Immersive theatre and the aesthetics of decadence: On the ruined worlds of Punchdrunk, SHUNT and Hammer Film Productions

Dr Adam Alston

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Abstract

This article considers how an aesthetics of decadence underpins approaches to design and audience engagement in work by Punchdrunk, SHUNT and Hammer Film Productions. Punchdrunk's *The Masque of the Red Death* (2007-08) invited wandering audiences to inhabit the ruinous landscapes of Edgar Allan Poe's short stories, recognised posthumously as 'decadent' fiction. SHUNT's *The Boy Who Climbed Out of His Face* (2014) guided promenading audiences through a series of discarded shipping containers, each containing a lonesome occupant appearing in a state of disturbing physical decay – a dystopian reflection, perhaps, on the decadence of capitalism. And Hammer Film Productions' *The Soulless Ones* (2017) staged a macabre homage to Hammer Horror films, complete with necromancy, blood-sucking vampires and orgiastic rituals. In this article, I explore how each performance, in their own ways, gestures toward a decadent imagination identified and unpacked in light of criticism that informed its evolution in the nineteenth century, alongside more recent analysis that has re-set the parameters of its study. This article also presents a challenge to scholarship that narrows focus to the enervating qualities of immersive theatre by considering ruination and decay as important themes informing the design of each performance, and the engagement of audiences both with and within ruined environments both actual and artificial. I argue that the decadent imagination is of much relevance to the study of aesthetics and politics in work that either sensationalises or questions its atomising tendencies, and that such work has much to offer to how decadence is understood not just as a mutable concept, but as a radical practice.

Keywords: immersive theatre, decadence, decadent theatre, ruins, Punchdrunk, SHUNT, Hammer Film Productions

Immersive theatre is a broad term applied to diverse forms and styles of theatre and performance. As numerous commentators have pointed out, this makes it hard to pin down beyond a few broadly-defined characteristics (Machon 2013, xv-xvi; Alston 2013, 128; Frieze 2017, 1). At the same time, the term has accrued *currency*, with discourse circling around common traits that at least bring us close to identifying a viable subject of study. Hence: immersive theatre performances usually place audiences *within* an aesthetic space, they often ask something of audiences by way of an invitation to participate, roam or explore, they are

frequently multi-sensory, and they appeal to sensuous experience as a primary site of aesthetic coherence. I am not going to labour this definition any further; instead, I want to focus on a tendency that sits somewhat awkwardly in a field enthralled by a rhetoric of vitality.

Good examples of this rhetoric can be found in Josephine Machon's book *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance*, which has come to play an important role in studies of immersive theatre since its publication in 2013, though her thinking was shaped by her 2003 doctoral thesis on '(syn)aesthetics' and outputs published in the interim (Machon 2003; see also 2007 and 2009). Through use of parentheses, Machon writes about the importance of 'live(d)' experience in immersive theatre, where the 'd' in 'lived' is in brackets to emphasise both liveness and *a*liveness. In using this term, she draws attention to how performing and perceiving bodies in immersive theatre 'are charged by the sensual aesthetic and the specific energies of the piece in a live and ongoing present [… embracing] the idea of the performing and perceiving body as living, tactile and haptic material' (Machon 2013, 44). Importantly, such charging by a 'sensual aesthetic' carries over into Machon's framing of immersive scenography, which focuses on the engagement of audiences in and with 'sensorial worlds' that appeal directly to 'embodied sentient consciousness' (Machon 2013, 89; see also Roth 2007, 157): worlds that possess 'affective and sensual powers' (138), and that rejuvenate perception (139).

While I agree with Machon that many immersive theatre makers are concerned with producing richly textured sensual experiences, it seems to me that many are also concerned with deadness, disease, decay and ruination.[1] It is interesting to note how frequently immersive theatre performances take place in ruined or re-purposed buildings (see Blyth 2017), often

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[1] This point is only rarely touched upon, for instance in discourse addressing the current penchant for zombie apocalypse experiences (see Howson 2015; Alston 2017), and a passing but insightful comment in Andy Lavender's book *Performance in the Twenty-First Century* (2016), where he gives a nod to how 'tropes of abandonment and decay are widely prevalent in immersive theatre productions, suggesting a cultural nostalgia for recognized pasts and a certain sort of fashionable necrophilia' (Lavender 2016, 179).

because these are the spaces that theatre companies are *enabled* to make use of: between business occupations, for instance, ensuring that the building remains in some way productive (see Alston 2016, 200-01). Such spaces offer a rich point of departure for theatre designers to work with – or to emulate in more established and well-maintained venues – and include disused warehouses, appropriated municipal buildings, semi-derelict houses, industrial off-casts, and abandoned office blocks. I will be looking at three examples in this article. Firstly, Punchdrunk's 2007-08 *The Masque of the Red Death* was based in London's Battersea Arts Centre (BAC). BAC was originally built as a town hall in 1893 and functioned as such until 1965, when it was threatened with demolition. It became a listed building five years later, and an independent arts centre in 1979 (BAC 2017). The building itself is haunted by ruination, or rather the threat of ruination, which was given a compelling twist when *The Masque* was presented to audiences as part of a lengthy renovation process in which the site remained open to the public. Almost every interior was designed to look like a ruin, each one populated by disease-ridden and drug-addled characters, based as it was on Edgar Allan Poe's short stories. Hammer Film Productions *Hammer House of Horror Live – The Soulless Ones* (2017) was also housed in a nineteenth century building, this time in Hoxton Hall: an old music hall in Hackney, now a performance space and cultural centre. Its main stage needed little by way of dressing to form a suitable backdrop for necromantic ceremonies set in the height of spiritualism and gothic Victoriana. And SHUNT's *The Boy Who Climbed Out of His Face* (2014) was performed on a former coaling jetty extending out into London's River Thames, with several shipping containers abstracted from continuous circulation perched on top. *The Boy* took place both in and on industrial relics, and the characters in each container appeared to be falling apart, faces cracked and drooping thanks to disturbing latex masks. Far from romanticising decadent bohemia, the performance's design materialised a dystopian world in

which the oft-promised 'decadence' or 'collapse' of capitalism – explored by influential Marxists like György Lukács – was envisioned as a ruined landscape one could enter.

