'Der tanzende Russe', p. 2.
- <sup>87</sup> It therefore repeats a key decadent trope of the 'erotic experience in and with artifice'. Kostas Boyiopoulos, *The Decadent Image: The Poetry of Wilde, Symons, and Dowson* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), p. 4; see also Sara Ahmed's twinning of disgust and desire in Sara Ahmed, 'The Performativity of Disgust', in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp. 81–100.
- <sup>88</sup> Thomas Mann, *Der Tod in Venedig* (Berlin: Fischer, 1922), p. 58.
- <sup>89</sup> Karl Ernst Osthaus, *Hagener Zeitung*, 22 March 1911, cited in Osthaus, *Reden und Schriften*, ed. by Rainer Stamm (Cologne: König, 2002), p. 153. On the contemporary concern with race, nation and ethnicity in criticism see Ross Dickinson, 'Race and Aesthetics', in *Dancing in the Blood*, pp. 117–59.
- <sup>90</sup> As cited in Stamm, p. 34. This idea of the dancer as 'lebende' [living] artwork had wider resonances: see Claudia Rieger, "'Lebende Bilder" und "Bewegte Plastik": Rita Sacchetto', in *Ausdruckstanz*, pp. 367–76.
- <sup>91</sup> On antiquity and the androgyne see Catriona MacLeod, *Embodying Ambiguity: Androgyny and Aesthetics from Winckelmann to Keller* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998).
- <sup>92</sup> As cited and translated in Horst Koegler, 'A Single Being and a Single Soul with Two Bodies; Alexander and Clotilde Sacharoff and the Pre-World War I Munich Avant-Garde', *Dance Chronicle*, 26.2 (2003), 253–59 (p. 257).
- <sup>93</sup> Legrand-Chabrier, 'Pour un Music-Hall d'Art', *Choses de théâtre: Cahiers mensuels de notes, d'études et de recherches théâtrales*, 10 (1921), 627–30 (p. 629).
- <sup>94</sup> André Levinson, 'Théâtre des Champs-Élysées: Les Galas Sakharoff', *Comoedia*, 26 April 1924, p. 1.
- <sup>95</sup> Vuillermoz, p. 34; Levinson, p. 1.
- <sup>96</sup> Lucia Ruprecht, 'Gestural Drag', in *Gestural Imaginaries: Dance and Cultural Theory in the Early Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).
- <sup>97</sup> Hans Erasmus Fischer, 'Tänze um Mitternacht, Gloria Palast Berlin' (unknown), October 1928, as cited and trans. in *Gestural Imaginaries*, p. 173. This derivative formulation has strangely persisted: Karl Toepfer, for instance, describes 'Golliwog's Cakewalk' (1916) as 'virtually a transvestite performance' with little further explanation. Karl Toepfer,

*Empire of Ecstasy: Nudity and Movement in German Body Culture 1910-1935* (London: University of California Press, 1997), p. 222.

<sup>98</sup> Brandenburg, 'Alexander Sacharoff (1913)'.

<sup>99</sup> Gerhard Thonhauser, 'Beyond Mood and Atmosphere: a Conceptual History of the Term *Stimmung*', *Philosophia*, 49 (2021), 1247–65.

<sup>100</sup> Edmond Locard, 'Echo d'une Soirée Sakharoff à Lyon', *Unique Soirée de Danse Donnée par Clotilde et Alexandre Sakharoff*, Concert Programme, Opéra Royal Flamand, 1924. Deutsches Tanzarchiv DTK-TIS-83.

<sup>101</sup> Concert Programme, Grand Théâtre de Lausanne, 1923. Deutsches Tanzarchiv DTK-TIS-83. Others saw this as a return to the true origins of dance, a popular theme at the time: 'la rénovation de l'art de la danse, en remontant à ses véritable sources, l'antiquité grecque, la Renaissance italienne, le Quattrocento' [the renovation of the art of dance, going back to its true sources: Greek antiquity, the Italian Renaissance, the fifteenth century]: 'Les Sakharoff, danseurs russes', 1922, newspaper clipping in Recueil factice de programmes de représentations données par Alexandre et Clotilde Sakharoff, 1921-1936. BnF, 8-RO-12755.

<sup>102</sup> E. Hirschfeld, 'Die Sacharovs Clotilde und Alexander', n.d. Deutsches Tanzarchiv DTK-TIS-83.

<sup>103</sup> L. Florentin, *Clotilde et Alexandre Sakharoff* (Lausanne, 1926), n.p. Deutsches Tanzarchiv DTK-TIS-83.

Intermediality and Decadent Performance in Anita Berber and Sebastian Droste's  
*Die Tänze des Lasters, des Grauens und der Ekstase* (1923)

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It is hard to separate fact from fiction when considering the life and work of Anita Berber. Anecdotes about her bisexuality, drug addiction and final demise paint a picture of a decadent living legend who dominated the Weimar Republic cabaret scene of the 1920s. Expressionist writer Max Herrmann-Neiße recounts that Berber's dance performances at the time could cause 'eine Revolte' [a revolt] in the short time they lasted.<sup>1</sup> However, anyone who watches the few preserved scraps of footage of Berber's performances on film or in photographs might well be disappointed to find them lacking in 'decadent' appeal. Her rather timid performance style and artificially staged photographs give little impression of the 'revolt' Herrmann-Neiße observed. So how can Berber's performances be considered in the context of decadence?

The decadence of Berber's performance resides largely in the transgression of genre boundaries and in the intermediality of her work, meaning that the work is best understood not in terms of a single medium but rather as the meeting or interaction of several media. Such intermediality can be best observed in her collaboration on the book *Die Tänze des Lasters, des Grauens und der Ekstase* [*Dances of Vice, Horror and Ecstasy*] (1923) with her second husband and artistic partner, the dancer and poet Sebastian Droste (Willy Knoblauch, 1898-1927). Together with Droste, Berber choreographed a series of theatrically bold and sinister dances, which the pair first performed in Vienna in 1922. The duo published the book after the scandal surrounding these dances, reimagining the performance in the form of expressionist poetry, photographs, drawings, costumes, and set designs. The displacement of the performing body into a literary context is most prominent in 'Pritzelpuppen' ['Pritzel Puppets'], a dance-poem that rehearses a cycle of intermedial translations from performing body to literary text to puppet. Through its transgression of aesthetic convention, *Dances of Vice, Horror and Ecstasy* self-consciously distorts preconceived definitions of

feminine beauty. Similarly, Berber and Droste's dance-poem 'Suicide' creates a decadent effect in its ironic perversion of ethical and aesthetic categories through its rupturing of formal media, essentially cancelling out the performing body in ways that parallel its aesthetic method. What emerges is the disappearance of individual artistic categories into an excessive amalgamation of materials – a core quality of decadent texts – which both perverts the ethical subject of suicide and permits the work to flourish as an excessive spectacle celebrating the vitality of the arts. Looking at the intermediality of Berber's dance practice by way of reference to examples like these therefore demonstrates how it is not so much how she chose to present herself (as in her nude performances) that makes her work 'decadent'; rather, the decadence of her work has to do with the transgression of aesthetic conventions and transplanting the performing body into the contexts of other media.

In Theatre Studies, intermediality generally refers to a translation of various performance texts into other media, especially technological media such as video, voice recordings, or virtual spaces. Intermediality here describes the co-relation between different media in the sense of mutual permeation and influence. The importance of intermediality to the romanticization of Berber as an icon of decadence becomes apparent with Berber's biography, which can be regarded as an intermedial artifact in itself. The sources that document the personal scandals surrounding Berber's career range from such contemporary accounts as the journalist Leo Lania's biographical novel *Tanz ins Dunkel* [*Dancing into the Dark*] (1929) and the Czech choreographer Joe Jenčík's study of Berber (1930) to Rosa von Praunheim's 1987 film *Anita: Dance of Vice*, Lothar Fischer's books on Berber's life, and Mel Gordon's *The Seven Addictions and Five Professions of Anita Berber: Weimar Berlin's Priestess of Depravity* (2006). The staged and highly theatricalized photographs add to the sense of displacement of the actuality of her persona as well as the actuality of her performances. While all these narratives help to elaborate the myth of Berber, they do not do much to establish reliable information given that Berber did little autobiographical writing.<sup>2</sup> Thomas Mann's son Klaus met Berber and summarized her appeal in 'Memories of Anita Berber': 'ich fand sie faszinierend, aber abscheulich [...] Nachkriegserotik, Kokain, Salomé, letzte Perversität: solche Begriffe bildeten den

Strahlenglanz ihrer Glorie' [I found her fascinating but detestable [...] Post-war eroticism, cocaine, Salomé, ultimate perversity: such notions formed the halo of her glory].<sup>3</sup>

Berber's many faces are reflected in the many art forms to which she applied herself. She appeared on screen (by 1923 Berber had appeared in twenty-six films under such famous directors as Richard Oswald and Fritz Lang),<sup>4</sup> in print as a nude model, as a dancer on the stage, and as a published poet. Her work was regarded as transgressive even by Weimar standards at a time when all social and moral boundaries had collapsed, both by those who wished to celebrate vice and those who wanted to condone it. Berber's notoriety is reflected in – and created by – reports such as one made in 1926 by an unnamed journalist in the magazine *Der Junggeselle* [*The Bachelor*]:

die Berber [ist] die Inkarnation der parodierten Gestalten. Durch und durch dämonische Frau [...]. Lasterverheißender Mund, böse Augen, verdorben bis in die Haare hinein. So gleitet sie dahin. Umgirrt etwas imaginär Männliches. Zuckt zurück, lockt und wirkt wie ein schlimmer, drückender Alptraum. Nichts ist echt.

[Berber [is] the incarnation of parodied figures. Demonic woman through and through [...]. A mouth promising vice, evil eyes, even her hair bedevilled. That way she glides past. Cooing around an imaginary masculine something. She jerks backwards, entices and appears like a fatal, oppressive nightmare. Nothing is real.]<sup>5</sup>

This passage captures the typical characteristics of the nineteenth-century *femme fatale* in the description of Berber's manipulation of gender boundaries, her artificiality, and her acute sense of staged realities. Yet this description is remarkable because it hints at the way in which the myth of Berber is reassembled and ironized by an evocation of nineteenth-century legends of decadence. As much as Berber's biography is a blend of various narratives and images reflecting on one another to establish the myth of her persona, the decadent element of her performance originates in the intermediality of the contexts out of which her dances grew. The excessive network of references, oscillating between those drawn not only from contemporary culture but also from nineteenth-century decadent literature, Symbolist paintings, and music, makes her work decadent by virtue of its referentiality. Berber's decadence, then, is not to be found in the performances themselves, but in the intermedial construction of her dances, which is in turn exploited to further disrupt social codes and traditional etiquette.

## Decadent performance

In the German-speaking context, decadent performance tends to be understood through dance, sculpture, or painting rather than drama. German decadence is indebted to its expressionist heritage and cuts across imported Symbolist and naturalist tendencies.<sup>6</sup> Historically, ideas of French decadence shaped the works of the German-speaking avant-garde and were mediated by figures like the Viennese editor Hermann Bahr (1863-1934). In his essay ‘Die Décadence’ (1891), Bahr criticized decadence and aestheticism (especially Wilde’s persona) and questioned whether the term could really be applied to German literature, which in his view had not yet overcome the influence of naturalism.

In fact, many works by authors writing at the same time that Berber performed were variously classified as expressionist, Symbolist or classicist, rather than outright ‘decadent’. Yet, works by famous writers – such as Else Lasker-Schüler’s Orientalizing prose adorned with her own drawings, or poet Stefan George’s poetry cycle *Algabal* (1892), or even Thomas Mann’s novellas *Der Tod in Venedig* [*Death in Venice*] (1912) and *Wälsungenblu* [*Blood of the Walsungs*] (1905) – display, at times, the strong influence of French decadent style and thinking. In sum, a fluidity of styles and schools were being practised simultaneously, which hinders a clear-cut definition of what artistic decadence entailed in Germany. That said, the hard-to-classify Berber seems to be one of the better cultural candidates to represent the equally hard-to-classify category of German decadence. Susan Laikin Funkenstein has examined the interplay between portraiture and performed artifice in Otto Dix’s rendition of Berber. She finds that by examining the cultural-historical background of Dix’s painting, Berber emerges as ‘a woman more complex than the written records reveal’.<sup>7</sup> A similar method of mutual enhancement was explored by writers of nineteenth-century French decadent literature who explored the intersection of artistic genres and media in the service of literary performativity.

With regard to theatre, decadence lacks a definite canon. Examples of plays frequently considered ‘decadent’ might include Oscar Wilde’s Symbolist play *Salomé* (1891), or possibly Stéphane Mallarmé’s anti-theatrical closet drama *Hérodiade* (1871). As Martin Puchner says, these play texts resist or reject the conditions of corporeality required by staged performance.<sup>8</sup> According to Adam Alston, ‘the closest thing we have to a “decadent theatre” is not the dramatic work of Wilde, but the symbolist theatre of Maurice Maeterlinck and Rachilde. Both situated interiority and painfully refined sensation at the forefront of their work.’<sup>9</sup> Decadent performance, then, is indebted to forms of Symbolist suggestiveness (no emphasis is placed on outward action or plot) and expressionist rawness of states of being. Understood in these terms, decadent performance in general and Berber’s performances in particular share the common condition of intermediality.

Symbolist theatre capitalized on the hidden depth of emotional states enabled by the suggestiveness of language that the nineteenth-century French poet and critic Théophile Gautier described in his ‘Notes on Baudelaire’ (Baudelaire dedicated *Les Fleurs du mal* to Gautier in 1857). Gautier describes the synaesthetic transposition between one art and another, whereby pictorial elements, music, or sculpture help structure poetic expression and vice versa, a quality also found in Berber’s choreography. In such transpositions, art is liberated from moral directiveness and integrity, and delivers unmediated ecstatic sensations. According to Gautier, Baudelaire’s literary decadence

is an ingenious, complex, learned style, full of shades and refinements of meaning, ever extending the bounds of language, borrowing from every technical vocabulary [...] a style that endeavours to express the most inexpressible thoughts, the vaguest and most fleeting contours of form, that listens, with a view to rendering them, to the subtle confidences of neurosis, to the confessions of aging lust turning into depravity, and to the odd hallucinations of fixed ideas passing into mania. This decadent style is the final expression of the Word which is called upon to express everything [...]. Contrary to the classic style, it admits of the introduction of shadows, in which move confusedly the larvae of superstition, the haggard phantasms of insomnia, the terrors of night, the monstrous dreams that impotence alone stays in their realisation, the gloomy fancies at which day would stand aghast, and all that the soul has of darkest, most misshapen, and indefinitely horrible in the depths of its uttermost recess.<sup>10</sup>



Berber's dance practice appears to have some of the same qualities that Gautier identifies in Baudelaire's poetry. The word is replaced by a moving body to be deciphered and 'read'. The embedding of the dancing image in other artistic media produces the 'shadow-like' quality that transfixed Berber's audiences. Just as Baudelaire's poetry, in Gautier's reading, extends 'the bounds of language', Berber's dance spectacles borrow 'from every technical vocabulary' to create a sense of multi-layered representation. In Berber's case, language and image are translated into bodily movement, rendering choreography as poetry. Cultural critic and expressionist poet Leopold Wolfgang Rochowanski (1888-1961) analysed Berber's dances and described her technique as 'speaking with the limbs'.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Herrmann-Neiße described a duet called 'Absinth', which Berber danced with her second husband Henri Châtin Hofmann, as a 'mimische Ballade' [mimed ballad].<sup>12</sup> These commentators perceived Berber's performances as not only aesthetically daring but also ethically provocative because of the intermedial play between embodied image and literary text.

Berber has previously been placed within the context of decadent performance based on the topicality of her dance routines, which often enact addiction, pain, lust, madness, and, not least, extreme forms of dying. Dance, as the ultimate form of corporeality on stage, enabled Berber to articulate these often oppositional and extreme states of physical and psychological sensation. For example, Berber very much embodied, as Alston puts it, 'the (a)liveness of decadence' which 'is made palpable as a state of ruination; we are invited to share in this peculiar breed of (a)liveness – to feel the exuberance of a dancer, for instance – only to find vitality steered towards decay'.<sup>13</sup> Barbara Hales also notes how the trance-like quality of Berber's style developed in the wake of Émile Jacques-Dalcroze's rhythmic gymnastics, which lend her performance a hyper-real quality.<sup>14</sup> Finally, the paradoxical tension between the pulsation of life exhibited by a body in motion and the representation of stasis is explained by Kate Elswit's analysis of the heightened corporeality required when enacting death through dance.<sup>15</sup>

In her extensive work on the implications of Berber's dance aesthetics, Elswit has argued that performer and audience become co-creators, and that the investment of an audience in Berber's naturalistic dramatization of death was conditioned by biographical 'offstage factors' such as Berber's celebrity persona, her drug addiction, and eccentric behaviour.<sup>16</sup> For example, Elswit explores how Berber's most acclaimed solo dance *Cocaine* evidenced 'both a distancing of display and enactment and a collapse, foreshadowing their complete unity when the actual breakdown of the dancer's body eclipsed the parameters of theatricality'.<sup>17</sup> Elswit also places particular emphasis on the 'creative, transformative work of spectatorship' that was necessary to fully realize the impact of Berber's dances.<sup>18</sup> Elswit's insistence on shifting the focus on to the work the audience has to do in order to 'translate' the artificial authenticity of Berber's dance is an important stepping stone for this discussion: decadent performance entails, to a large extent, the effect the performing body has on the audience. In other words, the audience's emotional, imaginative, and intellectual engagement completes the performance. Furthermore, in decadent performance the act of creating exists not only in watching a body on a stage, but in the audience's synthesizing the intermedial relations in which this body is placed. In the interaction with other media – for example, imagining an inanimate doll made in Berber's image as a dancing body while reading a poem on a doll – the audience creates a decadent spectacle by establishing a network of intermedial references. Such a virtual synthesis blurs generic boundaries, challenges social conventions, and does away with the conventional theatrical space.

Alexandra Kolb has identified Berber's *Nackttanz* [nude dance] as an aesthetic device to undermine normative renderings of the beautiful death of female performers on stage.<sup>19</sup> Kolb argues that Berber's mode of performance 'took a critical stance towards this culturally determined signification'.<sup>20</sup> Berber's aestheticization of real agony was not aimed at romanticizing death as something beautiful. On the contrary, Berber's violent body imagery aimed 'at arousing, or liberating, the spectator's feeling of threat and angst from its usual state of repression'.<sup>21</sup> While the importance of a breach of convention is visible in Berber's works, the aim was not to purge angst

from an audience witnessing a performance of death. Rather, Berber's dance, and the extra-theatrical media documenting her dances, invited the audience to pleurably explore extreme states of angst, desperation, irony, and sexual transgression from the safe distance of the individual's imagination. Thus, decadent performance does not necessarily rely exclusively on the performing body on stage but makes it part of an extra-theatrical context that completes the disembodied, virtual, intermedial spectacle. Building on these preliminary ideas, the following analysis explores how Berber's works and the dance culture from which they grew form an aesthetic space of permeation between such disparate artistic media as literature, fine art, puppetry, and music.

### **Weimar cabaret culture as the home of mixed media performance**

Berber's art notably contributed to a shift away from classical ballet in Germany in the early 1910s and 1920s towards ways of perceiving the body as a canvas for the expression of raw emotional states.<sup>22</sup> Berber started her classical training as a dancer with choreographer Rita Sacchetto from 1915 to 1916 alongside Valeska Gert in Berlin. Sacchetto's *Ausdruckstanz* [expressive dance], which had its foundations in ballet, was hailed as one of the main innovations of the New German Dance in the early twentieth century. It was influenced by ground-breaking, free-flowing solo performances by Isadora Duncan and Varieté performance by the 'living statues' duo Olga Desmond and Adolf Salge, who revolutionized the dance scene in the early 1910s, not least by performing in the nude. Other artists also emphasized the narrative significance of nudity, as in, for example, Valeska Gert's 'Grotesktanz' [Grotesque Dance]. Leading in an entirely different direction, Mary Wigman's 'absolute dance' also encompassed a physical exploration of the heroic and the primeval unconscious.<sup>23</sup>

*Nackttanz* became vital for Berber's aesthetics after the abolition of stage censorship in 1919. The exhibition of the nude female body supposedly introduced to society a new type of erotically liberated woman. The feminist *Freikörperkultur* [Naturism] propagated the pure and innocent 'return to nature', ironically via the cultivation of a 'de-eroticised' body through

gymnastics and sports.<sup>24</sup> In 1917, Berber premiered an ‘exotic’ Korean dance solo which showcased her as a mature artist early in her career, according to a review in the fashion magazine *Elegante Welt* [*Elegant World*], which praised her performance as ‘daring’, ‘remote from all sweetness’, and ‘always a little boyish’.<sup>25</sup> Classed as ‘New Women’ and/or *femmes fatales*, these artists experimented with prescribed gender and social roles (the mother, the whore, the nun, and so on) as a way to assess the reconfigured position of women in society.<sup>26</sup> This new way of ‘speaking with the limbs’ represented what Laurence Senelick calls ‘one outlet of release’ in a German society that felt the pressures of the post-empire and post-war collapse of economic, national, and moral certainties in the liberal climate of the early Weimar years.<sup>27</sup>

Weimar Berlin, the entertainment capital of Europe also described as the capital of vice in the 1920s, was a stage in itself. The frenzy for which this period in German history is known was created through extreme political and economic turmoil between 1918 and 1933, marked by post-war destitution, legalized prostitution, a sprawling entertainment industry, hyperinflation, and the rise of the Nazi party. Reviewing the cult of a ‘decadent theatre’ in the Weimar era, Senelick has found that in fact ‘the decadence of Weimar cabaret has been grossly exaggerated’ because of the retrospective embellishment of its dark glamour, which was aestheticized in Bob Fosse’s film *Cabaret* (1972), based on the play derived from Christopher Isherwood’s *Berlin Stories*.<sup>28</sup> Senelick has a point about the glamourization of 1920s Berlin, which for most of its population was more gritty than glamorous. The same can be said of cabaret culture, the alleged ‘perversity’ of which was often nothing more than a ‘liberation from convention’.<sup>29</sup> Berber’s decadent appeal might have appeared to some to be a mere reprise of Aubrey Beardsley’s black-and-white androgynous figures, Ernest Dowson’s verses, and Orientalist clichés, but Berber is due more credit for her aesthetic innovations, especially in the way in she shifts between dance, texts, drawings and music, constantly demolishing and rebuilding genre categories.

The case of cabaret lends itself to the reframing of decadence as an intermedial act of genre collapse. In the small cabarets, audiences were becoming part of the show rather than being set

apart from the performance in a classical proscenium set up. Peter Jelavich highlights the ‘intimacy of the setting’ which ‘allowed direct, eye-to-eye contact between performers and spectators’. Shows typically entailed ‘short (five- or ten-minute) numbers from several different genres, usually songs, comic monologues, dialogues and skits, less frequently dances, pantomimes, puppet/waxwork shows, or even short films.’<sup>30</sup> Cabaret performance is typically brief and quintessentially heterogeneous in terms of its art forms and anarchic in relation to individual performance parts. Unlike drama or opera, no literary or musical text fixes the structure of performance or the expectation of what is to be performed. According to Jelavich, cabaret performance ‘devised a new paratactic grammar, which juxtaposed divergent elements without claiming to see any logical unities to their relationships,’<sup>31</sup> placing a variety of genres side by side without logical connections. This way of conceptualizing performance mirrors Berber’s way of placing dance in the context of literature, music, and photography. The spontaneity, the non-linearity, the potential for subversion, and the intimacy of the cabaret format all relate to the characteristics of decadent styles which rely on the fracturing of narrative structures and correspondences between art forms. In other words, the audience is left to absorb and synthesize what we could call ‘decadent performance’.

The medial cross-over and the new ‘grammar’ of cabaret culture resembles Paul Bourget’s oft-cited idea of the anarchy of the parts that dissolve a wholesome organism. In 1883 Bourget described decadence as the disintegration of Western societies resulting from the rise of individualism, reflected in literature by disjointed narratives that devoted too much stylistic attention to individual words at the expense of artistic unity.<sup>32</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche also adapted the idea of a decadent quality in artworks, affirming, as Nicholas D. More puts it, that ‘decadent art is composite, calculated, artificial, and built for effects’.<sup>33</sup> The disintegration or paratactical grammar which cuts the logical or narrative links between symbols and images is likewise cultivated in Berber’s *Dances of Vice, Horror and Ecstasy*, which confronts the reader with a panorama of multiple arts. Elswit has argued that the cabaret audience watching the choreography of bodies in

Berber's choreography 'would co-produce dance's dramaturgy'.<sup>34</sup> By extension this relationship also holds true for the reader of *Dances of Vice, Horror and Ecstasy*. If the covers of the book can be understood to demarcate the "performance space" of reading, then the reader re-enacts in their mind's eye the collapsing of genre boundaries in the work Berber and Droste perform.

### The book as cabaret: the performance of literature in Anita Berber and Sebastian Droste's dance book

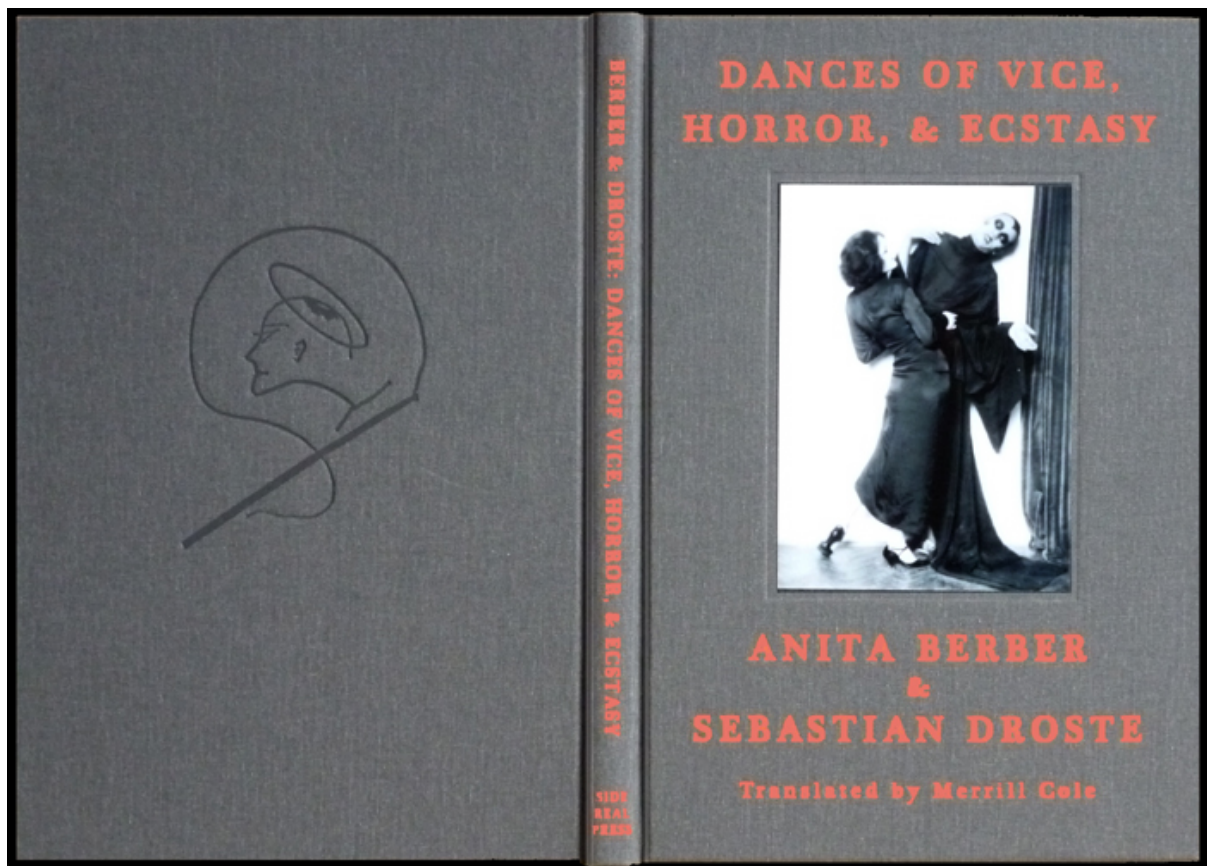


Fig. 1: Cover of the English translation of Anita Berber und Sebastian Droste, *Die Tänze, des Lasters, des Grauens und der Ekstase* by Merrill Cole. Courtesy of Side Real Press.

*Dances of Vice, Horror and Ecstasy* originated out of a performance routine of the same name staged in Berlin and Vienna in 1922, which Berber and Droste subsequently toured through Europe.<sup>35</sup> The book contains theoretical texts by Droste and Viennese poet and promoter of radical art, Leopold Wolfgang Rochowanski. Twenty-six dance-poems were authored by Droste,<sup>36</sup> and four are attributed to Berber. In their performance, Berber and Droste danced as a pair for seven of

the poems. The book also includes photographs from the Atelier D’Ora (studio of Dora Kallmus), staged after the dance performances of the pieces; set and costume designs by architect Henry Täuber; and two pencil-drawn self-portraits by Berber. In its hybridity, the book works as a cabaret performance on paper, a perfect expression of the anxiety and desperation of early 1920s expressionism. The poems, each a miniature drama, carry haunting titles such as ‘Byzantinischer Peitschentanz’ [Byzantine Whip Dance], ‘Haus der Irren’ [House of the Insane], and ‘Die Nacht der Borgia’ [The Night of the Borgia].

The book is decadent in both content and form, replete with such textbook tropes of decadence as Orientalism, addiction, exhaustion, sexual transgression, and sadomasochism. Among the many references to literature and art we find Edgar Allan Poe, whose works were translated by father of decadence Charles Baudelaire; Symbolist poet Paul Verlaine; German Renaissance painter Matthias Grünewald, whose depiction of Christ’s crucifixion figures in Joris-Karl Huysmans’s Satanist novel *Là-Bas* [*Down There*] (1891); Symbolist writer Auguste de Villiers de L’Isle Adam; contemporary influences such as the German expressionist actor Hans Heinz Ewers (famous for his grotesque performances); and painters Marc Chagall and Pablo Picasso, to name but a few. The specific atmosphere evoked by these allusions in each poem/dance is trans-medially supported by a specific piece of music. The poetry often reads like stage directions for the choreography, although no records survive indicating whether or not the poems were part of the staged dances.<sup>37</sup> Senelick claims that Berber’s performances lacked the aesthetic sophistication of nineteenth-century dancers. However, on closer inspection, we can see that her carefully curated network of allusions and symbols, combined with the intermedial transaction of certain themes, creates a rich backdrop of reference for the dances. Indeed, this network formed the decadent matrix out of which her dances and poems unleashed their enthralling power.

### **Distortion of beauty: ‘Pritzel Puppets’**



Fig. 2: Pritzel puppets by puppet artist and costume designer Lotte Pritzel, 1910, printed in *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration*, 14.1 (October 1910), 332, courtesy of Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg.



Fig. 3: Photograph of Berber as Pritzel doll, Atelier Eberth, 1920s, courtesy of Deutsches Tanzarchiv Köln.





Fig. 4: Pritzel puppet 'Anita Berber', courtesy of Hessisches Landesmuseum Darmstadt.

The 'Pritzel Puppets' poem by Droste and Berber takes the craft of Munich artist Lotte Pritzel (1887-1952) as its inspiration. Her puppets were the fashion items of the day; even Rainer Maria Rilke succumbed to their eerie charm and lifelike artifice, publishing a set of poems dedicated to them ('Über die Puppen der Lotte Pritzel' [On the Dolls of the Lotte Pritzel], 1921). Writer Carl Zuckmayer (1896-1977) describes Pritzel as a 'brilliant maker of dolls, creations which inspired a good many articles and essays at the time. They were delicate things of wax and cloth, marked by a subtle elegance and a touch of childlike depravity, like some of Beardsley's figures'.<sup>38</sup> The

marionette was an influential concept throughout the early decades of the twentieth century, inspiring Dadaists (Sophie Taeuber Arp), artists of the Bauhaus (Oskar Schlemmer), and theatre practitioners (Edward Gordon Craig), as well as artists of experimental forms of ballet and rhythmic movements (Émile Jacques-Dalcroze). The doll was a significant symbol because it encapsulates a paradox which Droste had outlined in his opening manifesto, ‘Der Tanz als Form und Erleben’ [Dance as Form and Experience]: lifeless things are full of life and become animated when performed in dance or in reading.<sup>39</sup> Through the doll’s conversion from object to moving body into text, we can see how Berber and Droste experiment with the notion of feminine beauty. Like the intermedial transformation of the doll, beauty undergoes a transformation in its various states of being. Berber and Droste incorporated a Pritzel Puppet piece into their dance routine, which then appeared as a poem in their book:<sup>40</sup>

PRITZEL PUPPETS  
DANCED BY ANITA BERBER AND SEBASTIAN DROSTE

MUSIC BY JAAP KOOL

Wax figures  
Decadence  
Degeneration  
Slender hands  
Powdered hips  
Slim thigh and groping finger  
Gemstones  
Jewelery [*sic*]  
Gold on the naked body  
Narcissists who stain themselves  
Self-love  
Vain straddling  
Dallying and cooing  
But ever glass  
So much glass  
Cut glass  
Byzantine<sup>41</sup>

In the poem Berber imbues words with a sense of dangerous vanity that hovers between the innocence and sexual suggestiveness of Pritzel’s dolls (fig. 2): ‘Wax figures | Decadence | Degeneration [...] Gold on naked bodies | Narcissists who stain themselves’.<sup>42</sup> This tension is

echoed in Berber's body posture – erect yet twisted, her arm framing her head as if creating a halo, while her left leg, lifted to reach the level of her raised head, opens her groin to face the audience (fig. 3). The bodies of the dolls appear lifelike yet always remain cold, like 'cut glass'. The wax figures as well as Berber's dancing body dramatized in the photograph stand in for the objectification or literal commodification of bodies and the re-animation of art objects, a common theme in decadent literature. Salomé treats John the Baptist's head like a fetish object and Dorian Gray's objectification of actress Sybil Vane renders her a stage puppet. In Rachilde's *Monsieur Vénus* (1884) the noblewoman Raoule de Vénérande artificially uses parts of her dead lover for a wax dummy with real hair, teeth, and fingernails. Humans, and especially women, are shown as fragile and disposable, yet the performance of humanness, symbolized by the doll, is preserved in its perfection. The doll holds the promise of life yet remains lifeless.

The paradox of the decadent body as a dead-yet-lifelike thing is explored in Berber's poem and in her performance titled 'Pritzel Puppets'. This routine was previously danced by Berber alone in Max Reinhardt's cabaret 'Schall und Rauch' ['Sound and Smoke'].<sup>43</sup> Eric Karl Toepfer notes that Berber and Droste subsequently performed the piece together, set to music by Dutch jazz composer Jaap Kool (1890-1959), whose music irritated those whose taste was more classical. His style combined 'jazz, African rhythms, Asian harmonics, popular dance forms like the tango and shimmy, and modernist tonal structures'.<sup>44</sup>

As much as the musical backdrop to this performance was concocted out of a blend of influences, Berber's doll-dance perverts the classical ballet technique and thus undertakes a queering of preconceived notions of female grace and beauty. Harlequins and doll-like figures were 'characters typical of mainstream interest' in dance, and women as commodities were frequently paraded as ornate objects in commercial troupe-dancing.<sup>45</sup> However, Berber's movements add a Gothic uncanniness to the playfulness and fragility that these characters represent. According to Eric Karl Toepfer, Berber's dance scenes displayed

a body well trained in ballet technique, able to move from decorative, on pointe delicacy to explosive lunges, but Berber's use of ballet technique was always subordinate to an expressionistic aesthetic that relied more on theatrical effects than on a refined sense of movement.<sup>46</sup>

Kolb comments on Berber's (de-)construction of gender and the way her performance of androgyny hovers between 'masculinisation and extreme feminisation'.<sup>47</sup> He reads these experimentations with gender roles as acts of female emancipation. In reviewing Berber's performance of the role of the eighteenth-century vamp for Charlotte Berend-Corinth's series of pornographic lithographs in 1919, Funkenstein has insisted on how consciously staged Berber's appearances were. In contrast, Berber's doll dance shows her in a lacy costume with over-knee boots, more reminiscent of a sexed-up doll rather than an ethereal ballerina. The reported 'harshness' of her movement interjects the ballet routine with jerks and quivers.<sup>48</sup> Otherwise her posture stays perfectly composed in what Elswit describes as a 'fascinating disunity in which her body was other or alien'.<sup>49</sup> The alienation of 'female beauty' is different from that of Mary Wigman's abstraction of body language, which was perceived as masculine yet un-sexed by contemporaries.<sup>50</sup> Berber's queering of femininity lies in the contrast of her hyper-erotic appearance and her autoeroticism. On the one hand her appearance seems contrived to satisfy the male gaze but on the other hand her aesthetic self-absorption is so extreme that no second party is needed for sexual satisfaction or for any other purpose, least of all reproductive. This doll dances for its own pleasure. The body replaces the spoken words in this scene in which the audience reads Berber's conscious distortion of beauty in her erratic, self-involved movements. Unsurprisingly, Herrmann-Neiße noted of Berber's dance: 'Etwas Wildes und im Grunde Einsames umschwebt ihre Schöpfungen' [Something wild and profoundly lonesome hovers around her creations].<sup>51</sup>

The doll dance revives a decadent obsession with artificial bodies and the transgressive (sexual) attraction to art works. The performative nature of decadent sexuality has many precursors in the canon of decadent literature. For instance, Dennis Denisoff, and most recently Patricia

Pulham, have identified the need for a sublimation of transgressive desires that cannot be openly acknowledged. These are often buried and encrypted in the marble bodies of statues in Victorian writing.<sup>52</sup> Victorian texts, such as Olive Custance's sculptural poems, are safe spaces that allow the reader to seduce and caress the (forbidden) artificial object of desire and make it come to life. In a modernist context, Berber's vulgar yet erotic enactment follows in the footsteps of the Galatea myth: she is a statue come to life. Berber's dance inspired Pritzel to create an 'Anita-Berber-Figure' in an effort to capture Berber's expressiveness. The doll seems decentred and barely subject to gravity, bringing the evolution from doll to dance to poem to doll full circle (fig. 4).<sup>53</sup> Embracing a transgression of the chasms between life and death, Berber's performance hovers between art forms. Her doll performance plays with the horror and attractions of necrophilia and object fetish, enabling a revaluation of female beauty. It is the chain of different medial presentations of the doll that makes the audience reflect on the dynamics of non-normative desires.<sup>54</sup>

### **Elimination of artistic genre categories: 'Suicide'**

In comparison to 'Pritzel Puppets', 'Selbstmord' ['Suicide'] is an extensive poem running over two pages sprawling with references to other artistic media and artworks. The self-referentiality and artificially constructed self-ruination in Berber and Droste's performances share another element of decadence, namely that of self-deconstruction through parody. At first glance, 'Suicide' provides another melodramatic, artificial display of death suffused with other artworks, including a sombre piano sonata by Beethoven. On a more metaphorical level, the list of references to artists, objects, and artworks could be read as an acknowledgement by Berber and Droste of their own bricolage technique. In reading the poem, one might assume that the voice in the text belongs to an artist surrounded by a gallery of admired and unsurpassed predecessors and contemporaries. The voice, presumably male, is aroused ('Sexuality | And agony | Steep aloofness of the poison flower')<sup>55</sup> and driven to madness by the idea of not being able to possess or master Art, allegorized in the figure of the violent female ('symbol of all evil' [p. 22]), who

eventually hands him a rope with which to strangle himself.<sup>56</sup> Yet, the suicide is a metaphorical one: each act of originality or claim to authenticity is suffocated through the ‘Clouds | Powder | And perfume’ (p. 20) of a long line of artistic precursors, from E. T. A. Hoffmann to the present day (1922).

The first half of the poem indulges in a series of accumulations and doublings to comical effect. For example, the listing of artists’ works hanging in the gallery, by ‘Kandinsky | Chagall | *And* Picasso’ is doubled by the description of the garments worn by the speaker of the poem: ‘Black silk pyjamas | Sumptuous silk pyjamas | *And* silvery tassels’ (p. 19). The excessive listing suggests that while surrounded by artworks, the voice fails to fulfil its own original artistic ambition. The voice in the text reacts with actions of madness, ‘Screaming | Laughing | Scoffing | Mocking | Crying’ (p. 20), in response to the accumulation of masterpieces which cannot be surpassed. The struggle against the inability of the self to create, instead of just wanting to possess and collect, appears both desperate and comical when ‘Snickering and scoffing’ (p. 22), Art ‘slinks’ (p. 22) in to claim the failed artist as her latest victim.

A studio effigy of dance poses (fig. 5) visually reconstructs the dramatic physical intensity suggested by ‘Suicide’: a man, driven to death, is suffocated by the presence of a female figure. In the image, Droste’s black cloak echoes the title of the poem as it annihilates all body contours that would allow the viewer to make out an individual. Berber, kneeling at his feet and also clad in a body-covering long black dress, reaches up to clasp his throat.



Fig. 5: Berber and Droste as 'Martyrs' from *Dances of Vice*, Nachlass Madame d'Ora, courtesy of Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg.

Droste leans backwards with lips parted as if experiencing a moment of ecstasy, reaching down to Berber's throat to keep her body at a distance. Taken on its own, this image is hardly decadent. Yet in combination with the heightened intermediality within the poem, the decadent nature of the performance becomes apparent. Neither the actual 'stage action' of the two bodies in motion nor the tragic story of a despairing artist signals a decadent dynamic so much as the intermedial relations the performance activates. The exuberant references to literature, music, painting, fashion and interior décor makes the irony of decadent excess evident from the opening of the poem:

SUICIDE  
DANCED BY ANITA BERBER/SEBASTIAN DROSTE

MUSIC BY BEETHOVEN

Villers de l'Isle Adam  
 Edgar Allan Poe  
 E. T. A. Hoffman  
 Hans Heinz Ewers  
 And 1922  
 Rooms long left  
 Tapestries  
 Silvery candlesticks  
 Kandinsky  
 Chagall  
 And Picasso  
 Black silk pyjamas  
 Sumptuous silk pyjamas  
 And silvery tassels  
 Long thin white hands  
 And thin manicured fingers  
 Tormenting dream  
 Dull defenses against the world and God  
 Slow pacing  
 Slide from being to non-being  
 Hanging head  
 And falling soul  
 Moonlight  
  
 And Beethoven's Sonata  
 Clouds  
 Powder  
 And perfume [...] (p. 19)

Presenting the dark parody of self-abandonment to art in 'Suicide', the risk of societal 'suicide' is also parodied in Rochowanski's 'Analysis' of the audience's physical reaction to Berber's *Nackttanz*. Rochowanski published some of Bahr's letters in his magazine *Die Literarische Welt* [*The Literary World*] in 1946. Rochowanski reflects on displaced performance in *Dances of Vice, Horror and Ecstasy* and concludes that it is not Berber's nudity itself but the audience's imagination and physical reaction to that imagination that produces the actual decadent performance:

Ich habe diese prächtige Gesellschaft in den auserlesensten Exemplaren schon oft auf einmal beisammen gesehen: [...] Die Apathie des immerwährenden Verdauungsstadiums ersehnt sich Bewegung, Erregung, Sensation!