All three of these examples, in their own ways, are designed around themes of decay and ruination; moreover, I argue that they are predicated on an aesthetics of decadence. To study decadence is to turn to morbidity, looking not to beautiful things so much as their imperfect replications, and it is to acknowledge its misogyny, aristocratic sensibilities, and preoccupation with esotericism. Moreover, to study decadence – at least historically – has been to turn away from theatre. Those associated with the 'decadent movement' in *fin de siècle* Europe who usually pique the interest of commentators, aside from the likes of Gabriele D'Annunzio, Pierre Quillard, Oscar Wilde and Rachilde, tend to be writers of prose fiction like Joris-Karl Huysmans and Barbey d'Aurevilly, and visual artists and illustrators like Odilon Redon and Aubrey Beardsley, though the movement can be expanded to include key influences including Edgar Allan Poe and Charles Baudelaire, as well as the philosophers Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche. Theatre, in short, is generally occluded in studies of the decadent movement and decadence more broadly beyond analysis of written play texts and the theatrical mechanics of representation in fiction, or dandyism. Perhaps this is because of what James Harding and John Rouse identify elsewhere as an 'antiperformative bias' (2006, 1), or because of the common valorisation of the decadent anti-hero, who almost always was depicted as a white male loner, often profoundly narcissistic and self-centred, and celebrating the pursuit of new and ever-more refined sensations and imaginative retreats; theatre's public fora, with the possible exception of symbolism, would not seem well-suited to a decadent art so obsessed with interiority.[2] But immersive theatre, especially those examples that present

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[2] As I have posited elsewhere (Alston 2018), 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 pulled interiority and painfully refined sensation to the forefront of their work, which Adolphe Retté, Aurélien Lugné-Poe, Maurice Denis and Paul Percheron were to exploit with Paul Fort's Théâtre D'Art in the early 1890s.

audiences with environments they can enter and explore, has perhaps made theatre a decadent medium *par excellence*. For a fixed period of time, audiences are invited to become the hero lionised in the decadent imagination. They can court death, play out the role of opium eater, and fantasise about debauchery that most wouldn't dare to dabble in outside of such a setting.

My contention is that a decadent imagination does indeed underpin the design of *The Masque*, *The Boy* and *Soulless*; however, while the design of these performances evokes or gestures toward decadence, and sometimes explicitly references the nineteenth-century decadent movement, the kinds of deviancy conventionally associated with decadence are either neutered in contexts that sanction and sanitise deviancy's potency, or refigured in ways that envision without undermining or challenging the debilitating effects of an existing state of affairs. Moreover, it is the engagement of audiences with and within immersive scenography that enables a clearer understanding of what is meant by this 'gesturing' toward decadence. I argue that each of the performances examined in this article complicate the aesthetics and politics of audience engagement in immersive theatre either by appealing to a kind of decadence less live(d) than romanticised as a relic, in the case of Punchdrunk and Hammer Film Productions, or by pitching decadence as a fatalistic and regressive process of decay, in the case of SHUNT. This is to take nothing away from the radical potential of a 'decadent theatre' fit for the twenty-first century;[3] rather, this article introduces a framework to address both the compromises and potential of a decadent aesthetics unique to live performance.

Decadent imagination

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[3] Performance makers including Ann Liv Young, Lauren Barri Holstein, Lucy McCormick, Ron Athey, Dominic Johnson, Nando Messias, Gavin Krastin, Berserker and many others offer a very different set of engagements with decadence that diversify its aesthetics and often radicalise its political dimensions (see Alston 2018).

Richard Gilman is one of only a small handful of scholars with a background in theatre to engage with the topic of decadence, albeit in a monograph tracing the etymology and civic, social and cultural histories of the term that almost entirely avoids discussion of theatre, and that ultimately dismisses the term 'decadence' as being void of any useful meaning.[4] For Gilman, 'decadence' was once a word 'that lived in the depths, under the pressure of extreme consciousness. Now it exists in the thin air of the pretense of extremity, a device for the imitation of spiritual or moral concern' (Gilman 1975, 7). The word 'decadence' is today, just as much as it was when the book was published in the 1970s, used loosely and glibly to refer to a broad range of extravagant styles, practices and tastes, or to moral deviancy of some kind – a kind of derivative deviancy, if that's not a contradiction in terms. As Gilman suggests, whilst we might 'nod; we know what is meant' (7) when decadence is evoked in this way – just as we might nod and 'know' what is meant when the term 'immersive' is summoned to describe a mode of encounter – it misses its particular qualities, existential facets, and their contingency on historical circumstance and perception. This is why Gilman prefers to describe it as being the result of a projection, or rather a *wish*, rather than as a word that relates to anything *actual* to which it might be legitimately applied (158). However, whilst a fashionable approach to the 'problem' of definition (see also Constable, Denisoff and Potolsky 1999, 1), this does not really help in a disciplinary context that has kept decadence studies in its peripheries. One needs first to grapple with the parameters of cliché before they are undermined – which to his credit Gilman does admirably – but given the novelty of decadence studies in theatre and performance research it is necessary to introduce a few of its most important traits as articulated by some its most influential commentators. Beyond this, my aim is to advance

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[4] Gilman (1975) offers a few cursory references to the dramatic works of Ibsen (52, 58), Beckett (59, 62), Chekhov (62, 154), and Wilde (134), and references a few uses of the term in theatre reviews from the 1960s and 1970s (175-76), but this is not to explore seriously the idea of decadence in theatre *per se*, and certainly not the possibility of a 'decadent theatre'; rather, these references are used to inform subsidiary concerns regarding 'ghosting' and temporality, or to dismiss the meaningfulness of the term altogether.

an understanding of decadence that *does* offer a framework to describe a set of practices and performed behaviours; in other words, unlike Gilman, my aim is to take seriously the idea of decadence as a meaningful term that has much to offer to understanding of historical and contemporary theatre practice, particularly theatre design and the engagement of audiences with and within environments that either exist in a state of dereliction, or that evoke or simulate ruination.

For Gilman, decadence refers to 'a moribund or late – not necessarily "last" – corrupted stage of one or another aspect of civilized existence' (15); however, he also maintains that decadence is a shape-shifting concept contingent on the shifting sands of attitude and situated somewhere between 'relic and drifting sign' (21). The 'between' here is important. It might be tempting to frame the ideas and practices of late-roman emperors like Nero or Caligula as a root, or 'relic', that offers the decadent imagination a certain kind of archetype; however, this would be to overlook how their beliefs and actions 'drift' as signs in the partisan and often homophobic narratives of their chroniclers.[5] Also, 'decadence' is not a term that these chroniclers used, but is rather the result of another mediation – translation.[6] Decadence might evoke hedonism, debauchery, lavishness, egoism, and a perverse fascination with destruction, but it is not limited by any such connotation; instead, it exists 'precariously and almost cabalistically beyond them' (Gilman 1975, 24), and often tells us more about the perspective of its critics than it does about the desires of protagonists.

The word 'decadence' and its various derivations and translations can be traced back to the Medieval period, but it was not until the second half of the nineteenth century and especially

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[5] For example, Suetonius's chronicling of Nero's life explicitly connects homosexuality to an apparently wilful destruction of civic society (2012, 64).

[6] As Gilman acknowledges, the word 'decadence' has been 'anachronistically employed in regard to Rome, being most often used to translate what the Roman historians and chroniclers, in so far as they were referring to the same things, expressed in other terms. Chief among these were *vacillatio* and *inclinatio*, both of which words were generally descriptive nouns without specific moral references…' (1975, 36).

the 1880s that it gained any real traction as the chronicling of late-Roman emperors like Nero inspired an *embrace* of decadent sensibilities (Bourget 2009, n.p.). At this time, the idea of decadence was applied in a way that suggests not just a set of practices, but also a state, or subject position, that effectively 'queers' the moralising discourse of chroniclers like Suetonius (see also Constable, Potolsky and Denisoff 1999, 12; Sherry 2015, 25). This was a novel invention of the nineteenth century, and one which its champions – decadents (largely affiliated with France) and aesthetes (their English equivalents) – clung to as a subversive condition. Hence, the concept of decadence is no stranger to radicalism, and cultural appropriation as a deviant mode of resistance to social normativity is its bread and butter – even if this did not extend so readily to wealth and privilege, as I return to later.

For Max Nordau, the 'decadence' of those adhering to this subversive condition was not metaphorical, but pathological – the result of *degeneration* in subjects whose moral corruption was said to derive from disease, evidenced in physical stigmata, and ultimately threatening the fabric of society. Nordau, who in his time became an influential art and social critic, was inspired by the then prominent paradigm of Social Darwinism associated with the likes of Cesare Lombroso, who argued that criminal tendencies were hereditary and manifested in 'sub-human' physiognomy. Taking Lombroso's model of degeneration theory as a point of departure, Nordau launches a diatribe against almost every major artistic and literary movement in the years leading up to the 1890s, including the Pre-Raphaelites, Symbolists, Naturalists, as well as the decadent literature of Barbey d'Aurevilly, Huysmans and Wilde. All are identified as degenerate participants in the moral corruption of society, entirely absorbed in a 'twilight mood' (Nordau 1993, 43) preoccupied with annihilation and a retrogressive rebuttal of progress that languishes in the archaic. Those enthralled by this twilight mood – inherited in no small part from Baudelaire – are marked out as exhausted *deviants* departing from some 'normal

type' in ways that infect both offspring, via heredity, and society at large, via exposure to degenerate art and literature (16).

Easy as it is to scoff at Nordau's pseudo-science and his complicity in the formation of a 'shrinking centre of normalcy' (Bernheimer 2002, 142), he nonetheless did a pretty good job of unpicking deviancy (or 'moral corruption') as a key feature of decadence in nineteenth-century art and literature. Nordau also digs into the philosophical underpinnings of this theme, most notably in a chapter dedicated to the 'diseased' writings of Nietzsche. Both Nietzsche and Schopenhauer theorised human subjectivity and agency in profoundly individualistic terms, where human subjects perpetually clash horns in their struggle for survival. Schopenhauer went so far as to urge the annihilation of a species ill-equipped to cure what he saw as the inherent sickness of life. Is it any wonder, then, that those bound up with the decadent movement, mulling over philosophies such as these, were prone to introspectiveness and sensationalisation of the disease-ridden anti-hero? Moreover, that they were prone to a profound *pessimism*?

Those championing decadence in the nineteenth century only turned two ways: inwards, and backwards. They turned inwards to admire the depths and profundities of novel and ever-more refined sensations, and backwards not so much to the glories, but to the extravagances and taboos of bygone eras. This led to a prizing of esoteric knowledge, and an acceptance and embrace of social atomisation. If one can speak of a decadent proximity to others in the literary imagination of the time, it is only insofar as one can speak of a desire to hasten the dissolution of the social sphere through malicious or negligent social interaction, or of a lustful desire for others that treats them not as people but as objects. This latter is a rare example of a decadent valuing *use*. Where most objects are concerned – such as vases, or plates – the decadent subject will care little for their use value; their primary interest will be aesthetic. 'Nothing is truly beautiful unless it is useless', writes Théophile Gautier (Gautier 2012, 19), who viewed all things utilitarian as base and at odds with spiritual fulfilment. However, the

human body has a use value for the decadent subject, or more accurately decadent *men*. Whether this body was male or female didn't matter much, so long as they were capable of giving pleasure in spite of their being framed as a lesser or at times even a contemptible organism – but it was usually women who were viewed with contempt. Baudelaire's attitude toward women is illustrative: 'Woman is the opposite of the dandy. Therefore she inspires horror. Woman is hungry so she must eat; thirsty, so she must drink. She is in heat so she must be fucked. How admirable! Woman is natural, which is to say abominable' (qtd. In Pierrot 1981, 124). While Baudelaire's writing on women wavered between outright castigation and insidious misogyny, objectifying women on the basis of idolisation and fetish, it is nonetheless representative of a general distaste for and distrust of women among those who either influenced, or were directly affiliated with, the decadent movement. Even Rachilde, one of the few female writers who contributed to the decadent movement, both undermined the concept of feminism whilst expressing 'dislike for women in general' (see Lively 1998, 44).