Nackttänze! (Ich liebe es, statt auf die Bühne, oft auf die Zuschauer zu sehen). Spannung. Gestörte Atmung. Bewaffnete Augen. Erwartung. Prüfung der eigenen nackten Arme. Gongschlag. Musik. Erregung. Glitzern und Leuchten. Erwartung.Pause der Wünsche. Lösen der Knoten. Keine At-mung. Erhöhte Atmung. Kniefall der Gewänder. Erlösung. Erfüllung. Raffinement der Entfaltung. Cresendo [sic.] des Körpers. Fortissimo der Linien. Furioso der Gefühle. Parfüms verströmen. Ein Bein



spricht zur Nachbarin. Ein Knopf stürzt sich zu Boden. Phallusglanz der Augen wetteifert mit den Strahlen des Scheinwerfers. Laster! Oh Sehnsucht des Bürgers! Ich bin dagegen! Gegen die Nackttänze!

[I have often seen this splendid society its most exquisite specimens coming together suddenly: [...] The apathy of a perpetual stage of digestion yearns for movement, arousal, sensation!

Naked dances! (I love to look at the spectators instead of the stage). Suspense, disrupted breath. Armed eyes. Expectation. Examining one's own naked arms. Gong sound. Music. Excitation. Glitter and glowing. Expectation. Suspension of wishes. Loosening of the knots. No breathing. Increased breath. Genuflection of garments. Redemption. Fulfilment. Refinement of unfolding. Crescendo of the body. Fortissimo of lines. Furioso of feelings. Perfumes exude. A leg speaks to its neighbour. A button hurls itself onto the floor. Phallic splendour of the eyes vies with the beams of the spotlights. Vice! O yearning of the bourgeois! I am against this! Against these naked dances!]<sup>57</sup>

Rochowanski's description of the 'performed' moral outrage on behalf of the bourgeois audience is in stark contrast to its secret enjoyment of Berber's nudity. The audience becomes an orchestra of sensations ('Crescendo of the body') enthralled by the movements of bodies in front of them. The viewer succumbs to self-abandonment and the dismissal of bourgeois codes of moral restraint. Through his ironic tone, mirroring the staccato style in which Berber and Droste's poems were conceived, Rochowanski mocks the hypocritical righteousness of bourgeois audiences and their performed storm of protest ('I am against it! Against the naked dances!'). Baudelaire employed this method to co-opt his readers in the shared pleasure of artistically experiencing taboo topics while they read his poems. He knew that while despising the depravity of his writing, they would be equally as excited by transgressive themes as their author ('Hypocrite reader, – fellowman, – my twin!').<sup>58</sup>

In the blurred boundaries between stage and non-stage, cabaret titillates the audience, but it also makes the audience feel uncomfortable, and this discomfort is heightened with bleak parody. Klaus Mann, for example, reports how Berber attended a cabaret show during which another performer, Hermann Valentin, presented an obscenely insulting swansong to her talents. Mann writes: 'Sie wollte dabei sein und mit den Augen blitzen, während sie vor dem Publikum verhöhnt und bloßgestellt wurde' [She wanted to be there and dart her eyes while she was being mocked and exposed in front of the audience].<sup>59</sup> The outraged reactions and scorn of Valentin and his

audience in response to Berber's performances were in fact an integral part of the overall *mise-en-scène* of herself as an artwork that somehow managed to reflect the audience back to themselves. If decadence entails the disruption of both societal and aesthetic unity, as Bourget argued, then Berber and Droste's performances can be considered decadent, in as much as the performer builds, questions, and ruins preconceived images of what constitutes a sound wholeness. The poem 'Suicide' and its contextual media thus move away from a display of psychological depression and violent despair through physical embodiment. The intermediality of the poem exposes the decadent method through excess, in two ways. First, the performing body shifts from stage to audience when the audience feels such an excess of emotion that the reaction to the performance becomes a kind of performance in itself. Second, the use of multiple media results in something like aesthetic overload, as the audience is put in the position of having to respond to an excess of artifice. Decadent performance is located in the in-between space of medial translation. Berber's dances, mediated through *Dances of Vice, Horror and Ecstasy*, reveal the rich heritage of nineteenth-century decadent tropes which shaped her aesthetics of perversity. While looking to the previous century for inspiration, Berber's decadent 'spectacles of the real',<sup>60</sup> reflecting the cabaret culture of the 1920s, were both innovative and remarkably modern in shifting the performance space from stage to audience.<sup>61</sup>

While decadence remains a 'question of viewpoint',<sup>62</sup> this article has focused on locating decadent performance in the exchange of a variety of medial expressions. *Dances of Vice, Horror and Ecstasy* reflects the hybrid nature of cabaret formats and transpositions of arts borrowed from nineteenth-century aesthetics. Through poem performance, the physical dancing body is rendered as one sign system to be read alongside the other art forms embedded in the choreography. This bleeding of one art form into another creates performances aimed at interrupting genre boundaries and social certainties. The performance piece 'Pritzel Puppets' and its medial configurations use the doll as a paradoxical lifelike object to distort assumptions of female beauty. Similarly, the dance piece 'Suicide' and its accompanying poem relegate the responsibility of performance to the

audience by way of ironic perversion of a highly problematic subject. The stage is no longer demarcated by bodies in performance but extends into an artificial hyper-reality. Berber and Droste's performance pieces thus exemplify how, through the usage of different media (book, dance, film, photography, drawing, puppets), decadent performance is not limited to, and cannot be contained by, stage, page, or indeed any single art form.

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<sup>1</sup> Max Herrmann-Neiße, *Kabarett: Schriften zum Kabarett und zur bildenden Kunst* (Frankfurt am Main.: Zweitausendeins, 1988), p. 74. With thanks to Frank Krause for his help with the translations, all of which are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>2</sup> There is no coherent catalogue of Berber's papers. Some materials can be found via the Deutsches Tanz Archiv in Cologne: <<https://www.deutsches-tanzarchiv.de/archiv/nachlaesse-sammlungen/b/anita-berber>> [accessed 12 December 2021].

<sup>3</sup> Klaus Mann, 'Erinnerungen an Anita Berber', *Die Bühne, Wochenschrift für Theater, Tanz, Mode*, 275.7 (1930), 43–44 (p. 43).

<sup>4</sup> Susan Laikin Funkenstein, 'Anita Berber: Imaging a Weimar Performance Artist', *Woman's Art Journal*, 26.1 (2005), 26–31 (p. 27).

<sup>5</sup> Paul Marcus [d. i. Pem], 'Die vom Brettl', *Der Junggeselle*, 24.3 (1926), p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Katharina Herold, 'Franziska zu Reventlow and Ruth Landshoff-Yorck', in *The Oxford Handbook of Decadence*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and David Weir (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), pagination forthcoming.

<sup>7</sup> Funkenstein, p. 30.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Puchner, *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-theatricality and Drama* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), p. 28.

<sup>9</sup> Adam Alston, 'Immersive theatre and the aesthetics of decadence: on the ruined worlds of Punchdrunk, SHUNT and Hammer Film Productions', *Theatre and Performance Design*, 3.4 (2017), 199–217 (p. 215).

<sup>10</sup> Théophile Gautier, 'Charles Baudelaire', in *The Complete Works of Théophile Gautier*, ed. and trans. by Frederick C. de Sumichrast, 12 vols (London: Atheneum Press, 1909), II, pp. 39–41.

<sup>11</sup> Leopold Wolfgang Rochowanski, 'Analysis', in *Dances of Vice, Horror and Ecstasy*, trans. by Merrill Cole (Newcastle upon Tyne: Side Real Press, 2012), pp. 51–56 (p. 55).

<sup>12</sup> Herrmann-Neiße, p. 171.

<sup>13</sup> Alston, p. 213.

<sup>14</sup> Barbara Hales, 'Dancer in the Dark: Hypnosis, Trance-Dancing, and Weimar's Fear of the New Woman', *Monatshefte*, 102.4 (2010), 534–49 (p. 539).

<sup>15</sup> Kate Elswit, *Watching Weimar Dance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 7.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> Alexandra Kolb, *Performing Femininity: Dance and Literature in German Modernism* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), p. 221.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 220.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Eric Karl Toepfer charts the diversity and significance of dance and *Körperkultur* for Weimar culture more broadly. See Eric Karl Toepfer, *Empire of Ecstasy: Nudity and Movement in German Body Culture, 1910–1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

<sup>23</sup> Ulrike Wohler, 'Tanz zwischen Avantgarde und Klassischer Moderne: Anita Berber and Mary Wigman', in *Avantgarden und Politik. Künstlerischer Aktivismus von Dada bis zur Postmoderne*, ed. by Lutz Hieber, Stephan Moebius (Bielefeld: transcript, 2009), pp. 67–88 (p. 79).

<sup>24</sup> Kolb, p. 205.

<sup>25</sup> N. N., *Elegante Welt*, 6.3 (1917), 15, translated by and quoted in Toepfer, *Empire of Ecstasy*, p. 84.

<sup>26</sup> On the significance of gender in Berber's performances see Barbara Hales, 'Dancer in the Dark: Hypnosis, Trance-Dancing, and Weimar's Fear of the New Woman', *Monatshefte*, 102.4 (2010), 534–49.

- <sup>27</sup> Laurence Senelick, 'The Mythical Decadence of Weimar Cabaret', 7 January 2021, <<https://www.stagingdecadence.com/blog/the-mythical-decadence-of-weimar-cabaret>> [accessed 10 September 2021], para. 12.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid., para 2.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid., para. 4 ('The Cabaret').
- <sup>30</sup> Peter Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 2.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 20.
- <sup>32</sup> Paul Bourget, *Essais de Psychologie contemporaine* (Paris: Alphonse Lemerre, 1891), p. 25. Translation by Nancy O'Connor, <<http://cat.middlebury.edu/~nereview/30-2/Bourget.htm>> [accessed 14 April 2017].
- <sup>33</sup> Nicholas D. More, 'The Philosophy of Decadence', in *Decadence and Literature*, pp. 184-200 (p. 189).
- <sup>34</sup> Elswit, p. 3.
- <sup>35</sup> The original edition of 1,000 (fragile) copies published by the Gloriette-Verlag, the same small publishing company that published Frank Wedekind's *Spring Awakening*, is now very rare and was only fully translated into English in 2012 by Merrill Cole. Anita Berber and Sebastian Droste, *Dances of Vice, Horror and Ecstasy*, trans. by Merrill Cole (Newcastle upon Tyne: Side Real Press, 2012). The poems 'Pritzel Puppets' and 'Suicide' in the body of the text are quoted from this edition and in Cole's translation.
- <sup>36</sup> A poet in his own right, Droste's first poem titled 'Tanz' ['Dance'] appeared in the April 1919 edition of the leading expressionist publication *Der Sturm*. He continued to publish his works centred on degenerate topics in 1921 and 1922 under his birth name Willy Knobloch alongside Filippo Marinetti's 'Drama der Gegenstände' ['Drama of objects'] and Surrealists Louis Aragon and Philippe Soupault.
- <sup>37</sup> Toepfer suggests the 'voice of the poems' did structure the choreographies. Toepfer, *Empire of Ecstasy*, p. 88.
- <sup>38</sup> Carl Zuckmayer, *A Part of Myself*, trans. by Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Harcourt, 1970), pp. 236-37.
- <sup>39</sup> Sebastian Droste, 'Dance as Form and Experience', in *Dances of Vice, Horror and Ecstasy*, pp. 9-10.
- <sup>40</sup> Toepfer, *Empire of Ecstasy*, p. 366.
- <sup>41</sup> Berber and Droste, 'Pritzel Puppets', in *Dances of Vice, Horror and Ecstasy*, p. 15.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>43</sup> Herrmann-Neiße, p. 34.
- <sup>44</sup> Eric Karl Toepfer, *Pantomime: The History and Metamorphosis of a Theatrical Ideology* (San Francisco: Vosuri Media, 2019), p. 871.
- <sup>45</sup> Funkenstein, p. 26; Kolb, p. 203.
- <sup>46</sup> Toepfer, *Empire of Ecstasy*, p. 83.
- <sup>47</sup> Kolb, p. 211.
- <sup>48</sup> N. N., *Elegante Welt*, p. 15.
- <sup>49</sup> Elswit, p. 23.
- <sup>50</sup> Kolb, p. 168.
- <sup>51</sup> Herrmann-Neiße, p. 74.
- <sup>52</sup> Dennis Denisoff, 'Posing a Threat', in *Perennial Decay*, pp. 83-100; Patricia Pulham, *The Sculptural Body in Victorian Literature: Encrypted Sexualities* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020).
- <sup>53</sup> Lothar Fischer, *Anita Berber: Ein getanzt Leben* (Berlin: Hendrik Baeßler Verlag, 2014), pp. 126-27.
- <sup>54</sup> A similar intermedial mechanism can be observed in Oscar Wilde's most decadent poem, 'The Sphinx' (1894) in which an object, the Sphinx, serves the speaker to bring to life his innermost sexually transgressive phantasies.
- <sup>55</sup> Berber and Droste, 'Suicide', in *Dances of Vice, Horror and Ecstasy*, pp. 19-22 (p. 21). All further references are given in brackets within the body of the text and relate to this edition and translation.
- <sup>56</sup> Berber and Droste, 'Pritzel Puppets', p. 15.
- <sup>57</sup> Rochowanski, 'Analysis', pp. 53-54.
- <sup>58</sup> Charles Baudelaire, 'To the Reader', in *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. by James McGowan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 4-7 (p. 7).
- <sup>59</sup> Mann, 'Erinnerungen an Anita Berber,' p. 43.
- <sup>60</sup> Elswit, p. 25.
- <sup>61</sup> Toepfer, *Empire of Ecstasy*, p. 91.
- <sup>62</sup> Senelick, para. 18 ('The Kabarett').

Visions of Phantasm:  
*Madame de Sade* in the Excess of Language and Imagination

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*Madame de Sade*, a celebrated play by Mishima Yukio (1925-1970), premiered on 14 November 1965 at Kinokuniya Hall in Tokyo, in a production by Theatrical Company NLT (Neo Littérature Théâtre).<sup>1</sup> Five years before the Japanese writer committed his infamous public suicide, the play expounded on a quasi-geometrical constellation of characters whose personalities embodied abstract ideological forms. *Madame de Sade* builds on the Japanese modernist genealogy of New Drama (*shingeki*) rooted in the late 1930s,<sup>2</sup> as well as European theatrical schemes built on realism and expressionism;<sup>3</sup> however, in terms of theme and semantics, the play also inherits Wildean fin-de-siècle decadence. With these artistic approaches, the play reflects Mishima's interest in recuperating the initial objectives of New Drama, especially the artistic modernization of Japanese theatrical plays and the promotion of the autonomy of art.

Due to a dissatisfaction with New Drama's political alignment with the rise of left-wing politics in 1960s Japan, Mishima branched out to form NLT.<sup>4</sup> Like Mishima's other plays, such as *Rokumei-kan* [*The Deer-Cry Hall*] (1957) and *Suzaku-ke no metsubō* [*The Decline and Fall of the Suzaku*] (1967), *Madame de Sade* is a historical costume play that wields the power of elocution and a lucid development of each act in response to the colliding worldviews held by each character. Set in the age of the French Revolution, the play explores the Marquis de Sade's libertinism, his notorious vice – symbolized in the physical violence he inflicted upon others – and the dwindling of his aristocratic privileges. As the consequence of his repeated transgressions, Sade faced numerous imprisonments before finally regaining his freedom in 1790. Assigning lucidly defined roles to each character, the play dissects the different ways in which Sade's revolutionary presence was perceived when the aristocracy's *Ancien Régime* and the age of Rococo were in decline. Centring on Sade's

wife Renée, Mishima conceived the play as a metaphysical response to why she ultimately rejected her husband in the post-Revolution phase.

*Madame de Sade* occupies a unique position in the context of modern Japanese decadent literature, as it inherits and partly defies the aesthetic traits of New Drama. New Drama strove to elevate the artistic quality of Japanese theatrical production while at the same time departing from trivial and mundane motifs associated with tear-jerking melodrama. In so doing, New Drama rejected the commercial priorities pursued by Kabuki and *Shinpa* [the New School], exploring instead a stylistic highbrow thanks to the leading exponents' familiarity with modern European theatres and naturalist realism (as exemplified in Osanai Kaoru's (1881-1928) introduction of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879) and *John Gabriel Borkman* (1896), and Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* (1904) to Japan's theatrical scene).<sup>5</sup> Mishima built on these aspects of New Drama by bringing it into dialogue with the artistic temperament of fin-de-siècle decadence. In this regard, the most influential figure for his aesthetic acculturation was Oscar Wilde, who, according to Mishima, possessed the mastery of shocking the mediocre middle classes.<sup>6</sup> His fascination with Wilde's oeuvre led Mishima to direct a theatrical production of Wilde's *Salomé* (1891) in 1960. However, in 1968 Mishima left the theatre company NLT and formed *Rōman Gekijyō* [Romantic Theatre], together with Matsu'ura Takeo. The manifesto of the new company denounced New Drama's 'inclination to (leftist) politics and playwrights' hypocrisy', which they believed deformed the literariness of plays. Instead, Mishima intended to design Romantic Theatre as a company capable of demonstrating the importance of language 'not only as a literary form', but also as 'an encounter of acting and words' on the living stage.<sup>7</sup>

The transition to Romantic Theatre took place two years before Mishima's death and lacked sufficient time to implement the full scope of his artistic vision. Even so, the 1965 NLT production of *Madame de Sade* significantly attests to Mishima's artistic ambitions. In the brief essay titled 'N•L•T no mirai-zu' [The Future Picture of NLT], he notes that the company's foremost objective lies in the maximal demonstration of 'engeki ni okeru serifu no jyūyō-sei' [elocution in

theatrical play]. The language in a play, according to Mishima, should eschew displays of its own literariness, manifesting instead at the intersection of ‘現場の演劇、現場の舞台の光彩陸離たる瞬間’ [actual acting, stage, and dazzling moment].<sup>8</sup> With such a deliberate use of language, to borrow from Wilde, Mishima envisions that the theatrical play is fundamentally ‘a supreme vanity [...] [and] ultimate deception [...] at the peak of artificiality’.<sup>9</sup> In stark contrast, he regarded New Drama in the 1960s as a pandemonium of ‘阿呆らしい先入主’ [ridiculous preconceptions] degraded by ‘心理主義 [...] トリヴィアルなリアリズム [...] [と] 空疎な様式主義’ [psychologism, [...] trivial realism, [...] [and] empty mannerism].<sup>10</sup> Overthrowing these factors, the NLT, by the time that *Madame de Sade* was staged, at least, aspired toward attaining ‘俳優が美神として現前する劇場の最高の瞬間’ [the supreme moment when actors emerge as an incarnation of beauty].<sup>11</sup> Hence, in a mode I choose to frame as distinctly ‘Wildean’, the company came to pursue and celebrate ‘order and beauty, extravagance, serenity, or pleasure’, and in so doing devoted their labour to the ‘voryupute no engeki’ [theatrical play of *volupté*].<sup>12</sup>

The critically acclaimed play *Madame de Sade* condenses these aesthetic ideals, while departing from the New Drama. However, the play has not received anything like the same degree of critical attention as Mishima’s novels, particularly with regard to its decadence.<sup>13</sup> Given his unwavering fascination with fin-de-siècle decadence, this article attempts to track down some salient characteristics embedded in *Madame de Sade* that resonate with the literary and cultural temperament of what Mishima conceived as decadence.<sup>14</sup> While exploring these characteristics, this article hopes to configure the ways in which Mishima amalgamates the mutually exclusive components of the play, including the motif of psychic entropy prevalent in the protagonist Madame de Sade (Renée), and the structurally cogent script. In the first instance, Mishima acquired a knowledge of the life of the Marquis de Sade through Shibusawa Tatsuhiko’s historiographical non-fiction, *Sado kōshaku no shōgai* [*The Life of Marquis de Sade*] (1964). While the life of Sade, whose name led to the coining of the term ‘sadism’ by German psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing, fascinated Mishima, what intrigued him the most was the fact that Renée rejected her husband

after spending so long advocating for his freedom. Mishima made this the focal point for the entire play, portraying Renée as a faithful Christian wife who dedicates herself to her husband. I consider that the excessive degree of her faith in the Marquis de Sade constitutes a central motif that is highly commensurate with the fin-de-siècle notion of decadence.

As his close friend and artistic accomplice Shibusawa notes, Mishima's understanding of decadence encompassed a vast historical period, far beyond the limit of the fin de siècle, spanning the age of the Old Testament through to his contemporary postwar decades in Japan.<sup>15</sup> Within such a wide spatiotemporal stretch, various versions of 'decadence' discursively coexisted in Mishima's imagination. Decadence intertwined with his fetish for words like 'sensuality', 'pleasure', 'profanation', and 'ennui'.<sup>16</sup> Whereas his infatuation with decadence and related concepts occasionally overrides the canonical European notion, the aesthetic premise of decadence he embraced was consistent throughout his literary career:

デカダンス[は]どんな時代とどんな国家にも、交替的に衰亡を欲求する文学的傾向[として]あらはれる。[...] その欲求に、破壊精神の旺盛な活力はなく、衰滅する主体の豊潤な感覚的生活と、知的な誇りとによる、衰滅の自己肯定だけが在るときに、デカダンス芸術と呼ぶに値ひするのである。

[D]ecadence that periodically desires a deterioration emerges in literary trends, regardless of historical ages and national [contexts]. [...] Such a desire deserves to be called decadent art only if it has lost destructive energies, affirming deterioration through the decaying subject's opulence, sensual life and intelligent dignity.<sup>17</sup>

As this perspective suggests, Mishima was consciously building artifices that fall into the thematic category of decadence, which prompts me to put forward the hypothesis in this article that *Madame de Sade* was a theatrical and dramatic variant of his decadent literature. Mishima's perspective affords an interpretation of the play as an artistic affirmation of the deteriorating old world where the decaying subject faces, to borrow Matei Calinescu's framing, 'a need [for] self-examination'.<sup>18</sup> Such a sense of restlessness underpins *Madame de Sade*. Ultimately, the foremost dramaturgy of the play is an eschatological consciousness of history that transforms the protagonist Renée into a decadent subject befitting the agonistic decay of an epoch.



## Overview

At first glance, adorned with rhetorical opulence and flowery costume, *Madame de Sade* echoes Mishima's earlier costume play, *The Rokumeikan* (premiered in 1957), set in the Meiji Restoration phase of Japan that faced radical Westernization. Nevertheless, in terms of subtextual theme, *Madame de Sade* portrays the twilight of a cultural epoch built on aristocratic extravagance, as implied by Sade's debauchery and decline. Set in the pre- and post-French Revolution periods, the three acts encapsulate the gradually declining power of the aristocracy that had been backed by the absolute monarchism inherited from Louis XIV. The presence of Sade is highly emblematic, with the moribund condition of the aristocracy paralleling the arrest and imprisonment of the marquis, and his miserable physique upon release. Rejected by his wife, Renée, Sade poignantly signifies an epochal threshold and the end of the *Ancien Régime*.

The play begins in the autumn of 1772. Countess de Montreuil invites Baroness de Simiane and Countess de Saint-Font to her mansion, requesting their support in rescuing her son-in-law, the Marquis de Sade, from the Fortress of Miolans in French Savoy. Saint-Font recounts Sade's abuse of aphrodisiacs and notorious debauchery with young prostitutes, including their flagellation, in Marseille. Both Simiane and Saint-Font are Mishima's fictional characters whose respective roles represent two mutually exclusive worldviews. Simiane embodies a conscientious Christian morality, and firmly believes that Sade's violent debauchery mirrors his paradoxical desire to give in to God. In turn, Saint-Font extols Sade's 'extraordinary passion for certainty',<sup>19</sup> which is directed toward the carnal senses. Confronted with these two contrasting perspectives, at this point in the play, Renée chooses to vindicate the man on sentimental grounds. Toward the end of the act, Renée's younger sister, Anne-Prospère de Launay, daringly reveals her sojourn to Venice with Sade, making a sly sexual innuendo. Baffled by Anne, Montreuil explodes with indignation towards the familial disgrace caused by Sade, gesturing to save him and to eradicate the familial infamy.<sup>20</sup>

Act Two focuses on ever-increasing mother-daughter conflicts in 1778, six years after Act One. Uplifting news arrives at the onset – the High Court at Aix-en-Provence have approved

Sade's release from the Fortress of Vincennes, and his criminal charge for sodomy and corruption of morals is expunged from the record. While celebrating his release, Anne, Saint-Font, and Montreuil share their memories of Sade's debauchery. Anne describes their intimacy as highly intuitive and instinctive, challenging Renée's naiveté and inability to grasp her husband's true nature. Saint-Font reveals her radical partisanship with Sade, confessing her participation in the profanation ritual where she offered her body as an altar. In turn, Montreuil accuses Renée by condemning her participation in an orgy at the Château de La Coste at Christmas time. The rest of Act Two shifts to an intensified struggle between mother and daughter. Montreuil defends her sense of societal propriety through a staunch rejection of Sade. In response, Renée denounces Montreuil's piousness, and ultimately declares, borrowing from Saint-Font's words, that 'Alphonse is myself' (p. 76).

Set in April 1790, nine months after the outbreak of the French Revolution, Act Three takes the form of a kind of postscript. Saint-Font, we are told, has died in Marseille – trampled by a mob of revolutionaries – while Simiane took her religious oath and became a nun. Unable to observe Sade's release, Renée wishes to retire from the mundane world, while Montreuil now wearily disregards her son-in-law's deeds as trivial matters. In such ways, the play portrays the collapse of the *Ancien Régime* as a cause of their enervation. An irony lies in the chiasmic condition that reverses the stances of Sade and the other women in the play. As a survivor of the revolution, Sade achieves an overturning of *morale larmoyante* [sentimental moralism] that was exalted in late-eighteenth-century France,<sup>21</sup> a theme that Sade made the focal point of *Justine* (1791). Sade wrote *Justine* while he was in prison, and toward the end of Act Three we find Renée directly referencing it as the first story of Sade's that she ever turned to. The story juxtaposes orphaned sisters – the older Juliette, and the younger Justine – with the former's vice affording a range of privileges, while the latter's virtue and purity results in misery, humiliation, torture, and the threat of execution for a crime she did not commit. Even after escaping that threat, she is killed by a lightning strike. Renée realizes that, by authoring the book in prison, Sade intended to confine her to the persona

of Justine. Accordingly, she realizes that her devotion and pleas for rescuing him have been meaninglessly wasted. In the closing moments of the play, the servant Charlotte announces the return of Sade. He remains invisible to the audience, but is described by her as being physically wretched, old, and dirty. Renée unequivocally conveys her final dictum, the last line of the play: ‘The marquise will never see him again’ (p. 106).

### ***Madame de Sade as a variant of a decadent play***

For Mishima, whose knowledge of French was quite limited, Shibusawa Tatsuhiko’s book *Sado kōshaku no shōgai* [*The Life of the Marquis de Sade*] (1965) was the major source of inspiration for *Madame de Sade*.<sup>22</sup> In response to Renée’s rejection of her husband when he finally returns to her after nearly twenty years of imprisonment, Mishima designed the play as a kaleidoscopic set of perceptions of and counterpoints to Sade’s character. For instance,

Madame de Sade stands for wifely devotion; her mother Madame de Montreuil, for law, society, and morality; Madame de Simiane for religion; Madame de Saint-Font for carnal desires; Anne, the younger sister of Madame de Sade, for feminine guilelessness and lack of principles; and the servant Charlotte for the common people.<sup>23</sup>

Among them, Saint-Font embodies the decadent psyche due to her boredom and radical deviance from aristocratic norms and values. Her audacity is likened to ‘Madame de Montespan in the days of the Sun King’ (p. 48), echoing also fin-de-siècle *femmes fatales*. In search of a psychosomatic stimulant, she comes to see the act of flagellation and other bodily rituals as resembling a perverse form of holy communion predicated on sensual awakening (p. 50). At their sacrilegious ceremony, a silver crucifix ‘placed in the cleft between [Saint-Font’s] breasts’, as well as the cold sensation of ‘the silver chalice poised between [her] thighs’, make her tremble with ‘the joy of profanation’ (p. 51). The climax of the mass further intoxicates her:

[T]he blood of lamb, hotter than sweat poured over me by any man, more abundant than any man’s sweat, flooded over my breasts, my belly, and into the chalice between my thighs.... I had been impassive, half-amused and half-intrigued, but at that moment a joy flamed up in my heart. As the flickering candles dropped hot wax on my spread-out arms, obscenely imitating the cross, I knew for a certainty the secret meaning, that the fire in my hands stood for the nails of the Crucifixion. (pp. 51–52)

Saint-Font's pleasure encapsulates the empirical nature of Sade's violence, which reflects the age of the Enlightenment marked by Voltaire and Diderot.<sup>24</sup> The eroticism provoked by the profane ritual is not trivial; like many other forms of violence Sade experimented with, it delves into a primal mechanism of pleasure as the most powerful human drive.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, the notion of sadism cannot be separated from Catholicism because its fundamental essence lies in 'a practice of profanation, rebellion against morality, spiritual dissipation, and ideologically Christian derangement'.<sup>26</sup> Saint-Font's decisive dictum – 'Alphonse was myself' – thus creates a sense of catharsis as it vindicates Sade's violence towards an innocent other (p. 52). In this regard, *Madame de Sade* dramatizes the decline of the aristocracy and its inherited sense of social superiority and entitlement – especially with regard to the liberty and welfare of others – which used to be 'the exclusive prerogative of the nobility' (p. 10). Therefore, Saint-Font's death is inevitable as it metaphorically announces the fading of noble privileges, now unleashed upon the wider public through the Jacobins' more radical terrorism and violence by guillotine. When Saint-Font dies in Marseille, she is in the guise of a prostitute, singing the revolutionary lyric, 'Hang the nobles from the lampposts!' at 'the top of her lungs' together with a mob (pp. 81–82). Her corpse displays the tricolore – 'red blood, white flesh, blue bruises', suggestive of, liberty, equality, and fraternity, the motto of the French Revolution – as though ironically yielding to the new republic governed by commoners. Upon her death, as if alluding to the defeat of the nobility, her ugly wrinkled body is revealed (p. 82). In essence, the fictional presence of Saint-Font accentuates the decline of an age of unfathomable passion and reason.

In stark contrast to the clear-cut affirmation of Sade by Saint-Font, Renée's staunch devotion to him displays three stages of semantic shift. A notable instance includes when Saint-Font questions Renée's awareness about Sade's imprisonment. Renée seems aware of the conspiracy of Montreuil, who shrewdly petitioned a Royal Warrant of arrest for him (p. 55). Renée self-consciously plays the role of a damsel in distress who helplessly waits for her husband,

although she also expresses determination not to leave Sade. Whereas Montreuil vehemently tries to expel Sade from the family through fear of reputational damage, Renée insistently vindicates him.

The mother-daughter confrontation becomes the focal point of Act Two, expanding the unbridgeable gulf between their standpoints. Montreuil increasingly speaks of the bifurcation between propriety and corruption, accusing both Sade and Saint-Font of an inconceivable deviation from her moral standard. In this act, Renée's commentary grows increasingly analytical, dwelling on the rationale behind Sade's deeds: He 'laid his plan' for proving 'the absolute limits of evil' (p. 60). Without listening to her daughter, Montreuil throws a tantrum, refusing to acknowledge his humanity. In response, Renée maintains her devotion and faith in Sade. Unlike her naiveté and passivity in Act One, here she emphasizes her sacrificial disposition, claiming that she has 'never counted on his love' (p. 61). The mother-daughter conflict turns out to be a stalemate. As Montreuil makes clear to Renée, despite her protests to the contrary, and in a way that foreshadows the play's conclusion: 'you are grateful to me. You and I have remarkably similar interests in keeping him locked up in perpetuity' (p. 63). From that point on, Act Two sets out a series of repetitive quarrels that go nowhere. For instance, Montreuil keeps reproaching Renée (rather than Sade) for her immorality, while Renée defends his violence and profanation as a scientific experiment. Regardless of her arguments, what truly vexes Montreuil is Renée's excessively poetic language, which she believes cannot legitimate Sade's vices. Her frequent use of similes comparing Sade with 'a dove' and 'a small, white, golden-haired flower' agitates Montreuil, who finds such language exasperating (p 69). In these ways, Act Two exhibits a clash between two incommensurable worldviews, and the language that underpins those worldviews.

The course of the Revolution plays an important role in Act Three. The Legislative Assembly announces that the Royal Warrants of arrest are invalid, leading to Sade's freedom. Nonetheless, this final segment of the play is essentially a postscript to the pre-Revolution phase when his radical empiricism was part and parcel of the age of the Enlightenment. Therefore,

Renée's rejection of Sade upon his return obliquely reflects the demise of the *Ancien Regime*. A well known line, in which she likens her memory to 'insects [trapped] in amber' (p. 83), affirms her alliance with Sade and the psychic world of a nobility in search of 'something [...] frightening, something indescribable, [...] something never [seen] even in nightmares' (p. 84). In contrast, Montreuil lacks such a sense of wonder, belonging instead to a realm of pragmatism capable of antagonizing Sade as 'an unmitigated scoundrel' (p. 95). By Act Three, Renée embodies epochal resignation and lassitude, metaphorically confined – perhaps a little tenuously – in the misery-laden image of Justine:

Our whole lives and all our suffering have ended in wasted effort. We have lived, worked, sorrowed, shouted, merely to help him complete this horrifying book. [...] My long endurance, my struggles to help him escape, my efforts to secure a pardon, the bribes I gave the prison guards, my tearful pleas to the wardens – they were all meaningless wastes of time. (p. 102)

Hence, the denouement of the play occurs with the epiphanic realization that such misery and wastefulness must be compensated with a logic that 'belongs to some different order' because

[t]his man, who has abandoned all human feelings, has shut the world of men behind iron bars, and goes walking around it, jingling the keys. He is the keeper of the keys, he alone. My hands can no longer reach him. I have no longer even the strength left to thrust my hands through the bars and beg in vain for his mercy. (p. 104)

Despite the unbridgeable distance that she feels from Sade, she nevertheless comes to glorify his transcendental sovereignty of a kind that remains incommensurate with 'liberty, equality, and fraternity':

Alphonse, the strangest man I have known in this world, has spun a thread of light from evil, created holiness from filth he has gathered. [...] His armor glows faintly with the violet light he sheds on the world. [...] Human anguish, human suffering, human shrieks rise like the lofty silver horns of his helmet. He presses a sword sated with blood to his lips, and heroically intones the words of his oath. [...] His icy-cold sword makes lilies wet with blood white again, and his white horse, dabbled with blood, swells forth its chest like the prow of a boat, and advances toward a sky streaked with intermittent flashes of morning lightning. The sky breaks at the moment, and a flood of light, a holy light blinding the eyes of the beholders, showers down. Alphonse, perhaps, is the essence of that light. (pp. 104-05)

Rhetorical opulence marks the climax of the play. Adorned with the image of a warrior in armour, this portrait of Sade celebrates Renée's excessive imagination and her tendency to luxuriate in

language. The passage reifies her ode to Sade, historically concatenating his reputation as an exponent of vice and sodomy. In other words, Sade's 'cathedral of vice' (p. 103) finds a match, of sorts, in Renée's poetic hyperbole.

Despite the differences in outward personality, Renée belongs genealogically to the obsessive psyche of fin-de-siècle decadents such as the titular protagonist in Wilde's *Salomé*, who wagers her life for the sake of her aesthetic obsession with Jokanaan. On the surface, Renée plays the docile wife, as though endorsing Catholic convention and patriarchy. But despite the guise, she controls her world, and allows Sade to be at the disposal of her imagination. It is her excessively logocentric worldview that affords *Madame de Sade* the right to be called a decadent play. Here, in a rather reductive sense, Max Nordau's typology of degenerates set out in *Entartung* [*Degeneration*] (1892) holds relevance, especially his commentary on the 'ego-maniac'.<sup>27</sup> Egomaniacs are, as Nordau borrows from criminologist Cesare Lombroso's phrasing, 'all delirious geniuses' who are 'captivated by and preoccupied with their own selves'.<sup>28</sup> Renée's narrative reaches a point of radical catachresis, much embellished and exhausted with an excess of imagination.<sup>29</sup> In the end, she negates the pragmatic ends of language altogether. Moreover, the thematic core of *Madame de Sade* engages with the impossibility of equating discursive human realities to a categorical mould. Therefore, unlike others in the play who represent more defined notions of morality, pious religious devotion, and political pragmatism, Renée, like Sade, cannot be likened to a single archetype. It is due to her egomaniac nature that she puts up with Sade's betrayal, finding a perverse form of solace in the imaginative lines of flight that he inspires.

### **Decadence at play**

Mishima implicitly employs indigenous Japanese methods of dramatic narrative in *Madame de Sade*.<sup>30</sup> Whereas the outlook of the play aims at the post-*shingeki* aesthetics based on logical lucidity, the narrative scheme specifically inherits the theoretical framework of Noh drama employed by Zeami Motokiyo (1363-1443), with which Mishima was familiar. While I acknowledge that

Kabuki's 'aesthetics of evil' and its baroque qualities may well be seen to be more in line with Mishima's own aesthetic outlook, as well as the eighteenth-century social context of this play, I contend that the narrative development across the play's three acts is more comparable with the three stages of dramatic development known as 'jo' [beginning], 'ha' [middle development], and 'kyū' [quick ending]. Respectively, each narrative stage bears significance: *jo* establishes a spatial order, while *ha* expands temporality in dramatic tension.<sup>31</sup> The final act of *kyū* destroys the orders, as seen in the resolution of conflicts established in the previous two segments. Following this triadic mutation, Act One of *Madam de Sade* establishes a metaphysical space set in the pre-Revolution age where moral, religious, and social standpoints collide but coexist; Act Two sets forth the temporal shift from the previous act, dramatizing the mother-daughter conflict over Sade; and Act Three overthrows the established conflict through the protagonist's quick decision to refuse to meet Sade. As typically observed in medieval Noh repertoires, *Madame de Sade* also omits extraneous accounts, designing the play as an extra-diegetic drama that presumes the historical conditions and Sade's reputation as a radical maverick.

In terms of dramaturgy, Mishima employs a form of *benshintan* [story of metamorphosis] that has existed in Japan since its antiquity. In Noh drama, a protagonist's metamorphosis occurs at the levels of visual transformation and invisible psychological resolution. The latter case is metaphorical and metaphysical, usually represented by a certain physical posture or dance. Akin to this, Renée and Sade complete metaphysical transformations exclusively through language and elliptical narrative.<sup>32</sup>

Alongside an indigenous narrative pattern linked to Noh, the complexity of *Madame de Sade* also lies in the logical lucidity with which Mishima tried to emulate Greek tragedy.<sup>33</sup> The dramatic ethos stems from his belief in Sade's commitment to an untamable and apparently instinctual disposition toward violence.<sup>34</sup> Being also familiar with *Justine, Juliette* (1797), and *The 120 Days of Sodom* (1785), translated by Shibusawa, Mishima articulates the extra-textual presence of Sade in *Madame de Sade*:



サドは理性の信者であるが、同時に理性の兇暴な追及力を知っていた。彼はラクロなどの暗黒小説のひとつとして、仮借ない理性の自然認識が、目の前のまさに地獄を開顕するのを眺めた。[...] サドの理性は、かくて十八世紀の啓蒙家の粗い網目をつき抜け、中世以来、永きにわたって辱められてきた自然の憤怒と復讐を理解したのである。サドが自然の衝動として理解する残虐性が、中世紀の反自然的なドグマが演じた拷問や刑罰の残虐と、いちいち符節を合してあるやうに見えるのはこのためである。

Whereas Sade was a believer in rationality, simultaneously, he knew its fierce power of pursuing [objectives]. Like other artists of darkness such as de Laclos, he observed, in front of his eyes, the hellish ruthlessness of reason's understanding of Nature. [...] Sade's rationality evaded the rough grids of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinkers, and understood the indignation and revenge of Nature that had been devalued for a long time since the Middle Ages. This is why Sade considered human cruelty as the impulse of Nature corresponding to the brutality of tortures or punishments employed by the anti-natural dogma of the Middle Ages.<sup>35</sup>

Nonetheless, the focal point of the play is not Sade but Renée's excessive subjectivity. Within the span of nearly two decades, she invests all her resources including youth, confidence, and social reputation. She admits in the end that these efforts are wasted, and instead comes to terms with her inability to reach Sade's transcendental prodigy. Here, the most relevant theoretical strand Mishima engages with is Georges Bataille's theory of entropy. Renée attains her own sovereign realm, wilfully escaping instrumentalized labour and the productive consumption of resources. In this regard, sovereignty denotes a subjectivity that remains indifferent to rationality and utility.<sup>36</sup> According to this perspective, unlike a mode of consumption geared toward a concrete purpose or goal, a sovereign subject expounds on subjective volition, and comes to understand the world phenomenologically, rather than as a 'thing' with a 'utility'.<sup>37</sup>

This is not arbitrary rhetoric; it resonates with fin-de-siècle decadence. As Nicoletta Pireddu observes,

the decadent pleasure of the ephemeral and the transformation of beauty as expenditure and gratuitousness are founded upon the principle of unconditional loss informing those primitive or archaic practices that inspire the nascent discourse on symbolic economy to reject instrumentality in life and in representation.<sup>38</sup>

Long before he composed *Madame de Sade*, Mishima was already familiar with Bataille's work, and had been placing the notion of entropic consumption at the very heart of his aesthetics.<sup>39</sup> Renée's final resolution in rejecting Sade belongs to the same symbolic economy, precisely because of her

wasteful expenditure of resources in having defended and supported Sade for so long. Waste, then, constitutes *Madame de Sade's* most significant thematic focus as a decadent play, just as it underpins the play's dramaturgy. As Tanaka Miyoko observes, the play dramatizes the process of Renée's self-discovery, up to the point at which she identifies herself with Sade despite the obloquy she needs to endure.<sup>40</sup> This plays into *Madame de Sade's* cultivation of a new terrain of decadence by means of the titular protagonist's vigorous subjectivity, journeying from unceasing devotion to its wastage. Moreover, the emotive dimension that the audience witnesses in Renée's restlessness produces an uneasy, devastating revelation; to borrow from Mishima, Sade ultimately emerges as one whose acceptance of humanity is both total and unconditional, traversing all human institutions – including art.<sup>41</sup> What Renée receives in return, by virtue of his excessive individualism and the didactic violence inflicted on her body and mind, is an ecstatic realization of the unattainability of Sade.