Misogyny is not the only political dimension associated with the decadent movement. Commenting on the formation of the Hydropaths around 1884 – a literary group, some of whom later identified as 'Symbolists' and some as 'Décadents', and who met regularly at the Café François I. in Paris – Nordau writes:

> The original guests of the François I. made their appearance at one o' clock in the day at their café, and remained there till dinner-time. Immediately after that meal they returned, and did not leave their headquarters till long after midnight. Of course none of the Symbolists had any known occupation […]; they despise the narrow-minded loons who demand that a man should either pursue a circumscribed bourgeois trade or possess an officially acknowledged status, and who profoundly distrust impecuniary professions. (1993, 102)

Relative privilege enabled many decadents and aesthetes to dedicate time to idleness, or writing about idleness, without worrying about the means to sustain not just life, but all the refined accoutrements of a decadent life. Even Wilde, who suffered infamously at the hands of the British judicial system, came to acknowledge his dependency on 'the fiction of position' to the extent that, as Gilman suggests, his creativity, too, depended on social standing (Gilman 1975, 127).[7] For the decadent subject in *fin de siècle* Europe, it was no use trying to fix a broken society; its decrepitude was seen to stretch beyond remedy, and the only viable response was to isolate oneself in an 'artificial paradise', to borrow from Paul Bourget (2009, n.p.), not so much of one's own making, but one's own acquisition; either that, or an artificial ruin one could craft and perfect (Wilde's jail cell would not seem particularly conducive to either).

Decadence in the European *fin de siècle* therefore conjures a number of illuminating connotations. Pleasure and excess are certainly pulled to the foreground, but of a particularly 'deviant' kind in the context of a morally conservative society or discourse – and only to the extent that such deviance did not threaten the ability of those already empowered to explore it. Sex and sexuality emerge as key themes in the poetics of decadence, but tend to be expressed and explored in ways that objectify and demean women, albeit not exclusively, reflecting the heteronormative moralising of decadence's earliest theorists. Another important, overarching, theme is ruination, or decay, evoked firstly in the 'twilight mood' identified by Nordau in the outlook of bohemians and aesthetes – an end-of-days mentality to match the closing of an epoch – secondly in the prevalence of pessimism, and thirdly in both the ruination of an increasingly and deliberately atomised society, and in the physical and mental decay of pathologically 'degenerate' subjects. It is important to note that this pathologising of decadent subjects,

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[7] While Gilman's narrative at times takes on the conservative overtones of Wilde's critics, it is worth taking seriously his suggestion that '[f]or the last few years of his life [Wilde] seemed not to think; stricken, in exile, he awaited the resurrection of his thought in a future, forgiving world' (1975, 127). Wilde's *De Profundis* (1905 [1897]) does not cohere with Gilman's suggestion that Wilde was left thoughtless, but his acknowledgment of a diminution in creative output – bound to untenable circumstances beyond his control – is worth noting, even if it fails to give credit to injustice.

determined by way of reference to their creative outputs, often derived from a fear that these subjects and the art they produced posed a threat to the stability of social strata and order – and hence 'ruination' might also be understood not just to signal something weak and feeble; rather, ruination also carries a subversive, potentially radical dimension. Finally, 'artifice' emerges as a key characteristic of the decadent imagination that sheds light on the decadents' disenchantment with and dissociation from a supposedly irremediable society, favouring instead a paradise of one's own acquisition or making. Moreover, it is in the crossing of these themes – pleasure *in* decay, artificial paradise, and so on – that the decadent imagination comes into view most clearly.

In closing this section, I want to return to the hesitancy of Gilman to pin down decadence as a concept. With him, I am wary of proffering a transhistorical understanding of decadence. The traits and tendencies outlined above are merely presented as a framework to help chart some of the ways in which decadence has evolved, which must necessarily involve tracing how it is *echoed*. At the same time, by turning a critical eye to contemporary theatre performances in the following sections, opportunities are afforded to get under the skin of decadence that are not afforded in other disciplines where decadence has played much more significant roles, like literary studies: opportunities not just to *imagine* it as a three dimensional phenomenon, as Gilman would have it (1975, 10), but to render it tangible and open to eye, ear, hand, nose and tongue. As I argue in the next section, immersive theatre affords opportunities to *spatialize* decadence in environments audiences can enter and potentially interact with; however, the extent to which decadence is rendered 'tangible' in these contexts remains to be seen. The line of enquiry I will be exploring suggests that the engagement of audiences with and within immersive design gestures toward decadence in a way that emphasises, rather than collapses, distance between a decadent spectacle and the live(d) experience of its enactment. I do not mean this in quite the sense offered by Gilman as 'a purely

formal act, a pose […] a quality of sham passion' (45); or rather, I think it can mean this, but we ought to be careful not to take for granted the antitheatrical prejudice underpinning the use of the word 'sham'. Ultimately, if decadence is situated somewhere between 'relic and drifting sign', then the theatre would seem an ideal venue to explore its qualities, potential and compromises as a medium conditioned by transience.

Morbidity and misogyny in *The Masque of the Red Death*

The Masque was based on Poe's short stories, whose writing impacted the decadent movement after Baudelaire glorified its putridity. It was co-directed by Felix Barrett and Maxine Doyle, and designed by Barrett, Livi Vaughan and Beatrice Minns, with Matt Prentice, Stephen Dobbie and Tina Bicât designing the lighting, sound and costume respectively. Anecdotal accounts of this performance are not hard to come by (thick descriptions are a favoured means of introducing articles dealing with Punchdrunk's work), so a gloss should suffice: imagine cobweb-ridden rooms spread across several floors that you are free to explore on your own whilst literally masked and cloaked, stumbling across or seeking out performed allusions and direct references to Poe's short stories. Each room is filled with vast amounts of junk shop crockery and eclectic trinkets: conchs, silver sculptures, dusty books, oil lamps, Persian rugs, and fabrics drooping from ceilings as if to hide the damp. Each in isolation might signal a kind of opulence, but together, in the gloomy lighting typical of Punchdrunk's work, they appear decrepit and left to wrack and ruin. An opium den with reclining, sunken-eyed rakes. A bedchamber, yellow-hued linen, something breathing beneath the sheets, but not before its tell-tale heart is stopped, a pillow pressed against the mouth. This menagerie is the diseased house of usher; a house of corpses in which anonymised audiences wander as ghostly voyeurs. This

is a house in which meticulously crafted ruins are offered up for perusal and delectation. This is a house of decadence.

I've written about this piece before and don't want to tread that ground again here (see Alston 2016, 129-39). Instead, what I want to consider is how this piece works as an homage to the decadent imagination of *fin de siècle* European literature as mediated through one of its key influences: Poe. The decadent imagination is *spatialized* – a concept borrowed from W. B. Worthen's (2012) study of Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More* (2011-). Worthen explores how *Sleep No More* 'spatializes' the 'written troubles' of Macbeth's brain in the material world of a performance that can be walked through, and explored. However, in *The Masque* it is not so much any given character that's spatialized, but a much broader imaginative terrain. Punchdrunk spatialize decadence as an alluring spectacle, and allow a decadent imagination to bind together an otherwise eclectic scenography. One example of how this is achieved can be found in the plethora of objects peppering each space, which recall the decadent movement's predilections for uselessness. These objects rarely carry any use value for the performers. A jug is not used as a jug; rather, it presents itself first and foremost for aesthetic contemplation. Each space is replete with useless objects save for their 'use' in scenic design and affordances as objects to be handled and contemplated by audiences. The sheer *excess* of these objects, their proliferation, their kleptomanic accumulation, and their artful presentation all play important roles in the design of *The Masque* as a decadent spectacle.

The spectacular qualities of *The Masque* also extend to its depiction of deviancy. Deviancy is presented to audiences as an exotic spectacle that charges the fabric of the performance with heady, intoxicating qualities. Indeed, the way intoxication is framed and to an extent encouraged in the performance helps to elucidate why. Intoxication, particularly in the form of the opium eater, was a key inspiration behind decadent and proto-decadent art and literature in the nineteenth century, most notably in the work of Baudelaire (2002) and his own

precursor Thomas de Quincey (2009). 'Given the decadent turn of mind', writes Jean Pierrot, who was an influential commentator on the decadent imagination in a book that takes the term as its title, opiates answer 'a double need: that of escaping by any possible means from a world where life can be nothing but unhappiness and tedium, and that of discovering new and hitherto unknown sensations by the use of artificial stimuli' (Pierrot 1981, 176). *The Masque*, too, can be seen to answer a similar 'double need' as an escapist playground offering enticing sensations in an artificial paradise (for even ruins, particularly manicured ruins, offer paradise of a kind for neophytes and sensation seekers). This playground may well produce a dizzying effect, appearing to connect an audience's 'live(d)' experience to an attractively wraith-like character seen languishing in an opium den, for instance, but this is something quite different from the pleasures and perils of opium eating; far from dizzying, for de Quincey opium produces 'the most exquisite order, legislation, and harmony', albeit as a 'chronic' and potentially destructive pleasure (61). This is also what distinguishes the narcotic effects of opium from alcohol, which takes on a compelling scenographic dimension in the performance. Audiences are encouraged to take a seat and drink in a bar housed within the fictive cosmos of the performance (calling to mind those decadent patrons of Café François I, explored in the previous section). The clink of glasses, the popping of bottle tops and corks, all serve a sonic and scenic purpose; moreover, this is an element of the scenography that can be incorporated within the body. Here, the sanctioned consumption of alcohol takes on a decadent quality, but not to the extent that it lives 'in the depths, under the pressure of extreme consciousness', to recall Gilman (Gilman 1975, 7). While I am clearly connecting this element of the performance with the kind of glib framing of decadence that Gilman takes issue with, my point is not to suggest that mild drunkenness or dizzying encounters in and with this fictive cosmos are at all problematic; either might loosen and even liberate spectatorship's anarchic potential. Rather, my point is simply to work through how deviancy is depicted and sensationalised as a spectacle. In my own experience of *The*

Masque, deviancy was appealed to, but not *lived* precisely because a desire for vivacious experience elicited by an immersive environment, taking the rhetoric of vitality so often deployed in immersive theatre scholarship at its word, was a far cry from the chronic pleasures of suffering more akin to the decadent imagination and its favoured anti-hero, the opium eater.

Social dis-ease might well be critiqued in the *The Masque*'s source text, as Geraldine Harris recognises (2017, 281), but it is also framed as a seductive attraction in Punchdrunk's rendering. Social decay is framed as something to be hastened within the performance in ways that reflect and polish the decadent imagination of *fin de siècle* Europe, the difference being that a desire for annihilation is courted rather than enacted in the little acts of dissension lauded by decadents. The performance enables audiences to engage with syphilitic, orgiastic spectacles, pitching these as states to enjoy, but from a distance. The cloaks and beaked masks that each audience member is required to wear see to that, at least in part. They call to mind the protective clothing worn by plague doctors in France and Italy in the seventeenth century, and may draw the attention of other audiences as an 'architectural dimension' (Machon 2007: n.p.) that coheres with the performance's decadent scenography; however, the cloaks and masks also work as 'devices of concealment' that enable and potentially embolden voyeurism (Shearing 2015, 72). Audiences might interact with decadence and contribute to its spatialization, but beneath their costumes they remain anachronistic, or may well feel themselves to be. To paraphrase Sophie Nield, here the audience's eyes, peering through their masks, act as a mirror held up to decadence, 'into which it gazes, seeking its own image […] Here though, we appear on the outside, facing the theatre, as a theatrical character' – a decadent subject – 'coherently in and of the theatrical world. But we do not necessarily appear so to ourselves' (2008, 535).