On the one hand, underscored by her unconditional faithfulness to her husband, Renée can be seen to embody the role of a docile wife moulded in accordance with patriarchal convention. Her traits correspond strongly with the ideal profile of women propagated by the Meiji Restoration as well as modern Japan.<sup>42</sup> However, on the other hand, her role in *Madame de Sade* departs from the social expectations of the time, and implicitly corresponds with the fin-de-siècle *femme fatale* akin to Wilde's *Salomé*. The difference is that in 1960 and 1971 (posthumously with the support of Wakuta Shigeo), Mishima and NLT consciously avoided a production of mass spectacle, unlike the first performance of *Salomé* directed by *Geijyutsuza's* (Art Theatre) Shimamura Hōgetsu in 1913<sup>43</sup> that sensationally featured the quasi-bare body of actress Matsui Sumako, which played to the audience's voyeuristic gaze.<sup>44</sup> This valence of visual femininity and literary objectiveness becomes irrelevant in *Madame de Sade*. Renée's persona and beliefs rely on the articulation and metaphysical construction of her subjectivity.<sup>45</sup> Although the stage production employed opulent eighteenth-century dresses that consist of a low-necked gown worn over a petticoat and head ornaments, visual splendour played a secondary role. The stage sets were also kept minimal in

order to place extra emphasis on ‘the collisions of ideas [that] constitute the drama as if they form a mathematical scheme in precision’.<sup>46</sup>

Given all of these theatrical stratagems, *Madame de Sade* was surely an attempt to advance the avant-garde when it premiered in 1965. As explored over the course of this article, Mishima’s alliance with fin-de-siècle decadence plays a vital role in the play at a nuanced, semantic level. Rendered mainly in the script, imaginative excess and passion unravels in the abstract. Also, through the structural logic of his narrative, Mishima looks to furnish his audiences with the play’s central concern – why Renée decides to leave Sade after nearly two decades of forced separation. As I have argued throughout this article, although *Madame de Sade* might be read as little more than a spectacular costume play displaying Mishima’s theatrical palate for visual splendour, there is much more at stake in this decadent work once it is read in light of its European forebears, as well as Sade’s own work – newly translated by Shibusawa Tatsuhiko’s at the time<sup>47</sup> – and indeed Mishima’s own creative and political trajectory in Japan as the course and fate of the NLT evolved. All of these elements contribute to multiple aspects of the play’s decadence, then, and not just with regard to its thematic concern with aristocratic decline and epochal change; what makes *Madame de Sade* so compelling as a decadent play is the unattainability of the Marquis’ vices for Renée, which are displaced in favour of an imaginative decadent hinterland all of her own: a devotee turned *femme fatale*, whose poetic excesses and ‘wasting’ of her own subservient devotion underpin both her final act of refusal, and the conditions for her own sovereignty.

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<sup>1</sup> The theatrical company Gekidan NLT was launched in 1964 by writers, playwrights, actors, and producers including Mishima Yukio, Yashiro Seiichi, Kahara Natsuko, and Tan’ami Yatsuko. Later the company was split into two streams that focused on Mishima’s work and comedy. As a result, Mishima left NLT and established *Rōman Gekijyō* [the Romantic Theatre], which took over the production of his *Madame de Sade*, *My Friend Hitler*, *The Decline and Fall of Suzaku*, and so forth. In 1971, after Mishima’s suicide the previous year, the Romantic Theatre presented Oscar Wilde’s *Salomé* as an homage to Mishima.

<sup>2</sup> New Drama thematically tended to cultivate proletarian interests, and later developed an offshoot of existentialist surrealism as represented by novelist/playwright Abe Kōbō (1924–1993). However, Mishima departed from the New Drama of the 1960s due to its increasing political inclination to leftism.

<sup>3</sup> Mikolaj Melanowicz, ‘The Power of Illusion: Mishima Yukio and *Madame de Sade*’, *Japan Review*, 3 (1992), 1–13 (pp. 3–4).

<sup>4</sup> Muramatsu Takeshi, *Mishima Yukio no sekai* [*The World of Mishima Yukio*] (Tokyo: Shinchō, 1990), pp. 411–17.

- <sup>5</sup> Matsumoto Shinko, 'Osanaï Kaoru's Views on Russian Theatre', in *A Hidden Fire: Russian and Japanese Cultural Encounters, 1868-1926*, ed. by Thomas J. Rimer (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 68–83 (p. 69).
- <sup>6</sup> Mishima Yukio, 'On Oscar Wilde', *The Wildean*, 43 (2015), 38–48 (p. 52).
- <sup>7</sup> Cited by Ôkubo Norio, 'Hen'ntai: Hyôden Mishima Yukio' ['The Chronicle of Critical Biography of Mishima Yukio'], in *Bessatsu Kokubungaku: Mishima Yukio Hikkei*, ed. by Miyoshi Yukio (Tokyo: Gakutô, 1983), pp. 183–211 (p. 210).
- <sup>8</sup> Mishima Yukio, 'N•L•T no mirai-zu' ['The Future Picture of NLT'], in *Mishima Yukio zenshû*, 34 vols (Tokyo: Shinchô, 2000), XXXIV, p. 242.
- <sup>9</sup> Mishima, 'On Oscar Wilde', p. 55.
- <sup>10</sup> Mishima, 'The Future Picture of NLT', p. 242.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 243. Mishima spells out the French word '*volupté*' in Japanese katakana.
- <sup>13</sup> See, for instance, Shibusawa Tatsuhiko, 'Mishima Yukio to dekadansu' ['Mishima Yukio and Decadence'], in *Mishima Yukio oboegaki [Memoirs of Mishima Yukio]* (Tokyo: Chûkô, 1986), p. 59.
- <sup>14</sup> The decadent temperament has stirred academic debates and views regarding various historical ages. Here, I borrow a Judeo-Christian view of decadence as noted by Matei Calinescu, as it coheres with an eschatological worldview underlying Mishima's *Madame de Sade*. According to Calinescu, its decadent temperament manifests itself in 'restlessness and a need for self-examination, for agonizing commitments and momentous renunciations'. See Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism Avant-Garde Decadence Kitsch Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), p. 154.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp. 59–61.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 61.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 60. Cited by Shibusawa, Mishima Yukio. My translation.
- <sup>18</sup> Calinescu, p. 154.
- <sup>19</sup> Mishima Yukio, *Madame de Sade*, trans. by Donald Keene (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p. 5. All other references to this text are cited inline.
- <sup>20</sup> The representation of Montreuil is fictionally modified and designed for the dramatic tension. In reality, she conspired to imprison her son-in-law Sade to mitigate the disgrace he caused for the family. According to Ronald Hayman, she was 'like a Machiavellian politician' who shrewdly manoeuvred to take control over and take advantage of the demeaned family affairs. See Ronald Hayman, *Marquis de Sade: The Genius of Passion* (London: Tauris Parke, 2003), p. 40.
- <sup>21</sup> Marco Menin, 'Sade's Ethics of Emotional Restraint: Aline et Valcour Midway between Sentimentality and Apathy', *Philosophy and Literature*, 40.2 (2016), 366–82 (p. 366).
- <sup>22</sup> Mishima, 'Author's Postface', in *Madame de Sade*, p. 107.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>24</sup> Shibusawa, *Memoirs of Mishima Yukio*, p. 119.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>26</sup> Shibusawa, *Biblioteca Shibusawa Tatsuhiko*, vol. 1 (Tokyo: Hakusui, 1979), p. 272. Joris-Karl Huysmans cited by Shibusawa. The source is not mentioned.
- <sup>27</sup> Max Nordau, *Degeneration*, trans. by George L. Mosse (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), pp. 243–45.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 244.
- <sup>29</sup> Hashimoto Osamu, 'Mishima Yukio' towa nanimono dattanoka [*Who was 'Mishima Yukio'?*] (Tokyo: Shinchô, 2002), p. 292.
- <sup>30</sup> Mishima's modernized form of Noh Drama in *Kindai nogaku shû* (1956) includes eight plays including 'Kantan' ['The Town of Kantan'], 'Aya no tsuzumi' ['The Damask Drum'], and 'Sotoba komachi' ['Komachi at the Stupa']. (Donald Keen's translated edition includes only five plays). All the plays in the collection are set in contemporary Japan and shaped in satiric pastiche of the original medieval Noh scripts. The overriding tone of Mishima's modern Noh drama is ludic, mundane, and even vulgar to some extent. In contrast, *Madame de Sade* emulates the structural convention and narrative efficacy prevalent in medieval Noh plays.
- <sup>31</sup> Konparu Kunio, *Nô e no sasoi: jo-ba-kyû to ma no saiensu [An Invitation to Nob: The Science of jo-ba-kyû and Pause]* (Kyoto: Tankô, 1980), p. 36.
- <sup>32</sup> Shibusawa, *Memoirs of Mishima Yukio*, p. 118. Shibusawa points out that the logic running through *Madame de Sade* is a dialectic that begins with '*innocence*', goes through '*monstruosité*', and arrives at '*sainteté*'. While these three stages concern the images of Sade in the other characters' perception, my discussion sheds light on Renée's transformation. According to Shibusawa, her realization that she is Justine created by Sade triggers her 'transcendence' as shown in her rejection of him after nearly two decades of separation.
- <sup>33</sup> Saeki Shôichi, *Monogatari geijyutsu ron [On Art of Narrative]* (Tokyo: Kôdansha, 1979), pp. 88–89.
- <sup>34</sup> Sadoya Shigenobu, *Mishima Yukio ni okeru seiyô [The West in Mishima Yukio]* (Tokyo: Tokyô Shoseki, 1981), p. 157.
- <sup>35</sup> Mishima Yukio, cited by Sadoya, p. 157. My translation.
- <sup>36</sup> Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, vols 1 and 2, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Zone, 1993), p. 199.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 233. Bataille contends that eroticism is also fundamentally an inner experience of human beings. See *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, trans. by Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights, 1986), p. 29.

- <sup>38</sup> Nicoletta Pireddu, 'Handing Out Beauty: Gabriele D'Annunzio's Ritual Squanderers', *Forum Italicum*, 51.2 (2017), 413–31 (p. 415).
- <sup>39</sup> Mishima's numerous novels, novellas, and plays endorse the notion of symbolic economy. In particular, his decadent literary works such as *Forbidden Colors* (1951) and the tetralogy *The Sea of Fertility* (1965-1970) engage with the thematic treatment of narrative. It is known that Mishima had access to Bataille's *Eroticism* in Muro Junsuke's translation, which he severely criticized for the quality. Later Shibusawa Tatsuhiko and Sakai Ken also translated the book.
- <sup>40</sup> Tanaka Miyoko, *Mishima Yukio: Kami no kage bōshi* [*Mishima Yukio: the Shadow of God*] (Tokyo: Shinchō, 2006), pp. 236–37.
- <sup>41</sup> Mishima Yukio, 'Jūnan no Sado' ['Sado's Passion'], in *Mishima Yukio zenshū*, vol. 33, p. 417.
- <sup>42</sup> Ayako Kano, *Acting Like a Woman in Modern Japan* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 55. The Meiji ideal of 'good wife, wise mother' did not reflect the majority of Japanese women's social status. The ideal was institutionalized in the 1890s not to reduce women into a gendered role but to recognize the importance of women whose social position used to be considered by Confucianism as 'borrowed wombs'.
- <sup>43</sup> Imura Kimie, *Sarome no henryō* [*The Transformation of Salomé*] (Tokyo: Shinshokan, 1990), p. 94.
- <sup>44</sup> Kano, pp. 224–25.
- <sup>45</sup> In reality, Renée-Pélagie was deeply concerned about the effect of Sade's imprisonment on their children. See Hayman, p. 110.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>47</sup> Shibusawa Tatsuhiko's publications on Sade include the books *Sado fukkatsu: Jiyū to bankō seishin no senkusha* [*Sade Resurrects: The Pioneer of Liberty and Spiritual Rebel*] (Tokyo: Kūbundō, 1959) and *Sado kōshaku no shōgai: rōgoku bungakusha wa ikanishite tanjō shitaka* [*The Life of Marquis de Sade: How the Imprisoned Literatus Was Born*] (Saitama: Tōgen, 1965).

‘That Melancholy Fiend’:  
Charles Ludlam’s *Bluebeard* and the Horrific City

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‘I love New York... I feel the whole city is my instrument’.<sup>1</sup>  
– Charles Ludlam

‘In my master, Baron Khanazar, the Bluebeard, you see the vilest scoundrel that ever cumbered the earth, a madman, a cur, a devil, a Turk, a heretic, who believes in neither Heaven, Hell, nor werewolf: he lives like an animal, like a swinish gourmet, a veritable vermin infesting his environs and shuttering his ears to every Christian remonstrance and turning to ridicule everything we believed in’.<sup>2</sup>

– Sheemish, Bluebeard’s minion

US President Gerald Ford might never have *actually* told New York City to ‘DROP DEAD!’ – the infamous *New York Daily News* headline was poetic license, to say the least – but the apocryphal response to the city’s near bankruptcy in the midst of its 1970s fiscal crisis resonates nevertheless.<sup>3</sup> Not only does the phrase continue to aptly reflect some of the nation’s lingering tensions – between conservatism and progressivism, urbanity and rurality, disinterested federal government and struggling localities – but its grotesque bluntness also evokes the New York City landscape of the 1970s, a period often understood as equal parts ‘freedom in the unkempt metropolis’ and ‘real danger’ in the ‘decrepit city’.<sup>4</sup> It was a period, in a word, of decadence, using David Weir’s understanding of the term as ‘historical decline’ or ‘social decay’ that bespeaks the fundamental limits of modernity’s optimistic promise of progress.<sup>5</sup>

For some theatre scholars and practitioners, few artists straddled (and exploited) that decadent period more colourfully than Charles Ludlam, who from 1967 until his death in 1987 produced twenty-nine original, wild, eccentric, brilliant, queer plays through his Ridiculous Theatrical Company. Though ‘startlingly few people outside of the theatre community have ever heard his name’,<sup>6</sup> Ludlam had by his death secured a legacy not only as a downtown New York City innovator but also as a singular voice in US theatre. His work brought uptown audiences and

critics outside of their mainstream comfort zone without sacrificing an experimental approach bridging high and low art, the epic and the personal, the zany and the ambitious, the artificial and the authentic, the ‘avant-garde and popular’.<sup>7</sup> Given their impressive stylistic variety,<sup>8</sup> Ludlam’s plays offer fertile ground for analysis of the continuity between the classical, literary playwriting tradition, and post-dramatic contemporary theatre reflective of a volatile world. In fact, it is in relation to a particular era of volatility – New York City on the brink of fiscal crisis – that I intend to position Ludlam and his landmark 1970 work *Bluebeard*. Through a focus on Ludlam’s use of horror tropes in the play, I argue that he designed and staged a production whose grotesque, decadent aesthetic offered its contemporary audiences a reflection of their city as it navigated its own decadent decline. More specifically, I illustrate how Ludlam’s use of horror expressed a deep ambivalence that simultaneously recognized and valorized the reality of decay, both through the play’s construction and through its correlation to the city from which its first audiences were drawn.

While it is not new to read Ludlam’s theatre, or even *Bluebeard* specifically, in relation to its discursive social quality, his work has traditionally been characterized largely through a queer lens, as a form of camp. Most of the posthumous scholarship tends to approach Ludlam *in toto*, grappling with his oeuvre as a reflection of the period’s tumultuous identity politics. For instance, Sean Edgecomb reads Ludlam’s work as a ‘queer entity based on a queer sensibility’, and his style as ‘a secret language [...] used to communicate exclusive codes to his gay audience’;<sup>9</sup> Kelly Aliano defines Ludlam’s ‘Theatre of the Ridiculous’ largely through its ‘gender performativity’;<sup>10</sup> Rick Roemer identifies Ludlam’s aesthetic as ‘ridiculousity’, whose core is ‘the concept of a gay identity’;<sup>11</sup> and Jordan Schildcrout focuses on Ludlam’s embrace of ‘queer villainy’.<sup>12</sup> There is a good reason for this general framing: Ludlam’s plays frequently challenge the heteronormative both in content and through liberal use of drag; his early success arrived in the era of Stonewall; his untimely death from AIDS-related illness gives his career a tragic resonance; and he was openly, unapologetically, fabulously gay.<sup>13</sup> Further, framing an artist via *milieu* is hardly uncommon,

especially for the 1970s, whose ‘plays and playwrights’ are largely analysed through the ‘prism’ of ‘identity politics’,<sup>14</sup> and since so many of that period’s social indignities remain unresolved, understanding Ludlam through a queer lens is an important framing.

But Ludlam did not want to be camp; he wanted to be Molière. In fact, he often resented being categorized as ‘gay theatre’, as though he was ‘like an Indian on a reservation selling trinkets to the tourists’,<sup>15</sup> and he actually preferred to play to ‘a more general audience’ who would understand his work more broadly.<sup>16</sup> My argument here is not intended as a challenge to the queer framing of Ludlam’s work, but instead as a widened consideration of the resonances it might have had for this ‘general’ audience. Of course, ‘general audience’ is an abstraction, and surely Ludlam didn’t mean that sexual preference alone guided reception, so I proceed here believing that he meant less to bifurcate (i.e., separate gay from straight) than to expand, to describe an affect that functioned *regardless* of sexual orientation rather than simply *in relation to* it. To that end, instead of considering Ludlam’s career *in toto*, I choose to focus specifically on the decadent resonances of *Bluebeard*, one of his best-known works. As *Bluebeard* was the play ‘that put the Ridiculous on the mainstream map of New York culture’,<sup>17</sup> it offers an opportunity both to understand Ludlam as part of the 1970s zeitgeist, as well as to consider the audiences of that zeitgeist.

I believe *Bluebeard* reflected that zeitgeist specifically through its generic and affective use of horror, a particularly important mode for Ludlam. While his use of horror as inspiration has hardly been overlooked, it is typically washed into a larger aesthetic of what Kelly Aliano calls ‘remix’, the practice of ‘borrowing, referencing, quoting, or sampling’ from other works and genres, an aesthetic that other scholars connect to Ludlam’s camp sensibility.<sup>18</sup> How, then, might the play’s horror tropes have resonated for its contemporary audiences?

In what follows, I will explore how the horror in *Bluebeard* functions as an affective corollary to New York City on the cusp of the 1970s, as it was transforming into what Kim Phillips-Fein would later call ‘Fear City’. I argue that *Bluebeard*’s bodily grotesqueness, transgressive perversity, and generic horror conventions resonated socio-geographically for audiences who were



confronting the city's decline on a day-to-day basis, offering them a means by which to navigate their own ambivalence about their shifting urban environment. With a focus on its initial production, presented at the 'sleazy [West Village] gay bar' Christopher's End,<sup>19</sup> I will examine how the play, both as text and onstage, provided a fertile ground for audiences to engage their socio-geographic reality through the work's explicit monstrosity. This reading is novel in large part because it understands the play's grotesque horror affect not as one operating on a sexual binary – the queer freaks versus the 'hetero-normates', more or less<sup>20</sup> – but on one that appealed to audiences in geographical terms – the New Yorkers of the depraved, decadent island versus everyone else. By simultaneously acknowledging the reality of the city's decadent decay, while also performing a 'generative',<sup>21</sup> emboldened pride (rather than shame) in that decay, the horror in *Bluebeard* can be understood as a reflection not only of its times, but also of the people looking to the theatre for clarity about their own ambivalent relationship with that perceived decay. While I intend no claim on Ludlam's overt intention nor on the audiences' conscious awareness, I do hope this inquiry might offer new insight into *Bluebeard*, into Ludlam's work overall, and into how transgressive or decadent performance interacts with periods of cultural transformation.

### **The scary story: Bluebeard and his island**

Charles Ludlam loved horror. In his uncompleted memoirs, he identifies 'frightening' imagery as central to his development, spotlighting as influences films like *The Thing from Another World* (1951) and the ritual of Halloween, when he sometimes dressed as a ghoul to frighten other children.<sup>22</sup> In a much-quoted story, he tells how he once snuck away from his mother at the carnival to visit 'the forbidden freak show', where he was 'enthralled' by the freaks, including 'armless black dwarfs'.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, grotesque horror tropes appear consistently throughout his largely comic corpus of plays. *The Ventriloquist's Wife* (1978) is a 'story of possession' based on *Dead of Night*, a 1945 British horror movie.<sup>24</sup> He produced an atmospheric horror short film called *Museum of Wax* (1987), starring himself as a murderous maniac. In 1979, he hosted a 'Victorian-style vaudeville of

carnival sideshow acts and circus freaks' called *Elephant Woman*.<sup>25</sup> Arguably his best-known work, *The Mystery of Irma Vep* (1987), is a 'penny dreadful' that counts amongst its many influences *Nosferatu* (1922), and Théophile Gautier's 1858 novel *Le Roman de la momie* [*Romance of the Mummy*].<sup>26</sup> This list is hardly exhaustive – one can find moments of *guignol*-style gore even in some of his more 'serious' works, like *Stage Blood* (1979) – but I offer it to stress that while horror can be identified as one of many interchangeable influences comprising the Ridiculous 'remix', it might also be seen as particularly important, if not integral, to what Tony Kushner calls Ludlam's 'moral vision', a vision that was 'dangerous', 'appalling', and 'wicked' in its 'bloody comedy'.<sup>27</sup>

Apart from *Irma Vep*, perhaps, there is no more horror-centric story in Ludlam's oeuvre than *Bluebeard*, and there are few plays that were more important to the Ridiculous Theatrical Company. Its fifth production, *Bluebeard* was quite distinct from Ludlam's earlier works; where those were huge, fragmentary 'mish mash' affairs,<sup>28</sup> *Bluebeard* was 'very traditional and formal, much more focused and carefully worked out', his first deliberately 'well-made play'.<sup>29</sup> Featuring a single protagonist in Baron Khanazar von Bluebeard (played by Ludlam himself) and a straightforward plot, the play matured Ludlam as both writer and director. Many in the cast also felt that they '[became] a company' with *Bluebeard*.<sup>30</sup> Further, the show was a hit: it won Ludlam his first Obie, toured several European cities, and remained an oft-reprised staple of the company's repertoire.<sup>31</sup> It perhaps transcends coincidence that Ludlam, in fashioning the play that would focus his talents and kickstart his career, did so by engaging the overtly horror-centric influences that were so important to him.

While *Bluebeard* 'cannibalizes'<sup>32</sup> many sources – H. G. Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), Charles Perrault's *Barbe Bleue* (1697), Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (1592), Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull* (1896), Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *The Rivals* (1775), the Bible, Shakespeare, 'every Gothic melodrama and "B" horror movie [...] ever created'<sup>33</sup> – its most recognizable influence is the 1932 horror film *Island of Lost Souls* (itself an adaptation of Wells's novel), which, like the play, is perhaps most succinctly described as a 'gothic thriller'.<sup>34</sup> In Ludlam's 'thriller', Baron

von Bluebeard inhabits an island off the coast of Maine, where he mutilates unwilling patients in search of a ‘third genital’.<sup>35</sup> The play opens as his two enslaved minions – Sheemish and Mrs Maggot (played by John Brockmeyer and Gary Tucker, in drag) – curse their cruel master, while anticipating the impending arrival of visitors. After the title character delivers a deliciously depraved speech about his ambitions and resentments, immediately establishing the play’s generously fecund wordplay, he welcomes those visitors: his ingénue niece Sybil (played by long-time collaborator Black Eyed Susan), her fiancé Rodney (Bill Vehr), and her tutor Miss Cubbidge (Lola Pashalinski). Throughout the play, Bluebeard cruelly seduces both women, prohibiting them from entering a forbidden chamber (his medical lab), knowing of course that Sybil’s curiosity will eventually overcome her reticence. Rodney uncovers Bluebeard’s plan too late; when Sybil enters the chamber, Bluebeard surgically replaces her vagina with a ridiculous monstrosity: a ‘loofah sponge with a movable bird’s claw’.<sup>36</sup> All seems lost until the ‘Leopard Woman’ Lamia (played by Mario Montez), another of Bluebeard’s victims, suddenly appears to disrupt the Baron’s unveiling ceremony. High jinks ensue and the visitors flee the island, Sybil’s genitals beyond repair. Bluebeard is left with his deformed minions, unhappy and alone.

If its plot alone does not evidence the play’s indebtedness to ‘gothic’ horror – specifically the golden-age ‘late-night’ horror of the 1950s and 1960s (for example RKO or Hammer films)<sup>37</sup> – its contemporary reviews certainly identified that influence in production. Those reviews, mostly written by uptown critics who had trekked downtown for the show, are liberally peppered with words like ‘ghoulish’, ‘lunatic’, ‘scared to death’, ‘menace’, ‘monstrous’, ‘terror’, ‘gothic melodrama’, ‘macabre’, and ‘grotesque’.<sup>38</sup> Clearly, the play was affectively received as one built on grotesque horror (fig. 1). I do not mean to ignore the play’s deliciously deranged comedy or camp aesthetic; many of its horror elements<sup>39</sup> were presented and received as ‘parody’,<sup>39</sup> a part of Ludlam’s ‘contemporary high comedy’.<sup>40</sup>



Fig. 1: 'Charles Ludlam *Bluebeard* beard intact', first European tour, c. 1971.  
Photo: Unknown. Courtesy of the Sean F. Edgecomb theatre and ephemera collection.

Consider Bluebeard's demented opening speech, which undercuts a dark, gothic style – 'Is to end desire desire's chiefest end?' and 'Yet chastity ravishes me' – with bizarre proclamations – 'And yet the cunt gapes like the jaws of hell' – or campy mad scientist tropes – 'They said I was mad at medical school'.<sup>41</sup> Or the big reveal of Sybil's mutilated 'loofah' genitals, less gore than clown prop. Or perhaps its most (in)famous exchange, Bluebeard's 'seduction' of Miss Cubbidge, a wild eight minute 'scene of unprecedented eroticism'<sup>42</sup> in which Ludlam and Pashalinski employed outrageous slapstick choreography and absurd theatricality, an exchange hilarious by practically every account.<sup>43</sup>

Arguably the clearest indication of the show's camp intentions was Ludlam's casting of Mario Montez, since it indicates the way that he employed a decadent aesthetic for hyperbolic comic appeal. Montez was a drag performer (Ludlam wrote that he 'towers above all the [other drag queens] in eleven-inch Fuck Me Pumps'),<sup>44</sup> and a downtown camp icon for having appeared in Jack Smith's early films. Smith had not only been a pivotal figure in the early days of the Playhouse of the Ridiculous (the company from which Ludlam's own Ridiculous Theatrical grew after his split with its founder John Vaccaro), but also was a central figure in the New York City avant-garde of the period, particularly for his use of a 'trash' aesthetic. Ludlam's casting of Montez was more than simply a playfully queer cameo for a knowing audience; it also illustrates the extent to which Ludlam's central aesthetic was shaped not only by camp but by a tradition of decadence, a tradition that merges 'ornate style' with 'sadistic action' and transgressive humour.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, Ludlam continued to employ this mode of aesthetic decadence throughout his career, perhaps most notably in his late-career work *Salammô* (1985), which adapted Gustave Flaubert's 1862 novel about ancient Carthaginian decline into an epic play that '[celebrated] lascivious promiscuity' in part through the casting of professional bodybuilders whose talent was specifically to bring 'raw muscle onstage'.<sup>46</sup> Marked as much by its lavish design requirements and ornately stylized language as by this deliberately provocative casting, *Salammô* illustrates how Ludlam trafficked in 'civilized depravity' that is the stuff of decadent art,<sup>47</sup> much as he did in *Bluebeard* by employing a campy

'low' aesthetic by casting Montez while simultaneously marketing the work as mainstream. Thus, it is easy to understand why *Bluebeard* has traditionally been categorized as hilariously campy, its horror signifiers merged into the Ridiculous 'remix' rather than being analysed as a unique genre divorced from that remix. The decadent intent seems to be to confound any particular genre signification, to obfuscate rather than clarify through its use of multiplicity.

However, while acknowledging that there is much work outside the scope of this article to be done on investigating the overlap between horror and camp, I see in *Bluebeard* not merely a stylistic hybrid, but also indications of an unabashed and explicit embrace of horror style. Consider the script's parentheticals, used to clarify line readings – 'terribly frightened'; 'sadistically'; 'ominously'; 'horrified'<sup>48</sup> – all of which could indicate melodramatic excess, but which likewise point towards Ludlam's intentions. The plethora of horror genre elements – an on-stage 'operating table', evoking unanaesthetized mutilation; the 'dramatic music' as Bluebeard, 'his eyes ablaze', approaches Sybil to commit sexual violence; the 'sound of thunder and flashes of lightning', 'the candles and incense', and the 'science-fiction lighting effects'<sup>49</sup> – together insist that any faithful production ought to embrace a heavy dose of (admittedly, often schlocky) horror movie atmosphere. Its early set designs confirm that claim, as Ludlam's first fully-realized production used 'cardboard icicles of blood dripping off the stage, bats and cobwebs covering the furniture',<sup>50</sup> while a Zagreb production 'built their fantastic gothic set [...] with a cuckoo clock and candles burning'.<sup>51</sup> As previously mentioned, the play was unabashed in its pursuit of a comic affect; however, I also see in its plenitude of grotesque, horror imagery evidence that *Bluebeard* seems to have been constructed not only to imitate but also to function as a horror story that was meant to unsettle, frighten, or gross out an audience on top of whatever else it did.

And indeed, as the reviews above indicate, it seemed to have achieved that effect for some audience members, who appreciated its horror tropes less from ironic, campy distance and more as genuinely engrossing terror. Ludlam once wrote of *Irma Vep* that 'there were two kinds of audiences': those 'that perceived it as [...] a parody of a gothic thriller, and [...] those for whom it

was a gothic thriller, [who] would scream with fright'.<sup>52</sup> *Bluebeard* likely invited similarly ambivalent reactions. Even the play's ridiculous climactic reveal – Sybil with the new, third genital – merges the comic camp of a rubber bird claw with a horrific performative affect: she 'screams with horror' and 'growls with displeasure',<sup>53</sup> providing room for disgust and terror in addition to amusement. That people laughed does not mean that they might not also have been creeped out.

The play pursues this affect not only through its signifiers, but also through its construction. Its basic premise – a twisted, perverse scientist using butchery in pursuit of this 'third gender' – conforms quite closely to archetypal horror narratives. Philosopher Noël Carroll has identified how horror usually employs a figure – often but not always a monster – who '[breaches] the norms of ontological propriety presumed by the positive human characters in the story'.<sup>54</sup> Horror, then, is built around an 'impure' creature whom the audience understands as distinct from themselves.<sup>55</sup> Later in his life, Ludlam wrote that his 'early plays were all pain, all cruelty, all victims and predators', and specifically that *Bluebeard* expressed 'a lot of rage' as it 'explored surgery as a form of violence'.<sup>56</sup> These dark intentions are manifest in the play's monster, Bluebeard himself, whose alterity was defined both by the intensity of his fury and by his desire to express that fury through embodied violence. Employing what Carroll identifies as an 'overreacher plot', a horror tale 'concerned with forbidden knowledge'<sup>57</sup> and in which perverse ambition causes terror, *Bluebeard* tells a story of how monstrous ambition carries within it a rage that terrorizes those who encounter it. While there is no question that Ludlam performed *Bluebeard* with his much-lauded comic skill, he was likewise constructing an explicitly threatening character, one notably marked by rage and lunacy, a mad scientist we are meant to avoid even as he amuses us.

Further, horror is typically constructed around an oppositional quality, one delineating the monster from the normates. Carroll identifies how the genre typically positions its 'impure or unclean' element against 'positive human characters' whose 'affective responses' indicate what the audience is *supposed* to feel.<sup>58</sup> Through their anxieties over a monster's *otherness*, the characters in

horror provide audiences with ‘a set of instructions about the appropriate way’ to respond in a type of ‘mirroring-effect’ that links audience members and non-monster characters.<sup>59</sup> This bifurcation of normativity against queerness (defined broadly) was central to the Ridiculous from the beginning – one of its greatest influences, Jack Smith, was well known for work that intentionally positioned his community of ‘freaks’ against the ‘pasty normals’ usually understood to indicate the heteronormative<sup>60</sup> – but *Bluebeard* is unique in the way Ludlam develops that bifurcation through a horror affect, introducing his monster specifically through the lens of the terror he produces for others in the play. In the opening scene, Sheemish and Mrs Maggot exhibit palpable fear: they ‘dread the wrath of the Bluebeard’,<sup>61</sup> immediately establishing how the audience is *supposed* to feel about him. That they are themselves mutilated (Sheemish a hunchback, Mrs Maggot a ‘deformed old crone’)<sup>62</sup> complicates the construction; even the liminally human characters fear the villain, thereby doubly establishing his threat to the normative *status quo* as reflected in Sybil’s ‘lily-white body’.<sup>63</sup>

However, the play’s oppositional quality – between threatening monstrosity and normality – manifests not merely through Bluebeard’s alterity, but also through the fear of being infected by him and his island. In a sense, both Bluebeard *and* his ‘Island of Lost Love’ operate as ‘impure’ forces challenging the otherwise ‘clean’ characters, since the monster’s perversity is manifest in the world he contaminates. Consider when Sheemish force-feeds meat to Mrs Maggot as a form of internalized rage produced through traumatic abuse, or when Rodney, after discovering Bluebeard’s intentions, attempts to strangle himself from the shame of his newly discovered, Bluebeard-inspired murderous feelings. Note also that Bluebeard refuses to simply kidnap Sybil; he insists that she *choose* her own mutilation by tempting her with the forbidden chamber, making her his accomplice. Through his viciousness, the Baron produces more than physical disfigurement; he also spreads mental and moral corruption.

Even worse, though the normate characters escape, they carry Bluebeard’s perversity back to the mainland: a now deformed Sybil speaks like him, spewing his deranged fantasies – ‘The



human heart [...] who knows to what perversions it may not turn, when its taste is guided by aesthetics?<sup>64</sup> – and Miss Cubbidge is pregnant with his child. The island’s threat is viral, both to those who visit, and to the mainland to which those visitors return. Thus, the play’s island setting is not merely a random trope; it evokes a continental fear of the cannibalistic alterity of insularity, and underscores the horror-centric opposition between the ‘normal’ and the ‘impure’. The play’s horror is xenophobic; the monsters are not simply freaks left to themselves but committed villains who want to infect and pervert what surrounds them. Again, Ludlam’s work here reflects a decadent aesthetic, not only through its ‘delight in disgust’ as a work both horrific and comedic, but also through its indication that decadent depravity is not a character flaw so much as a defining community characteristic. If, as Weir argues, the ‘taste-based community’ engendered by decadent performance is one wherein ‘author, audience, and character’ together share that ‘delight in disgust’,<sup>65</sup> then *Bluebeard*, in its insistence that all within the Baron’s vicinity enjoy his self-proclaimed embrace of vicious villainy, seems to threaten this same risk of decadent spread.

In fact, that framing within a decadent tradition offers insight into one deviation Ludlam *does* make from Carroll’s horror conception: he makes his monster the protagonist. Ludlam insists that we inhabit the same mental space as his villain, who, by virtue of his delightful language, physical comedy, and flamboyant style, would be hard not to love. Naturally understanding that ‘works of horror are in some sense both attractive and repulsive’,<sup>66</sup> Ludlam used his play to both unsettle and entice, to frighten while insisting that his audience willingly subsist in and laugh along with the decadent depravity of Bluebeard’s island. Like Sybil, who ultimately elects to open the door, Ludlam’s audience must *choose* to be there.

### **The scary city: the island of downtown New York**

Ludlam’s embrace of horror can easily be understood as aligned with a particular characteristic of decadent art: specifically its use of a debased aesthetic as an ambivalent reaction towards periods of ‘historical decline’ and ‘social decay’, and a desire to uncover ‘generative’ profundity by

celebrating a diminishing civilization.<sup>67</sup> Ludlam once remarked that ‘decadence is to art what manure is to organic farming. It creates a fertile atmosphere.’<sup>68</sup> I want now to consider how New York City on the cusp of fiscal crisis might be understood as a ‘fertile’, generative influence not only on the play Ludlam crafted, but also on the way his early audiences might have responded. If horror is ‘a genre [...] through which the anxieties of an era can be expressed’,<sup>69</sup> and the excesses of decadent art employ ‘a mixture of subject and style’ to ‘express the illness of the age’,<sup>70</sup> so might we reasonably consider Ludlam’s decadent horror play as corollary to a period largely defined by unprecedented urban anxieties.

Central to my analysis is the horror-centric oppositional quality which I have identified in *Bluebeard*. Traditional readings of the play would correlate this oppositional quality with Ludlam’s queer intentions, understanding Bluebeard’s ‘queer quackery’<sup>71</sup> as a challenge to the heteronormative. Despite being ostensibly straight, Bluebeard is typically understood by scholars as ‘metaphoric personification of the contemporary homosexual’, the ‘third genital’ as ‘a clear metaphor for homosexuality’, and the play overall as some degree of ‘wicked satire’ of heteronormative ‘pathologizing attitudes to sexuality’.<sup>72</sup> I accept that such a binary – between the queer freaks and the heteronormates, as it were – might have resonated for audiences at the time, especially at its early venue: the ‘sleazy gay bar’ Christopher’s End, where Ludlam had to stack wooden planks on the bar in order to construct a playing space, and where reviewers from some of the city’s top periodicals might have stood shoulder-to-shoulder with ‘young, handsome men, some in leather and all in dungarees [...] [clinging] to each other lustfully’.<sup>73</sup> Christopher’s End might have functioned as corollary to Bluebeard’s ‘Island of Lost Love’, offering through its defiantly queer rage a confrontation for normative society: *So you think we queers are scary, do you? Well, you have no idea!*

Yet the dual functioning of horror, its use of transgressive grotesqueness to entice as well as repel, might ironically have allowed for a grander *communitas* than one simply open to the queer community. Whereas Ludlam’s earlier plays had indeed served to offer ‘political valence’ to ‘gay

people coming together in a shared space’,<sup>74</sup> *Bluebeard* offered that potential *in addition to* a confrontational thrill for those for whom that space was not designed, thereby engaging more than ostracizing this ostensibly normate patron. Especially given the production’s early mainstream success, it may have functioned less to bifurcate its audience into a queer/normate binary than to offer an ambivalent space wherein all patrons were simultaneously aware of their positionality in relation to others *and* joined by an ‘acute, elevated sensibility attuned to [the] nuances’ of the ‘distasteful’, decadent *Bluebeard*.<sup>75</sup> Put another way, perhaps the play’s horror-centred oppositional quality inspired not some sentimentalized fraternity but rather an evocative, shared recognition of their ambivalent reactions to the play’s grotesque horror. That ambivalence might have even encouraged such oppositional affect *within* the uptown audience, the play’s ‘horrific, repulsive imagery’ serving to touch on ‘sexual wishes [...] [that] are forbidden or repressed’,<sup>76</sup> even, if not especially, for the ostensibly non-queer audience. So even within the traditional queer reading of Ludlam’s work, *Bluebeard*’s horror affect is deeply correlated with its potential profundities.

However, it is worth noting that the play’s original reviews ‘largely ignored (or missed) the [play’s] gay subtext and symbolism’.<sup>77</sup> At the very least, however the play might have functioned in terms of sexual identity, the dominant, normative critical culture chose not to highlight that affect in its generally glowing assessment. Given that absence, I propose that the play’s horror-centric oppositional xenophobia might be understood in geographical terms, as opposition between the perceived, excessive freakery of the depraved city and the ostensibly sophisticated ‘normal’ folk who feared it. Perhaps for some of its audience, Christopher’s End, that ‘sleazy gay bar’, may have resonated less as particularly ‘gay’ than it did merely ‘sleazy’, as semiotic metonym of its city, whose seemingly horrific decline was mirrored by the horror of the play that everyone was talking about, a play whose decadence then was not merely aesthetic – DIY sleaze treated with literary tact – but also socio-geographic.

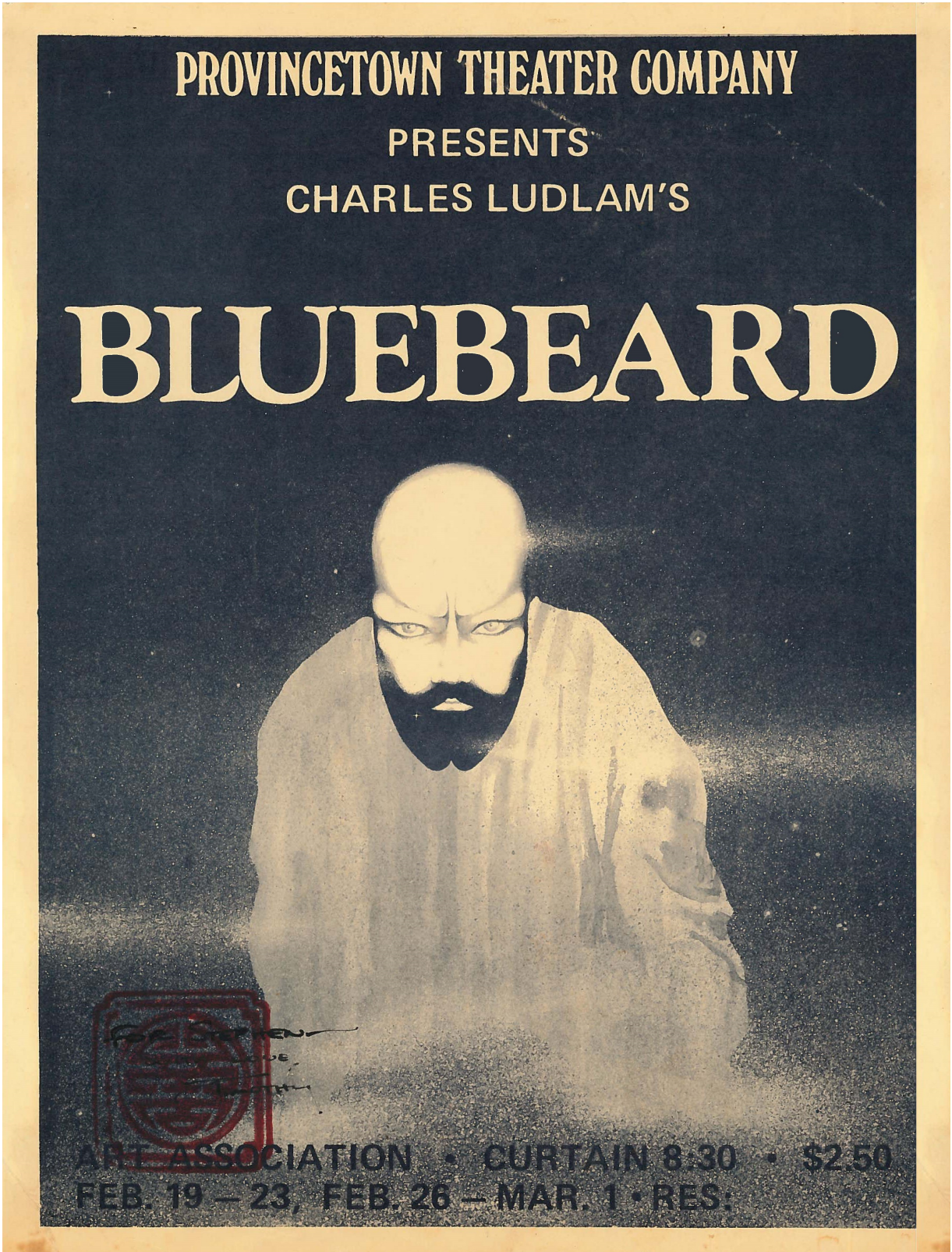


Fig. 2: Promotional poster from a 1976 touring production of *Bluebeard*.  
Courtesy of the Sean F. Edgecomb theatre and ephemera collection.