The figuring of performing bodies in Punchdrunk's work resonates strongly with the misogynistic leanings of the decadent imagination, just as it resonates with the voyeuristic

appeal of strip clubs, as Colette Gordon (2012) points out – although with darker, more explicit connotations of violence that exceed the violence of the (male) gaze, undermining any serious commentary on social dis-ease by rendering it as a site of indulgence. Sensuality and love are rarely depicted as positive phenomena; they are prone to Faustian pacts, bloody violence, treachery, or are conceived wholly within the terrain of the macabre, where the only hopeful, almost joyful moments – in the form of visceral *pas de deux* toward the end of the performance – mark the arrival of a catastrophic plague: the Red Death. Moreover, while male bodies may appear vulnerable, or eroticised, female bodies are more prone in this particular performance to finding themselves subjugated, as evidenced in Stephen Dobbie's photographic documentation of the work (recognising that some of these images are staged for the purposes of documentation – but their composition as such suggests a particular desire for selected moments of the performance to be recorded, viewed and disseminated, and hence these 'relics' of the work are especially illuminating). In one image, we find the sole female seated on the floor, while the men are elevated on chairs; in another, a man towers over a woman as he gauges out her eye; a third finds open-mouthed women crouched in ecstasy beneath a man ejaculating water from his mouth. In the significant majority of documented images, women appear subjugated in one form or another, either reliant on men for elevation, appearing beneath men, or crouched in corners, or positioned as if they are about to be attacked in the delirious rampage of an inebriated man. It is hard not to be reminded of Baudelaire's commentary on women, and of Pierrot's illumination of 'a dilemma that was never to cease tormenting the decadent consciousness: the simultaneous recognition of the satanic and perverse nature of love, the contemptible nature of woman, and the impossibility of doing without her', accepting women only in a 'purely carnal existence' (Pierrot 1981, 124). The female body is used 'as a springboard toward the esthetic universe' of an immersive environment in which women are presented as both siren and victim, as they are throughout decadent literature (138-39).

The Masque of the Red Death therefore displays numerous symptoms of decadence. My use of the term 'symptoms' implies a conventional, but limited reading of the concept as a moral, physical or social failing of some kind, limited because decadence might just as well promote radical inversion of social normativity. However, reflection on these 'symptoms' makes for a useful guide in assessing the decadence of this performance, as it is in accordance with the model of decadence forwarded by the likes of Nordau. The performance both stages and sensationalises disease and ruination; its landscapes and the wraith-like bodies that populate them are made to look as though they are in a state of decay; its intelligibility is grounded in esoteric knowledge; and the performance clearly revels in a 'twilight mood' – a mood that certainly gestures toward a live(d) experience of decadence, but that ultimately dissociates taboo from its breakage. The result, I argue, is a celebration of decadence in precisely the senses that Nordau ridiculed, only sensationalised as a site of touristic pleasure.

Decay and ruination in *The Boy Who Climbed Out of His Face*

A very different figuring of decadence can be found in SHUNT's collectively created 2014 performance, *The Boy Who Climbed Out of His Face*. As with much of SHUNT's work, *The Boy* is based very loosely on famous literary works – in this case Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies* (1863) – although one has to make bold imaginative leaps to draw connections between the source texts that inspire a work, and the work itself. After waiting for their allotted group to be called in accordance with staggered entry, the audience enter a complex of shipping containers housing each of the work's environments, or 'scenes' – but not before taking off their shoes and socks and placing them in shoeboxes.[8] They then wind their way through a narrow maze (a familiar SHUNT device) until

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[8] The removal of shoes and socks might be seen to introduce a spiritual dimension to the work reminiscent, perhaps, of The Performance Group's environmental performance *Commune* (1970); however, its purpose in *The*

they find a performer who asks them to place their shoe boxes on a table. As with most of the characters encountered in this performance, she wears an ill-fitting wig and latex mask that gives the impression that her face is falling off, or peeling (see fig. 1). She opens one of the shoeboxes and draws out a fistful of jewellery. Decadent authors are prone to waxing lyrical about sapphires, rubies and emeralds for pages on end; jewellery poses no real use value, but it is beautiful, and for that reason it is perhaps unsurprising that such non-utilitarian objects attracted these writers. But for me the jewellery was not what piqued interest most; instead, what felt most imposing, and what sucked attention, was the sickly quality of the artificial light in the space: a pungent, overpowering yellow. Decadent literature in France in the 1890s, as well as pornographic fiction, was often wrapped in yellow paper.[9] The colour is symbolic of decay and depravity. Not only that, but it is symbolic of the 1890s – the so-called 'yellow nineties', as Holbrook Jackson mused in 1913: 'yellow became the colour of the hour, the symbol of the time-spirit. It was associated with all that was bizarre and queer in art and life, with all that was outrageously modern' (Jackson qtd. in Kooistra and Denisoff). The container oozes yellow, and more specifically yellow as it derives from an artificial light source. It is the first pointer audiences have, aside from the containers themselves – as I elaborate shortly – as to the performance's decadent design.[10]

The next container that audiences enter after making their way through an ever-narrowing corridor, again dowsed in putrid yellow, is made up to look like a tiny night club.