At its height, the 1970s fiscal crisis gave New York City ‘the qualities of a grotesque’ as it declared bankruptcy in the wake of severe diminishment of public services and a loss of its long-held self-image as exceptional.<sup>78</sup> While *Bluebeard* was first produced several years before those heights, the city’s social, economic, and racial tensions had already been simmering for over a decade. Though very few scholars or historians have closely analysed how awareness of the fiscal crisis shaped or challenged artists to produce the particular work they made during the 1970s,<sup>79</sup> it seems unlikely that those artists could have been unaware how, in the popular imagination if not actuality, New York City had become ‘decrepit’ by the 1970s; as early as 1965, the *New York Herald-Tribune* was profiling the city’s ‘crisis’ in managing poverty, homicide increases, and a diminishment in essential social services.<sup>80</sup> By the decade’s end, the intertwined forces of post-Fordist de-industrialization, white flight, and the contraction of the federal welfare state left the city suffering not only corporate bankruptcies but also public financial crises like that of the Penn Central railroad, which owned Penn Station and Grand Central Station.<sup>81</sup>

That suffering was felt in the quotidian sphere as well. Following a 1969 recession, the unemployment rate increased alongside widespread property abandonment. ‘Once-beautiful parks were dirty and deteriorating’, while libraries, hospitals, and public universities struggled to fulfil their missions.<sup>82</sup> And of course there was the crime, the most commonly-evoked manifestation of the city’s declining health (homicides rose over 150 per cent between 1966 and 1973 as public heroin use became common in some neighbourhoods).<sup>83</sup> While these struggles were hardly confined to New York City in the period, its decline carried a symbolic weight because it had long presented itself as a city of ‘promises’ and ‘visions’,<sup>84</sup> its robust welfare state touted as an evolved social contract whose promises were now being betrayed, its visions unrealized in the face of fiscal uncertainty.

Ludlam’s early adulthood in downtown Manhattan would have given him personal insight into the city’s potential for the ‘threat and disgust’ that is the stuff of horror.<sup>85</sup> He lived almost exclusively in the Lower East Side (defined broadly), an area that, more than most, shouldered the



reputation for decline; of all the ‘needle parks’ (sites of public heroin use), perhaps the most infamous were those around what today is known as Alphabet City.<sup>86</sup> That this area was presented by the media as ‘comically dismal’ as the fiscal crisis escalated only underscores how it was perceived by the city at large.<sup>87</sup> Until he secured a rent-controlled West Village apartment in 1972,<sup>88</sup> Ludlam and his colleagues lived like ‘paupers on the Lower East Side’;<sup>89</sup> his first New York City apartment was a ‘dumpy railroad flat in a tenement building’ on Broome Street, and he later inhabited a ‘tenement dwelling’ in ‘Heroin Alley’.<sup>90</sup> His early productions were staged in spaces like a porno theatre, where ‘all these guys [were] jerking off’ during the daytime, or in a ‘drug-sodden West Village apartment’.<sup>91</sup> Crime and unruly crowds were on the rise even in the more desirable West Village where he would later produce his work.<sup>92</sup>

Although it is impossible to know exactly what Ludlam or *Bluebeard*’s early audiences knew or felt about downtown Manhattan, it is fair to assume that many of them would have been aware of its reputation as emblematic of the city’s wider decline, an awareness they brought into the theatre. Theatre scholar Marvin Carlson has argued that any audience experience is influenced by more than the onstage presentation; instead, ‘the entire theatre, its audience arrangements, its other public spaces, its physical appearance, even its location within a city, are all important’ in determining a show’s ‘social and cultural meanings’, as are the particular ‘social semiotics’ of any particular neighbourhood.<sup>93</sup> Thus, one might consider how the perceptions of a declining New York City, over-riddled with junkies, freaks and queers, would have fed into if not been mirrored by a play trafficking in overt horror tropes. Perhaps Ludlam, seeing the city as his ‘instrument’, was exploiting its resonances to enhance those of his horror play, working in the decadent tradition of using a seemingly debased aesthetic as semiotic corollary to the decaying material world around it. Indeed, while Ludlam had intentionally courted the mainstream with *Bluebeard* – both by writing a ‘well-made play’ and by initially securing a quickly-aborted run at La MaMa to attract wider patronage<sup>94</sup> – he nevertheless showed little interest in sacrificing his downtown aesthetic wherein ‘everything [was] made out of garbage’.<sup>95</sup> Inspired as it was by Jack Smith, Molière, and so much in

between, this dual embrace, of a DIY ethos alongside a professionalized sheen helps explain its multiplicitious appeal to the '[gay] crowd, the *cognoscenti*, and the mainstream critics all at once',<sup>96</sup> many of whom might have recognized in his decadent valorization of 'garbage' an awareness of the city's depravity without any corresponding shame. It was not simply that he had sympathy for the monstrous qualities of New York City; he was one of the monsters, and he loved it. *Bluebeard*, for those early audiences, then, might have offered intertextual reference not only to decades-old horror films, but also to their own changing urban environment.

However, I argue the play did more than merely reference the city's decline through its aesthetic; I contend that its embrace of horror tropes and pursuit of horror affects provided audiences with an opportunity to explore a shared identity as New Yorkers at a time when 'the mood in the city was dreary and pessimistic'.<sup>97</sup> Central to this reading is the play's island setting and its inherent oppositional quality. I will now consider two ways in which that oppositional quality might have resonated for contemporary New York City audiences: as an opposition between uptown and downtown, or as an opposition between the city *in toto* and the larger nation and world who were perceived as celebrating its decline.

We might first read the play's oppositional quality – between the 'pure' and 'impure', the normative and the depraved – as a reflection of the city's uptown/downtown dynamic. *Christopher's End*, in its 'sleaziness', might well have resonated for its uptown audiences as representative of the 'comically dismal' downtown neighbourhoods that were generally 'neglected'<sup>98</sup> during the period of the fiscal crisis. The theatre spaces in these neighbourhoods – even the more respected La MaMa – were 'clearly on the margins' of the highbrow culture, 'in locations both precarious and ambiguous', marginally and decadently impure at a geographical if not ontological distance from the uptown exemplar of the 'public monument' of Lincoln Center.<sup>99</sup>

That divide has a clear parallel in Ludlam's perverse horror play, which straddles both insular, marginal depravity, and highbrow theatrical traditions. Perhaps its most striking semiotic highbrow reference comes in its printed form, which delineates a new scene with every entrance

or exit, a French neoclassical convention particularly affiliated with Molière. Though contemporary playgoers would not have had a printed text, the reference indicates Ludlam's desire to operate within a 'highbrow' theatrical culture. Of course, such highbrow signifiers are corrupted by the play's depravity (not to mention its sexualized farcical elements), much as Bluebeard's visitors are by their island sojourn. Carroll argues that horror affect often relies on its threat to 'destroy one's identity [...] [or] the moral order' by advancing 'an alternative society'.<sup>100</sup> Given that later in his career Ludlam was overt about a dream of the Ridiculous Theatrical Company displacing Lincoln Center as the 'national comic theater',<sup>101</sup> we might see in *Bluebeard* the seeds of an ambition to unseat the normative in favour of the horrifically depraved. *Bluebeard* tells its audience that the Ridiculous does not mean to save the city through high art; they want the decadent depravity of their island to spread. Uptown and downtown critics and audiences alike may have appreciated the play's 'mirroring-effect' as it both repulsed them by evoking their daily fears and enthralled them by validating their own perverse affection for those fears.

Then again, *Bluebeard* remained popular after moving in late 1970 to a theatre on West 43<sup>rd</sup> Street – another space that might have paralleled the play's horror, being as it was in a former 'funeral parlor' in a neighbourhood known at the time for being the centre of the city's smutty underbelly.<sup>102</sup> So, for those who saw its first productions, perhaps the play's oppositional horror functioned more broadly than simply as a reference to the uptown/downtown dynamic; perhaps it suggested an opposition between the island of a declining New York City, and the nation celebrating that fall from *schadenfreude*, if not disgust. In 1975, Allan Greenspan saw the city as 'the epitome of a nation and a culture that had veered into chaos', and as an emblem of 'a nihilistic mood'.<sup>103</sup> Or consider filmic depictions of the city from that time – think *Taxi Driver* (1976), *The Panic in Needle Park* (1971), *Serpico* (1973) – many of which highlight the perceived correlation between the city's urban and moral decay.

Ludlam's professed instrumentalization of New York City could indicate the correlation of Bluebeard's 'quackery' to the city's promises and visions, whose limitations were becoming all



too apparent as the social safety net diminished. Richard Schechner's original review noted that the play mocks 'utopian pretensions' in order to 'touch on the deepest aspirations and fears of modern, urbanized man',<sup>104</sup> an understanding we could read either as reference to the fine line between Bluebeard's ambitious brilliance and the horrific underside of such brilliance, *or* as reference to the much-lauded New York City system that was in the process of collapse. Not only the play but also the city are examples of Carroll's 'overreacher [horror] story', one in which ambition breeds terror: the play easily parallels how many in America saw New York City during the period, *especially* if they resided safely outside its figurative island. Hillary Miller describes the city in 1975 as 'an island within a country that took a relentless anti-urban, conservative, and anti-cosmopolitan stance towards the city';<sup>105</sup> in the same way that the 'Island of Lost Love' threatens the mainland, so was New York City already being defined apart from 'the real America', to borrow an anachronism, a place that needed to 'DROP DEAD!' lest its depraved values proliferate.

Perhaps *Bluebeard* appeared to anticipate if not intuit the intensity of that oppositional discourse, and rather than trying to convince anyone to the contrary, wickedly revelled in an exaggerative view of its city's dark side, embracing its very threat to the figurative mainland, as though to ask a version of that same question posed above – *So you think New York is scary, do you? Well, you have no idea!* – thereby allowing its audience to enjoy the thrill of embracing what they were otherwise expected to lament. *Bluebeard* does not fear its protagonist: it insists we valorize him because of his decadent depravity. While films like *Taxi Driver* depicted a tragic descent into nihilistic despair, Ludlam's play celebrates decay, engaging a dual 'attraction and repulsion' that could have had uptown audiences and downtown freaks identifying one another as fellow New Yorkers, as denizens of the same island. Bluebeard's 'mockery' of 'utopian pretensions' is, after all, more good-natured fun than it is dire warning: the Baron's island is without question cruel, vicious, depraved, and horrific, but it embraces that reality without judgement or shame, and through its ambivalent affective qualities asks the audience to do the same. As Bluebeard takes perverse glee in corrupting his normative visitors, so might *Bluebeard* have gleefully invited audiences to enjoy

the threat that their city seemingly posed to the terrified yokels beyond its borders, and to proudly identify themselves as the monsters, as though to say: *The city might be going to hell, but what does that matter to the demons who live there?*

Ludlam once wrote that ‘New York is the super-society that is, at the same time, the jungle. They both exist in man.’<sup>106</sup> Much as his play embraces the ambivalent, decadent, dual embrace of ‘delight’ and ‘disgust’ at a time when his city was grappling with such contradictions, so might his New York audiences have understood themselves ‘mirrored’ less by *Bluebeard’s* normative characters than by its brutally vicious villain and his depraved island. Faced with the reality of their long-vaunted city’s decline, those audiences may have recognized the cathartic comfort and pride *Bluebeard* finds in his embrace of decadent decay. That the play’s monster fails but soldiers onwards at the story’s end might be dismissed merely as a horror trope, but it might also have been for its first audiences a reminder that they were hardly dead yet.

## Conclusion

Though Charles Ludlam remains most closely affiliated with the city in which he made his work, *Bluebeard* did not belong to New York City alone. It was the centrepiece of every tour the company ever made, and was a hit more often than not.<sup>107</sup> That speaks to its diverse appeal, but also perhaps confirms that its response to the fertile, decadent failure of New York carried resonance beyond national or municipal policies, instead hewing closer to the ‘universal’ concerns Ludlam aspired towards.<sup>108</sup>

The reading of *Bluebeard* presented in this article is intended to widen consideration of the play’s often discussed *communitas*, one available not only to New York City’s queer communities, but in fact to all those demonized by a larger national culture for their city’s decadent decline. What I propose is a *communitas* built not on grief, but on a perverse form of pride, and a defiant embrace of a city’s decadent, horrific reality. Such a reading allows us to accept the play’s powerful articulation of queer identity while coming closer to understanding how such a bizarre figure as

Ludlam so thoroughly entered the mainstream as to earn a front-page obituary in the *New York Times* following his death in 1987.

If nothing else, *Bluebeard*, as a lens through which to understand the era that began to transform New York into ‘the highly stratified metropolis it is today’,<sup>109</sup> offers an opportunity to interrogate both the realities and the public imaginary of a city fighting to protect its identity, no matter the challenge. As the heroes of the film *Island of Lost Souls* abscond from Moreau’s island, someone warns them, ‘Don’t look back’. I hope my argument here might encourage us, whether as scholars, artists, or fans, to do the opposite, to re-examine this epoch as one not simply of failed promise but also of decadent triumph. As artists and citizens navigated the forces of decay and public disapproval, desperate to maintain their pride without lapsing into delusion, perhaps they took inspiration from the twisted glee of ambivalent decadence that *Bluebeard*’s horror offered, thanks to the bizarre, queer, grotesque and wonderful Charles Ludlam.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Ludlam, *Ridiculous Theatre: Scourge of Human Folly: The Essays and Opinions of Charles Ludlam*, ed. by Steven Samuels (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1992), pp. 243–44 (p. 89).

<sup>2</sup> Charles Ludlam, *Bluebeard*, in *The Mystery of Irma Vep and Other Plays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1999), pp. 239–40.

<sup>3</sup> History, ‘Behind the Headline: “Ford to City: Drop Dead”’, 30 May 2012, <<https://www.history.com/topics/us-states/ford-to-city-drop-dead-video>> [accessed 13 December 2021].

<sup>4</sup> Kim Phillips-Fein, *Fear City: New York’s Fiscal Crisis and the Rise of Austerity Politics* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2017), pp. 35–36, p. 39.

<sup>5</sup> David Weir, *Decadence: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 41–42.

<sup>6</sup> Sean F. Edgecomb, Charles Ludlam Lives!: Charles Busch, Bradford Louryk, Taylor Mac, and the Queer Legacy of the Ridiculous Theatrical Company (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), p. 30.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Ludlam, 1982 Artist Statement, quoted in David Kaufman, *Ridiculous!: The Theatrical Life and Times of Charles Ludlam* (New York: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2002), p. 351.

<sup>8</sup> As a brief sample, his plays include: a Wagner adaptation, a two person/thirty-five character play, children’s puppet plays, a country/western musical, and a Noël Coward high comedy.

<sup>9</sup> Edgecomb, p. 13, p. 33.

<sup>10</sup> Kelly Aliano, ‘Ridiculous Geographies: Mapping the Theatre of the Ridiculous as Radical Aesthetic’ (unpublished PhD thesis, CUNY Graduate Center, 2014), p. 41.

<sup>11</sup> Rick Roemer, Charles Ludlam and the Ridiculous Theatrical Company: Critical Analyses of 29 Plays (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, 1998), p. 46.

<sup>12</sup> Jordan Schildcrout, *Murder Most Queer: The Homicidal Homosexual in the American Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press), p. 82.

<sup>13</sup> As Kaufman describes, Ludlam was proudly flamboyant even when growing up in suburban Long Island, displaying a self-confidence uncharacteristic of the era.

<sup>14</sup> Hillary Miller, *Drop Dead: Performance in Crisis, 1970s New York* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2016), p. 16.

<sup>15</sup> Kaufman, p. xiii.

<sup>16</sup> Ludlam, *Scourge*, p. 185.

<sup>17</sup> Kaufman, p. 110.

- <sup>18</sup> Aliano, p. 7.
- <sup>19</sup> Edgecomb, p. 3.
- <sup>20</sup> Throughout the essay, I employ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's concept of the 'normate', the fantasy of able-bodied normality, both because *Bluebeard* implies that fantasy, and because, as should become clear, my understanding of horror is contingent on such a delineation. See Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).
- <sup>21</sup> Weir, *Decadence*, p. 45.
- <sup>22</sup> Ludlam, *Scourge*, p. 7, Kaufman, p. 8.
- <sup>23</sup> Ludlam, *Scourge*, p. 7.
- <sup>24</sup> Ludlam, *Scourge*, p. 69, Kaufman, pp. 270–71.
- <sup>25</sup> Kaufman, p. 298.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 387.
- <sup>27</sup> Tony Kushner, 'A Fan's Foreword', in Charles Ludlam, *The Mystery of Irma Vep and Other Plays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1999), pp. vii–ix.
- <sup>28</sup> Kaufman, p. 74.
- <sup>29</sup> Ludlam, *Scourge*, pp. 23–24.
- <sup>30</sup> Kaufman, p. 114.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124, p. 209.
- <sup>32</sup> Richard Schechner, 'Two Exemplary Productions', *Village Voice*, 23 April 1970, p. 44.
- <sup>33</sup> Roemer, p. 91.
- <sup>34</sup> Ludlam, writing as 'Althea Gordon' for *Gay Power*, quoted in Kaufman, p. 129. Yes, Ludlam reviewed his own play under a pseudonym.
- <sup>35</sup> Ludlam, *Bluebeard*, p. 235.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 269.
- <sup>37</sup> Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror, or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 3.
- <sup>38</sup> Mel Gussow, 'Laughs Pepper Ghoulish "Bluebeard"', *New York Times*, 5 May 1970, p. 57; Schechner, p. 44; Martin Washburn, 'Theatre: Bluebeard', *Village Voice*, 16 April 1970, pp. 44, 53; and John O'Connor, *The Wall Street Journal* review, quoted in Kaufman, p. 124.
- <sup>39</sup> Ludlam, *Scourge*, p. 62.
- <sup>40</sup> Schechner, p. 44.
- <sup>41</sup> Ludlam, *Bluebeard*, p. 234.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 258.
- <sup>43</sup> We are fortunate that an audio recording of this infamous 'seduction scene' exists. The recording is special not only for preserving part of Ludlam's performance, but also for illustrating how raucous the scene was for the audibly laughing audience. See <<https://vimeo.com/87693838>> [accessed 12 December 2021].
- <sup>44</sup> Ludlam, *Scourge*, p. 153.
- <sup>45</sup> Weir, *Decadence*, p. 115.
- <sup>46</sup> Kaufman, p. 405.
- <sup>47</sup> David Weir, 'Afterword: Decadent Taste', in *Decadence and the Senses*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and Alice Condé (Oxford: Legenda, 2017), pp. 219–28 (p. 223).
- <sup>48</sup> This sample of parentheticals is taken from throughout *Bluebeard*; most repeat several times.
- <sup>49</sup> Ludlam, *Bluebeard*, p. 233, p. 268.
- <sup>50</sup> Roemer, p. 67.
- <sup>51</sup> Ludlam, *Scourge*, p. 27.
- <sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187.
- <sup>53</sup> Ludlam, *Bluebeard*, p. 269.
- <sup>54</sup> Carroll, p. 16.
- <sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- <sup>56</sup> Ludlam, *Scourge*, p. 128, p. 100.
- <sup>57</sup> Carroll, p. 123.
- <sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23, p. 17.
- <sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31, p. 18.
- <sup>60</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of color and the performance of politics* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. xii.
- <sup>61</sup> Ludlam, *Bluebeard*, p. 234.
- <sup>62</sup> Kaufman, p. 116.
- <sup>63</sup> Ludlam, *Bluebeard*, p. 263.
- <sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 274.
- <sup>65</sup> Weir, 'Afterword', p. 221, pp. 226–27.
- <sup>66</sup> Carroll, p. 160.
- <sup>67</sup> Weir, *Decadence*, pp. 41–42, p. 45, p. 195.
- <sup>68</sup> Ludlam, *Scourge*, p. 55.

- <sup>69</sup> Carroll, p. 207.
- <sup>70</sup> Weir, *Decadence*, p. 195.
- <sup>71</sup> Lamia the Leopard Woman, in Ludlam, *Bluebeard*, p. 252.
- <sup>72</sup> Edgecomb, p. 22, p. 4; Stephen J. Bottoms, *Playing Underground: A Critical History of the 1960s Off-Off-Broadway Movement* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), p. 328.
- <sup>73</sup> Edgecomb, p. 3.
- <sup>74</sup> Aliano, p. 9.
- <sup>75</sup> Weir, 'Afterword', p. 223.
- <sup>76</sup> Carroll, p. 170.
- <sup>77</sup> Edgecomb, p. 22.
- <sup>78</sup> Phillips-Fein, p. 9.
- <sup>79</sup> For a significant exception, see Hillary Miller's *Drop Dead*, cited frequently in this article.
- <sup>80</sup> Phillips-Fein, p. 39, p. 71.
- <sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50, p. 10.
- <sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91, p. 49.
- <sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.
- <sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- <sup>85</sup> Carroll, p. 28.
- <sup>86</sup> Phillips-Fein, p. 124.
- <sup>87</sup> Miller, p. 49.
- <sup>88</sup> Kaufman, p. 155.
- <sup>89</sup> Ludlam, *Scourge*, p. 17.
- <sup>90</sup> Kaufman, p. 34, p. 40.
- <sup>91</sup> Kaufman, p. 101; Edgecomb, p. 20.
- <sup>92</sup> Miller, pp. 33–34.
- <sup>93</sup> Marvin A. Carlson, *Places of Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 2, p. 205.
- <sup>94</sup> Bottoms, p. 326. Ludlam premiered *Bluebeard* there to attract a wider audience; an argument with Ellen Stewart quickly ended that arrangement.
- <sup>95</sup> Ludlam, *Scourge*, p. 80.
- <sup>96</sup> Kaufman, p. 115.
- <sup>97</sup> Phillips-Fein, p. 121.
- <sup>98</sup> Miller, p. 16.
- <sup>99</sup> Carlson, p. 68.
- <sup>100</sup> Carroll, p. 43.
- <sup>101</sup> Kaufman, p. 315.
- <sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.
- <sup>103</sup> Phillips-Fein, pp. 361–62.
- <sup>104</sup> Schechner, p. 44.
- <sup>105</sup> Miller, p. 2.
- <sup>106</sup> Ludlam, *Scourge*, pp. 243–44.
- <sup>107</sup> Kaufman, pp. 142–46.
- <sup>108</sup> Ludlam, *Scourge*, p. 29.
- <sup>109</sup> Phillips-Fein, p. 23.

# Survival of the Sickest: On Decadence, Disease, and the Performing Body<sup>1</sup>

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Decadence and sickness are proximate concepts so long as sickness is understood not just as a physiological disorder, but as a metaphor for aesthetic or moral transgression. They are also protean concepts. ‘Decadence’ is referenced in the puritanical condemnation of ‘sick’ pleasures, identities and relationships, just as ‘sickness’ is embraced in transgressing the bulwarks of social conservatism. But decadence and sickness are also more than just concepts; they are seen to be embodied by specific, and often ostracized, people or groups. This is why theatre and performance lend themselves to exploring decadence and sickness as embodied phenomena, and it is also why decadence and sickness have been associated with the discursive production of the performing body as a threat.<sup>2</sup>

This article explores how performance makers in the 1990s and 2010s staged their experiences of physical sickness, specifically cystic fibrosis, in ways that appropriated and undermined the perceived ‘sickness’ of unconventional desires, including queer and sadomasochistic desire. My approach is informed by two studies in particular. The first is Susan Sontag’s *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1991), initially published as two separate essays in 1978 and 1989. The second is a lesser-known book by Barbara Spackman called *Decadent Genealogies: The Rhetoric of Sickness from Baudelaire to D’Annunzio* (1989). Both deal with illness metaphors, although their arguments lead in different directions. Where Sontag asks us to jettison metaphors that warp lived experiences of illness, Spackman explores how fin-de-siècle writers associated with decadence worked with metaphors of sickness in subversive explorations of physiological and cognitive difference. My own argument resides between the two, as it is not content with either.

Spackman considers approaches to sickness in decadent literature as the ‘ground of a new consciousness, a new interpretation of the body’s relation to thought’.<sup>3</sup> This will become an important point of reference in what follows, only I choose not to limit this ‘ground’ and ‘interpretation’ to rhetoric and narrative. Theatre and performance ‘do’ things with metaphors. As Meredith Conti recognizes in a recent study of illness on the nineteenth-century stage, the performing body evinces or stands in for ‘the transfiguring, holistic, enculturating experience of illness, of an illness *lived*’.<sup>4</sup> I share Conti’s interest in the fleshy presence of performers, but rather than focusing on performers who are bio-medically normative at the time of performance, this article considers how sick performance makers choose to stage and engage with metaphors of sickness. This is not necessarily to valorize the ‘authenticity’ of a given performance; rather, it is to acknowledge the institutional, discursive, and cultural production of sickness metaphors and narratives by learning from those who traverse and explore their bio-medical, cultural and counter-cultural frames of reference.

Like tuberculosis – which Linda and Michael Hutcheon describe as ‘an affliction of the sensual decadent’<sup>5</sup> – cystic fibrosis ‘is a disease of liquids – the body turning to phlegm and mucus and sputum [...] – and of air, of the need for better air’; however, where tuberculosis was thought of in the nineteenth century ‘as a decorative, often lyrical’ illness, cystic fibrosis takes on something more akin to Sontag’s description of cancer, where ‘it seems unimaginable to aestheticize the disease’.<sup>6</sup> Through analyses of the collaborative work of Bob Flanagan and fellow artist, dominatrix, and lover Sheree Rose in the years leading up to Flanagan’s death in 1996, and Rose’s collaboration with the British live artist Martin O’Brien in the 2010s, I will be looking at how the ‘unimaginability’ of aestheticizing cystic fibrosis might also become a platform for reclaiming punitive or demeaning illness metaphors. Moreover, I argue that they go much further than Spackman’s analysis permits in recalibrating how a sick body relates to desires that escape majoritarian preferences.

‘Decadence’ is not a term that has come into the orbit of the discourse surrounding O’Brien’s work, save for a short blog post,<sup>7</sup> although the term has been used by conservative commentators to condemn the collaborative work of Flanagan and Rose, among others, as I explore in the following discussion. For its critics, especially its right-wing critics, the concept of decadence refers to a dangerous process of moral and cultural decline that arises as a consequence of endemic perversity, degeneracy, the undoing of classical traditions, societal decay, a threat to ‘good old-fashioned values’, and the enfeeblement of body, mind, and culture. Decadence usually means all of these things for those willing to embrace it as well – both historically and globally, whether keyed in the vein of European, Japanese, or Ottoman decadence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (for instance), or in the sensualist poetry of writers in the last years of the Ming dynasty in China<sup>8</sup> – only they see each in a different light, pitched less in a mode of castigation, and more as an opportunity, or tool, for exploring and expressing unconventional attractions, tastes and desires. This is why it is so important to acknowledge decadence’s protean qualities, as without recognizing how it has been invested with a whole host of different meanings – especially with regard to sickness – one risks validating its more nefarious utilization.

The US culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s offer one of the most instructive contexts for considering the work of Flanagan, Rose, and O’Brien,<sup>9</sup> particularly the furore surrounding the work of performance artist Ron Athey. Athey’s work engages with a range of themes, but the ‘specific pains, pleasures, rages, and ecstasies’ of living as a white, HIV+, gay male during the AIDS crisis has played a particularly important role throughout.<sup>10</sup> While a very different illness, the controversy surrounding Athey’s queer staging of sadomasochistic rituals in the 1990s makes explicit how multiple connotations of sickness and decadence can be harnessed for political ends by those who view ‘sick’ performance as the decadent progeny of cultural renegades and social pariahs – just as it makes clear how decadence might be embodied and enacted as the basis of a transgressive or transformational practice.



There is no shortage of studies addressing how decadence and sickness were explored as proximate concepts over the course of the European fin de siècle – Spackman’s monograph is an example – but the mythologization of sickness, the risks associated with falling ill, the perception of illness, and the codification of illness metaphors do not transcend historical boundaries unscathed. There are of course correspondences, such as the synergies between decadence and sickness in right-wing diatribes condemning a broad range of transgressions in art, literature, and performance, as well as how artists and writers responded to their own ostracism or marginality by embracing decadence; however, these synergies are also protean in ways that demand engagement with the specific historical and geographical contexts in which an artist is working, as these contexts impinge on both the production and reception of a work. The Introduction to this issue of *Volupté* offers a more expansive engagement with decadence, but the present article journeys instead from the US culture wars, which saw commentators and politicians decrying the ‘sickness’ and ‘decadence’ of artists like Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano, and performance makers including Flanagan, Rose, and Athey, to a historical juncture cast in the increasingly long shadow of the coronavirus pandemic, which has deeply affected what it means to be staging and engaging with decadence and sickness.

In addressing coughing bodies, this article is intended as an opportunity to ruminate, from a distance, on our own viral moment. It is not ‘about’ the pandemic – it is about how artists have chosen to stage cystic fibrosis, and the relevance of the culture wars in understanding these stagings – and nor is it drawing a line between societal decadence and a virus that has already claimed millions of lives. If anything, it is an attempt to call out the short-sightedness of attempts to pathologize the ‘decadent society’,<sup>11</sup> which fail to recognize decadence as a form of ‘perennial decay’,<sup>12</sup> and which fail to engage in any meaningful way with the cultural politics of decadence. Nonetheless, my hope is that it might contextualize how notions of health and propriety relate to thought, embodiment, and sociality, emphasizing the extent to which these have been harnessed

as punitive moral concepts, as well as examining the space available for charting configurations of decadence and disease as the ground of an alternative consciousness.

### **‘An unmistakable decadence’: decadence, sickness and the culture wars**

In December 1988, the American photographer Robert Mapplethorpe’s retrospective exhibition *The Perfect Moment* opened at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, which was meant to be the first in a seven-stop tour of museums in Chicago, Washington DC, Hartford, Berkeley, Cincinnati, and Boston. While the bulk of the exhibition centred around Mapplethorpe’s celebrated portraits, floral compositions, and classical nudes depicting black and white male bodies, two photographs of nude children and five images of gay men in bondage soon drew the attention of neoconservative and fundamentalist Christian critics. The controversy escalated after the Corcoran Gallery in Washington DC cancelled its staging of the exhibition in light of public and political backlash (although the Washington Project for the Arts took it on with the help of private donors), and came to a head in 1990 – a year after Mapplethorpe’s untimely death from AIDS-related illness – when a grand jury issued two criminal indictments against the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center (CAC), and two against its director, Dennis Barrie, ‘for pandering obscenity and illegal use of a minor in nudity oriented materials. Seven of Mapplethorpe’s photos were deemed obscene – two portraits of children and five of explicit male sexual behavior’.<sup>13</sup> The matter was settled in court, leading to the acquittal of both the CAC and Barrie on 5 October 1990 after the prosecution was unable to persuade the jury that Mapplethorpe’s photographs were bereft of artistic merit.

This well-documented episode in the cultural-political history of North America’s most recent *fin de siècle* entrenched positions in a culture war that reached fever pitch by the early 1990s, following hot on the heels of another controversy centred around the exhibition of Andres Serrano’s photograph *Immersion (Piss Christ)* (1987), which depicts a wood and plastic crucifix immersed in Serrano’s own urine. The exhibition of *Piss Christ* prompted readers of the pious and

highly conservative American Family Association newsletter to lobby congressional representatives about its supposed indecency, leading the Republican Senator Alfonse D'Amato to describe it on the floor of the Senate as a 'deplorable, despicable display of vulgarity'.<sup>14</sup> That Serrano was also the beneficiary of a \$15,000 grant supported by the NEA prompted D'Amato to implore the Acting Chair of the NEA, Hugh Southern, to prohibit the funding of 'shocking, abhorrent and completely undeserving art', with a \$30,000 grant supporting the travel and exhibition costs for Mapplethorpe's show suffering similar scrutiny.<sup>15</sup> By June 1990, performance, too, was under fire after the newly-appointed NEA chairman John Frohnmayer vetoed grants that were due to be awarded to Karen Finley, Tim Miller, John Fleck, and Holly Hughes, who became known as the 'NEA 4' after seeking to challenge the decision in the courts.

That the work of these artists and performance makers was funded with taxpayers' money (despite the NEA budget being only a tiny fraction of its west-European counterparts) formed an important point of departure for how the culture war played out in print and broadcast media, and in the political arena – although allegations about the supposedly profligate distribution of public funds only tells a part of the story. Mapplethorpe, Miller, Fleck, and Hughes were all known to identify as gay or lesbian; Finley was both an ally and a feminist; and Serrano was a self-professed Christian of Honduran and Afro-Cuban heritage using a range of bodily fluids to explore his religion. As such, they represented what New Right critics regarded as the threatening deviancy of a left-liberal arts establishment that was in desperate want of purgation. Hence, there was more than money at stake; freedom of artistic expression, the visibility of marked bodies, the enjoyment of non-normative desires, and gay rights at the height of the AIDS crisis were all on trial, in some cases quite literally.

These events are now a canonical point of reference on Performance Studies programmes, but the specific rhetoric that was mobilized by key commentators has received less attention. 'Sickness' and 'decadence', as well as their converse – 'health' and 'vigour' – played vital roles in how critics and advocates of the art bound up in the culture wars were being thought of as

threatening, or revealing of an exclusionary horizon of taste, decency, and appropriateness, depending on the perspective of the commentator. For instance, the conservative critic Patrick Buchanan set the tone for a raft of attacks against the NEA on the basis that it was supporting a ‘polluted culture’ that threatened to poison ‘a nation’s soul’ if left to ‘fester and stink’, imploring that ‘[w]e should not subsidize decadence’.<sup>16</sup> Senator Jesse Helms also spearheaded attempts to gut the NEA through the so-called ‘Helms Amendment’ (No. 991), which was proposed in October 1989, defeated in 1990, revived in a form akin to the original proposal in 1994, and defeated again that summer. As these events suggest, Helms and his allies doggedly pursued and condemned the ‘decadence’ of ‘disgusting, insulting, revolting garbage produced by obviously sick minds’,<sup>17</sup> citing Flanagan, Rose, and Athey in a series of vitriolic attacks<sup>18</sup> – but not without staunch opposition.

A point that often goes unnoticed in scholarship dealing with the culture wars is that important advocates of artists subjected to such hyperbolic diatribes also made recourse to a similar rhetoric. For instance, the performance scholar Peggy Phelan responded by insisting that ‘the health of art influences in a direct way the health and wealth of the nation’, imploring that the art community ‘must articulate the connection between vigorous artistic expression and the values of democracy’.<sup>19</sup> In other words, the perceived ‘health’ and ‘vigour’, or ‘sickness’ and ‘decadence’, of art or a specific artist were not incidental to the controversy, for either side of the culture war; sickness and its relationship to decadence *was* the controversy. As Phelan puts it, ‘bodies soak through language’;<sup>20</sup> but equally, language sticks to bodies, and this stickiness had important ramifications for how the centre and the margins were configured and perceived.

Decadence scholars may well be reminded at this point of two relatively well-known events in the United Kingdom that drew connections between decadent art and lifestyle, queerness, and the threat of societal decadence and degeneration: namely, the trials of Oscar Wilde for ‘gross indecency’ in 1895, and the 1918 Pemberton-Billing trial, in which conservative MP Noel Pemberton-Billing used a libel claim against him to smear and effectively ruin the careers of theatre makers J. T. Grein and Maud Allan (Pemberton-Billing took their staging of Wilde’s *Salomé* (1891)

as an excuse to condemn what his own newspaper dubbed ‘The Cult of the Clitoris’, which, the paper claimed, was bound up with seditious and treasonous plots at a pivotal point in the war effort).<sup>21</sup> Where the Helms Amendment failed, the victorious legal teams in both the Wilde and Pemberton-Billing trials used condemnation of literature and performance as ‘evidence’ for condemning queer lifestyles and practices that were deemed to be socially and morally corrosive. However, Helms’s staunch opposition to gay rights, political liberalism, and freedom of artistic expression was closely indexed to a rising tide of New Right politics, as well as the AIDS crisis, which are specific to the late twentieth century (as is the erosion of public subsidy and the size of the state that came to define the emergence of neoliberalism, although for Helms this took a back seat relative to the policing and protection of a rigidly-defined moral high ground).<sup>22</sup> It is these contexts, then, particularly once read in light of Christian fundamentalism, that are the most pertinent to consider in addressing Helms’s critique of ‘sick’ performances and the social and moral ‘decadence’ that they represent and threaten.

Although Flanagan and Rose had a role to play in Helms’s attacks on the NEA, it was Ron Athey who came under closest scrutiny, not least when Helms lambasted Ron Athey and Company’s *4 Scenes in a Harsh Life* (1993-1996) on the floor of the US Senate. Helms focused on its incorporation of scarification rituals, bloodletting, and the queer staging of Pentecostal evangelism and Christian martyrdom in a truncated version of that performance, titled *Excerpted Rites Transformation*, that was presented at a small 100-seat cabaret venue by Minneapolis’ Walker Art Center on 5 March 1994 (performance scholar and Athey collaborator Dominic Johnson has provided an authoritative overview of the event and its context, and documentation of an earlier version can be found on Vimeo).<sup>23</sup> It was a thinly-veiled attack on queerness and its expression during the AIDS crisis, as well as the very idea of public arts funding. Helms claimed that to fund such art – however inconsequentially<sup>24</sup> – was to participate in a dangerous process of cultural erosion. However, ‘[t]he broader issue’, he argued,

is the sober realization that for the past two decades, an unmistakable decadence has saturated American society. A furious assault on the traditional sensibilities of the American people has taken its toll. So many have become afraid to stand up and declare the difference between right and wrong, what is ugly and what is destructive and what is noble and what is degrading. No wonder [...] there has been a cultural breakdown.<sup>25</sup>

In one sense, Helms is appealing here to a conservative ‘common sense’ in strict opposition to Athey’s ‘uncommon sense’, a term that David Weir identifies as a key characteristic of artistic and literary decadence.<sup>26</sup> However, while the judgement of taste played an important role throughout the culture wars, Helms’s primary concern in this particular passage is moral, not aesthetic. He expresses worry about the decline of values that have supported people like him since time immemorial. In other words, Helms’s moral critique of societal decadence casts Athey’s uncommon aesthetic sense as ‘decadent’.



Fig. 1: Video still featuring Jesse Helms on the floor of the US Senate on 25 July 1994. Next to him is an image of Ron Athey as St. Sebastian in *Martyrs & Saints* (1992). Public domain.  
Available at: <https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4520996/user-clip-jesse-helms-ron-athey>.

This is not to say that Athey's work is decadent merely because it is accused of being so. The image that Helms uses to illustrate his point finds Athey depicting an arrow-strewn St. Sebastian in a scene from an earlier work, *Martyrs & Saints* (1992-1993), that was partly inspired by the decadent writer Mishima Yukio, and the fact that St. Sebastian was prayed to by devotees in times of plague (fig. 1).<sup>27</sup> Hence, what Helms's diatribe really stages is the cultural politics of decadence: on the one hand determined by the fears and prejudices of a puritanical senator intent on ostracizing Athey, the art he produces, and the communities he affiliates with, and on the other demanding acknowledgment of Athey's body and actions as sites for exploring a queerly decadent hagiography.

This pivotal moment in the culture wars captures much of decadence's complexity in relation to performance and politics by making clear that the concept of decadence is as much a weapon in the rhetorical arsenal of the Right as it is an attribute of counter-cultural practices aligned with the Left. To begin with, Helms's attack underscores how the 'threat' of decadence – keyed in a derogatory mode that holds individual 'degenerates' responsible for societal and cultural decline – can be made to stick to particular kinds of bodies: in this case, a queer, suffering body. However, it also illustrates how these very same bodies have been centred in practices that refuse and seek alternatives to mainstream and repressive attitudes toward crisis (particularly the AIDS crisis), memorialization, grief, sociality, desire, and pleasure. Helms's attack also extends theatre and performance's long-standing associations with contagion.<sup>28</sup> The perceived threat of physical contagion was linked to the erroneous claim that Athey exposed audiences to his own HIV+ blood in a scene that he dubs the 'Human Printing Press', although it was not Athey's blood but his collaborator's, Darryl Carlton – aka Divinity Fudge, who was HIV-negative – that was used in this scene.<sup>29</sup> Although Athey's blood was shed in other scenes, this was at some distance from the audience. Hence, we might see the contagion at stake as being not only linked to the perceived threat of biological infection, but exposure to uncommon practices. In this, as Johnson recognizes, 'both Athey and Helms held true to their own equivalent (though morally divergent) convictions

that a work of art can be a force for social change, primarily through disruption'.<sup>30</sup> The difference in these convictions can be found in how both understand decadence, or in Athey's case concepts adjacent to decadence. Where Helms is content with the metaphorical punch of decadence, condemned as biomedical and moral sickness, Athey can be seen to embody decadence as the basis for a transformational or transgressive practice, refusing to be a silent witness to the ascendancy of moral and behavioural puritanism.

The impulses underpinning Helms's agenda have not gone away, just as they are cast in the long shadow of history. They resonate with historical attacks on socio-cultural decline and individual 'degeneracy' – especially Max Nordau's infamous railing against fin-de-siècle culture, *Entartung [Degeneration]* (1892) – as well as recently published critiques of societal decadence coming from the religious Right, such as Ross Douthat's *The Decadent Society* (2020).<sup>31</sup> This makes Athey's first retrospective exhibition all the more timely. 'Queer Communion: Ron Athey' (2021) was curated by Amelia Jones, presented at New York's Participant Inc, and featured, among other events, a live-streamed recreation of *4 Scenes in a Harsh Life* on 16 February 2021.<sup>32</sup> The exhibition and especially the re-staging of this performance, given the controversy surrounding it, prompts reflection on the importance – and urgency – of taking decadence and related concepts seriously, especially as they pertain to performance and performance makers in a precarious contemporary moment. Arguments about the 'decadence' of art and public arts funding, as well as the 'decadence' or 'degeneracy' of particular kinds of body, orientation, appearance, and behaviour, are set to be key points of reference in the months and years ahead as governments struggle to deal with the economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic, as well as resurgent right- and far-right-wing sentiment.

What Buchanan and Helms stood for, in Sontag's words, was a 'Kulturkampf against all that is called, for short (or inaccurately), the 1960s':<sup>33</sup> gay liberation, radical politics, pleasure activism, sexual experimentation, exploring new forms of social relationality, and the undermining of traditional institutions and values, including heterosexual and monogamous marriage. Morally



‘decadent’ lifestyles and practices were regarded by their critics as symptomatic of narrowly-defined moral, social or cultural ‘sickness’, with the expression of non-conformist desire in contemporary art serving as a scapegoat and platform for redressing societal ‘decadence’. Equally, though, as Athey’s work can be seen to illustrate, decadence as a praxis of spectacular transformation or transgression can also be seen to have been embraced by artists who sought alternatives to the dogmatism of reproductive futurism, the resurgent power of the puritanical New Right, and the insistence that art must contribute to ‘the health and wealth of the nation’.