Boy seems less esoteric and more practical, enabling tactile encounters with each environment – which include sandy desert islands and cold steps in the open air – that would otherwise be 'distanced' by footwear. If there is a connection to be made with *Commune*, it is in the latter's exploration of cultishness, violence and vulnerability as a response, in part, to the Manson Family murders.
[9] The front cover of the decadent periodical *The Yellow Book*, illustrated by Aubrey Beardsley, was a reference to this phenomenon.
[10] However, this observation comes with a caveat – many of those involved with the decadent movement were resolutely anti-modern, contra Jackson's comment. Decadents turned to history, and to the sensuous present – not to the future. At the same time, this understanding of decadence has been convincingly challenged by Vincent Sherry, who draws a wide range of persuasive connections between modernism and decadent poetry and prose in *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (2015).

Inside is an apparently amphetamine-riddled masked male, clutching a large bottle of water, and moving in such a way that managed to meld a dance with a shuffle and a twitch (see fig. 2). He is sweaty, and it is not long before we, the audience, are sweaty too in this tiny space, which has already seen several other groups pass through prior to our entry. The dishevelled dancer, the audience (past and present) and the pungent space all play into a scenography not just of materials, or sounds, but a holistic scenography of the senses. To recall Machon, this is indeed a 'sensorial world' possessing 'affective and sensual powers', only here an appeal to 'embodied sentient consciousness' is utterly contingent on exhaustion and the moist, smelly remnants of hedonic excess. This is a profoundly decadent space; any life it has relies on the expended energy of revelry.

After leaving the club, the audience is then guided into another container, mostly bare, with grubby hand marks on the walls. Soon after entering, the space is plunged into darkness, accompanied by the sound of waves crashing against the sides of the container. Here, the figurative connotations of the container are diminished, and its status as a means of transporting goods from one point to another are highlighted – only here, we, the audience, are the goods. A voice emitted from invisible speakers tells us that we may run out of air, and that we should spot the weakest amongst us – presumably to satiate hunger, should it come to that. Later in the performance, at the end of their bizarre voyage, the audience climbs their way to the top of the stacked containers and out into the open air, affording them a view of London's skyline, as well as a view downwards into a square hole shaped by the containers. An upturned, angled container rests in the centre, surrounded by water, and with the containers' contents spilled out and floating in the corner: countless plastic dolls – water babies, I suppose – appearing naked as trafficked bodies-cum-commodities, ship-wrecked detritus hidden from view to all except those who stand on top of the containers, looking down. What connects these two scenes as an audible and scenic presence, respectively, is water as a decadent element of the work's

scenography. Death and water were often combined in the decadent imagination's 'deep-rooted predilection for urban settings and its morbid obsessions by displaying a marked preference for any city that was both watery and dying', as Pierrot writes of decadent fiction (1981, 173). His focus is on literary works by Georges Rodenbach (*Bruges-la-morte*, 1892) and Camille Mauclair (*L'Ennemie des rêves*, 1899) that are set amongst Bruges' canals in Belgium. However, in *The Boy* the decadent imagination is cast in a mode that concerns itself not just with an urban waterway, but its connectedness to histories of globalisation, figuring or rather *revealing* the Thames as an outmoded, ruin-strewn gateway to economic prosperity.

Another important element of the scenography that connects these scenes, and indeed all of the scenes, are of course the shipping containers, which again help to illuminate the performance's decadent aesthetics. Michael Shane Boyle opens an article on *The Boy* with an instructive epigraph by the artist and essayist Allan Sekula: 'If there is a single object that can be said to embody the disavowal implicit in the transnational bourgeoisie's fantasy of a world of wealth without workers, a world of uninhabited flows, it is this: the container, the very coffin of remote labor-power. And like the table in Marx's explanation of commodity fetishism, the coffin has learned to dance' (qtd. in Boyle 2016, 57). However, where for Boyle this performance is ultimately about, or at least foregrounds, the container as an important cornerstone and means of exploring an infrastructural aesthetic in contemporary art, and an infrastructural politics more broadly, I suggest that the container is one element among several that suggest that it is about the *decadence* of such infrastructure. What is under scrutiny is the role of ruination in the developmental tendencies of capitalism. Capitalism, or rather a time after capitalism's fall, or 'decadence', is depicted as a wasteland populated by people whose very bodies are in a state of decay, and who have taken on a state of ruination akin to their environment.

The Boy engages audiences both with and within the detritus of capitalism. When the containers stop moving, when their productivity is spent, what emerges is stasis and decay for both the containers and their contents. For Gilman, the decadent movement was at least partly a response to 'the enlistment of human energy in the service of ever-increasing productivity' associated with the growth of industrial capitalism in the mid-nineteenth century, along with 'the consequent necessity to organize society in ever-more complex and rationalized ways' (1975, 82). I see *The Boy* as a response to such enlistment. Interestingly, in a marked contrast with Lukács's theorisation of decadent expression (he has formalism and abstraction in his sights) as the antithesis of an art reflecting 'the objective developmental tendencies of society' (2013: 271-72), SHUNT work with a decadent aesthetic that seems to me to be *inspired* by a developmental tendency that envisions a time after capitalism's decadence. The air that is struck is one of hopelessness deriving from a fundamental pessimism, with pessimism being one of 'several alleged symptoms' of decadence that socialist realism and the socialist state needed to protect itself against in Lukács's thinking (Ibs 2014: 88). The way in which decadence is expressed in *The Boy*'s scenography – the yellow light, the ripped masks, the sweaty walls, the water, the discarded containers, and so on – is clearly a world apart from the kinds of 'decadent' formalism critiqued by Lukács, and yet a pervasive, pessimistic mood ensures that the performance's critique of capitalism's developmental tendencies takes on a decadent edge. What emerges is a strange merging of decadence's framing as historical process and critical tool. A decadent aesthetic that is in no way 'formalist' is deployed to illuminate a dialectical understanding of history, only to find itself abstracted from the prospect of progress.