### **‘Fight sickness with sickness’: Bob Flanagan and Sheree Rose**

Flanagan and Rose moved and cut their teeth (and skin) in the same circles as Athey at venues like Club Fuck! and Sin-a-Matic in Los Angeles in the 1980s and 1990s. They were also friends and occasional collaborators in S&M contexts, and were bundled together by Helms as part of the same decadent cabal during the culture wars. A toxic rhetoric of decadence and sickness in the political diatribes of the New Right were explicitly and thoroughly queered in their hands in ways that make clear what an ‘uncommon’ decadent sensibility has to offer to our understanding of the cultural politics of the culture wars, and to the cultural politics of decadence in performance.

Flanagan’s collaborative work with Rose – too often overlooked as such<sup>34</sup> – might best be described as a praxis of sickness grounded in Flanagan’s experiences of living with cystic fibrosis, their sadomasochistic relationship, and Rose’s memorialization of Flanagan’s legacy in the years leading up to, and after, his death from the disease in 1996. Multiple connotations of sickness and decadence underpin their artistic experimentation, cultural-political outlook, and way of life. While committed to a heterosexual relationship, Flanagan and Rose’s championing of sadomasochism in both quotidian and aesthetic practice was more closely aligned with queer artists like Mapplethorpe and Athey than with the normative institutions and values that underpin majoritarian perspectives and relationships. Hence, they posed a particular threat to heteronormativity at a point in time – the height of the AIDS crisis – when heterosexuality itself was producing what Amelia Jones calls

‘queer effects’ in the eyes of conservative commentators, as much as those willing to embrace those effects.<sup>35</sup> They revelled in the ‘degeneracy’ of which they were accused, reading queerness through sickness and sickness through queerness, and brought metaphors of sickness back to the bodies they effaced, demeaned, or ostracized.

For Rose, Flanagan’s life ‘was like the story of Camille reversed. Instead of the dying young woman with the cough it was the story of the dying young man with the cough.’<sup>36</sup> This is an interesting analogy to make. It references Alexandre Dumas *fil’s* play *La Dame aux camélias* (1852), based on his novel of 1848 and the real life and death of the nineteenth-century French courtesan Marie Duplessis. Duplessis was famed at the time for her literary salon and relationships with the political and cultural elite (including Dumas), although she is now better known through her rendering as the play’s eponymous ‘Camille’, and for Dumas’ squeezing of her biography’s melodramatic potential, especially the romanticization of a death from tuberculosis. As Sontag acknowledges, tuberculosis is one of the diseases most ‘encumbered by the trappings of metaphor’, not least with regard to its associations with intensified sexual desire, a ‘liveliness that comes from enervation’, and ‘physiological decadence or deliquescence’.<sup>37</sup> Hence, while a romantic melodrama and not a decadent play per se, *La Dame aux camélias* still plays into the mythologization of tuberculosis as ‘an affliction of the sensual decadent’, to recall Hutcheon and Hutcheon. Also, various stagings and adaptations have been contextualized or critically received in light of decadence, be it the decadence of those performing the work, or the decadence of its interpretation. Examples range from Sarah Bernhardt’s wildly successful touring productions in the 1880s (which effectively saved her from financial ruin after leaving the Comédie Française),<sup>38</sup> to *Camille (A Tearjerker): A Travesty on La Dame Aux Camélias* (1973), which was one of Charles Ludlam’s and the Ridiculous Theatrical Company’s more lucrative productions.<sup>39</sup>

The analogy that Rose draws between Flanagan and Camille is an acknowledgment of how a very particular lung disease found itself caught up in a decadent mythologization, for which theatre makers must claim some responsibility. Although Bernhardt and Ludlam’s associations

with decadence emerged more through the writing of their critics, they were also drawn to a plotline that finds Camille succumbing to a ‘noble’ martyrdom that helped to cement the trappings of metaphor that circulate around tuberculosis as a disease of the lungs, and those bodies that succumb to its influence.<sup>40</sup> In contrast, Flanagan and Rose resisted the beautification of disease. They turned instead to the performing body to ‘fight sickness with sickness’,<sup>41</sup> to borrow one of Flanagan’s best-known dictums that aligns the realities of an afflicted body with a queering of the metaphors that frame sickness as abjection. Both connotations were at once in Flanagan’s ‘nature’, as he put it, while at the same time *à rebours*, or ‘against nature’.<sup>42</sup> As with Phelan’s reading of Mapplethorpe’s *The Perfect Moment*, this is what led them to be perceived by moral puritans as threatening, because they insisted upon the possibility ‘for one’s body to demonstrate love – or at least desire – by enduring the other’s infliction of pain’, upsetting the alchemy of the ‘natural body’.<sup>43</sup>

Flanagan articulates his attraction to masochism in an oft-quoted poem called ‘Why’, but his journals offer a slightly different perspective. ‘*It’s not just the pain that I want*’, he writes; ‘*there has to be an atmosphere of eroticism, of decadence, of meanness, of sincerity, of understanding, of control. Without some of these things it’s more like having a headache or toothache.*’<sup>44</sup> Decadence is not simply the inverse of a body *in extremis*; for Flanagan, it became a part of how he conceptualized the practice of masochism, immersed in the writings of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch and Pauline Réage (Anne Cécile Desclos), as much as the Los Angeles BDSM scene that he and Rose helped to establish in the 1980s.<sup>45</sup>

Flanagan and Rose’s best-known body of work, *Visiting Hours* (1992), offers an example of such sickness at work. It was presented just a few years before Flanagan’s death at the Santa Monica Museum of Art in 1992, before moving to the New Museum in New York City in 1994, and the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston in 1995. They transformed the exhibition space into a paediatric hospital ward, recreating the context of Flanagan’s medicalization in a space that he and Rose both designed and controlled. It was saturated with generic medical

accoutrements including a hospital bed (his ‘home away from home’, as Linda S. Kauffman puts it),<sup>46</sup> an oxygen tank, drips, a visitor’s chair, X-Rays of Flanagan’s lungs that also highlighted his pierced nipples, token cacti to give an otherwise drab waiting room a bit of a lift, and so on. Alongside this, the installation was filled with toys and objects from Flanagan’s early childhood, such as a wall of 1400 alphabet blocks spelling CF [cystic fibrosis] and SM [sodomasochism] over and over again, a toy chest, pacifiers, and a barred crib, as well as bondage equipment (resonating with some of the childhood paraphernalia just mentioned), television screens displaying bondage-like scenes culled from Hollywood films and cartoons, and a coffin with a screen that replaced Flanagan’s head with that of the viewer if they looked inside.<sup>47</sup> Hospitalization, childhood, and sodomasochism were thus drawn together as disease, development, and discipline.

As examples like this suggest, Rose and Flanagan sought to reclaim the positioning of what Jennifer Parker-Starbuck calls ‘the medical body’: a body that is ‘acted upon’ by medical diagnoses and treatments.<sup>48</sup> In doing so, Flanagan’s marking as both ‘abject’ and ‘object’ by medical institutions and the perceptions and discourses surrounding them were treated as creative resources, and as the basis of a way of life – but on terms defined by Flanagan and Rose. These creative resources can also be seen to take on a therapeutic dimension in what has been dubbed both ‘Sadomedicine’ and ‘aesthetic self-medication’, acknowledging the twin ‘pathologies’ of cystic fibrosis and S&M without being limited by the disembodied medicalization of either.<sup>49</sup> This is not simply about reclaiming illness from a medical frame; the discourses themselves were being appropriated, while at the same time rubbing up against the public presentation of lifestyle practices more usually conducted in private or in shared subcultural spaces. Flanagan and Rose were recontextualizing the disciplining of the medical body as a masochistic compliance with the demands of a lover and mistress, queering abjection and objectification in the service of desire and creativity.

It is important to emphasize the centrality of Flanagan’s body in this work. He would lie in the hospital bed as visitors related their own experiences of sickness, or Rose would laboriously

pull his body from the bed feet-first and upside down via a pulley mechanism attached to the ceiling, causing his hospital gown to slip off. Rose's manipulation of Flanagan's body in *Visiting Hours* queers the view, held by none other than Sigmund Freud, that tragedy is founded upon the pleasure to be found in the suffering of others. For Freud,

a person physically ill is possible on the stage only as a property, but not as the hero – excepting as some particular psychic aspect of illness is susceptible of psychic elaboration, as for example of the abandoning of the sick Philoctetes [the eponymous role in Sophocles' play], or the hopelessness of the sick in the plays of Strindberg.<sup>50</sup>

Contra Freud, it was precisely in his own objectification that Flanagan searched for both autonomy and a new lease of life, as well as the foundations upon which his mock-super-hero status was built as a self-confessed 'supermasochist'. This was a far cry from the 'heroism' so often attributed to the embattled sick and the disabled; it was a crippled take on the attribution of heroism to a sick performing body that found pleasure in 'super' masochism.<sup>51</sup>

Flanagan's manipulated performing body, then, played a central role in *Visiting Hours*; however, its manipulations were subject not just to Rose's whims, but the choreography of his illness as well. In a compelling study of this piece, the scholar and live artist Martin O'Brien, who I will be returning to later as key to the study of Flanagan's legacy, imagines what it must have been like to visit Flanagan while he was dangling upside down, making his body appear 'almost lifeless and reminiscent of a piece of meat hanging in the slaughterhouse. The only sign of life is his coughing'.<sup>52</sup> Here, the cough – erupting from a suspended, naked and supplicant body – becomes a sign of both terminal finitude and convulsive life. It is what choreographs cystic fibrosis, and it is what animates Flanagan's willingly submissive body as it hangs in all its glory. To put it another way, he makes a spectacle of his sickness in ways that anticipate and riff on its double edge – the product not just of the kind of 'obviously sick mind' bemoaned by Helms, but of an obviously sick body. Flanagan finds meaning in this sick body, indeed harnesses his body – both literally and figuratively – as a basis for reorienting its place within an environment that he and Rose both craft and manipulate. Upside down, and appealing to an uncommon as much as an anti-aesthetic taste,

Flanagan's 'sickness' comes across as deeply, profoundly decadent: decadent because of the ways in which sickness is foregrounded as a means of orienting and finding meaning within a carefully-crafted environment, and because of how the spectacularly sick body, presented in a way that re-contextualizes the fulfilment of queer desire in sub-cultural spaces, appeals to the gaze and appreciation of a spectatorial public.



Fig. 2: Bob Flanagan and Sheree Rose on the anniversary of their wedding, 1995.  
Photo by © Michel Delsol, all rights reserved. Courtesy of Sheree Rose and ONE Archives at the USC Libraries.

If we are to take seriously the task of tracing decadent genealogies, and of approaching the sick body as the ‘ground of a new consciousness, a new interpretation of the body’s relation to thought’ – to recall Spackman’s framing of sickness in the decadent imagination – one wonders what better place there might be to start than with the ‘*atmosphere of [...] decadence*’ explored by Flanagan and Rose. Moreover, it seems a particularly compelling moment in which to return to a corpus that draws as much on ‘the laboured breathing of CF’ as it does on ‘the controlled breathing and ecstatic breathlessness of BDSM performance’.<sup>53</sup> One cannot help but wonder how Flanagan might have responded to the coronavirus pandemic, which poses a particular acute threat to those living with CF, and to the ways in which it has deprived so many of the capacity to breathe easily, or to breathe at all.<sup>54</sup> However, Flanagan’s fatally-laboured breathing and ecstatic breathlessness was not simply appropriated in the name of art; it became the basis of a praxis upon which he built his approach to survival, a praxis that was deeply rooted in Flanagan’s own autobiography and the particularities of the world that he and Rose had built together (fig. 2).

### **Only the sick will survive: Sheree Rose and Martin O’Brien**

The collaborations of Flanagan and Rose provide instructive context for considering other artists who have since made work about their experiences of living with cystic fibrosis, such as the British performance maker Jill Hocking (who died of the disease in 2004), and the Los-Angeles-based Dominic Quagliozzi. Organizations like Sick of the Fringe and Unlimited Festival have also been doing much to propagate the idea of fighting sickness with sickness, as did the late performance maker Katherine Araniello. However, it is O’Brien who has most explicitly sought to honour Flanagan’s legacy. Like Flanagan, O’Brien’s work stages and explores his own cystic fibrosis, and usually incorporates masochistic acts including cutting, piercing, spanking, binding, and breath restriction (fig. 3). He has been collaborating with Rose since 2011, although all of his work pays homage to Flanagan by ‘punctur[ing] the abjection of his condition with glitter and gunge’, as performance scholar Gianna Bouchard so evocatively puts it.<sup>55</sup> In O’Brien’s work, sickness is the

starting point for working through the contingencies and uncertainties of his own life – approaching it as ‘a way of talking about the temporal experience of a life lived longer than expected’<sup>56</sup> – just as it is the starting point for imagining an apocalyptic, though quasi-utopic, world ‘in which only the sick can survive’.<sup>57</sup> O’Brien made one such depiction – a short film he developed with Suhail Merchant called *The Unwell* (2016) – freely available online during the pandemic. It is a riff on the zombie movies of filmmakers like George A. Romero in which we find staggering zombies, all played by O’Brien, that crawl and lurch to the sound of a relentlessly hacking cough.



Fig. 3: Martin O’Brien, *Last(ing)* (2013). Toynbee Studios, London.  
Photo: Guido Mencari. Courtesy of Martin O’Brien.



As O'Brien puts it, *The Unwell* 'seems to speak to the times we are living in. I'm currently trying to understand how to speak about [the pandemic], which poses such a big threat to me personally, but which also means sickness is something everyone is having to face.'<sup>58</sup> It certainly resonates when watched in conditions of a national lockdown in the United Kingdom, with images of deserted streets and shut-up shops, and labourers in high-visibility jackets dressed for work, but with nowhere to go, and that sound – the hacking cough – periodically erupting from the distorted recesses of a speaker. But it is also a highly personal rumination on living with CF, depicting a sick interpretation of the body's relation to thought as much as action, desire, and relationality. It reads as being at once familiar in the generalization of symptoms and the imagination of deserted streets, and strange in the idiosyncrasies of an illness that renders the CF-zombie, inhabiting the 'zombie years' of a life lived longer than expected, particularly susceptible to succumbing to a rampant virus.

*The Ascension* (2017) is O'Brien's most visceral and compelling honouring of Flanagan's legacy. It was a collaborative piece developed with Rose that was presented as part of a group show at the Jason Vass Gallery in LA, called 'Every Breath You Take'. It was intended as a 'channelling' of Flanagan's spiritual presence, with Rose acting as a Kali figure, and O'Brien embodying both Flanagan and Shiva. Documentation has recently been made available in Yetta Howard's edited volume *Rated RX: Sheree Rose with and After Bob Flanagan* (2020), which is an invaluable resource for piecing together Rose's collaborations with both Flanagan and O'Brien. The performance begins with two dominatrixes partially dressed as nuns sprinkling tiny, confetti-like photos of Flanagan over O'Brien's naked and flogged body as he crawls his way in a kinky procession toward a shrine memorializing Flanagan's life and death. O'Brien then delivers a 'Sermon on Sickness' before Rose and Athey – another important mediator of Flanagan's legacy – baptise him in water, glitter, and rose petals. Rose carves a zig-zagged letter 'S' (for Sheree, as well as, perhaps, for sick, slave, superman/supermasochist, sadomasochism, and survival) onto O'Brien's breast, mirroring the marking that she had made on Flanagan's body over twenty years

previously. The piece culminates with members from a specialist artistic collective called Embrace Chaos piercing his skin with hooks to facilitate a crucifixion-like ‘ascension’ of O’Brien’s limp, suffering body: the righted counterpart to Flanagan’s being winched feet-first in *Visiting Hours* (a scene that also went by the title ‘The Ascension’). The ‘apotheosis’ of the piece, as Amelia Jones puts it, finds Rose embracing and then briefly hanging from O’Brien’s suspended, supplicant body, reopening ‘wounds for those who lost Flanagan as a friend’ in ‘a state of emotional release that is almost ecstatic in its catharsis’.<sup>59</sup>

Alongside the ‘S’ marking, one of the ways in which O’Brien’s body serves as a medium for the channelling of Flanagan in this performance is the thematization of the cough. Far from ‘purifying’ sickness of its metaphorical baggage, O’Brien’s ‘Sermon on Sickness’ imagines ‘that other place’ – famously explored by Sontag as ‘the kingdom of the sick’ – as a world in which only the sick survive, both referencing and subverting the ‘punitive and sentimental fantasies’ that tend to dominate figurations of illness.<sup>60</sup> In O’Brien’s hands, this world depicts not a kingdom, but a small town anywhere known for the health of its inhabitants – at least to begin with:

No one ever coughed in this town and anyone that sneezed was put into quarantine. [...] The town was full of health food shops and people seemed to live off salad. [...] There were never any orgies, and no one liked BDSM. Sex was done once a week with the lights off, missionary style, mainly by younger people in order to have children once they were in stable relationships. [...] This was the perfect town if you were healthy, pretty, and rich.<sup>61</sup>

That is, until the day that a prophet and their ‘twelve disciples of sickness’ rode into the town, their coughs echoing through the streets and the residents bolting their doors for fear of becoming ill. “‘Only the sick will survive’” preached the prophet. “‘We are here to spread the good word: fight sickness with sickness’”.<sup>62</sup> One by one the inhabitants approach the prophet to be cured of their health, and one by one they begin to cough:

With the cough came a new take on life, a new understanding of existence. [...] The hospital, which once was a place for rich people to get plastic surgery, soon became a place of care. The town hall was transformed into a disco for the infected. [...] Everyone started experimenting sexually. The prophet and the twelve disciples of sickness watched as the town collapsed and a new society started to form. [...] Only the sick can survive in this world. Being sick becomes a lifeline, a way to live in a hostile environment. It becomes the only way to be.<sup>63</sup>

The cough, as a sound and physical action, resides at the centre of O'Brien's practice, and especially the exacerbation of illness through feats of physical endurance. The cough in question is not just 'a small polite cough', although regular clearing of the throat is a hallmark of O'Brien's performances; rather, it is 'those lung-racking, bone-shaking coughs. You can almost hear phlegm. It is the sound of cystic fibrosis. It is the sound of disease.'<sup>64</sup> It is this cough that forms the point of departure in O'Brien's 'Sermon on Sickness', just as it forms the basis for a wry utopia in which 'only the sick can survive'.

O'Brien's thematization of the cough has been his principal means of paying homage to Flanagan since his first durational work, *Mucus Factory* (2011): a performance that was mentored by Athey through the Live Art Development Agency, that was first presented at LADA's two-day *Access All Areas* programme at London's Club Row Gallery in March 2011 (which Athey also attended), and that was followed, as part of the same programme, by O'Brien's first collaboration with Rose (*Thank You Ma'am, Please May I Have Another*, 2011). Aside from sharing a space with Athey and Rose, *Mucus Factory* inaugurated O'Brien's honouring of Flanagan's legacy by appropriating and re-situating medical paraphernalia in a mode reminiscent of *Visiting Hours*, including a trampoline and a physiotherapy table used by O'Brien and his co-performer, Becky Beyts, to loosen mucus in O'Brien's lungs; referencing Flanagan in the title of the performance ('I am a factory of mucus as thick as pudding'); and transforming a performance space into 'one of both discipline and *jouissance*', echoing Flanagan's incorporation of kink in his actions, and the 'queer use' of medical paraphernalia.<sup>65</sup> In this case, O'Brien uses his phlegm, which also adorns his beglittered body, to lubricate a nebuliser so that he can penetrate himself with its mouthpiece. The performance is oriented around the sound and choreography of coughing, the affordances of phlegm as a material, and the queer use of medical equipment. These all become media – both artistic media, and a spiritual medium – for channelling Flanagan. In other words, the cough, the appropriation of its disciplining, and the cough's secretions form the bases of a queerly decadent

genealogy in a performance attended by those whom Flanagan's life and work had touched, and performed by one who Helms and his allies would no doubt have judged to be an 'obviously sick mind'.

The visceral and audible presence of O'Brien's coughs in performance signal a kind of decadence that is concerned as much with the pathology of a body's sickness as it is with the passive undoing of its objectification as such. As with Flanagan, this is not as simple as rejecting the bio-medical subjectification of the sick body. Rather, as O'Brien says of his own work, 'the cough establishes itself as the voice of illness';<sup>66</sup> it speaks louder and more clearly than the voice by altering the medium through which sickness is defined, apprehended, understood, and felt by witnessing bodies 'dis-eased'<sup>67</sup> by the presence of a sick sickness. What results is a fraying of 'the representational edges of the normal and the abnormal, the healthy and the sick', to borrow from visual art scholar Janice Hladki.<sup>68</sup> The cough may still be an abject sign of the healthy body's 'constitutive outside',<sup>69</sup> but O'Brien values it *as* abjection, and as the basis of a 'new interpretation of the body's relation to thought'. It is this refusal to pull the margin to the centre, and to revel instead in that which is ordinarily stifled or 'cured', that enables O'Brien to breathe new life into a queerly decadent genealogy.

## **Conclusion**

In concluding, it is worth drawing attention to the ways in which ideas of legacy and alternative kinship have been performed and passed on by Flanagan to O'Brien, with Athey and especially Rose serving as vectors of transmission. Cystic fibrosis is not contracted by infection – it is a genetic condition – but Flanagan, Rose, and O'Brien nonetheless exploit metaphors of illness by spectacularizing and embracing the sick body as a foreign body with a contagious influence. Where Athey's work and Flanagan and Rose's collaborations during the culture wars were diagnosed as being symptomatic of societal decadence, participating in a process of cultural decline that threatened the 'health' and 'vigour' of a nation, O'Brien plays on the fears that stick to the coughing

body as an abject and contagious Other, which is what makes his penchant for the zombie so compelling: a coughing, cannibalistic embodiment of a figure who does not just survive, but thrives in the apocalyptic kingdom of the sick. O'Brien's tongue is of course firmly in cheek; he is not inviting those who recognize themselves as healthy to contract a disease, and his quasi-utopic vision is certainly not inviting his audiences to fetishize viral outbreaks. Rather, the invitation he offers – and, in their own ways, the invitation offered by all of the examples considered in this article – is to reflect on how bodies inherit, are subsumed within, or might potentially reconfigure narratives and metaphors of sickness that rehearse spurious and exclusionary notions of health and propriety.

The utility of health and propriety as moral concepts in cultural and political discourse risks detracting from the corporeal, as well as intersubjective spaces of affective exchange that make metaphors of sickness meaningful in the first place. The invitation at stake is to recognize how easy it is for metaphors of sickness to serve the policing of 'proper' behaviour, 'appropriate' sexuality, 'legitimate' tastes, and 'productive' abilities. Rather than simply succumbing to demeaning metaphors of decadence and sickness, the artists considered in this article encourage us to reorient ourselves in the terrain of the specific illnesses that they experience. They invite us to explore unconventional performing bodies and desires not merely as symptoms of societal decadence and decline, but as that which might challenge its more puritanical harbingers. Most of all, they prompt us to consider not just *what* we inherit through cultural transmission, but *how*, and what it might mean to live by metaphors on terms that elude their punitive frames.

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<sup>2</sup> For an overview of examples framing the performing body as a threat, see Jonas Barish, *The Anti-theatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Spackman, *Decadent Genealogies: The Rhetoric of Sickness from Baudelaire to D'Annunzio* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. ix. See also Pirjo Lyytikäinen, 'Decadent Tropologies of Sickness', in *Decadence, Degeneration, and the End: Studies in the European Fin de Siècle*, ed. by Christopher Nissen and Maria Härmänmaa (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 85–102.

- <sup>4</sup> Meredith Conti, *Playing Sick: Performances of Illness in the Age of Victorian Medicine* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), p. 16. Emphasis in original.
- <sup>5</sup> Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon, *Opera: Disease, Desire, Death* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), p. 43.
- <sup>6</sup> See Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 14, p. 20.
- <sup>7</sup> Adam Alston, 'On sick performance and theatre's chronic maladies', *Staging Decadence Blog*, 11 February 2021, <<https://www.stagingdecadence.com/blog/on-sick-performance-and-theatres-chronic-maladies>> [accessed 12 May 2021].
- <sup>8</sup> You can find examples across this special issue of *Volupté*. For a study of decadent poetry in the twilight years of the Ming Dynasty, see Li Xiaorong, "I Sliced my Flesh into Paper, and Ground my Liver into Ink": Wang Cihui's (1593-1642) Sensualist Poetry as an Alternative Route to Self-Realization', *Ming Studies*, 67 (2013), 30–53.
- <sup>9</sup> The term 'culture wars' refers to numerous contexts, including the 'two cultures controversy' of the 1960s. This article focuses on debates circling around public funding of the arts in the US in the 1980s and 1990s. See Dominic Johnson, "'Does a Bloody Towel Represent the Ideals of the American People?": Ron Athey and the Culture Wars', in *Pleading in the Blood: The Art and Performances of Ron Athey*, ed. by Dominic Johnson (London: Live Art Development Agency; Bristol: Intellect, 2013), pp. 64–93 (p. 65).
- <sup>10</sup> Amelia Jones, 'Introduction: Queer Communion and the Worlds of Ron Athey', in *Queer Communion: Ron Athey*, ed. by Amelia Jones and Andy Campbell (Bristol: Intellect, 2020), pp. 1–23 (p. 12). For instructive insight into the range and nature of these 'pains, pleasures, rages, and ecstasies' in 1980s and 1990s Los Angeles, where Flanagan, Rose, and Athey were based, see Brian Getnick and Tanya Rubbak, eds, *Final Transmission: Performance Art and AIDS in Los Angeles* (London: *Native Strategies* and the Live Art Development Agency, 2021).
- <sup>11</sup> Ross Douthat, *The Decadent Society: How We Became the Victims of Our Own Success* (New York: Avid Reader Press, 2020).
- <sup>12</sup> Liz Constable, Dennis Denisoff, and Matthew Potolsky, eds, *Perennial Decay: On the Aesthetics and Politics of Decadence* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).
- <sup>13</sup> Alex Palmer, 'When Art Fought the Law and the Art Won', *Smithsonian Magazine*, 2 October 2015, <<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/when-art-fought-law-and-art-won-180956810/>> [accessed 12 May 2021].
- <sup>14</sup> Alfonso D'Amato quoted in Peggy Phelan, 'Serrano, Mapplethorpe, the NEA, and You: "Money Talks": October 1989', *TDR*, 34.1 (1990), 4–15 (p. 6).
- <sup>15</sup> D'Amato quoted in Phelan, 'Money Talks', p. 6; see also p. 5.
- <sup>16</sup> Patrick Buchanan quoted in Richard Serra, 'Art and Censorship', *Critical Inquiry* 17.3 (1991), 574–81 (p. 578).
- <sup>17</sup> 'Congressional Record: July 25, 1994', 140.98, <<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CREC-1994-07-25/html/CREC-1994-07-25-pt1-PgS17.htm>> [accessed 10 February 2020].
- <sup>18</sup> Jesse Helms's letter to NEA chairman John Frohnmayer, dated 7 November 1989, is reprinted in Linda S. Kauffman, *Bad Girls and Sick Boys: Fantasies in Contemporary Art and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 28–29; Louis Elovitz, '4 Scenes in a Harsh Life RON ATHEY October 15 1993 L.A. Center Theater', 9 August 2012, <<https://vimeo.com/47239842>> [accessed 14 May 2021].
- <sup>19</sup> Phelan, 'Money Talks', p. 8, p. 10.
- <sup>20</sup> Phelan, 'Money Talks, Again', *TDR*, 35.3 (1991), 131–41 (p. 131).
- <sup>21</sup> For an instructive summary of these events, see Petra Dierkes-Thrun, 'Perverts in Court: Maud Allan's *the Vision of Salomé* and the Pemberton-Billing Trial', in *Salomé's Modernity: Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetics of Transgression* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), pp. 83–124.
- <sup>22</sup> Elaine Showalter draws a parallel between outbreaks of syphilis and AIDS at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, respectively, as 'apocalyptic forms of sexual anarchy [...] that seem to be the result of sexual transgression and that have generated moral panic'. However, this parallel risks obscuring the ways in which AIDS was weaponized as a war on gay rights, liberation, and survival. Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (London: Virago Press, 1990), p. 188.
- <sup>23</sup> Johnson, 'Bloody Towel'; see also Elovitz, '4 Scenes in a Harsh Life'.
- <sup>24</sup> The performance in question only received \$150 in sponsorship from the publicly funded Walker Arts Center in Minneapolis. The total amount is variously cited as \$150 or \$100. See 'Congressional Record'. See also Jones and Campbell, *Queer Communion*, p. 420.
- <sup>25</sup> 'Congressional Record'.
- <sup>26</sup> David Weir, 'Afterword: Decadent Taste', in *Decadence and the Senses*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and Alice Condé (Cambridge: Legenda, 2017), pp. 219–28 (p. 221).
- <sup>27</sup> Ron Athey, 'Deliverance: The "Torture Trilogy" in Retrospect', in Johnson, *Pleading in the Blood*, pp. 100–09 (p. 102).
- <sup>28</sup> For a study of relevant examples, see Fintan Walsh, ed., *Theatres of Contagion: Transmitting Early Modern to Contemporary Performance* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2019). See also Miriam Felton-Dansky, *Viral Performance: Contagious Theaters from Modernism to the Digital Age* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2018).

- <sup>29</sup> Ron Athey, 'Polemic of Blood: Ron Athey on the "Post-AIDS" Body', in Jones and Campbell, *Queer Communion*, pp. 55–58 (p. 57). See also Dominic Johnson, 'Divine Fire: Ron Athey in Europe', in Jones and Campbell, *Queer Communion*, pp. 294–303 (p. 295).
- <sup>30</sup> Johnson, 'Bloody Towel', p. 93.
- <sup>31</sup> Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), pp. 296–337; Douthat, *The Decadent Society*.
- <sup>32</sup> For an overview of the exhibition and its surrounding events, see Tavia Nyong'o and Coco Romack, 'Glory in Our Sufferings', *Artforum*, May 2021, <<https://www.artforum.com/print/202105/tavia-nyong-o-and-coco-romack-on-ron-athey-at-participant-inc-85473>> [accessed 13 May 2021].
- <sup>33</sup> Sontag, *Illness*, p. 149.
- <sup>34</sup> See Tina Takemoto, 'Love is still possible in this junky world: Conversation with Sheree Rose about her life with Bob Flanagan', *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory*, 19.1 (2009), 95–111 (p. 100).
- <sup>35</sup> Amelia Jones, *In-Between Subjects: A Critical Genealogy of Queer Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 2021), p. xvi.
- <sup>36</sup> Takemoto, 'Love is still possible', p. 106.
- <sup>37</sup> Sontag, *Illness*, p. 5, p. 13, p. 26. For a more Foucauldian approach to the discursive production of illness, including tuberculosis, see Athena Vrettos, *Somatic Fictions: Imagining Illness in Victorian Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).
- <sup>38</sup> John Stokes, 'Sarah Bernhardt', in John Stokes, Michael R. Booth and Susan Bassnett, *Bernhardt, Terry, Duse: The actress in her time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 13–63 (pp. 20–21).
- <sup>39</sup> Contemporary accounts picked up on its 'aura of decadence'. See Charles Busch, 'Charles Ludlam in "Camille"', *Back stage – National Edition*, 53.12 (2012), 10.
- <sup>40</sup> The deaths of both Bernhardt and Ludlam were distantly linked to tuberculosis, albeit very obliquely. Bernhardt died of uremia, although a pathologist initially diagnosed 'tuberculosis of the joint' after amputating her leg in 1915, and Ludlam died of AIDS-related pneumonia, which is another disease of the lungs. For more on Bernhardt's leg amputation, see Conti, *Playing Sick*, p. 67.
- <sup>41</sup> See C. Carr, 'The Pain Artist', *Village Voice*, 18 November 1997, <<https://www.villagevoice.com/1997/11/18/the-pain-artist/>> [accessed 27 January 2021].
- <sup>42</sup> Bob Flanagan, 'Why', *Art Journal*, 56.4 (1997), 58–59 (p. 59).
- <sup>43</sup> Phelan, 'Money Talks, Again', p. 132.
- <sup>44</sup> Flanagan, quoted in Mary Ann Davis, 'Oatmeal and Shit: Some Notes on Mundanity', in *Rated RX: Sheree Rose with and After Bob Flanagan*, ed. by Yetta Howard (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2020), pp. 159–71 (p. 160). Emphasis in original. See also Flanagan, 'Why'.
- <sup>45</sup> See Flanagan, 'Why'; Howard, 'Sheree Rose, Martin O'Brien, and Rhiannon Aarons on *Philosophy in the Bedroom and The Viewing*', in Howard, *Rated RX*, pp. 135–51 (p. 140); Takemoto, 'Love is still possible', p. 101; Adam Alston, 'Sheree Rose – Interview for Staging Decadence', *Staging Decadence Blog*, 23 March 2021, <<https://www.stagingdecadence.com/blog/sheree-rose-interview-for-staging-decadence>> [accessed 12 May 2021].
- <sup>46</sup> Kauffman, *Bad Girls*, p. 21.
- <sup>47</sup> For an account of the exhibition, see Bob Flanagan, Sheree Rose, and Ralph Rugoff, 'Visiting Hours', *Grand Street*, 53 (1995), 65–73.
- <sup>48</sup> Jennifer Parker-Starbuck, 'A Cabinet of (Medical) Performance Curiosities', in *Performance and the Medical Body*, ed. by Alex Mermikides and Gianna Bouchard (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), pp. 23–36 (p. 24).
- <sup>49</sup> Kauffman, *Bad Girls*, pp. 20–37 *passim*; Jean-Thomas Tremblay, 'Aesthetic self-medication: Bob Flanagan and Sheree Rose's structures of breathing', *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory*, 28.3 (2018), 221–38 (pp. 238–39).
- <sup>50</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Psychopathic Characters on the Stage', *The Tulane Drama Review*, 4.3 (1960), 144–48 (p. 146).
- <sup>51</sup> The term 'crippled' borrows from 'crip theory'. See Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).
- <sup>52</sup> Martin O'Brien, 'Lie Back and Take It: BDSM, Biomedicine and the Hospital Bed in the work of Bob Flanagan and Sheree Rose', *Body, Space, Technology*, 15 (2016), 1–12 (p. 9).
- <sup>53</sup> Tremblay, 'Aesthetic self-medication', p. 225.
- <sup>54</sup> Another factor at stake, though more tangential to the core focus of this article, can be found in the aftermath of Eric Garner's killing at the hands of the NYPD in 2014. Garner's dying words – 'I can't breathe' – have since been immortalized in national protest movements and in the global news media.
- <sup>55</sup> Gianna Bouchard, 'Introduction: With Diseased Affection', in *Survival of the Sickest: The Art of Martin O'Brien*, ed. by Martin O'Brien and David MacDiarmid (London: Live Art Development Agency, 2018), pp. 6–8 (p. 6).
- <sup>56</sup> Martin O'Brien, 'Zombie Time', <<https://www.martinobrienart.com/zombie-time.html>> [accessed 30 December 2020].
- <sup>57</sup> Martin O'Brien, 'The Unwell', <<https://www.martinobrienart.com/the-unwell.html>> [accessed 30 December 2020].
- <sup>58</sup> Ibid.

- <sup>59</sup> Amelia Jones, 'Rose/Flanagan/O'Brien: The Aesthetics of Resurrection', in Howard, *Rated RX*, pp. 98–109, pp. 107–08. See also 'The Ascension (2017)', in Howard, *Rated RX*, pp. 301–07.
- <sup>60</sup> Sontag, *Illness*, p. 3. Pirjo Lyytikäinen explores a similar notion in an illuminating study of decadent literature in Scandinavia, in which maladies tend to serve 'as a sign of distinction separating the world of the Decadents from that of appalling normality, that is, the bourgeois idea of health'. Pirjo Lyytikäinen, 'Decadent Tropologies of Sickness', in *Decadence, Degeneration, and the End: Studies in the European Fin de Siècle*, ed. by Marja Härmänmaa (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 85–102 (p. 85).
- <sup>61</sup> Martin O'Brien, 'Sheree, Bob, and Me: Performing Painful Histories', in Howard, *Rated RX*, pp. 89–97 (p. 94).
- <sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.
- <sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 95–96.
- <sup>64</sup> Martin O'Brien, 'Cough, Bitch, Cough: Reflections on Sickness and the Coughing Body in Performance', in Mermikides and Bouchard, *Performance*, pp. 129–36 (p. 129).
- <sup>65</sup> Martin O'Brien, *Mucus Factory*, in *Access all Areas: Double DVD Set*, ed. and produced by Andrew Mitchell and Paula Gorini. Available in Lois Keidan and CJ Mitchell, eds, *Access all Areas: Live Art and Disability* (London: Live Art Development Agency, 2012). The term 'queer use' is taken from Sara Ahmed, *What's the Use? On the Uses of Use* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019), p. 26.
- <sup>66</sup> O'Brien, 'Cough, Bitch', p. 133.
- <sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136. For an illuminating study of spectatorial 'dis-ease', see Janice Hladki, 'Thresholds of the Flesh: Disability and Dis-ease and Producing "Ability Trouble"', *The Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, 27.3 (2005), 265–85 (p. 268). See also Patrick Duggan, 'Unsettling the Audience: Affective "Dis-ease" and the Politics of Fear and Anxiety in Contemporary Performance', *Key Words: A Journal of Cultural Materialism*, 15 (2017), 40–54.
- <sup>68</sup> Hladki, 'Thresholds of the Flesh', p. 268.
- <sup>69</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies that matter: on the discursive limits of 'sex'* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 140.



Symbolism, Empire, and the Dance:  
On Sarojini Naidu's 'Eastern Dancers' and Arthur Symons's 'Javanese Dancers'<sup>1</sup>

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Born and raised in Hyderabad, Sarojini Naidu (1879–1949) is largely known for her role in the Indian independence movement and her tenure as the President of the Indian National Congress in 1925. Yet, in her lifetime, she also developed a rich literary career and published multiple Anglophone poetry collections. She began writing in her childhood, composing '1300-line poems when she had barely entered her teens'.<sup>2</sup> It was when her father arranged for her to study abroad at Cambridge and London in 1896, however, that Naidu encountered Arthur Symons and the British decadent community for the first time through Edmund Gosse, one of her teachers at Cambridge.

An Orientalist dynamic undergirded Naidu's connection to Gosse, but her friendship with Symons was, as Makarand Paranjape observes, 'more honest and equal [...] genuine and intimate'.<sup>3</sup> Viewing Naidu's relationship to Symons in this way might seem surprising given their age gap and his exoticizing tendencies, but one reason why they formed a bond has to do with their shared engagement with decadent aesthetics. Symons was the first to encourage Naidu to publish her poems as a collection, *The Golden Threshold* (1905), and critics like Meena Alexander, Elleke Boehmer, Mary Ellis Gibson, Edward Marx, Chandani Lokuge, Sheshalatha Reddy, Anna Snaith, and Jane Stafford have highlighted how these poems engage with her political positions on cosmopolitanism, Empire, and Indian nationalism.<sup>4</sup> Yet, Naidu's concerns, as Symons implies in his preface to her collection, are also unmistakably articulated through decadent tropes like decay, excess, and extreme sensuality, which is why Lisa Rodensky later included Naidu's work when compiling her anthology of decadent poetry.<sup>5</sup> Of course, other influences exist in Naidu's oeuvre – she experimented with sources from British Romantic, Indo-Islamic, and Urdu poetry, as well

as the Indian aesthetic principle of *rasa* [heightened states of sentiment] – but they are refracted through decadent aesthetics.<sup>6</sup>

Naidu's relationship to decadence, however, was not without friction. She sensed early on that her work ran along alternative lines when she read the *Savoy*, the short-lived magazine of decadent literature that Symons established:

I got the *Savoy*, the newest and youngest of all English magazines, edited by the youngest of editors, Arthur Symons [...] but, I am disappointed. [The *Savoy*] is very brilliant, dazzling, but – these boys, are wildly extravagant, wildly audacious – well, I haven't done much else except practicing, but wrote two poems. Rather different in themes to be of some inspiration.<sup>7</sup>

Here, the lure of decadent aesthetics is spliced with a concern about contrasts, suggesting that Naidu was not only aware of her position as an Indian woman in an English boys' club at the heart of the Empire, but that she had also noticed how her poetry was 'rather different' from Symons's and that of his contemporaries.

What were the differences between Naidu and Symons, and how might those differences deepen our understanding of decadence, especially in light of the recent turn toward 'undisciplining' Victorian studies?<sup>8</sup> This essay takes a modest step toward answering these questions by focusing on how Naidu and Symons engaged with a particular strain of decadent aesthetics: Symbolism.

Symons's treatises largely inform our understanding of Symbolism as a genre that privileges the spiritual sphere of analogy, metaphor, and imagery, over the visible world.<sup>9</sup> Symbolist poets, as Barry J. Faulk has explained, were preoccupied with creating word images – 'the images the mind forms in its interactions with the world'.<sup>10</sup> As a result, Symbolist poetry often appears to erase a distinct speaker in order to articulate language at its purest, or what Linda Dowling describes as the 'sensual, visceral basis of gestural language'.<sup>11</sup> Drawing on Charles Baudelaire's theory of correspondences – the notion that there are hidden relations linking the physical and spiritual spheres, and that the poet's job is to reveal those relations – Symbolism ultimately aims, as Symons declared, to articulate the 'disembodied voice, but the voice of the human soul'.<sup>12</sup>

Yet Symbolism is also underpinned by complex colonial and racial politics. This is most obvious when Symbolism turns toward non-white and non-Western subject matter. In this essay, I perform a case study of two poems, Symons's 'Javanese Dancers' (1892), and its twin, Naidu's 'Eastern Dancers' (1896), in order to show how the dynamics of mastery and submission, the colonizer and the colonized, and the white self and the Other, play themselves out through a seemingly apolitical trope: the dance. I argue that these poems, in addition to a set of historical materials, suggest that the pure and universal perspective embedded in Symbolism's founding theories is a fallacy. In Symons's poetry, the disembodied voice of Symbolism is not the voice of the 'human' soul so much as the voice of a white soul that draws correspondences between white women and life, while associating non-white women with death. Four years later, Naidu's poem tries to address Symbolism's inability to sufficiently engage with Otherness by stressing the Other's vitality at every moment. Yet this comes at a cost – one that rests on whether we read the poem's vivid, sensual language as a sign of liveliness, exoticization, or queer desire.