Conclusion

On 21 October 2017, just over a week before Halloween, I went to see London's latest 'immersive' offering at Hoxton Hall in East London: *Hammer House of Horror Live – The Soulless Ones* (2017). *Soulless* was produced by the British production company Hammer Film Productions – famed for its seminal (as well as schlocky) 'Hammer Horror' films – and was co-directed by Oscar Blustin and Anna Söderblom, and designed by Jane Brodie (set), Seb Blaber (lighting) and Dan Jeffries (sound). The performance invites audiences to explore a spooky and at times gruesome uprising of a vampire 'hive', raised from slumber after a theatrical ritual that we, cloaked audience members, were invited to witness. Freshly risen and dispersed throughout the building – an old Victorian music hall – it was then incumbent on us to put to rest any doubts about the supernatural by exploring their dwellings. Aside from the hall itself, these included a basement reminiscent of an opium den – a suitable haunt for one of the characters, a poet, who at one point lyricises its potency before becoming the subject of a sacrificial ritual. Upstairs, in a richly textured, gloomily gothic bedroom, the audience might find Carmilla, Queen of the Vampires, doted on by her wraith-like human slave and victim Dimi – later subjugated to a gory feeding frenzy. Elsewhere, one might be serenaded by a troubadour-cum-vampire in the bar, witness to blood sacrifice in a crypt, or might peruse a copy of Percy Bysshe Shelley's verse drama *The Cenci* (1819) resting on an altar. The performance concludes with a ritual intended to secure the return of the vampire hive to power and freedom, only to fall foul of Abaddon, a destroying angel depicted in the book of Revelation and variously interpreted as a Holy or satanic being of immense destructive power.

It is perhaps unconventional to introduce new material in a conclusion, but engaging with this more recent performance provides opportunities to engage with the legacy of the work addressed elsewhere in this article, and to revisit afresh key areas of concern. First of all, the influence of Punchdrunk on *Soulless* is abundantly clear. While to this extent derivative, *Soulless* was nonetheless an invigorating experience with 'thrill' placed squarely at its heart:

the thrill of necromancy and necrophilia, as one might expect of a performance produced by Hammer. The arousal of thrill is where the performance's homage to lineages both artistic (haunted by *The Masque* as much as Hammer's *oeuvre*) and mythical (the spectres of Stoker) takes its lead, extending the 'living museum' work with which the artistic team have been affiliated in the past.[11] The audience is invited to 'live' a purgatorial existence, but as a transient presence (Nield 2008, 534) that ensures their own abstraction as wandering spectators.

Perhaps there is a certain naivety in thinking such work could achieve anything else. As Liz Constable, Matthew Potolsky and Dennis Denisoff suggest of decadent literature, to analyse *literally* that which is figurative is an 'interpretative illusion […] As such, decadent writing is no more "decadent" than realist writing is "real"' (1999, 12). But theatre affords possibilities that are foreclosed in literature. Theatre enables *enactment*, and hence the possibility not just of a decadent style, but of decadent acts unfolding in a live event. To what extent, then, might theatre performances, not least those offering some kind of audience participation or immersion within an event, provide space for the enactment of decadence, or give rise to a 'decadent theatre' that is neither literal, nor limited to figuration, but *lived*?

There was a grimy immanence to the staging of decadence in the sweat-sodden and watery spaces of *The Boy* that begin to hint at some of the potential that a radically decadent theatre might present. Here, the (a)liveness of decadence 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 toward decay. *The Boy*'s turn to decadence is not predicated on ruin lust; rather, it makes a spectacle of capitalism's exploited raw materials, and populates that spectacle with acts of decadence at odds with the beautification of decay. Even the prospect of revelry in the figure of the dancer ultimately falls

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[11] Blustin with his company SPECIFIQ have worked with a number of museums and cultural institutions including Durham Castle and the National Maritime Museum.

foul of brutality as a voice booming from unseen speakers implies that the last vestiges of his identity are to be removed in a game of 'pulling teeth'. The world that audiences are invited to inhabit is predicated on a profound disenchantment with an irremediably broken society where every last vestige of productivity is drained or wrenched from objects and objectified subjects. Hence, the potential of a radically decadent theatre, in this case, is a theatre pitched in a regressive mode. The only solution it forwards in responding to the decadence of an economic order is a pessimistic embrace and hastening of obliteration.

Something quite different is at stake in *The Masque* and *Soulless*. The manicured ruins of these performances seem to achieve a typically decadent goal – the perfection of artifice – but there is nothing of decadence's spirit of radical opposition here; decadence is thematised, and stylised – and to great effect – but it is not enacted beyond gestures to motifs, myths and archetypes. Decadence typically involves a turn toward subversive visions of excess in the annals of history, and in enacting these visions the heroes of decadent literature, while usually reliant on their own privilege, stood in stark contrast to the dominant social and cultural mores of their time. To this extent, the aesthetics of decadence and its political potential rests on an experimental spirit of provocation and deviancy. In contrast, whilst *The Masque* and *Soulless* harvest the decadent imagination, and while they stage deviance, deviancy is also granted license. It is appealed to, and romanticised – from the look and feel of decadence in literature and film, to its gender and class politics – but the staging of a sanitised decadence confirms and supports, rather than upturns, sanctioned frames of legibility.

My purpose in forwarding this critique of immersive theatre's decadent leanings is certainly not to dismiss the value of what a 'decadent theatre' has to offer in the present moment, and even less to dismiss the power of bold theatrical gestures. Rather, my intention is to forward a framework and context to serve the analysis of a subject that has so far existed largely outside of the conceptual and theoretical frameworks of theatre and performance

studies. At a point in time when the conjunction of 'decadence' and theatre feels painfully close to theatre's sustainability – at a point, that is, when critics might again use decadence as a charge to undermine the value of the arts as budgetary constraints continue to exert pressure – it seems all the more important to understand the roles, compromises and possibilities of decadence, particularly with regards to expressions of decadence that are uniquely the preserve of live media. The next steps in this project, then, must surely be to examine how radical theatre today is (re-)configuring decadence as a peculiarly theatrical phenomenon, exploring not just motifs and styles of decadence gleaned from literature and film, but that which theatre alone can grapple with as a live event: that is, as an event conditioned by its own decay.

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