Ultimately, my goal is not to enforce a dichotomy of 'bad imperialist' and 'good native' but to show how Naidu and Symons's poems demonstrate that Symbolism and decadence experienced a crisis when they intersected with what Isobel Armstrong identified as 'an almost obsessive interest in the master-slave dialectic in the last part of the nineteenth century'.<sup>13</sup> Here, Armstrong does not mean poets explicitly depicted master-slave scenes; rather, they obliquely wrote 'in terms of paradigms of power and explored despotic structure through analogy [...] rather than writing directly of the political abuse of class oppression and colonialism'.<sup>14</sup>

### **If looks could kill: Symons's 'Javanese Dancers'**

Dance holds a special place in Symbolist poetry – its non-verbal reliance on bodily gestures evokes what the Symbolists believed language should do. As Symons puts it: dancers 'reach[ed] the brain primarily through the eyes, in the visual, concrete, imaginative way' and each gesture is a 'picture [that] lasts only long enough to have been there'.<sup>15</sup> Dance creates those abstract 'correspondences'

between the signified and signifier, inspiring W. B. Yeats to ask one of the tenderest questions that English poetry has ever uttered: how, indeed, can we know the dancer from the dance?<sup>16</sup>

Symons's 'Javanese Dancers', which he wrote for *The Book of the Rhymers' Club* and later published in *Silhouettes* (1896), is one of the most explicit iterations of this idea in decadent and Symbolist poetry. To quote the poem in full:

Twitched strings, the clang of metal, beaten drums,  
Dull, shrill, continuous, disquieting;  
And now the stealthy dancer comes  
Undulantly with cat-like steps that cling;

Smiling between her painted lids a smile  
Motionless, unintelligible, she twines  
Her fingers into mazy lines,  
Twining her scarves across them all the while.

One, two, three, four step forth, and, to and fro,  
Delicately and imperceptibly,  
Now swaying gently in a row,  
Now interthreading slow and rhythmically,

Still with fixed eyes, monotonously still,  
Mysteriously, with smiles inanimate,  
With lingering feet that undulate,  
With sinuous fingers, spectral hands that thrill,

The little amber-coloured dancers move,  
Like little painted figures on a screen,  
Or phantom-dancers haply seen  
Among the shadows of a magic grove.<sup>17</sup>

The tight, almost synecdochal focus on body *parts* – 'lingering feet', 'sinuous fingers', 'inanimate smiles' – epitomizes the paradoxical Symbolist predilection for precise yet suggestive word images. Even the poem's rhyme scheme, which alternates between ABAB and CDDC format and then repeats the latter in the concluding verse, mimics the interthreading 'to and fro' of the dancer's movements. Accounting for the dancer's every gesture, this poem feels like a meticulous aesthetic and sonic record of her dance.<sup>18</sup>

Yet 'Javanese Dancers' also draws correspondences between the dancer's gestures and their signification. In the case of this dancer – a non-white, non-Western Javanese dancer – her

every gesture corresponds to an Orientalized mystery. Simplistically speaking, the poem describes her dance in ways that are animalistic – sometimes likening her explicitly to a cat, and other times implicitly associating her movements with what we see in the nonhuman world (‘undulate’ and ‘twines’). At strategic moments, however, the poem also portrays the *dancer* as ‘motionless’, ‘still’, ‘fixed’, ‘inanimate’, and ‘spectral’. She becomes a motionless surface – ‘still [...] monotonously still’ – and epitomizes the Symbolist ambition to describe a subject through image alone. The speaker voids her of life as they perceive her body’s movements but her facial features, where self-expression is usually most intense, are described as ‘monotonous’ and ‘inanimate’. The poem separates the dancer from her art, peeling skin from soul, dancer from dance. Moreover, although Symons titles his poem ‘Javanese Dancers’ (emphasis mine), the poem collapses the dance company into one representative dancer.<sup>19</sup> Re-casting the corps as though they are a single person – a single image – extends the Orientalist assumption that all Easterners are the same. Why observe them all when gazing at one will do?

To portray dancers in Symbolist terms, then, it appears that they must undergo an existential death. But, of course, it isn’t always this way. For example, in ‘The World As Ballet’, Symons asserts that ‘the art of dancing symbolize[s] life’, at one point even conceptualizing dance as an art form that can ‘create life’.<sup>20</sup> The same correspondences that Symons draws between dance and life in the essay also emerge in his poetry, like the ‘Masks and Faces’ section in *Silhouettes*, where ‘Javanese Dancers’ is included with poems about dancers and beloveds. For example, in ‘Emmy’, a poem about a prostitute, her laughter ‘rings in my ears, as bright, | fresh and sweet as the voice of a mountain brook’.<sup>21</sup> Even though she dances ‘the dance of death so well’, the death referred to here is a moral rather than an existential one, for she burns across the page repeatedly with her ‘exquisite youth’, ‘virginal air’, and ‘witching smile’.<sup>22</sup>

The same correspondences between dancers, dance, and life also occur in Symons’s music hall reviews. These reviews have not gone unnoticed in scholarship on Symons, but Faulk’s work is, again, most useful because he notices that Symons’s campy sensibilities unsettle his colonial

tendencies, especially in ‘A Spanish Music Hall’ (1892) and ‘At The Alhambra: Impressions and Sensations’ (1896). In both reviews, Symons’s interest in the art of posing ensures that he restores agency to the dancers that he exoticizes by describing their return to everyday scenes after their performances, and this, according to Faulk, ‘has the calculated effect of displacing the sovereign observer from the scene he surveys’.<sup>23</sup>

In ‘Javanese Dancers’, however, campiness, if it exists, fails to unsettle exoticization in the same way that it does in Symons’s reviews. The question, then, is why this failure occurs. Interestingly, what the dancers in ‘The World As Ballet’ and the ‘Masks and Faces’ section of *Silhouettes* have in common is that they are white women.<sup>24</sup> The Spanish dancers in ‘A Spanish Music Hall’ and the British dancers performing Europeanized versions of shows like *Aladdin* in ‘At the Alhambra’ were white as well – or in the case of the former review, white-passing. As Leire Barrera-Medrano has pointed out, ‘A Spanish Music Hall’ describes the flamenco traditions of Spain’s Romani communities, which Symons viewed as lively and primal. His conclusions, however, are largely facilitated through white-passing dancers: Isabel Santos’ daughter is ‘pink and white’, Señorita Villaclara is ‘a fair-complexioned woman’, and the only person identified as distinctly non-white is ‘a dark Southerner’ in the audience.<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, in ‘At the Alhambra’ Symons is responding to the re-presentation of Eastern cultures through the white body. Two sections of ‘At the Alhambra’ were previously published in the *St James’s Gazette* in 1892, and in these initial drafts, Symons highlights *Aladdin* as a European production, where the dancers are white: ‘the new principal dancer, Signorina Pollini, from Milan [...] danced attractively; Mlle. Marie was an excellent *Aladdin*’.<sup>26</sup> Symons later compares another dancer in *Aladdin*, ‘Signorina Legnani [...] in the quaintest little costume [...] [dancing] in what might be the Chinese manner’ to Simeon Solomon’s painting, ‘Lady in a Chinese Dress’, which depicts a white lady wearing a traditional Chinese *cheongsam* (長衫).<sup>27</sup> The title, which identifies the Other but not the white self, reiterates white Europeanness as the universal norm upon which other cultures might be worn or taken off, echoing what the dancers in *Aladdin* are doing (‘wearing’

Eastern culture), or what the white imagination's fantasy about the 'Eastern culture' is, superimposed over the white body.

There is, however, one difference between Solomon's painting and the dance performance. Since the painting depicts the white adoption of an Eastern 'object', the viewer can visually discern boundaries between the *cheongsam* and the white body. Yet, when viewing a dance, if one cannot tell 'the dancer from the dance', then that boundary becomes so ambiguous that, in the case of *Aladdin*, the fact that the dancer is a white Italian woman does not seem to prevent her from embodying China and the Middle East all at once. Through Symons's eyes, 'the East' can only signify life – the 'possibility of endless vistas [...] a thousand shifting signs that refuse or exhaust description' – when articulated through whiteness.<sup>28</sup>

In all of Symons's pieces, then, the dancers are white or white-passing women, or white women pretending not to be white women, and it is their bodies that inspire Symons's core theories about Symbolism, particularly the correspondence he makes between dance and life. Yet in 'Javanese Dancers', the gaze observes the Asiatic body proper, in its shades of brown, bronze, and yellow, un-remediated by whiteness. Indeed, Karl Beckson's biography of Symons confirms that Symons saw the Javanese dancers not in London's music halls but at the 1889 Universal Exhibition in Paris with Havelock Ellis.<sup>29</sup> Actual Javanese dancers – not white dancers representing a Javanese style – were brought to the exhibition by the Dutch, who had colonized what is now Indonesia. These are the dancers Symons wrote about in 'Javanese Dancers', one of the first poems in his oeuvre that portrays dance as an airless death.

It should be clear by now that the 'correspondences' that Symbolism purported to reveal to the reader were not as universal, or as removed from the visible world, as its practitioners presumed. Symons's bejewelled lines can seduce us into believing that we really are dealing simply with word images, 'pure' language without messy speakers and human interventions, but the fractures in these assumptions fester within 'Javanese Dancers' itself, as indicated in the subtle yet significant moment in line sixteen where 'spectral hands' provoke a surreptitious 'thrill'. For a thrill

to be felt, a body must be there to detect it. If there is a body, then there is a speaker. If the dramatic monologue largely exposes, as Herbert F. Tucker has argued, ‘the play of verbal implication that creates character’ – how textuality invents a speaker – then Symbolism’s pursuit of pure language tries to conceal precisely that play as though there is no speaker in a poem.<sup>30</sup> But there is a speaker there, and we know this because the poem’s gaze evinces how they see and feel. In Symons’s case, the speaker across many of his pieces is not the disembodied voice of the human soul, but the white soul that has learned to associate whiteness with life and nonwhiteness with death.

The poem’s suggestive ‘thrill’ also highlights another problem. After admitting a ‘thrill’ – and, by so doing, placing its presumably speaker-less state under threat – the poem reasserts disembodiment with a gesture that is at once Symbolist and Orientalist, for the speaker flattens the dancer into a painted figure and compares her body to a mystified and inscrutable ‘phantom’. On the one hand, the dance, once compared to a painted shape, is returned to the Symbolist realm, and, on the other, the similes exacerbate the poem’s Orientalist energy and fulfil Symbolism’s representational ambitions by producing some of the poem’s most dehumanizing gestures.

The real upshot of it all, however, is this: none of the poems about the white dancers in *Silhouettes*’ ‘Masks and Faces’ section can match the prowess of ‘Javanese Dancers’. Its carefully wrought language overall is masterful, in both senses of that word – it not only reveals the poet’s mastery of Symbolism but also the tradition’s ultimate need to *master* its subject matter in order to achieve its own representational ambitions. The more firmly the poem fixes its subject, the sharper the images become. When choosing a dancer to sacrifice, however, Symons repeatedly hesitates to ‘master’ white or white-passing women, always linking them ultimately to life. The result is that these poems are not as aesthetically complete by the standards that Symbolism set for itself. In ‘Javanese Dancers’, however, that hesitation vanishes. The poem’s Symbolist glory occurs in large part, then, because the poem’s gaze has found a subject – an Asian woman - that it could bear to kill.



### **If looks could revive: Naidu's 'Eastern Dancers'**

Unlike Symons, Naidu never wrote any essays about Symbolism and, with the exception of 'Eastern Dancers', dance did not preoccupy her as much as it did Symons. However, she sometimes theorized about Symbolism in her letters. In a letter to her publisher, William Heinemann, Naidu rewrites Walter Pater's focus on the Symbolist possibilities of the hawthorn flower in 'The Child in the House'. Here, the protagonist, Florian, encounters the hawthorn and its blushing petals ignite 'a passionateness in his relation to fair outward objects [...] a sympathetic link between himself and actual, feeling, living objects'.<sup>31</sup> Like Symons's poem, the gaze here is white and European: in the crimson, Florian perceives 'the world of old Venetian masters, or old Flemish tapestries'. Naidu, however, revises the Europeanized correspondences that Pater's Florian draws:

Pater, in one of his books, speaks somewhere of the hawthorn being the reddest thing that he had ever beheld but I cannot imagine anything in the world that holds the sumptuous, multitudinous crimsons of the gulmohur [*szil*] flower: it grows in huge bouquets, and it stands for me as a symbol of a hundred passionate and splendid emotions such as the colours that a bride wears on her bridal morn and the hue of the blood that was shed on Rajput battlefields centuries ago: the sacred flame into which the Sati princesses leapt preferring death to dishonour: O it is a wonderful flower, with a wonderful capacity for symbolism.<sup>32</sup>

Naidu replaces Pater's hawthorn with the gulmohar, a flower originally native to Madagascar but well known to Naidu in India, and expands on the correspondences that the gulmohar connotes. Linking the gulmohar to events like a forthcoming marriage and historic wars, for instance, draws associations between joy and bloodshed, union and division, future and past. Florian's encounter with the hawthorn was a European awakening, but Naidu's gulmohar is more varied, unstable, and intercultural, stressing a multiplicity of feelings, histories, cultures, and positionalities.

Yet Naidu's expansion beyond a European frame comes with its own set of problems, at least in this passage. An important critic of colonialism and indigeneity in *Empire*, Jane Stafford, has concluded that the same passage exemplifies Naidu's self-Orientalizing performance of her

Indianness, for Naidu's references to 'bridal morns, battlefields, and sati [...] are sourced more from European orientalism than any local context'.<sup>33</sup> Naidu's revision of Pater's work departs from white Eurocentrism, but Stafford helps us see that this departure is laced with a seeming reliance on self-exoticization, and this tension is echoed in more consequential ways in Naidu's 'Eastern Dancers', which was initially published in the *Savoy*. The poem in full reads:

Eyes ravished with rapture, celestially panting, what passionate spirits aflaming with fire  
Drink deep of the hush of the hyacinth heavens that glimmer around them in fountains of  
light  
O wild and entrancing the strain of keen music that cleaveth the stars like a wail of desire  
And beautiful dancers with Houri-like faces bewitch the voluptuous watches of Night.

The scents of red roses and sandalwood flutter and die in the maze of their gem-tangled  
hair  
And smiles are entwining like magical serpents the poppies of lips that are opiate-sweet,  
Their glittering garments of purple are burning like tremulous dawns in the quivering air,  
And exquisite, subtle and slow, are the tinkle and tread of their rhythmical, slumber-soft  
feet.

Now silent, now singing and swaying and swinging, like blossoms that bend to the breezes  
or showers,  
Now wantonly winding, they flash, now they falter, and, lingering, anguish in radiant choir,  
Their jewel-girt arms and warm wavering, lily-long fingers enchant thro' the summer-swift  
hours,  
Eyes ravished with rapture, celestially panting, what passionate spirits aflaming with fire!<sup>34</sup>

Here, Naidu draws on Symbolism but she endeavours to ensure that, unlike 'Javanese Dancers', her dancers are predominantly linked to life. The poem begins with those ravished (rather than fixed) eyes, signalling the same obsession with imagistic body parts in 'Javanese Dancers' – 'slumber-soft feet', 'lily-long fingers', 'jewel-girt arms', 'gem-tangled hair', 'poppies of lips'. Like Symons, Naidu accounts for the movements of the dance itself, but she re-presents her dancers in ways that stress dynamism rather than stagnation through the anaphoric 'now', which records how the dancer moves at every second for the reader – '*now* silent, *now* singing [...] *now* wantonly winding [...] *now* they falter'.

By choosing the anapestic octometer, Naidu also positions her poem within and against a prosodic tradition that includes Edgar Allan Poe and A. C. Swinburne, with the former famously using anapestic octometer to concoct atmospheric and affective horror in 'The Raven' (1845).

Naidu, however, orients that same prosodic tradition toward excitement rather than terror in this poem, for the anapestic gallop in this case mimics the fast-paced movements of the dance. In some lines Naidu also deploys the anapestic octometer with minimal punctuation. Unlike ‘The Raven’ where dashes force firm pauses, her unpunctuated lines drive the poem’s affective excitement toward a literal breathlessness that becomes especially obvious when one recites the poem aloud. Interestingly, this breathlessness echoes that Paterian desire to fit ‘as many pulsations as possible into the given time’,<sup>35</sup> but, in this case, Naidu ensures that the subject provoking those pulsations is one that aesthetes like Pater overlooked, and Symbolists like Symons associated with death: the Other.

The Symbolist tendency to play with language through abstraction can be seen in the alliteration and assonance in lines such as ‘singing and swaying and swinging’, which invite the reader to pay attention to the way that the words sound rather than to their meaning. Even if one were to resist the poem’s attempts to pull us into its soundscape, some lines are so abstract that they seduce us into a Symbolist ‘spiritual’ realm regardless. Does the simile ‘like magical serpents’, for example, modify ‘smiles’ or ‘lips’? And how can one ‘drink deep of the hush of the hyacinth’? Auditory, visual, and olfactory senses are all intensified as they merge abstractly into one lush, synaesthetic phrase. That the poem concludes with the same line (and therefore the same images) with which it began also means that it ties itself back into a full circle – a complete image embedded directly in the form.

In the same way that expanding beyond Pater’s Eurocentrism came at a cost, however, the resuscitation of the non-Western, non-white Other in Naidu’s poem also causes its own difficulties. Images of blossoms, serpents, jewels, and sandalwood scents fluttering and dying can seem, like the Rajput battlefields and Sati practices that Naidu mentions in her letter, to extend the tropes of exoticization in European Orientalism. These concerns deepen once we consider the poem’s historical context. Jeffrey Spear and Avanthi Meduri have discussed how Naidu’s poem seems to echo a tendency in fin de siècle poetry to produce idealized depictions of Indian ‘Nautch’ dancers

who, until the arrival of British colonial law in India which branded them as prostitutes, were previously highly regarded as unchaste yet holy *devadasis*.<sup>36</sup> Questions of caste and class become especially relevant here, for, unlike the ‘Nautch’ girls, Naidu belonged to a privileged caste, meaning that the self-Orientalization of Eastern Otherness in her poem could also be read as an exoticization of an abject caste.

Yet, unlike the firm historical link between Symons’s ‘Javanese Dancers’ and the Javanese dancers at the 1889 Paris Exhibition that he attended, the link between Naidu and the ‘Nautch’ dancers is more ambiguous, primarily because the poem actually has two titles. It was initially titled ‘Eastern Dancers’ in the *Savoy*, and changed later to ‘Indian Dancers’ when Naidu republished the poem in *The Golden Threshold*. Spear and Meduri base their analysis of the poem on its second title and Naidu’s unpublished correspondence about it with Gosse, but the poem’s doubled history deserves some pause. That Naidu initially titled the poem as ‘Eastern’ rather than ‘Indian’ suggests that she did not necessarily have the ‘Nautch’ girls in mind when she first wrote the poem. Indeed, the particularly culturally loaded label, ‘Eastern’, suggests a preoccupation with ‘speaking back’ to the totalizing gaze of the English boys’ club that she was working within and against.<sup>37</sup>

There is one more angle that troubles decisive conclusions about the poem’s treatment of the Other. In the same way that we often assume that the speakers of poems like Symons’s ‘Javanese Dancers’ are men, if we presume that the speaker here is, like Naidu, a woman, then it becomes obvious that queer desire may be the basis of the poem – that what we are witnessing in this case is desire between women. Even if one were to dismiss the possibility of a female speaker, the possibility of queer desire opens up once more – this time *between* the dancers themselves – when we account for the perspectival instability in Naidu’s poem. Gibson’s study insightfully observes that the poem abandons first- or second-person pronouns, favouring the third-person ‘their’ or no pronoun at all.<sup>38</sup> These choices not only stress the presence of multiple dancers (as opposed to the single representative figure in Symons’s poem), but also momentarily collapses the boundaries between the speaker and the dancers, as well as the boundaries between each dancer

in the corps, meaning that some of the poem's descriptions could apply to all subjects in the poem. If smiles are 'entwining like magical serpents', for example, are they exchanged between the dancers themselves, or between the dancers and the speaker? And whose eyes are 'ravished with rapture'? Symons's poem makes it obvious that the speaker and the dancer look at each other in ways that mimic a Hegelian or colonial dialectic, but the gazes in Naidu's poem are multidirectional: the speaker and the dancers could be making eye contact and smiling at one another, but those exchanges could also be happening between the dancers.

Moreover, unlike the idealized 'Nautch' girls who were perceived to perform and service a particular audience, the dancers in Naidu's poem are not represented as exclusively concerned with 'approaching' the speaker as explicitly as Symons's dancer ('and now the stealthy dancer comes'). In fact, Naidu's poem begins *in medias res*. Unlike Symons's poem, the speaker does not have the opportunity to define when the dance begins and ends; instead, the poem suggests that the speaker has stumbled upon a scene rather than attending a performance hosted for their pleasure, thus deploying the same de-centring effect that Symons achieved in his reviews but not in 'Javanese Dancers'. Indeed, Naidu's poem highlights that the only audience these dancers are attempting to 'bewitch' is the personified Night rather than the viewer, which seems to suggest that they are dancing for dancing's sake – women exercising their agency to dance together for their own pleasure.

## **Conclusion**

While Symons's poem demonstrates that Symbolist beauty depends on the Other's death, these competing readings of Naidu's poem ultimately suggest that keeping the Other alive within a Symbolist space may depend on using language that is fundamentally ambiguous – language that, in this poem, disorders the boundaries between fetishistic, possessive lust (like mastering the Other in Symons's poem) and an erotic longing that responds more fully to the Other by acknowledging their agency and multiplicity. Indeed, it is precisely this representational ambiguity that transforms

the Other from a reductive figure of exoticized threat in ‘Javanese Dancers’ into an ‘open’ signifier, where the fetishization of the Other and the recognition of the Other’s agency are at play. Crucially, that fetishistic impulse is perennially available, but it is also not the only articulation of the Other in this poem. This ambiguity in ‘Eastern Dancers’ should not be interpreted as a mark of Naidu’s failure as a poet so much as a reflection of precisely what it is like to exist as an Othered subject within an English poetic tradition like Symbolism: it is to experience continual risk – the risk that the words and images that express the Other’s agency or desire are precisely the same words and images that will turn against them. If Symons’s ‘Javanese Dancers’ captures the voice of the white soul, Naidu’s ‘Eastern Dancers’ is its twin because it captures the complexities – and, perhaps, the impossibility – of fully articulating a Symbolist ‘voice’ for the Other’s soul.

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<sup>2</sup> Maharand Paranjape, ‘Introduction’, in *Sarojini Naidu: Selected Letters 1890s to 1940s*, ed. by Maharand Paranjape (New Delhi: Kali for Women Raj Press, 1996), pp. vii–xl (p. viii).

<sup>3</sup> Paranjape, pp. xxv–xxvi.

I should note here that critics have taken issue with Symons’s preface to *The Golden Threshold*, which, although well-intentioned, seems to Orientalize Naidu and some aspects of her poetry. Although an extensive discussion about their interpersonal dynamics is outside the scope of this paper, see Mary Ellis Gibson for a nuanced discussion about the ways that their relationship moved within and against the typical model of Orientalizing patron and self-exoticizing devotee. Mary Ellis Gibson, *Indian Angles: English Verse in Colonial India from Jones to Tagore* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Meena Alexander, ‘Sarojini Naidu: Romanticism and Resistance’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 20.43 (1985), WS68–71; Elleke Boehmer, ‘East Is East: Where Postcolonialism Is Neo-Orientalist – the Cases of Sarojini Naidu and Arundhati Roy’, in *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), pp. 158–71; Edward Marx, ‘Sarojini Naidu: The Nightingale as Nationalist’, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 31.1 (1996), 45–62; Chandani Lokuge, ‘Dialoguing with Empire: The Literary and Political Rhetoric of Sarojini Naidu’, in *India in Britain*, ed. by Susheila Nasta (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 115–33; Sheshalatha Reddy, ‘The Cosmopolitan Nationalism of Sarojini Naidu, Nightingale of India’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 38.2 (2010), 571–89; Anna Snaith, ‘Sarojini Naidu: Feminist Nationalism and Cross-Cultural Poetics’, in *Modernist Voyages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 67–89; Jane Stafford, *Colonial Literature and the Native Author: Indigeneity and Empire* (Cambridge: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); and Gibson, *Indian Angles*.

<sup>5</sup> Lisa Rodensky, *Decadent Poetry from Wilde to Naidu* (London: Penguin, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> For a compelling account of *rasa* and Naidu’s work, see Christin Höne, ‘Senses and Sensibilities in Sarojini Naidu’s Poetry’, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 44.5 (2021), 966–82.

<sup>7</sup> Sarojini Naidu, ‘To M. Govindarajulu Naidu’, in *Sarojini Naidu: Selected Letters 1890s to 1940s*, pp. 6–7.

<sup>8</sup> Ronjaunee Chatterjee, Alicia Mireles Christoff, and Amy R. Wong, ‘Undisciplining Victorian Studies’, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 10 July 2020 <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/undisciplining-victorian-studies/>> [accessed 14 December 2021].

<sup>9</sup> Symons built on his thoughts in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, conceptualizing Symbolism as a ‘revolt against exteriority’. Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, with an introduction by Richard Ellmann (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1958), p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> Barry J. Faulk, 'Symbolism and Decadence', in *A Companion to Modernist Poetry* (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2014), pp. 144–56 (p. 144).

<sup>11</sup> Linda Dowling, 'Disembodied Voices', in *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 175–243 (p. 241).

<sup>12</sup> Arthur Symons, 'The Decadent Movement in Literature', *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 87 (November 1893), 858–67 (p. 862).

An example of the Symbolist reliance on correspondences can be found in Faulk's 'Symbolism and Decadence', which explains how Stéphane Mallarmé's 'L'Azur' ['The Blue'] turns to analogies such as 'sad chimneys smoke' and 'drifting prison made of soot' to convey the apparent terror of darkness, rather than describing darkness outright.

<sup>13</sup> Dowling, p. 241; Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 398.

<sup>14</sup> Armstrong, p. 398.

<sup>15</sup> Arthur Symons, 'The World as Ballet', in *Studies in Seven Arts* (New York: Dutton, 1907), p. 391.

<sup>16</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'Among School Children' (1928), in *W. B. Yeats*, ed. by John Kelly (London: Everyman, 1997), pp. 56–58 (p. 58).

<sup>17</sup> Arthur Symons, 'Javanese Dancers', in *Silhouettes*, 2nd edn (London: Leonard Smithers, 1896), p. 33.

<sup>18</sup> No wonder, then, that reviewers like Rosamund Marriott Watson and Graham R. Tomson should praise this poem as an 'extremely clever *study*' (emphasis mine). See Graham R. Tomson and Rosamund Marriott Watson, 'The Book of the Rhymers' Club', *The Academy and Literature* (March 1892), 294–95 (p. 295).

<sup>19</sup> The ambiguous 'one, two, three, four' in the poem could refer to the possibility of four dancers moving forward, but generally others have conceptualized the phrase as referring to the dancer moving to the beat of the music (e.g., the dancer 'step[s] forth' on the first beat, 'steps to' on another beat, etc.).

<sup>20</sup> Symons, 'The World as Ballet', pp. 389, 390. In the same essay, Symons perceives animality and death in dance as well. Yet, what he means by 'animal life' is religious ecstasy. Similarly, in the one instance where death arises, it does so within the context of birth, where dance embodies the circle of life.

<sup>21</sup> Arthur Symons, 'Emmy', in *Silhouettes*, p. 24. All other references to *Silhouettes* are to this edition.

<sup>22</sup> Other poems, although not about dancers, link the female beloved to life. 'Her Eyes', for example, reiterates that tight, Symbolist focus on body parts but links the beloved's eyes to 'a little flame that dances | A firefly in a grassy nest' (p. 12). In 'Morbidezza', death is evoked by analogy with funeral flowers – white lilies – and a 'frozen moon' (p. 13) hovering above the beloved, but only to play with the half-life that morbidezza (the appearance of extreme softness in sculptures) coyly refers to. Her flesh, the poem claims, 'is lilies' (p. 13) – but regardless of how 'still' it is, the body remains 'virginal' and 'alluring' at the end.

<sup>23</sup> Barry Faulk, 'Camp Expertise: Arthur Symons, Music-Hall, and the Defense of Theory', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 28.1 (2000), 171–93 (p. 188). This move, as Faulk argues, allows Symons to highlight how the dancers are in control; they can 'placidly negotiate different spaces, able to regulate the flow of their charisma [...] signify their Spanishness and distance themselves from it' (p. 178).

<sup>24</sup> The dancers who inspire Symons's conceptualization of dance more broadly are described as 'alluring by an artificial heightening of whites and reds on the face, displaying, employing, all their natural beauty, themselves full of joy in motion, or affecting that enjoyment, offered to our eyes like a bouquet of flowers [...] so human, so remote, so desirable, so evasive'. 'The World as Ballet', p. 387.

<sup>25</sup> Arthur Symons, 'A Spanish Music Hall', *Fortnightly Review* (May 1892), pp. 716–22 (p. 719, p. 720, p. 718). When Symons uses the term 'Moorish', he is describing the dance movements or the chants rather than the dancers, claiming that 'Spanish dancing [...] derives its Eastern colours from the Moors' (p. 719).

<sup>26</sup> Jane Pritchard, "'More Natural than Nature, More Artificial than Art': The Dance Criticism of Arthur Symons", *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research*, 21.2 (2003), 36–89 (p. 53).

<sup>27</sup> Pritchard, p. 57.

<sup>28</sup> Faulk, 'Camp Expertise', p. 185.

<sup>29</sup> Karl Beckson, *Arthur Symons: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 50.

<sup>30</sup> Herbert F. Tucker, 'Dramatic Monologue and the Overhearing of Lyric', in *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*, ed. by Chaviva Hošek and Patricia Parker (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 226–43 (p. 243).

<sup>31</sup> Walter Pater, *The Child in the House: An Imaginary Portrait* (Portland, ME: Thomas B. Mosher, 1896), pp. 30–31.

<sup>32</sup> Sarojini Naidu, 'To William Heinemann. 8 June 1911', in *Sarojini Naidu: Selected Letters 1890s to 1940s*, p. 54.

<sup>33</sup> Stafford, p. 52.

<sup>34</sup> Sarojini Chattopâdhyây (Sarojini Naidu), 'Eastern Dancers', *Savoy*, 5 (September 1896), p. 84.

<sup>35</sup> Walter Pater, 'Conclusion', in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 118–21 (p. 120).

<sup>36</sup> Jeffrey L. Spear and Avanthi Meduri, 'Knowing the Dancer: East Meets West', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 32.2 (2004), 435–48.

<sup>37</sup> It is also possible that the title change to 'India' could have occurred to position the poem more cleanly within the larger focus on Indian nationalism and Indian traditions in *The Golden Threshold*, where other poems are also titled similarly, like 'Indian Weavers', 'Indian Love-Song', 'The Indian Gipsy', and 'To India'.

<sup>38</sup> Gibson, *Indian Angles*, p. 221.

‘We Must Find Out If We Are Still Alive!’:  
Sex Apocalypse and How to Survive It in *La Messe dorée*<sup>1</sup>

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And in utterly abandoning himself he found – not, it is true, the rapture of love – but a half-crazed rapture reminiscent of a massacre, of sex-maniacal homicide or, if there can be such a thing, a state of being seized and rapt away by the daemons of the void, who have their habitation behind all the painted scenery of life.

– Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*<sup>2</sup>

Sunset. A black car drives, in the slowly fading light, across a flat and featureless plain outside Paris. We hear, as if from far off, the low plaintive wailing of a flute, the soft insistent throbbing of a drum. Some words flash onto the screen. ‘Wanting to lose myself in you, I long for death.’<sup>3</sup> They come from the sixteenth-century Spanish mystic St. Teresa of Ávila. The car pulls up outside an ornate Art Nouveau villa of pale rose-tinted stone, with round turrets at the corners and a sweep of marble steps in front. A chauffeur gets out and opens the rear door for a young blonde woman. She is dressed in white; a diaphanous orange scarf floats about her neck. She climbs the steps to the front door of the house, where an elderly maid tells her she is the first guest to arrive. With her we enter the world of *La Messe dorée*.

The second of two films by the author, illustrator, and stage designer Beni Montresor, *La Messe dorée* [*The Golden Mass*] is a film more talked about than seen. Nor has it been talked about a great deal. Released in 1975, it was widely dismissed as blasphemous and obscene. A critic in *Le Monde* declared: ‘Pour l’homme occidental façonné par la morale judéo-chrétienne, pour un catholique romain en particulier, *La Messe dorée* ne peut être reçu que comme un film blasphématoire, attendant à toutes les valeurs reconnues.’ [To a man brought up in the Judaeo-Christian morality of the West, and to a Roman Catholic in particular, *La Messe dorée* can only be seen as a blasphemous film, an attack upon all of our accepted values.]<sup>4</sup> Lacking a conventional narrative of any kind, it centres on a glamorous high society orgy in the guise of a Roman



Catholic mass. Or rather, and this seems equally valid, a Roman Catholic mass in the guise of an orgy. It is a film not of actions but of textures, of flowing silken robes and gilded Byzantine crowns, of naked skin and limbs entwined in shadow, lit by a sporadic glow of candles and torches. It has the aura of a decadent and erotic nocturnal vision.



Fig. 1: French theatrical release poster for *La Messe dorée* (1975).

At the same time, *La Messe dorée* feels less redolent of any lived experience than of prophecy, madness, and dreams. Its essence is hard to grasp and harder still to define. You might start by imagining the languid high fashion *ennui* of *India Song* (1975) by Marguerite Duras cross-bred with the raw sexual transgression of *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* (1975) by Pier Paolo Pasolini. But even that juxtaposition is so bizarre as to leave you scratching your head. Its indefinable essence is reflected in its bewildering range of titles. In Germany it bore an overtly religious title, *Das Ritual* [*The Ritual*], while in Spain it was released (following the death of General Franco) as *La orgía del sexo* [*The Sex Orgy*] (figs. 2 and 3). Its Italian title *La Profonda Luce*

*dei Sensi* [*In the Deep Light of the Senses*] (fig. 4) bore no relation to any of the others and the Italian distributors re-edited the film to the point of incoherence, reducing it to little more than a classy soft-porn flick.

Yet all these titles reflect aspects of the film and its creator. Born in Bussolengo near Verona in 1926, Montresor spent his childhood in near-orgiastic thrall to the mystical and sensuous rituals of the Roman Catholic Church. ‘The church was my dream world and also my bed’, he recalled in a 1978 profile in *People*, ‘sensuous with the fragrance of incense and flowers and the heat from the candles.’<sup>55</sup> He made his name with his flamboyant sets and costumes for Italian movies – from the Gothic Expressionism of *I Vampiri* (1956) by Riccardo Freda to the mythical fantasy of *Sigfrido* (1957) by Giacomo Gentilomo. Moving to New York in 1960, he designed costumes for Broadway and for the Metropolitan Opera. In 1966, he accompanied a staging of Mozart’s opera *The Magic Flute* with a children’s book that contained his own retelling and illustrations. From then on, he pursued two parallel careers: as a designer and director in opera and theatre and as a prize-winning author and illustrator for children.

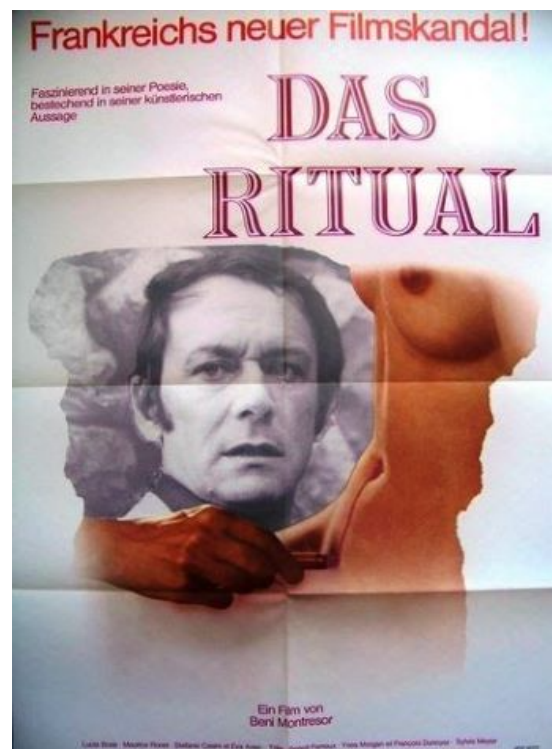


Fig. 2: German theatrical release poster for *Das Ritual*.



Fig. 3: Spanish theatrical release poster for *La orgia del sexo*.

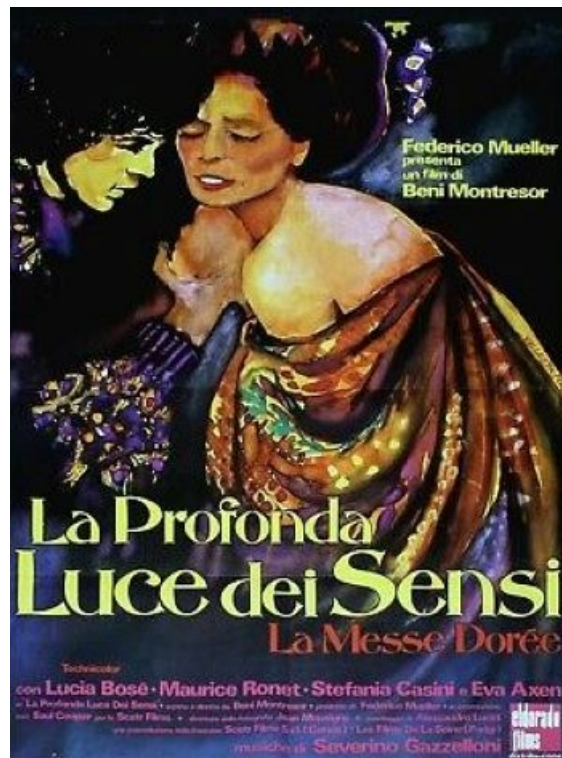


Fig. 4: Italian theatrical release poster for *La Profonda Luce dei Sensi*.

His approach to his work sounds disarming in its simplicity. ‘I must astonish and amaze myself first’, he said, ‘and if I do, then the spectator will react in the same way.’<sup>6</sup> Was it this need to astonish and amaze that led Montresor to start making his own films? His first film *Pilgrimage* (1972) was shot in New York and tells a quasi-Oedipal story of a father, a mother, and a son. His next film *La Messe dorée* was shot in France with two major European stars – the Italian diva Lucia Bosè and the French actor Maurice Ronet – and such rising starlets as Stefania Casini and Eva Axen. It sparked an international scandal and critics snootily opined that it ‘confirmed that his talents were more in visuals than dramatics.’<sup>7</sup> Both films were commercial failures and plans for a third – *Victoria Macbeth* with Laurence Olivier and Catherine Deneuve – were put indefinitely on hold. Both *Pilgrimage* and *La Messe dorée* have long since vanished from commercial distribution and neither is available in any home viewing format.

When Montresor died in 2001, his films were treated even by his admirers as a bizarre footnote. Yet *La Messe dorée*, at any rate, holds up an opulent mirror to the aspirations and anxieties of the 1970s. It was a decade when feminism, gay rights, Black Power, a worldwide energy crisis, and a wave of strikes and left-wing movements led the conservative Western middle classes to fear the world they knew was doomed to vanish. Such anxieties were reflected in the all-star ‘disaster movies’ that dominated the global box office. Films like *Airport* (1970), *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972), and *The Towering Inferno* (1974) spoke eloquently for a world that feared it was on the edge of an apocalypse. *The Cassandra Crossing* (1976) even conjured up the spectre of a deadly global pandemic. Ironically, the mass audience found this premise quite ridiculously far-fetched, and the film was both a critical and a commercial flop.

What *La Messe dorée* posits is an apocalypse in an entirely different form – one that is at once spiritual and sexual. In it the nuclear heterosexual family unit – indeed, the very idea of heterosexual manhood – rots away and collapses in upon itself, while the sanctity of the Roman Catholic mass gives way to the profanity of an orgy. The iconic figure of the Virgin Mary remains an object of veneration, but the act of worshipping her culminates in her symbolic mass

rape. This delight in the wilful profanation of the sacred has led critics to compare the film to the works of Georges Bataille or the Marquis de Sade. As Bataille wrote about Sade, ‘the essence of his work is destruction: not only the destruction of objects or of a given set of victims [...] but also the destruction of the author and his own work’.<sup>8</sup> The problem with this reading is that Sade writes less about sex than about power. His descriptions of sex are graphic but resolutely un-erotic. In contrast, *La Messe dorée* is a work of refined and aestheticized eroticism *par excellence*.

Sexual desire in all its forms is the live and beating heart of *La Messe dorée*. The orgy it depicts is nothing more or less than an all-out Sex Apocalypse. In the course of one night, a mother and father split apart and turn their erotic appetites on their children. Midway through the film, the father beds down with his daughter – although Montresor discreetly avoids showing us what happens. At the end, the mother (Bosè) performs oral sex on her teenage son and this Montresor does show. As Alberto Pezzotta writes, ‘Quanto alla fellatio della Bosé, non sarà hard, ma va vista per essere creduta.’ [Bosè’s act of fellatio is in no way hardcore, but it still has to be seen to be believed.]<sup>9</sup> Rather than copulating in order to produce children (as Roman Catholic doctrine prescribes) the parents in *La Messe dorée* seem to produce children so they can have young and beautiful partners to copulate with. At the same time, fatherhood and heterosexual manhood become both disposable and dispensable. As the father, played by Ronet, withdraws from the family and the film, a younger married man watches helplessly as his wife makes love to another woman. Later on, the two women lure him into triangular S&M games that culminate (possibly) in his death.

For all the scandalous nature of his work, Montresor was an intensely private man. Reports of his sexuality are contradictory and varied. But with its rippling brocades, its glittering jewels and its succulent Art Nouveau interiors, *La Messe dorée* has what many have come to recognize as the hallmark of a gay aesthetic. Its images echo such early Kenneth Anger films as *Puce Moment* (1949) or *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* (1954) which also depicts a ritualized high society orgy. Its remote and luxurious mansion stands next door, imaginatively, to the enchanted

chateau of *La Belle et la Bête* [*Beauty and the Beast*] (1946) by Jean Cocteau. In a specifically Italian context, Montresor shows a close aesthetic kinship with Luchino Visconti, ‘zooming into one glittering *objet d’art* after another, positively wallowing in acres of ormolu and crystal’.<sup>10</sup> In its visual luxuriance, *La Messe dorée* sits neatly beside several Italian films of the mid-70s – *The Innocent* (1976) by Visconti, *The Inheritance* (1976) by Mauro Bolognini, *The Divine Nymph* (1975) by Giuseppe Patroni Griffi – which are heavy with what we might call ‘gay style’ even though male homosexuality plays little or no role in the action.

Ultimately, *La Messe dorée* can be viewed as a bold and pioneering work of queer art, one that gleefully shatters bourgeois norms while exulting in ‘aberrant’ or ‘deviant’ sexuality in all its forms. At the same time, it paints ‘i conti col fallimento della rivoluzione sessuale reichiana e le conseguenti utopie già deludenti ed effimere sul nascere’ [a merciless and unflinching portrait of a society coming to terms with the failure of the Reichian sexual revolution and the dream of a utopia that was deceptive and ephemeral from the beginning].<sup>11</sup> It is simultaneously a prophecy, a celebration and warning of a coming Sex Apocalypse. In this way it can be seen as foreshadowing the onset of AIDS in the 80s, which gave the notion of ‘sex apocalypse’ a terrifying biological reality. In the early years of the twenty-first century – and in an age of mass contagion and fears of economic, political, and social collapse – *La Messe dorée* evokes a world that looks alarmingly like our own.

## The Last Supper

Each gesture of the virgin princess was linked to the suffering and death of a man. The old king was well aware of this and as a result kept her macabre virginity hidden in the unknown cloister. The cunning princess knew this too, hence her smile as she kissed the foxglove or tore apart lilies with her deliberate and lovely fingers.

– Jean Lorrain, ‘Princess of the Red Lilies’<sup>12</sup>

Like the demonic but virginal princess in Lorrain’s ‘La princesse aux lys rouges’ [‘Princess of the Red Lilies’] (1902), the young girl (Eva Axen) who arrives at the start of *La Messe dorée* spends

most of the story in seclusion. Her name is Marie-Odile and she has been invited because she is a virgin (fig. 5). To her will fall the role of the Virgin Mary in the decadent restaging of the Roman Catholic mass. Its climax will be her ritual deflowering. But up until that point, she plays no direct role in the orgy. She stays cloistered up in her bedroom – like Lorrain’s princess, in a mystical and hieratic space that is exclusively her own. Her only independent action is to bathe herself and contemplate her nude reflection in a large oval mirror. She does not copulate with the other guests any more than Princess Audovère fights in her father’s battles. But just as the princess plucks the flowers and causes men to die, Marie-Odile seems to facilitate the Sex Apocalypse through her numinous and mystical off-screen presence.

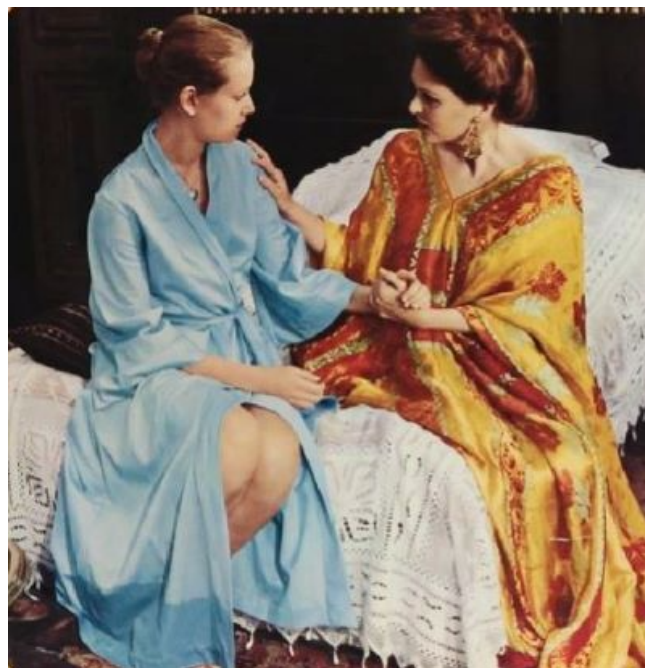


Fig. 5 (00:06:40): Eva Axen as Marie-Odile and Lucia Bosè as Héléne.

The stage manager of the orgy – the alluring but merciless puppet master who pulls the strings – is Héléne, the lady of the house, played by Bosè. An actress of haunting and enigmatic beauty, Bosè became an icon of European cinema through her roles in Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Chronicle of a Love* (1950) and *The Lady Without Camellias* (1953). Her sulphurous dark eyes, her



ivory skin and her lustrous torrent of black hair gave her the air of a Mona Lisa who has uncannily stepped out of her frame and deigned to mix with mere mortals. Her career was cut short in the 1950s when she married the bullfighter Luis Miguel Dominguín, who forbade her from working and required her to be a full-time wife and mother. But after her divorce in the late 60s, she returned to the screen in a string of obscure and bizarre films. In *The Legend of Blood Castle* (1972) by Jorge Grau, she is an aristocrat who preserves her beauty by bathing in the blood of virgins. In *Arcana* (1972) by Giulio Questi, she is a modern-day witch who longs incestuously for her son and spits live toads out of her mouth.

Yet even for an actress as adventurous as Bosè, *La Messe dorée* was a bold and even a shocking choice. By the mid 70s, it was by no means unheard of for a ‘name’ actress to appear in a sexually controversial film. Catherine Deneuve had made *Belle de Jour* (1967) for Luis Buñuel and Charlotte Rampling had made *The Night Porter* (1974) for Liliana Cavani and both had emerged as bigger stars than before. However, these were younger women whose fame did not pre-date the ‘permissive’ moral climate of the 60s. The role of Héléne called for an actress *d’un certain âge* and Ava Gardner and Melina Mercouri had both been offered it and turned it down. In accepting the role, Bosè balked only at Montresor’s suggestion that her real-life son Miguel Bosè might play her son in the film. ‘Now, Beni, you go too far’,<sup>13</sup> she declared. Her son would make his name as Spain’s first ‘out’ gay pop star and played the transvestite Femme Letal in the Pedro Almodóvar melodrama *High Heels* (1991).

Whatever reservations Bosè may have had, there is no denying *La Messe dorée* is the apotheosis of her later screen career. With her swirling red and gold kaftan and her dark tresses piled atop her head, Héléne seems less a flesh-and-blood woman than a Technicolour Aubrey Beardsley drawing sprung to life. She is at once passionate and cold-blooded, gracious yet chillingly and utterly ruthless. Choreographing her guests as if they were so many life-size automata, she is quick to react when a gauche young woman shows up in a gown that is less than becoming. ‘Next time’, she says, ‘I’ll choose your outfit for you.’ Her only weakness is her



adoration of her teenage son Philippe (Yves Morgan) – a bond that is clearly incestuous from the start – and her slavish devotion to a mysterious sex guru named Raphaël. This man does not appear until late in the evening and Hélène grows visibly anxious as she waits for him to arrive.

In sharp contrast, Hélène shows little but contempt for her husband David. He is played by the French actor Maurice Ronet, who specialized in wearily sophisticated roués who have often seen better days. Ronet was the first Dickie Greenleaf in *Plein Soleil* (1960) – the René Clément adaptation of *The Talented Mr Ripley* – and the suicidal anti-hero in the Louis Malle film *Le Feu follet* [*The Fire Within*] (1963). His role in *La Messe dorée* is alarmingly small and consists of only four scenes. We first see him hovering in a corner of the living room, casting a wary eye on his wife's guests as they arrive. All of them are young and beautiful and androgynous, that rare and elegant species of Eurotrash you might find in a fashion shoot by Helmut Newton. They wear lashings of mascara and satin robes in bright rainbow colours. And that is just the men. Each one radiates and glitters like an eye in a peacock's tail. David shows not the slightest interest in any of them until, suddenly, he makes a beeline for a handsome blonde stud who stands awkwardly in the doorway.

What exactly is going on here? It is clear the two men do not know each other – but David wastes no time in introducing himself. The way in which he approaches the young man suggests that David may be gay or, at least, bisexual. Could that be why his marriage to Hélène is on the rocks? Later in the evening, when his son Philippe is reluctant to join the orgy, David takes him up to his bedroom and orders him to strip. Dressing the boy up in a diaphanous red kaftan, the father eyes his son with what appears to be naked sexual hunger. 'Don't think a Messiah will come and save you', he warns, 'there is no Messiah'. Just as we are becoming seriously alarmed at the turn events are taking, Hélène enters and delivers the boy from his father's clutches. Although nothing is ever stated directly, *La Messe dorée* may be the only film in which a father and mother are locked in a bitter feud over which of them will get to deflower their son.

Having failed in this endeavour, David eventually beds down with his daughter Élisabeth (Bénédicte Bucher) – a strange child of around twelve who keeps a large black snake in a bathtub and worships it as a pagan god. We do not see what happens between father and daughter. Both of them vanish midway through the film and do not reappear. Yet as strange and shadowy a figure as David may be, what we see in him is an overt abdication of patriarchal authority in any form. Eschewing the role of heterosexual lover to his wife and guide and protector to his children, he becomes instead a predator of a decidedly incestuous bent. He comes across as a bisexual equivalent to Humbert Humbert in *Lolita* – both the 1958 novel by Vladimir Nabokov and the 1962 film by Stanley Kubrick, starring James Mason (whom Ronet physically resembles). He is a morally and perhaps also sexually impotent man who stewes in his own superfluity and self-hatred. In him we see the key theme of *La Messe dorée*: specifically, the decay and downfall of patriarchy and the dissolution of any conventionally heterosexual notion of manhood.



Fig. 6 (00:50:16): Maurice Ronet as David and Bénédicte Bucher as Élisabeth.

Even as we watch the implosion of the heterosexual family unit, the majority of Hélène's guests embody the new and polymorphous order that will supplant it. The most striking is Loulou (Stefania Casini) a voracious flame-haired lesbian who wears clomping silver platform heels and appears not to have read Marlene Dietrich's dictum that 'Dark nail polish is vulgar.'<sup>14</sup>

She is there in a tandem with a young married couple. The wife is a delicate blonde beauty called Laure. (The actress who plays her is named Trille, which means literally the ‘trill’ of a bird.) The husband is a bespectacled and ultra-straight *petit bourgeois* named Pierre (François Dunoyer). The two women are clearly lovers but Pierre does his best to ignore it. It is apparent – as it is with David – that he feels extraneous to his own marriage. He fumes silently all through dinner, as his wife holds up a chicken leg for Loulou to eat. Loulou takes it sensuously into her mouth, licks at it, sucks on it, and gorges it down with great relish.

The scene is an echo of the infamous one in *La Notte Brava* [*The Good Night*] (1959) by Mauro Bolognini – in which an aristocratic playboy (Tomas Milian) dangles a chicken leg for the delectation of a working-class youth (Laurent Terzieff). In both cases, the act is an obvious visual metaphor for fellatio. What makes it so odd in *La Messe dorée* is the fact it involves two women. It is recognizably a gay male sex act performed by lesbians. Just in case we miss the point, Montresor takes the fellatio up to and beyond the point of ejaculation, as Loulou spits out the chicken, half-chewed and gooey with saliva, all over her girlfriend’s face. She then cries out ‘I love you!’ and dabs the girl clean, covering her face passionately with kisses. If we translate the symbolism into literal terms, it is a sequence unimaginable outside of *Deep Throat* (1973) or a hardcore gay porn film. Yet its handling is so masterful that it barely disrupts the mood of refined aestheticism.

Just as the climax of *La Messe dorée* is a profane re-enactment of the Roman Catholic mass, so the dinner that precedes it can be read as a lewd parody of the Last Supper. This idea is in no way unique. The Surrealist director Luis Buñuel plays a similar game in *Viridiana* (1961) where a banquet of cripples and beggars degenerates into an orgy. But the concern of Montresor is not with the outcasts at the bottom of society, but with the perverse and enervated beings at the top of it. Towards the end of dinner, a young woman scrawls on an empty plate: ‘Take and eat. This is my body.’ Once the meal is over, Héléne leads the women in a wild and orgiastic dance. Swooping and swaying about the room, she takes on the hieratic and mythical air of Maria

Callas in the Pasolini film of *Medea* (1969). The other women swirl around her to the lilting sound of flute and drums like Bacchantes in a classical Greek drama (fig. 7).



Fig. 7 (00:29:56): The dance.

As the dance grows wilder, the men rise out of their seats to join in. The dancers surge in a circle round the table. One by one, they start to strip off their clothes. It is at this point the guru Raphaël makes his entrance. With his androgynous beauty and his mop of curling black hair, the actor who plays him (Raphaël Mattei) has the look of a perverse vampire angel. He looks eerily like the winged hermaphrodite in Aubrey Beardsley's drawing 'The Mirror of Love' (fig. 8). He stares down on the dancers from a minstrels' gallery that overlooks the room. Hélène rushes up to join him and falls slavishly at his feet. She flings her arms round him and begs him to stay with her always. She insists vociferously that he must never leave her again. 'We must find out', she tells him cryptically, 'if we are still alive!'

In the words of Louis Marcorelles in *Le Monde*, Hélène is on a quest for 'des ailleurs insaisissables, de l'évasion sans frein' [an unattainable elsewhere, an escape without limits].<sup>15</sup> This was a fashionable enough quest in the 70s and visible even in the glossy banality of Just Jaeckin's *Emmanuelle* (1974) and its sequels. Yet what exactly does this quest involve and what price must

be paid to see it through? If a full-blown Sex Apocalypse is desirable or possible, who will be its victims and who, if any, will be its survivors? *La Messe dorée* answers none of these questions in any direct or easily explicable way. Its achievement – as distinct from the commercial erotic films of its era – is to ask these questions at all or, perhaps, simply to admit that they exist. It is one thing to demolish the heterosexual nuclear family and the entire patriarchal order as we know it. But what – to put it ever so politely – is anybody meant to do next?

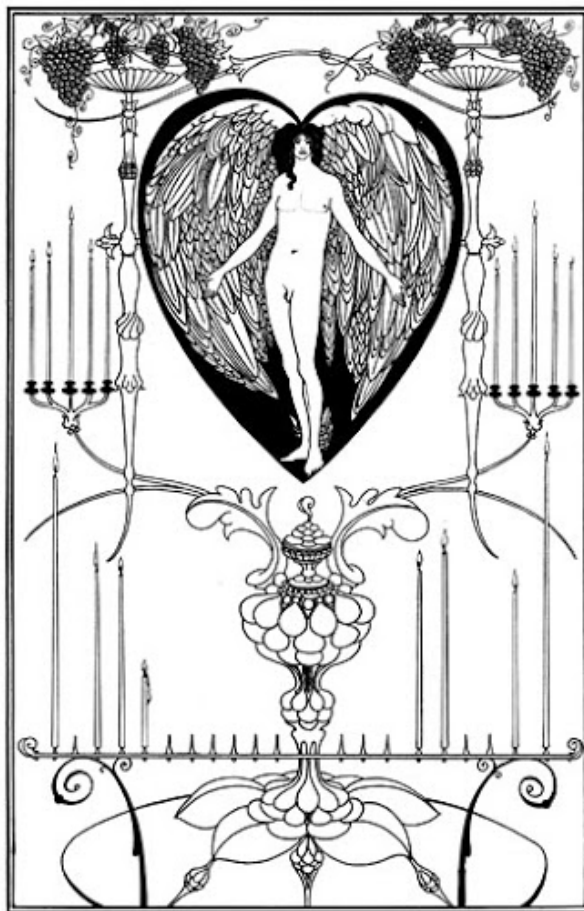


Fig. 8: Aubrey Beardsley, 'The Mirror of Love' (1895).

### The sacrifice

His inner life seemed to detach itself, to fall to pieces, to dissolve in a ferment which spread to the deepest strata of his being, casting up to the surface shapeless fragments of totally diverse nature, unrecognisable as forming part of the life of the same man. Of all these strange things, so

inextricably mixed and jostling one another so violently, he was dimly aware as in a dream.

– Gabriele D’Annunzio, *The Triumph of Death*<sup>16</sup>

After the feasting and the dancing, the cast of *La Messe dorée* plunges – like the anti-hero in D’Annunzio’s *Il trionfo della morte* [*The Triumph of Death*] (1894) – into a maelstrom of sexual excess that leads to the dissolution of their day-to-day social identities and, in one case, to actual physical death. But its darker implications become apparent only later. All we see at first is guests copulating throughout the villa in anonymous twos and threes. One young man sprawls on a sofa and masturbates in full view of the camera. The sight of his erect penis is unprecedented in a mainstream (i.e., non-pornographic) movie apart from Pasolini’s ‘Trilogy of Life’ – *The Decameron* (1970), *The Canterbury Tales* (1972), and *The Arabian Nights* (1974) – and *Salò*. Oddly enough, the guru Raphaël plays no part in the orgy. Instead, he goes upstairs to bathe and groom the naked Marie-Odile for her role as the Madonna in the coming re-enactment of the Roman Catholic mass.



Fig. 9 (00:57:40): Eva Axen as Marie-Odile and Raphaël Mattei as Raphaël.

Hélène too retires to her bedroom. There she encounters a younger woman who gazes at her in slavish adoration. ‘Your skin is so soft, like my mother’s’, the girl marvels. This is presumably the prelude to a sexual act that is (literally) lesbian and (psychologically) incestuous but one that – given Bosè’s status as a glamorous heterosexual diva – we do not actually see. All we see is a shot of Hélène primping in her bathroom mirror once the act is over, sliding out of her red-and-gold kaftan and into a robe of deep blue silk. Now she undoes her lustrous black hair and lets it flow freely about her shoulders. She looks more than ever like Da Vinci’s Mona Lisa sprung to life. But her cool is soon shattered by the sight of her son Philippe (whom she had, earlier on, rescued from that awkward situation with his father) stealing into her bedroom, slipping off his robe and sliding stark naked into her bed.

Hélène reacts to this with shock and fury. ‘You come into the bed of your old mother?’ she shouts, and orders him to be gone at once. The sheer vehemence of her outburst suggests that here is the erotic encounter she most desires, but also the only one that her lingering sense of bourgeois propriety will not allow her to commit. The erotic tension between mother and son in *La Messe dorée* is easily commensurate with that of Jocasta and Oedipus, Phaedra and Hippolytus or Violet and Sebastian Venable in Joseph Mankiewicz’s adaptation of Tennessee Williams’s play *Suddenly, Last Summer* (1959). Philippe seems as much aware of this tension as his mother does. Crushed by her rejection, he flees down the hallway to his own bedroom. Hélène’s young female friend does her best to console her, telling her that every son secretly desires his mother. But it seems that is no consolation. ‘What if the mother is no longer able to resist?’ Hélène asks. ‘This is not and it cannot be the end!’

Her words turn out to be prophetic. At this point, *La Messe dorée* has only just begun its journey towards an all-out Sex Apocalypse. As Montresor described it, ‘The film is about the deepest, darkest place in my soul; all my childhood obsessions [which he pronounces, oddly, ‘obsexions’]. It terrifies me.’<sup>17</sup> Any autobiographical import is impossible to gauge without a greater knowledge of the director’s private life. Yet the family romance in this movie feels less

biographical than mythical and archetypal. Unlike Oedipus in the Greek myth, the young Philippe has no need to slay his father (although he may have to elude his father's sexual advances). The father David withdraws from the family very much of his own accord, as his role as patriarch becomes increasingly hollow and superfluous. That will free the mother and son – sooner rather than later – to consummate their incestuous feelings for each other. Gore Vidal wrote in *Myra Breckinridge* (1968) that 'films are the unconscious expressions of age-old human myths'.<sup>18</sup> Nowhere does that feel truer than in *La Messe dorée*.

In another bedroom, another dethronement of heterosexual male hegemony is taking place. The lesbian couple Laure and Loulou are making love as the conservative and uptight husband Pierre watches forlornly in the doorway. With its images of black lace stockings and cream silk panties sliding over naked skin, the lesbian sex is poised awkwardly between the dreamy soft-focus posing of Susan Sarandon and Catherine Deneuve in *The Hunger* (1983) and the full-on all-you-can-eat lustiness of the Bob Guccione porn epic *Caligula* (1979). Such content is a standard trope of 70s soft-core erotica, but its import here is not primarily erotic. The focus here is on Pierre, the husband, and his mounting despair at his irrelevance and superfluity in his own marriage. As he watches his wife find erotic fulfilment with another woman, he unzips his trousers and begins frantically to masturbate. In a close-up, we see his fingers slimy with drops of semen. He has become as pathetic and ludicrous a figure as David, but lacking any interest in incest or homosexuality to console him.

In this context, the two women's torture and (possible) killing of Pierre is not just a gratuitous S&M *frisson*. It is the literal and physical destruction of a man who has already been symbolically and psychologically destroyed. Stripping him naked and laying him face down on the bed, the two women bind Pierre's wrists to the bedposts – much as Sharon Stone does to her victims-cum-lovers in *Basic Instinct* (1992). Loulou starts off by drawing the marks of scars on his back in bright red lipstick. But soon the women claw his back for real, as Loulou straddles him, grabs him by the throat and beats his head savagely against the bedstead. 'I want to die!' Pierre



cries. 'I want to die!' Like the hero in D'Annunzio's *The Triumph of Death*, he seeks only a physical actualization of his existing psychological state. We do not see what actually happens. We hear a loud burst of music and see other guests come running from all parts of the villa – drawn, perhaps by the screams of a dying man. We see Pierre lying face down and motionless. He does not appear in *La Messe dorée* after this point.

Is he really dead? Or is this part of an elaborate sexual game? It is a common trope in movies for a lesbian couple to seal its bond by killing a man who tries to exert control over one of them. In *Daughters of Darkness* (1970) by Harry Kümel, the Countess Bathory (Delphine Seyrig) and the young bride she has seduced (Danièle Ouimet) slit the wrists of the bride's husband (John Karlen) with the shards of a cut-glass fruit bowl. They assert their identity – both as lesbians and as vampires – by drinking his blood in a perverse Holy Communion. Similarly, in *The Hunger* the liaison between the vampire Deneuve and the mortal Sarandon begins with the exit of Deneuve's male lover (David Bowie) who withers and gets sealed up in a coffin. It cements itself with the slaying of Sarandon's boyfriend (Cliff de Young) who becomes the first casualty of her new life as a vampire and as a lesbian. But whether Pierre is physically dead – as we suspect – or just psychologically dead – as Hélène's husband David undoubtedly is – may well be beside the point. What we have witnessed twice in *La Messe dorée* is the systematic erasure of patriarchy and heterosexual male identity.

What arises in their place is a cult of polymorphous perversity centred on the worship of a mythical Virgin Goddess. It is in this spirit that the guests go upstairs to the attic, where Marie-Odile sits now upon a carved wooden throne. In his role as leader of the cult, Raphaël powders her nude body all over until it is a ghostly shade of white. His fellow votaries join in, applying rouge to her nipples and tracing a red line from her belly to her pubic hair. They dress her in red silk robes, gold medallions, and lengths of glistening gold chains. Hélène places a jewelled Byzantine crown reverently on her head. The guests kneel at her feet and stretch out their hands to touch the folds of her robe. This worship of Marie-Odile evokes – at one and the same time –

the Roman Catholic cult of the Virgin Mary and the pagan cult of an all-powerful Mother Goddess, which are identified by Camille Paglia as two sides of one coin:

The autonomy of the ancient mother goddesses was sometimes called virginity. A virgin fertility seems contradictory, but it survives in the Christian Virgin Birth. Hera and Aphrodite annually renewed their virginity by bathing in a sacred spring. The same duality appears in Artemis, who was honoured both as virgin huntress and as patron of childbirth. The Great Mother is a virgin insofar as she is independent of men. She is a sexual dictator, symbolically impenetrable.<sup>19</sup>

If we follow Paglia's line of reasoning, we may see both the virgin Marie-Odile and the matriarch Hélène as aspects of this same Mother Goddess. One is fair and one is dark, one is chaste and one is promiscuous and amoral. Yet both embody a power that supersedes the patriarchal rule of men.



Fig. 10 (01:12:06): The final procession.

Lifting the virgin Marie-Odile on her throne, the guests carry her in procession down the long and winding stairs. It is recognizably the parade of the Virgin Mary that is celebrated in most Roman Catholic countries. Some of the guests carry candles, others the gilded fronds of palms. The mood turns from spiritual to sexual in the main hall, where they lay Marie-Odile supine on a large white sheet. As they kneel and bow their heads in prayer, Loulou slits open the

girl's scarlet robe and exposes the nude splendour of her pale and powered flesh. As the worshippers run their hands over her naked body, it is hard not to flash forward twenty years to the live virgin (Laure Marsac) who is sacrificed on the stage of the Théâtre des Vampires in the Neil Jordan film *Interview with the Vampire* (1994). It is the kind of fantasy that only an extravagantly lapsed Roman Catholic could ever have – and both Montresor and the best-selling author Anne Rice seem to slot neatly into this tradition.

The perversely sexualized Adoration of the Virgin gives way, abruptly, to an orgy. The scene is clearly recognizable from the annals of nineteenth-century decadent fiction, notably Joris-Karl Huysmans's novel *La-Bas* [*The Damned*] (1891), with its graphic depiction of a Black Mass: 'In the wake of this act of sacrilege, a wave of collective hysteria now spread through the hall.'<sup>20</sup> The guests make love in a bewildering array of groups and combinations and even Hélène – who has held herself aloof up until now – rolls about on the floor, shrieking in a Bacchic frenzy. The guru Raphaël seizes Marie-Odile's hand and guides it to the cleft between her thighs. A woman forces her own hand into the same place and brutally breaks the girl's hymen. As Marie-Odile cries out in pain, her assailant wipes her own face ecstatically with the girl's blood. This all-out sexual assault upon the Virgin Mary has the air of a ritualized gang rape. The profane and the sacred have merged and become indivisible. A Sex Apocalypse – long feared and long desired – is now well and truly here.

But even that is not the final profanation. As the frenzy rises to a climax, we hear a cry louder than the rest. Hélène rises to her feet and runs out of the hall, her voluminous blue robe billowing behind her. She races up the stairs to her son's bedroom. What follows is cut in its entirety from *Nella profonda luce dei sensi*, the Italian release of *La Messe dorée* that was disowned by Montresor. Its excision makes nonsense of the film's ending and much of what has gone before it. The scene of incestuous fellatio between Hélène and her son is in no way sensational or gratuitous. It is the logical and necessary culmination of the erotic and psychological tensions that have been building up throughout the film. As Paglia has pointed out, 'The Great Mother's

main disciple is her son and lover, the dying god of Near Eastern mystery religion.<sup>21</sup> The incestuous union of Héléne and Philippe is essential to the destruction of the nuclear family and the patriarchal world order it embodies. As we bear witness to it, *La Messe dorée* grants us a front-row seat at the Sex Apocalypse.

Stealing into her son's bedroom, Héléne peels away the sheet that hides his naked form. Is he asleep or is he just pretending to be? Slowly his eyes open and the mother and son stare at one another, transfixed. As she bends low over his groin, her torrent of black hair shields the act of fellatio from our view. It is of course inconceivable that Bosè – a major star of prestigious art-house films – would ever perform a graphic sexual act on camera. Yet we sit there paralysed with shock by the fact it is happening at all. This is the literal fulfilment of the cult of the Great Mother as Paglia describes it: 'Masculinity flows from the Great Mother as an aspect of herself and is recalled and cancelled by her at will. Her son is a servant of her cult. There is no going beyond her. Motherhood blankets existence.'<sup>22</sup> It is worth noting that, some years later, Lucia Bosè made headlines by posing with her son Miguel Bosé in a discreetly nude photo-shoot. The world was duly scandalized and Miguel was set for stardom.

*La Messe dorée* ends with a series of disconnected shots of the empty house. The red robe worn by Marie-Odile is spread across the floor of the great hall like a pool of congealed blood. Her jewelled Byzantine crown lies abandoned in one corner. A title flashes onto the screen: 'This film is dedicated to my mother.' A large number of rational narrative questions are left in limbo. How will Loulou and Laure explain away the presence of Pierre's dead body in their bedroom? How much therapy will Marie-Odile require after her ritual deflowering, which may have been followed by an actual mass rape? What will Héléne and David talk about over breakfast, knowing that one (or perhaps both) of them has had carnal knowledge of their own child? All these questions are worth asking but none of them ultimately matter. What this film is about – and what Montresor has shown us – is a radical deconstruction of the nuclear family and patriarchal heterosexual manhood in a delirious nocturnal vision of Sex Apocalypse.

In offering us this sublimely decadent vision, *La Messe dorée* takes us perilously close to the place evoked by Susan Sontag in her essay ‘The Pornographic Imagination’. Writing of sexual desire and its power to disrupt accepted social norms, Sontag states:

Tamed as it may be, sexuality remains one of the demonic forces in human consciousness – pushing us at intervals close to taboo and dangerous desires, which range from the impulse to commit sudden arbitrary violence upon another person to the voluptuous yearning for the extinction of one’s consciousness, for death itself.<sup>23</sup>

The art of Montresor is recognizably an art of ‘voluptuous yearning’. This may be a yearning for a transcendent sexual or mystical experience. Or it may be an innately decadent yearning for the annihilation of the nuclear family, of patriarchal society or of one’s own social, physical, or psychological self. By the end of *La Messe dorée*, any or all of these yearnings strike us as both achievable and achieved. But a question remains as to what if anything will survive this Sex Apocalypse. Even though the twenty-first century is a far less *outré* and glamorous place than the one conjured up by Montresor, it is still a world in thrall to the spectacle of its own decay and the spectre of its own impending collapse. It is hard not to wonder who its survivors will be. Harder still, at times, not to wonder if survival is desirable at all.

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is dedicated to the memory of Lucia Bosè (1931-2020) who passed away due to Covid-19 at the start of the worldwide pandemic. Thanks also to my friends and fellow film junkies David Cairns, Andrea Novarin, and Pete Tombs, and to Saul Cooper for his invaluable kindness and support.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities – Volume Two*, trans. by Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser (London: Picador, 1981) p. 399.

<sup>3</sup> Beni Montresor, dir., *La Messe dorée* (Les Films de la Seine, Eldorado Film, SCE’TR, 1975).

<sup>4</sup> Louis Marcorelles, ‘La Messe dorée de Beni Montresor’, *Le Monde*, 11 April 1975, my translation.

<[https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1975/04/11/la-messe-doree-de-beni-montresor\\_2593486\\_1819218.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1975/04/11/la-messe-doree-de-beni-montresor_2593486_1819218.html)> [accessed 13 December 2021].

<sup>5</sup> Nancy Faber, ‘Talk About Something for Everyone: Beni Montresor Ranges from Opera to Porn Movie to Children’s Books’, *People*, 11 December 1978,

<<https://people.com/archive/talk-about-something-for-everyone-beni-montresor-ranges-from-opera-to-porn-movie-to-childrens-books-vol-10-no-24/>> [accessed 13 December 2021].

<sup>6</sup> William H. Honan, ‘Beni Montresor, Artist in 2 Worlds, Dies at 78’, *New York Times*, 13 October 2001, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/13/books/beni-montresor-artist-in-2-worlds-dies-at-78.html>> [accessed 13 December 2021].

<sup>7</sup> John Francis Lane, ‘Beni Montresor – Obituary’, *Guardian*, 4 December 2001,

<<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2001/dec/04/guardianobituaries>> [accessed 13 December 2021].

<sup>8</sup> Georges Bataille, quoted in ‘Eccentrico italiano: Nel delirio dei sensi’, Fondazione Centro Sperimentale del Cinema 22 February 2012. My translation from Italian translation of Bataille.

<<https://www.fondazioneccsc.it/evento/eccentrico-italiano-nel-delirio-dei-sensi/>> [accessed 13 December 2021].

<sup>9</sup> Alberto Pezzotta, ‘La profonda luce dei sensi’, in *Nocturno*, February 2012. My translation.

<<https://www.nocturno.it/movie/la-profonda-luce-dei-sensi/>> [accessed 13 December 2021].

- <sup>10</sup> Gilbert Adair, *The Real Tadzio – Thomas Mann’s Death in Venice and the Boy who Inspired It* (London: Short Books, 2001), p. 81.
- <sup>11</sup> Fondazione Centro Sperimentale del Cinema, ‘Eccentrico italiano’.
- <sup>12</sup> Jean Lorrain, ‘Princess of the Red Lilies’, in *Fairy Tales for the Disillusioned: Enchanted Stories from the French Decadent Tradition*, trans. and ed. by Gretchen Schultz and Lewis Seifert (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019), p. 139.
- <sup>13</sup> Lucia Bosè quoted in Faber, ‘Talk About Something for Everyone’.
- <sup>14</sup> Marlene Dietrich, *Marlene Dietrich’s ABC – Revised Edition* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1984), p. 114.
- <sup>15</sup> Marcorelles, ‘La Messe dorée de Beni Montresor’.
- <sup>16</sup> Gabriele D’Annunzio, *The Triumph of Death*, trans. by Georgina Harding (London: Dedalus, 1990), p. 312.
- <sup>17</sup> Beni Montresor quoted in Faber, ‘Talk About Something for Everyone’.
- <sup>18</sup> Gore Vidal, *Myra Breckinridge & Myron* (London: André Deutsch, 1987), p. 13.
- <sup>19</sup> Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae – Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 43.
- <sup>20</sup> Joris-Karl Huysmans, *The Damned (Là-Bas)*, trans. by Terry Hale (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 227.
- <sup>21</sup> Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, p. 52.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.
- <sup>23</sup> Susan Sontag, ‘The Pornographic Imagination’, in *Styles of Radical Will* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 57.

Isabelle Eberhardt, 'Infernal: Sepulchral Pleasure' (1895):  
A New Translation

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Swiss writer Isabelle Wilhelmine Marie Eberhardt (1877-1904) was born out of wedlock: the daughter of German-Russian Nathalie de Moerder (*née* Eberhardt), who was married at the time, and her children's tutor, Alexander Trophimowsky, an Armenian anarchist and nihilist who converted to Islam. As a child, Isabelle Eberhardt received an extensive education and learned several languages. Raised on an equal footing with her brothers, she learned how to ride horses, and shoot firearms, and she took part in all the chores around the house; she wore boys' clothes and kept her hair short. Always encouraged to question and transgress gender roles, Eberhardt grew to reject the submissive role women had been assigned by society and strove to escape the confines of her sex.

Spellbound by the novels of Pierre Loti and nineteenth-century Orientalism, she settled in Algeria with her mother in 1897, converted to Islam and joined the Qadriya brotherhood of Sufis. Disguised as an Arab man, calling herself Si Mahmoud Saâdi, her head shaved and wearing men's clothing, the 'Androgyne du Désert' identified with men more than women, and felt free to enjoy countless erotic adventures. Even though she married Slimène Ehnni, an Algerian officer in the colonial army, in 1900, she refused domestic life. Sadly, Eberhardt's life was cut short when she was killed in a flash flood that swept her home in 1904.

None of Eberhardt's work, aside from her journalism, was published during her lifetime. Even though her mother tongue was Russian, she wrote in French. Today, Eberhardt is most famously known for her anti-colonial writings, denouncing the alienating effects of the French presence in North Africa on the colonized. The short story translated here, 'Infernal: Volupté sépulcrale' ['Infernal: Sepulchral Pleasure'], was written when Eberhardt was only 18 years old, and appeared on 15 September 1895 in the *Nouvelle Revue moderne* under the male pseudonym of

Nicolas Podolinsky. It tells the story of a medical student's sexual attraction for a dead woman waiting to be dissected for the advancement of medicine.

Nineteenth-century scholars might be familiar with the plethora of Francophone decadent texts dealing with the subject of love for and with the dead. The motif of necrophilia remained mostly within the domain of male writers: works by Théophile Gautier, Guy de Maupassant, Jules Laforgue, Charles Baudelaire, Jean Lorrain, and Jean Richepin, among others, described men's relationships with female corpses, ghosts, and vampires. Eberhardt, quoting Richepin at the beginning of her short story, clearly stresses her desire to become part of this masculine legacy. Yet, 'Infernal' has remained largely forgotten. This feminine version of love with and for the dead needs more critical attention as it brings to light something Eberhardt's male counterparts never did: the dead woman's feelings about this forceful encounter.

### **Translator's Note**

Eberhardt's style is very Baudelairean – poetic and dark – and her syntax is overall a bit stilted, with sudden shifts in focus and tone. The meaning can be ambiguous at times. This translation tries to preserve these idiosyncrasies as much as possible in order to retain the obscure and poetic feeling of the text, its authenticity and uniqueness, as it is *her* story, and this is the way she chose to write it. Though, as the tempo picks up – as if pacing along with the young medical student's heartbeat – the awkwardness of the phrasing seems to disappear as the reader feverishly runs through to the ending of the story.



## Infernal: Sepulchral Pleasure

Isabelle Eberhardt

To Ahmed ben Arslan *In memoriam*

Love without end, loves innumerable,  
Love for nameless objects,  
Love for a dream, love for a shadow,  
This is always love. Love!

Love! In your pure eyes  
These ever-rekindled flickers  
Are the quick sparks  
Of eternal flame. Love!

J. Richepin, *The Islands of Gold*

In the silence of the night, the large room, gloomy and barely lit, was half-asleep...  
From the dreadful tables, from the soiled floors, rose a mild smell – the smell of human entrails, of clotted blood, of spilled drugs...

In this scent of misery, in this painful room, two cadavers, covered by a white shroud, sinister cloth of horror, were sleeping on two tables.

Next to the bare wall, the wall of a hospital or a prison, of an asylum or a fire station, a man was lying under his tragic sheet, forever still, his eyes closed, now in eternal indifference. Very young, maybe 20 years old; the profile of a white statue, very soft, his pallid lips barely smiling on his livid face, a smile from beyond the grave...

In the opposite corner, a woman was also lying under the sheet of the wretched.

A mystical and pure image, with the pale, transcendental beauty of a martyr...

In the blueish shadow of her black hair, still and white, her voluptuous flesh stiffened by the cold of death, she was/is forever foreign to passionate embraces, to burning kisses.

With its perfect curves, her rigid shape lifted the vile shroud...

And the dimmed flame of the gas light cast bloody shadows on the sinister kingdom of dark death.

In the heavy silence, in the nauseating smell, the nameless corpses, both young and beautiful, were sleeping a frightening sleep...

They still had their human shape, but, in the mortuary room, they did not matter... They *existed* not, forever erased from the count of human lives.

Two wretched creatures crushed by destiny, brought down by vice; fleeting passers-by, they had landed here. Tomorrow, under the cold scalpel, torn to shreds, disgracefully skinned, their entrails made bare, they would show to other young men and women, eager to live, to know and to love, their ripped organs, their miserable and bloody lifeless bodies, their only possession, undoubtedly, during their lifetime, now forever forgotten...

They would display their ultimate misery to the great, indifferent sun – to the sun in its eternal joy...

It is of no concern!

In the great mystery of Eternal life, how would one regret sacrificed blood, life, and flesh?

And tomorrow, all those who would dip their young and warm hands in this frozen blood, in this butchered flesh, would later try and ease the pain of their pitiful brethren, and one day, they would try to appease the loud scream brought on by Unending life!

And then, eventually, they would also roll around, suddenly still and frozen, in the same shapeless, timeless and nameless Nothingness...

And so on, forever...

They were lying in the strange rays of the waning light...

And there, close to them, the immobile deceased, a living man was fighting against the dark, unknown forces of his being's miserable depths, forces that were about to overcome him, annihilate him...

Next to the miserable bed where the pallid woman was lying, stood a student, on duty at the clinic.

He was looking at her, his flesh aroused by dreadful desires.

His pale face, with his tormented dark eyes, was shivering with cold chills...

With all his might, with all the energy of his youth, he was trying to resist, fighting against the sinister calls of neurosis...

But, mesmerized and still, he could no longer escape; his lethargic flesh was weakening by the minute, a prey to deadly horror, his heart seized by revulsion...

He felt powerless at the thought of the monstrous embrace he madly desired.

And he would soon give in...

His suffering was intolerable in this cruel night...

His virility rebelled against the revolting coitus; he wanted to run away...

And yet he remained still, his forehead drenched in sweat, his fists clenched...

He felt strong and handsome; he knew he was very young and wholly male. And his pride was aroused at the thought of this deadly sham of love which, so many times before, had dragged him into the unspeakable abyss of pleasure.

Nauseated, he was trying to chase away the obscure fantasy born of his neurosis which, tonight, in front of this woman whose frozen curves he could see without any reserve under the soft sheet, in front of this horrible chimera, was prevailing, enslaving him.

With all his energy, with all his chastity that was being silenced yet still alive in him, he was trying to displace his crazed desire of possession onto a living woman – *any* living woman...

But all the images brought on by his memory, by the violent tension of his will, were insipid, impersonal..., whereas, just looking at this one – the dead woman – his young flesh quivered, swooned, wilted, in spite of himself.

Contemplating this degeneration, his face became flushed by shame... He despised and hated himself in this agonizing hour.

His gaze rested on the curved lines the funereal sheet made along the body. And he knew, he could see through it.

But he could not resist wanting to see it without filter.

And so, he gave in to this desire, though still fighting against the *other* who he knew to be perverse and vile...

With his hand, which was shaking uncontrollably, he removed the sheet and looked at this pitiful nakedness offered to his indecent eyes.

So then, he felt like he was about to swoon, he felt a long quiver from the depth of his triumphant flesh...

And he flung himself onto the white corpse, squeezed it in a wild and painful embrace, clenching his teeth, shivering with a horrifying fever ...

When he took her, without even feeling her coldness, he sensed an ultimate pleasurable chill.

He embraced her again and again with all his strength, feeling her alive, burning, crazed by his touch, pressing against his quivering flesh, with the lustfulness and softness of a warm and tender passive lover...

He let out a crazed grunt of pleasure, the triumphant cry, the great alleluia of almighty neurosis.

And the more this frenzied, wholly wild male embraced her, the more he felt her live, and quiver under his crazed touch.

He violently pressed his lips on the lips of his lover-ghost, the indifferent dead woman, until he felt pain.

Once again, the same sensual quiver shook his entire body.

With eyes widened by pleasure, his head was resting softly, languidly, on the dead woman's chest.

And the woman, *distant*, inanimate, indifferent to the passionate touch of the male who was possessing her in spite of death, was still lying, her face turned towards the ceiling that was covered with indistinct shadows.

Her dead eyes remained shut, without expressing any joy or pain, during this monstrous coitus; in the powerful embrace of the living, she remained more passive than any other lover would ever be.

In the pale dawn of a spring day, on her bed of blood and love, the dead woman and her sleeping lover were lying: she, forever at peace, already swept away into the dark unknown; he, meant to whirl about for a few more years in the impersonal turmoil of Eternal life...

## Infernalìa: Volupté s pulcrale

Isabelle Eberhardt

  Ahmed ben Arslan *In memoriam*

Amour sans fin, amours sans nombre.  
Amours aux objets innom s,  
Amour d'un r ve, amour d'une ombre,  
C'est toujours de l'amour. Aimez !

Aimez ! Dans vos regards limpides  
Ces  clairs toujours rallum s  
Sont les  tincelles rapides  
De la flamme  ternelle. Aimez !

J. Richepin, *Les Iles d'Or*.

Dans le silence nocturne, la grande salle morne,   peine  clair e, vaguement dormait...  
Des tables inf mes, du plancher souill , montait une odeur fade – une odeur d'entrailles  
humaines, de sang caill , de drogues r pandues...

En ce parfum de mis re, en cette salle douloureuse, sur deux tables, deux cadavres  
dormaient, couverts de linceuls blancs, sinistres v tements d' pouvante.

Pr s du mur nu, mur d'h pital ou de prison, d'asile ou de caserne, sous son drap  
lamentable, un homme  tait couch , fig    jamais, les yeux clos, en son indiff rence d sormais  
 ternelle. Tr s jeune, vingt ans peut- tre ; le profil de statue blanche, tr s doux, les l vres bl mes    
peine souriantes dans la face livide, d'un sourire d'outre-tombe...

Au coin oppos , une femme  tendue, elle aussi, sous le drap des mis rables.

Une image mystique et pure, en sa transcendantale beaut  p le de martyr...

Sous l'ombre bleu tre des cheveux noirs, une blancheur immobile, la chair voluptueuse  
raidie dans le froid de la mort,  trang re d sormais aux  treintes ardentes, aux baisers enflamm s.

La forme rigide soulevait le voile inf me de son galbe parfait...

Et sur ce r gne sinistre de la mort t n breuse, la flamme baiss e du gaz jetait ses reflets  
sanglants.

Dans le silence pesant, dans l'odeur naus euse, jeunes tous deux et beaux, les cadavres sans  
nom dormaient de leur sommeil d' pouvante...

Ils avaient encore gard  la forme humaine, mais, dans la salle mortuaire, eux ne comptaient  
pas... Ils *n' taient* pas, ray s   jamais du nombre des  tres.

Mis rables  cras s par la destin e, terrass s par le vice ; passants inconnus d'une heure, ils  
 taient venus  chouer ici. Demain, sous le scalpel froid, d chiquet s, honteusement d pouill s,  
leurs entrailles nues, ils allaient montrer   d'autres jeunes hommes,   d'autres jeunes femmes, avides  
de vivre, de savoir et d'aimer, leurs organes d chir s, leur mis rable loque sanglante, leur seul bien,  
sans doute, durant leurs vies   jamais ignor es...

Ils allaient  taler leur mis re ultime au grand soleil indiff rent – au soleil en sa joie  
 ternelle...

Qu'importe !

Dans la grande  nigme du Devenir  ternel, comment regretter le sang, la vie, la chair  
sacrifi s ?

Et tous ceux qui, demain, allaient tremper leurs mains, jeunes et chaudes, dans ce sang glacé, dans cette chair mutilée, après, ils iraient essayer de soulager un peu la douleur de leurs frères pitoyables, essayer d'apaiser un jour le grand hurlement qu'arrache le Devenir incessant !

Ensuite, eux aussi allaient rouler, inertes soudain et glacés, dans le même Néant sans forme, sans durée et sans nom...

Et ainsi, toujours...

Ils gisaient dans le rayonnement étrange de la lumière faiblissante...

Et là, près d'eux, trépassés immobiles, un vivant luttait contre les sombres forces inconnues des en-dessous ténébreux de son être, qui allaient le dompter, l'anéantir...

Près de la couche misérable où gisait la femme livide, un étudiant, de garde à la clinique, se tenait debout.

Il la regardait, la chair soulevée d'un désir effroyable.

Sa face pâle, aux yeux noirs angoissés, se convulsait de frissons glacés...

De toute sa volonté, de toute son énergie jeune, il résistait, luttant contre les appels sinistres de la névrose...

Mais il ne pouvait plus s'enfuir, fasciné, immobile ; la chair alanguie, faiblissant d'instant en instant, en proie à une épouvante mortelle, le cœur soulevé de dégoût...

Il se sentait sans force en face de l'étreinte hideuse qu'il désirait follement.

Et il allait céder bientôt...

Sa souffrance était intolérable en cette nuit cruelle...

Sa virilité se révoltait contre le coït abominable ; sa volonté était de fuir...

Et il restait immobile, le front trempé de sueur, les poings serrés...

Il se sentait fort et beau ; il se savait très jeune et mâle tout à fait. Et sa fierté se soulevait à la pensée de ce simulacre funèbre de l'amour qui, tant de fois déjà, l'avait entraîné dans les abîmes ineffables de la volupté.

Il chassait, écœuré, l'obscur fantasmagorie née de sa névrose qui, ce soir, en face de cette femme dont ses yeux voyaient sans pudeur la forme glacée sous le drap mou, en face de l'horrible chimère, triomphait, l'avalissant.

Il essayait de toute son énergie, de toute la chasteté déjà inconsciente, mais encore vivante qui était en lui, de reporter son désir délirant de possession sur une femme vivante – n'importe laquelle...

Mais toutes les images qu'évoquait sa mémoire, sous la tension violente de sa volonté, étaient pâles, impersonnelles..., tandis qu'à la vue de celle-ci – la morte – sa chair jeune frémissait, se pâmait, s'alanguissait malgré lui.

Le rouge de la honte, en face de la déchéance, lui monta au visage... Il se méprisait lui-même et se haïssait en cette heure torturante.

Son regard glissa sur le soulèvement du drap funèbre, au-dessus du corps. Et il savait, il voyait à travers.

Mais il voulut voir en réalité, invinciblement.

Alors, à ce désir, il céda, luttant pourtant toujours contre *l'autre* qu'il savait morbide et infâme...

De sa main qui tremblait violemment, il enleva le drap et regarda cette nudité lamentable qui s'étalait à ses yeux impudiques.

Alors il se sentit défaillir, il eut un long tressaillement jusqu'au plus profond de sa chair triomphante...

Et il tomba sur le cadavre blanc, le serra d'une étreinte sauvage, douloureuse, les dents serrées, frissonnant en sa fièvre horrible...

Quand il l'eut prise, ne sentant même pas sa froideur, il eut un frisson de volupté ultime.

De toute sa force il l'étreignait encore et encore, la sentant vivante, brûlante, folle sous ses caresses à lui, se serrer contre sa chair palpitante, lascive et molle en sa chaleur douce d'amante passive...

Il eut un râle furieux de volupté, le cri triomphant, le grand alleluia de la névrose toute-puissante.

Et lui, enragé, en mâle sauvage tout à fait, plus il l'étreignait, plus il la sentait vivre, tressaillir sous ses caresses folles.

Il pressa violemment, jusqu'à la douleur, ses lèvres sur celles de son amante-fantôme, de la trépassée insensible.

De nouveau, le même frisson voluptueux secoua tout son corps.

Sa tête, aux yeux élargis par la jouissance, reposait mollement, languide, sur la poitrine de la morte.

Et celle-ci, *lointaine*, inanimée, insensible à ces caresses ardentes du mâle qui la possédait malgré la mort, restait toujours étendue, la face tournée vers le plafond noyé d'ombres vagues.

Ses yeux morts restaient clos, et sans joie et sans douleur, en ce coït monstrueux ; elle reposait plus passive qu'aucune amante ne le sera jamais, sous l'étreinte puissante de l'être vivant.

Au lever pâle du jour printanier, sur sa couche de sang et d'amour, la trépassée et son amant endormi reposaient : elle, tranquille à jamais, envolée déjà vers l'inconnu ténébreux ; lui, destiné à tournoyer encore quelques années durant dans le tourbillon impersonnel du Devenir éternel...

Jake Elwes, *The Zizi Show – A Deepfake Drag Cabaret*  
(Edinburgh: The New Real, Edinburgh Futures Institute, 2020)

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Technology is not neutral. We're inside of what we make, and it's inside of us. We're living in a world of connections – and it matters which ones get made and unmade.

– Donna Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto*, 1984.

Life and death become luxurious, for those of us who fight for it.

– Ruthie Wilson Gilmore, *Theory from the Margins*, 2021.

*The Zizi Show – A Deepfake Drag Cabaret* (2020) is a virtual online interactive artwork combining Artificial Intelligence (AI) and drag performance.<sup>1</sup> It was created by the British visual artist Jake Elwes with thirteen established, UK-based drag artists, kings, queens, and 'everyone beyond the binary', and with support from the Edinburgh Futures Institute.

'Deepfake', a portmanteau of deep learning or machine learning and 'fake', was popularized in 2018 when a modified video was circulated on social media of Barack Obama mouthing words contained in a separate audio track that appeared deceptively like the ex-president of the United States' own words. In our present age of Covid-19 conspiracy theories, fake news, and celebrity revenge porn, deepfakes are ranked as a 'serious AI crime threat' and 'a threat to democracy'.<sup>2</sup>

In Elwes' compelling artwork, however, deepfake deception is connected more affirmatively to deception's age-old emergence as entertainment in the decadent cabarets of the Weimar Republic and more recently the television show *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009-present). While demonstrating the ability of AI to entertain the masses like cabaret, *The Zizi Show* also unleashes its potential as a radical pedagogic tool to educate on pressing contemporary concerns including the serious issue of human bias in AI, where variables such as gender, ethnicity, or sexual identity are often excluded. Such 'algorithmic bias' and 'discriminatory design'<sup>3</sup> perpetuate forms of

inequality tethered to the human world. Elwes' *The Zizi Show* calls for an eradication of such bias by demystifying AI and machine learning: taking it from the Silicon Valley elite and connecting it to the popular form of drag cabaret.

Access to this virtual performance requires a computer, laptop, or smartphone. On opening the webpage, one first encounters the prompt 'Enter *The Zizi Show*' in a snazzy decorative font. On clicking the viewer is immediately taken to a video in which a voiceover announces, 'Welcome to the stage, our host for the evening, the world's first deepfake drag act – Zizi.' As our host steps onto the stage, a familiar showtune begins to play – 'Willkommen, Bienvenue, Welcome' from John Kander's 1966 musical *Cabaret*, based on Christopher Isherwood's gloriously decadent *Berlin Stories* (1945).<sup>4</sup> In accordance with popular cabaret formats, there is a requirement to 'join in' or 'play along' with this automated show, which, because I am watching it on a laptop alone at home at 9.30 in the morning, feels a little silly or embarrassing. The stirring of such feelings, however, is key in reminding us that our very humanness as pleasure-mongering sentient beings is what is at stake in this artwork, in the history of cabaret, and if at all worth pursuing – in the future of AI too.

The host, Zizi, a shimmering translucent digital figurine, crosses to take centre stage, re/dis/appearing or rather morphing to the lip-sync 'Im cabaret, au cabaret, to cabaret!'. Zizi is difficult – impossible even – to identify in terms of gender, ethnicity or sexuality, and that is the point. As the figure's face and body mutate across multiple incarnations, we are reminded of the fluidity and multiplicity of identity – especially in the digital age where drag performance and avatar play have become ubiquitous forms of selfie-presentation online. While our host continually transmutes, what remains constant, familiar, and legible in this performance, is its framing as a decadent drag cabaret.

In the frame decadence constitutes a digital rendering of a classic red velvet curtain and black linoleum stage containing marks or footprints reminding us that many have trod these boards before, and that drag performance, and indeed deepfake cabaret, might trace their footprints back



to Ancient Greece, where for Plato theatre was, of course, philosophically undesirable – it was simply a lie. The choreography also identifies this performance as a short-form cabaret act. Zizi takes a few steps forward and one step back, creeps and repeats and turns, arms open to *Willkommen* us, acknowledging that this performance is for an audience (real or imagined) and an invitation to look and admire.

Speed, rhythm, and movement, synchronize with the musical backing track, keeping our attention on this (not so) solitary figure. And while remnants of flamboyant costume, feather boas, sequins, contour cleavage, thickly-caked makeup moustaches and lashes tell us that this is a drag show, these representations nevertheless crack and flicker before our very eyes. Like a flame they ignite memories of the bodily senses, reminding us of human passions and textures: the feeling and smell of warm plump bodies squeezed into synthetic fabrics, and greasy makeup on spotlight skin. The sound and hum of an imagined auditorium beckons: a recording of dispersed chatter, glasses clinking, gasps, claps, and cheers help create an illusion of cosmopolitan sociality: an ambience absent from the present pandemic. The lockdown launch of this artwork couldn't be more timely.

Following Zizi's opening performance, viewers are invited to 'pick a performer' from a menu of UK drag artists including Oedipussi Rex, Chiyo, Bolly-Illusion, and Ruby Wednesday, among others. After selecting a performer as one would in a computer game, the viewer is then invited to 'pick an act' from a menu of songs such as 'This is My Life' by Shirley Bassey, 'Freedom' by George Michael, 'I am What I Am' from La Cage Aux Folles, and more. Slightly distinct from Zizi's introductory performance, where our host continually morphs across multiple performers and identities, when viewers pick a drag performer and an act the performer remains singular and identifiable. The movement of the performer's body and lips matches (or rather approximates) the selected act, many of which were choreographed by the performers themselves and were fed into the programme's algorithm – an uneasy feast for an AI to digest, perhaps, given that the lip-sync rarely matches the song with any accuracy. Note: this is not a flaw. In fact, such performative

failure is a well-honed technique in drag performance and queer campery. It is the failure of virtuosity in drag performance that is so often compelling and entertaining. Algorithmic malfunction is comparable but decisively not the point here, but neither is *The Zizi Show* another rumination on the ‘queer art of failure’,<sup>5</sup> a subject given significant attention in scholarship on avant-garde art and theatre across the past decade or so. It is definitively more affirmative.

From listening to some accompanying lectures by Elwes on *The Zizi Project* – a larger project connected to this artwork on ‘queering the dataset’ – I learn that Elwes has fed the AI thousands of videos of drag performers garnered from the internet, all of which influence the creation of Zizi.<sup>6</sup> This inclusion of non-normative decadent subjectivities does the job of queering a would-be hegemonic dataset. Without a fixed or originary referent for Zizi, there is no gender to undo and no failure to be had. Thus, what distinguishes *The Zizi Show* from early explorations of drag and queer performance is the fact that drag here is not iterative, imitative, or parodic in the Butlerian sense of gender performance. That would rely on fixed gender binaries for drag to do the work of ‘doubling’ or ‘undoing’. Rather, drag, in *The Zizi Show*, is generative, multiplicitous, and expansive. Zizi is a glittering example of non-binary diva allyship – as much an exemplary queering of gender and identity as it is a call to ‘queer the dataset’ of all discriminatory binaries and hierarchies.

Elwes’ creative research is part of a momentous movement in queer, feminist, and decolonial scholarship at present focused on counteracting ‘discriminatory design’ in AI, such as the work of authors, artists, and activists including Ruha Benjamin, Joy Buolamwini, Safiya Umoja, Virginia Eubanks, Zach Blas, and Cathy O’Neil. What is so impressive about Elwes’ *The Zizi Show* is the way that flamboyant drag performance is harnessed once again as a mainstay for progressive movements. Lest we forget, it was drag queens like Marsha P. Johnson who instigated the Stonewall uprising in the summer of 1969 that led to the Gay Liberation Movement. As AI is increasingly incorporated into our day-to-day lives, Zizi represents a potentially new icon of liberty and democracy for our time.

In some ways *The Zizi Show* still feels like a prototype for a future AI artwork that will undoubtedly manage to fully immerse spectators in a virtual cabaret experience by generating algorithms that respond to spectators and that will automatically spawn those bodily senses, textures, and smells that are so sensuous and pertinent to the experience of cabaret. As a rehearsal for a future not quite here yet, this virtual artwork also seems to echo the notion that, in José Esteban Muñoz's memorable words, 'Queerness is not yet here.' In his book *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009), Muñoz writes, 'we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality.'<sup>7</sup> *The Zizi Show* is an enticing experiment which enacts this queer potentiality in drag performance, and indeed AI, to influence, to educate, and to entertain. As new datasets produce new synthetic worlds, Elwes' contribution is an illuminating call for the inclusion of the spectacular body, idiosyncrasy, difference and all the sensual promises they afford.

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<sup>1</sup> <<https://zizi.ai/>> [accessed 12 August 2021].

<sup>2</sup> M. Caldwell, J. T. A. Andrews, T. Tanay and L. D. Griffin, 'AI-enabled future crime', *Crime Science*, 9.14 (2020), no pagination, <<https://crimesciencejournal.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s40163-020-00123-8>> [accessed 13 December 2021].

<sup>3</sup> See Ruha Benjamin, *Race after Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> See Laurence Senelick, 'The Mythical Decadence of Weimar Cabaret', Staging Decadence Blog, <<https://www.stagingdecadence.com/blog/the-mythical-decadence-of-weimar-cabaret>> [accessed 18 August 2021].

<sup>5</sup> Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> See Jake Elwes, 'Making of The Zizi Show', online video recording, YouTube, 7 June 2021, <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3c5-ABUKI\\_M&t=31s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3c5-ABUKI_M&t=31s)> [accessed 18 August 2021].

<sup>7</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), p. 1.

*Life: LIVE!*, by Lucy McCormick  
Fierce Festival, Birmingham (UK), 19 October 2019

Phoebe Patey-Ferguson

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To be a cult sensation you must aim for Hollywood-level stardom. In *King Kong* (1933), Fay Wray – who has spent the majority of her screen time screaming hysterically – dangles precariously as she is carried up the Empire State Building by the giant gorilla. This image is evoked by Dr Frank-N-Furter (‘What ever happened to Fay Wray? That delicate satin draped frame’) in an elaborately shonky ‘floor show’, which becomes the doomed finale of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975). Wet from ‘absolute pleasure’ in the pool, his mascara and signature heart tattoo have smeared across his skin as he is carried by Rocky up the cardboard RKO Tower, which topples and plunges them both a few feet to their deaths. *King Kong* used the most advanced stop-motion and model-building techniques of the day in scenes which, to a twenty-first century audience, add a layer of ridiculousness to the still heart-wrenching love story. In *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, the possibilities of what can be achieved by centring fantasy on a tight budget and schlocky-horror techniques means the work is both parody and tribute, never mocking what it loves but rather reworking it.

In 2019, I watch Lucy McCormick climb the silver stage rigging high above the crowds in a warehouse in Birmingham. Her Wray-like delicate frame is not draped in satin but wrapped tightly in a skimpy, strappy bodysuit made from pale green duct tape. Mascara runs down her face. The silk gown or feather boa is replaced with a resplendent cape made from a length of blue hose and dozens of silver takeaway dishes. My neck cranes to look up at her, our pop-feminist heroine fighting to be seen and recognized, to not fail or fall but ascend.

McCormick is crying as she approaches the lighting rig, head hidden under a towel like a starlet escaping a hotel under the paparazzi’s gaze. The tears are evidently scripted, but appear to lurch from contrived to heartfelt, littered with apologies. ‘Sorry, I’m a bit overwhelmed’, she sobs.

'I've just been waiting a long time for this'. As she clambers up the scaffold, the pseudo-humility of her blubbering speech is performed with saccharine sincerity: 'you know me, I used to have a bit of a problem believing that I am interesting enough just being me, but I think I'm over that now! [*Crowd Cheers*] Thank you! Thank you!'. As the beat is dropped for the next song, the tears dry fast and McCormick shouts hoarsely:

It's almost like every moment in my life, up until this point has just been leading to me being here, in this warehouse in Digbeth. You better be ready to party, because you know what? You can change things! Things do get better! Things can be good! You can be, who you want to be! Just look at me!

She sings the first verse of *O.V.E.R.* (one of the several original compositions she has written for the show) and releases a fistful of colourful confetti over our heads. I realize I have tears streaming down my face and start laughing at my own susceptibility for being swept up in the manipulation. As I look around, I realize that I am not the only one.

As much as the cynical Live Art crowd in attendance at Birmingham's Fierce Festival in the United Kingdom might appear to be hardened to such gauche notions as 'celebrity', myself, McCormick and the majority of the audience fall into the generational bracket of 'Millennial', raised in a pop-cultural daze of girl-power, Britney Mania, and The Fame Monster. I spent my teenage years trying to start hardcore bands, but not before developing three distinct dance routines to Christina Aguilera's *Dirrty* as a twelve-year-old in 2002. We long to believe in the dream of self-love and self-actualization, and McCormick delivers this in a self-serving emotional turn that is simultaneously utterly moving and ridiculous. Seeing the 26-year-old Ariana Grande break down in tears during her Sweetener Tour due to feeling 'everything very intensely' invokes genuine compassion rather than scoffing at her mawkish, repeated thank yous (*thank u, next*).<sup>1</sup> It is undeniable that Lady Gaga emphatically telling you that there 'could be one hundred people in a room, and ninety-nine of them don't believe in you but all it takes is just one and it changes your whole life' *feels* inspirational, until you see the internet montages of her saying it over and over again, each time with apparently candid earnestness which pushes it beyond meaninglessness into

the sinister.<sup>2</sup> Pop is already a maniacal arena. The female pop star in the twenty-first century is not easily defined, stretching the boundaries of femininity and cyborg, confronting patriarchal norms, expanding hyper-sexualization into strange territories, visibly accruing huge amounts of wealth, and speaking out against injustices. It is a nexus of the difficult and conflictual contemporary social space we occupy where our emotions are exploited and capitalized upon, but necessarily expressed with great intensity in desperation for connection.

What the tear-soaked moment in *Life: LIVE!* proves is that the emotional intensity of the pop star stadium concert survives McCormick's exposure of the displays of technique and artifice, her backstage revelation. It is parodic, but not in a way that simply mocks pop stars and their fans. Neither does the work patronize the audience by claiming to *show* the artifice at play in pop stardom, as if that would be a surprise to anyone. And I am most thankful that the work steers well clear of being archly clumsy, unpolished, or cheap *just because* that is perceived to be a 'Live Art' aesthetic. Instead, we witness McCormick locate us as spectators, expose her own feelings, make us conscious of our spectatorship, and lead us through various stages of involvement and detachment. She uses everything she can to create the spectacle – emotional, vocal, physical, material, and collaborative – maxing out the resources she has to create the deluded illusion of pre-eminence. McCormick can sing, but she is *in fact* not Beyoncé. I look really good, but I am *in fact* not Beth Ditto (although I am wearing my Beth Ditto for Evans dress), and Fierce Festival is *in fact* not Coachella. But it is also not cheap imitation. Coachella has been described as 'revelling in the decadence of consumerism',<sup>3</sup> and in McCormick's high camp performance of pop stardom we are invited to revel in decadence itself, defined by Adam Alston as a 'playfully subversive ruination',<sup>4</sup> disaggregating those consumerist terms on which mainstream festivals are based in order to open up a different practice of togetherness.

This is not to cast aspersions on the quality of artistic expression in contemporary pop music. The reason we could not have a Solange collaboration with Tania El Khoury (another artist presenting at Fierce), or to see them on the same festival programme, is predominantly financial

and commercial rather than ideological. Fierce cannot afford Solange's fees, and Tania El Khoury does not have a fan base big enough to interest the festivals that can afford those fees. This financial side-lining was evident when Joseph Keckler, the 'headliner' of Fierce, cancelled his performances the week of the Festival to go on tour supporting Sleater-Kinney instead. I would suspect that if St. Vincent had made the same offer to McCormick we would have lost her too. But there is no need to wait for the call for someone else to make you a star when it is possible to build a facsimile stardom for yourself, using whatever and whoever you can get your hands on, and inviting an audience to believe in the fantasy with you.

In *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal* (2012), Jack Halberstam writes that the twenty-first century landscape of popular culture is a historic and important battleground for queer activism, identifying a 'scavenger feminism' which 'borrows promiscuously, steals from everywhere, and inhabits the ground of stereotype and cliché all at the same time'.<sup>5</sup> McCormick is scavenging from the scavengers, stealing tropes and gluing, nailing and taping them together until she has become a femme Frankenstein's monster that re-appropriates the female popstars who have appropriated queer aesthetics, churning the Vevo music video back on itself via a trip to B&Q. In *Justify My Love: Sex, Subversion, and Music Video* (2018), academic and popstar Ryann Donnelly writes that she is 'interested in how new performances can fuck up and expose old performances'.<sup>6</sup> Here, she draws on Jodie Taylor's *Playing it Queer: Popular Music, Identity, and Queer World-Making* (2012), which qualifies queerness as 'resistance imbued with anti-assimilationist and de-constructionist rhetoric that aggressively opposes hegemonic identificatory and behavioural norms'.<sup>7</sup> Drag performance draws on and transforms pop cultural iconography. The dream of being a pop star, or having one right in front of you, has long been one of the most rapturous enticements for both attending and performing drag ('don't dream it – be it', as Dr Frank-N-Furter sings).

The freakishness of McCormick is created by McCormick. She is both Wray and Kong, Furter and Rocky. In *Fill Me Up* (another original track), McCormick's head and torso are swamped

by a giant Lion's head created from chicken wire, multi-coloured fur scraps and cable ties, blood-stained tin foil teeth, and gaping eyes lit internally by torches. There is an allusion to a sexy cat costume, one of the most ubiquitous of feminine dress-up tropes, but it manifests squarely in mechanical terror, reminiscent of Lindsey Lohan as Cady turning up at the Halloween party in *Mean Girls* (2004). McCormick is the archetypal 'hot girl' who cannot, or will not, perform the expectations of 'hot girlhood' correctly. The pop song, like much chart fodder, has a sexual thrust rimmed with enough murkiness to ensure it can be played to a family audience. McCormick stands on a platform and has the bottom of the lion's jaw (a grey pipe insulate) which is held up and manipulated by Lennie (one of her two backing dancers) as the creature is fed (filled up) with half the contents of the corner shop – ketchup, cornflakes, porridge oats, oranges, bread, and crisps. She lustfully sings – over a moody slow electronic beat with heavy, reverberating bass – 'baby fill me up, fill me up'. Words like these – which can pass for sincere emotional desire but appear to 'really' be about dirty sex – are revealed through the image as describing bestial consumption in a comically literal turn.

McCormick's work is undeniably camp: a skilfully crafted and deliberate camp, self-conscious and self-parodic, which intentionally reveals a failed seriousness through artifice.<sup>8</sup> It is the essence of 'Being-as-Playing-a-Role', where the being, playing, and role are all held uncomfortably and murkily. There is Lucy McCormick (off stage), and there is Lucy McCormick (on stage), and these manifestations are not exactly the same (in terms of behaviour, speech, intention, and so on). However, Lucy McCormick has identified that the driving force of Lucy McCormick is still Lucy McCormick.<sup>9</sup> There may be exaggeration but there is not invention. This emphasis on the camp approach to self-representation, which merges artifice and realism, theatricality, and authenticity – without being able to clearly draw the lines between them – is transgressive, as it explicitly undermines the notion of fixed identity and any claim to an authentic existence.



When the work was next performed at Battersea Arts Centre (BAC) in the summer of 2021, to re-open their space following the pandemic closure, I was disappointed to notice that in the copy Lucy McCormick had been differentiated clearly from her alter-ego Lucy Muck.<sup>10</sup> I am unsure whether this is for the sake of sanity or professional protection (McCormick will be performing in *Wuthering Heights* at the National Theatre in autumn 2021, and when booking Lucy McCormick to do a virtuosic acting performance perhaps you would not want Lucy Muck to turn up). Being able to locate an alter-ego of McCormick clearly as the hysterical hedonistic narcissistic creature is much less satisfying. It removes an awkward complexity and reads much more clearly to non-queer audiences. Predominantly, this is due to how the workings of camp are partially explained by allowing a clear binary separation to be made between Lucy McCormick as the reasonable, real and stable subject and Lucy Muck as a slightly terrifying, egotistical and highly unstable fictional ‘character,’ easily dismissed as unreal and unreasonable. Many reviews of *Life: LIVE!* at BAC noted how the Covid-compliant physical distance required between audience and performer removed the ‘threat’ that is often inherent in McCormick’s work, where she may cover you in various liquids, scramble over your head, or scream into your face from millimetres away.<sup>11</sup> This threat, from which much of the tension in the work is created, is also disarmed by McCormick being distanced from Muck. The audience is kept comfortable in the knowledge that they will remain intact existentially (as subjects) as well as physically. The thrill and political potency are both reduced.

The two backing dancers now essential to all of McCormick’s recent work, here Lennie (only their first name is given) and Francesco Migliaccio, are the explicitly sexually desirable and visibly queer locus for the audience’s thirst.<sup>12</sup> This desire is thus displaced from McCormick, who becomes free to occupy a grotesque femininity that does not and will not submit to anyone or anything. In *King Kong Theory* (2009), Virginie Despentes describes the typical subjugated position of femininity as a requirement to behave as though ‘inferior’:

Not talking too loud. Not being forceful. Not sitting with your legs splayed to be more comfortable. Not speaking with authority. Not talking about money. Not wanting to claim power. Not wanting a position of authority. Not seeking glory. Not laughing too loud. Not being too funny.<sup>13</sup>

McCormick queerly torpedoed all these expectations, arriving at epic full femme mastery. This is supported by the skilful presence of the show's designer Morven Mulgrew as a visible soft butch in dungarees and walking boots. Their performance adds another amusing camp layer of butch/femme dynamics as much as it draws attention to the (otherwise invisible) artistic labour of the designers, dressers, and technicians in pop shows.

*Life: LIVE!* is McCormick's bid to belong to the 'cult of the diva': a role model of extraordinary talent, who embodies our longings, fears, heartaches, joys, and failures.<sup>14</sup> The audience squeals with excitement when, in the first finale of the show, a jeep reverses into the warehouse and McCormick jumps on it and is driven (very slowly) into the street. She quickly runs back to demand that we demand an encore. The audience obliges. After another song, and adorned in a magnificent sculptural ball gown made of underlay, McCormick disappears into a hole carved by Mulgrew into the floor of the stage with a circular saw. She reappears to sign autographs and announce that t-shirts are available at the merch stand for £12. The audience, still cheering for more, are chastised by McCormick as she dances through the crowd shouting 'that's it, it's really over now!'. But we are not ready to stop. Luckily for us a piped air horn blasts into the room, a DJ takes over, and the space is instantly transformed into a club night, with music acts and performances into the early hours of the morning. It is close and sweaty. A few hours later I slip over on some blue paint that had been squirted over McCormick in the midst of dancing with hundreds of others to Robyn.

Access to the substantial joy of the work requires an investment into McCormick and her practice. This willingness to invest exists for many due to the successes of her previous two shows, *Post-Popular* and *Triple Threat*, either when performed as full shows at venues such as Soho Theatre in London, or as shorter extracts in (mainly queer) nightclubs and cabarets. It feels exhilarating to

believe that we have followed this performer as she has reached the heights of pop stardom. It is all the fun of McCormick ringleading us into collectively imagining a contemporary fairy tale – where we can all be part of the story, as long as she remains firmly both the heroine and the villain at the centre of it.

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Postscript: This review was intended to be of *Life: LIVE!* at Battersea Arts Centre in July 2021. Due to having to self-isolate, I was not able to attend and instead wrote about this earlier iteration. The closeness and gig-format felt essential, as well as the general messiness of McCormick and the threat of her detritus (which the audience had to dodge alongside a moving vehicle), all of which seems vital to the pop-and-roll intoxication of the work.

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Ariana Grande explains tearful performance: “I’m still processing a lot”’, BBC News, 8 July 2019, <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-48906836>> [accessed 13 December 2021].

<sup>2</sup> ‘Fans are finding it hilarious that Lady Gaga can’t stop saying the same thing about Bradley Cooper’, *NME*, 23 October 2018, <<https://www.nme.com/news/music/fans-finding-hilarious-lady-gaga-cant-stop-saying-thing-bradley-cooper-2392679>> [accessed 13 December 2021].

<sup>3</sup> Allan Dumbreck and Gayle McPherson, *Music Entrepreneurship* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), p. 256.

<sup>4</sup> Adam Alston, “Burn the Witch”: Decadence and the Occult in Contemporary Feminist Performance’, *Theatre Research International*, 46.3 (2021), 285–302 (p. 299).

<sup>5</sup> J. Jack Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), p. 30.

<sup>6</sup> Ryan Donnelly, *Justify My Love: Sex, Subversion and Music Video* (London: Repeater, 2019), p. 134.

<sup>7</sup> Jodi Taylor, *Playing it Queer: Popular Music, Identity and Queer World-Making* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2012), p. 14.

<sup>8</sup> See Susan Sontag, *Notes on ‘Camp’* [1966] (London: Penguin Random House, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> McCormick discusses the blurred boundaries between Lucy McCormick as a persona and her own sense of identity in the podcast ‘Curtain Twitchers’, hosted by Bourgeois and Maurice, 11 January 2021. This is also explored in McCormick’s *Workshop* (VFD, London, 2018), which is the performance of an artist’s workshop by Lucy McCormick in her stage persona, while still functioning as a workshop that can be fully participated in.

<sup>10</sup> See McCormick’s website, <<https://www.lucymccormick.com/life-live>> [accessed 13 December 2021].

<sup>11</sup> For example, Ava Wong Davies ‘Review: Lucy McCormick’s *Life: LIVE!* at Battersea Arts Centre’, *Exeunt Magazine*, 10 July 2021, <<http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/review-lucy-mccormicks-lifeline-battersea-arts-centre/>> [accessed 13 December 2021].

<sup>12</sup> McCormick has a rostrum of co-performers who occupy these roles, appearing in various combinations across different iterations of her work.

<sup>13</sup> Virginie Despentes, *King Kong Theory* [2006] (London: Fitzcarraldo, 2020) pp. 128–29.

<sup>14</sup> See Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (London: Macmillan, 1986).

## Letter to the Editors That Doggone Baudelaire

David Weir

The Cooper Union, New York

In the special Baudelaire ‘Appreciations’ section of the summer 2021 issue of *Volupté* I recounted my experience teaching ‘Une Charogne’, first published in 1857.<sup>1</sup> The fact that the poem escaped the attention of the censors who banned six poems from the first edition of *Les Fleurs du mal* perhaps argues in favour of certain obscurities (the censors could not ban things they could not understand), such as the one that I focused on in my appreciation, namely, the animal identity of the carrion creature whose lively decay Baudelaire describes. I am convinced that ‘une charogne’ must be ‘un chien’ or another ‘chienne’ (a female dog feeds on the carcass), but strictly speaking, I cannot offer hard evidence in support of the interpretation. As near as I can figure, only five dogs wander through *Les Fleurs du mal*. In ‘Hymne à la Beauté’, Destiny is figured as ‘un chien’ that Beauty takes for a walk. In the third ‘Spleen’ poem, ‘ses chiens’ [dogs] divert the young, decrepit spleen-king from ennui as he rules his rainy country. In ‘Le Vin de l’assassin’, the wife-murderer sleeps ‘comme un chien’ [like a dog], a simile meant to suggest that the assassin is free to do as he pleases. In the first section of ‘Abel et Caïn’, Cain is cursed to suffer hunger ‘comme un vieux chien’ [like an old dog]. And then there is ‘une chienne inquiète’ [a worrisome, anxious bitch] gnawing on the carcass in ‘Une Charogne’. Possibly, the dog comparison in ‘Abel et Caïn’ might be used to advance the case that in ‘Une Charogne’ the dead animal is ‘une chienne’ because of the way the tables are turned in the second section of ‘Abel et Caïn’: Abel is now the brother who is cursed, his ‘carrion’ condemned to ‘fatten’ the earth: ‘Ah! race d’Abel, ta charogne | Engraissera le sol fumant!’ [Ah! race of Abel, your carcass | Will fatten the smoking earth]. That dog-carrion, Cain-Abel reversal is a strained connection, to say the least, so the canine identity of the carcass in ‘Une Charogne’ must remain a matter of conjecture, at least for now; however, since my appreciation was published, I have come across a piece of evidence that, at the very least, shows

that I am not the only person to have imagined that ‘une charogne’ might very well be ‘une chienne’.

Everyone knows that the celebrated photographer Nadar (pseudonym of Gaspard-Félix Tournachon) made several compelling, formal studio portraits of Baudelaire and that the two men were on friendly terms. Less well known is Nadar’s work as a skilled caricaturist who used his talents to capture the likenesses of many of those he photographed in drawings as well. One of these caricatures shows Baudelaire walking – or at least standing – in the woods, the words ‘Fleurs du’ at the top left of the drawing (near the right shoulder of the poet) and ‘Mal’ at the bottom right (near the left hand of the figure). The scruffy vegetation suggests that the poet is indeed out of doors, his hands raised as if in alarm over something he has encountered. In the bottom left of the drawing is a dead dog, its legs in the air, as in ‘Une Charogne’ (‘Les jambes en l’air’). There also appear to be a mass of flies swarming over the canine carcass, another detail that chimes with the poem (‘Les mouches bourdonnaient sur ce ventre putride’). The drawing is in the archives of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, bearing this title: ‘Ch. Baudelaire: (caricature, en pied, marchant à côté d’une charogne)’ [Ch. Baudelaire: (caricature, full-length, walking next to a carcass)], the brackets suggesting the title was not given to the work by Nadar himself but is, nevertheless, a fair description of the action the caricature depicts. Indeed, the image could have been used as an illustration for ‘Une Charogne’. Moreover, the fact that Nadar incorporates the title of the collection as a whole into the image suggests that the photographer – or rather, the caricaturist – understood ‘Une Charogne’ as perhaps the one poem that best captures the larger meaning of *Les Fleurs du mal*, dogs and all.

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<sup>1</sup> For a translation and the French text of the poem, see Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. by James McGowan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 58–63. Further references to Baudelaire poems cited in this letter are to the McGowan edition.



Nadar, 'Ch. Baudelaire: (caricature, en pied, marchant à côté d'une charogne)', date unknown.  
Bibliothèque nationale de France, <http://ark.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb42559105t>.



## Notes on Contributors

**Amano Ikuho** is a native of Japan and currently Associate Professor of Japanese at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in the United States, where she teaches literature, popular culture, film, and language. Her research has explored various themes and issues salient in modern and contemporary Japan, including discourses on decadence, social entropy, industrial history, and literary translation. Her current project examines the literature of the economic bubble in the late 1980s, consumer culture of the time, and its legacy.

**Barbara Bessac** is completing a joint PhD in History of Art (Université Paris Nanterre) and Theatre Studies (University of Warwick), exploring the links between decorative arts, materiality, and the theatre in the second half of the nineteenth century. Her thesis, titled 'Performing crafts: Circulations of decorative arts between theatrical stages of London and Paris 1851-1908', proposes a reinterpretation of the nineteenth-century decorative arts and design historiography by including the significant role of performing arts.

**Stephen Cedars** is a writer, director, teacher, and scholar originally from south Louisiana. As a theatre maker, his work has won multiple awards, his plays have been published or produced throughout the United States and Canada, and he has directed or produced shows throughout New York City. As a scholar, he has presented his work at several major conferences and has two forthcoming journal publications. He holds an MFA in Dramatic Writing (NYU), and a PhD from the CUNY Graduate Center, Theatre and Performance, is currently in process.

**Özen N. Dolcerocca** is an Associate Professor at the University of Bologna. She received her doctoral degree in Comparative Literature from NYU in 2016. She is the author of *Self and Desire in the Modern Turkish Novel: A Study on Non-Western Literary Modernities* (2012), and the guest editor of a special issue of *Middle Eastern Literatures* entitled 'Beyond World Literature: Reading Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar Today'. She is the recipient of a 2020 European Research Council (ERC) Starting Grant for her project 'Modernizing Empires: Enlightenment, Nationalist Vanguards and Non-Western Literary Modernities'.

**Frankie Dytor** is an AHRC-funded PhD candidate in the History of Art department at the University of Cambridge. Their work, which looks at popular revivals of the Italian Renaissance at the end of the nineteenth century, has appeared in the *Journal of Victorian Culture*. In 2020, Frankie was a Hanseatic Scholar at the University of Hamburg as a beneficiary of the Alfred Toepfer Foundation.

**Katharina Herold-Zanker** is Assistant Professor in English Literature at the University of Regensburg. Previously she has held positions as Lecturer in Victorian and Modern Literature at Brasenose and Trinity College, Oxford. She trained and worked as a theatre director in Germany before continuing her studies at Goldsmiths and Oxford. She is currently preparing her first monograph, *The Indispensable East in Decadent Literature*, for publication. Her journal output includes an article for *Feminist Modernist Studies* on global decadence, and war plays written by women.

**Owen G. Parry** is an artist and researcher working in contemporary theatre, visual arts and digital cultures, and an Associate Lecturer in Critical Studies Fine Art at Central Saint Martins. He is currently a researcher contributing to the AHRC-funded '[Staging Decadence: Decadent Theatre in the Long Twentieth Century](#)' project at Goldsmiths, University of London. Owen's research forms around a fascination with the counter-practices of the poor, the minor, the weak, and the trashy, and includes research on New York Drag Balls, South African Rap-rave, Gay Cruising, Fanfiction, LARP, Automated Luxury Communism, and Conspiracy Theories. His work has been

staged in public programmes in the UK, Ireland, Belgium, Canada, Finland, and South Korea. Publications include chapters in *Fandom as Methodology* (Goldsmiths Press, 2019), *The Creative Critic* (Routledge, 2018), and articles in *Performance Research Journal* (2015), *Contemporary Theatre Review* (2016), and more.

**Phoebe Patey-Ferguson** is an academic, artist and producer. Their research expertise is on international theatre festivals, rooted in the Sociology of Theatre and Performance. This work frequently intersects with their further research interests in live art, contemporary British theatre, and queer theory. Phoebe's doctoral thesis examined the history and practice of international theatre festivals in Britain, with particular focus on the London International Festival of Theatre (LIFT) and its social, political, and economic context. Phoebe is a lecturer at Rose Bruford (Kent, UK), co-leading the Theatre and Social Change BA programme. Phoebe is a practising live artist and frequently works as a dramaturg for contemporary performance makers. They have worked as a producer with LIFT, In Between Time (IBT), and VFD delivering international festivals of theatre and Live Art, and co-run Live Art Club London.

### ESSAY PRIZE WINNERS

**Cherrie Kwok** is a PhD Candidate in the Department of English and the Elizabeth Arendall Tilney and Schuyler Merritt Tilney Jefferson Fellow at the University of Virginia. Her dissertation examines a set of writers from the African, Asian, and Indigenous diasporas in the nineteenth century and beyond to elucidate the relationship between decadence and anti-imperialism in their poetry and prose. Her work appears, or is forthcoming, in *Volupté: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, *Undisciplining the Victorian Classroom*, *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal*, and *The Journal of Interactive Technology and Pedagogy*.

**David Melville** is a teaching fellow in Film Studies and Literature at the University of Edinburgh Centre for Open Learning. His courses include *Gothic Cinema*, *Vampire Fiction*, *Dark Fairy Tales*, *Divine Decadence* and *Magnificent Obsessions: A Century of Film Melodrama*. A former journalist and radio news presenter, he has contributed widely to *The Guardian*, *Sight & Sound*, *Senses of Cinema*, *Gay Times*, *Shadowplay*, and the Romanian film journal *Noul Cinema*. His current project is a book on Cinema and Queer Spectatorship, which he can only describe as a blend of autobiography, film criticism, and non-fiction novel.

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**Céline Brossillon** is Assistant Professor of French at Ursinus College, Pennsylvania. Her research focuses on the crisis of masculine identity at the end of the nineteenth century in France, and the connection between solitude and madness in literature. She is particularly interested in deviant behaviours that result from overextended isolation. Her research engages with multiple fields such as cultural anthropology, gender and sexuality studies, and psychiatry. She is the author of *Le Taureau triste: La Solitude du célibataire de Maupassant (The Sad Bull: The Solitude of Maupassant's Bachelor*, CNRS Editions, 2021). She is also the co-editor of a special issue of *French Forum* titled *L'Amour des Morts: Love with Ghosts, Vampires and Other Dead(ly) Beings in the Francophone 19<sup>th</sup> Century*, which will be published in Spring 2022.

### GUEST EDITORS

**Adam Alston** is Senior Lecturer in Modern and Contemporary Theatre at Goldsmiths, University of London. He is currently the Principal Investigator of an Arts and Humanities Research Council ECR Fellowship titled [‘Staging Decadence: Decadent Theatre in the Long Twentieth Century’](#), of



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## EDITORIAL

**Jane Desmarais (Editor-in-Chief)** is Professor of English and Director of the Decadence Research Centre in the Department of English and Creative Writing 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 the [Oxford Handbook of Decadence](#) (2021) and *Decadent Plays, 1890-1930* with Adam Alston (forthcoming with Bloomsbury in 2023). Her monograph, *Monsters Under Glass: A Cultural History of Hothouse Flowers, 1850 to the Present*, was published by Reaktion in 2018.

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**Robert Pruett-Vergara (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, University of London. His chapter on 'Dowson, France, and the Catholic

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