States of Decadence

States of Decadence:

On the Aesthetics of Beauty, Decline and Transgression across Time and Space Volume 2

Edited by

Guri Barstad and Karen P. Knutsen

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INTRODUCTION:
FORTY SHADES OF DECADENCE

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In everyday use, the word decadence brings to mind visions of excess and opulence; who has not been tempted at times to devour too much chocolate or to tipple an extra glass of wine, disregarding both health and the dictates of reason? Etymologically the English word decadence had its origin in the mid-16th century French *décadence*, derived from Medieval Latin *decadentia*, which is related to *decay. Decadēre* is to decay, derived from *de-* down + *cadēre* to fall (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Its meaning is defined as follows:

> **a.** The process of falling away or declining (from a prior state of excellence, vitality, prosperity, etc.); decay; impaired or deteriorated condition.
> **b.** *spec.* Applied to a particular period of decline in art, literature, etc.
> **c.** *lit.* Falling down, falling off. (*Oxford English Dictionary*)

In literary studies the word is used more specifically as a descriptor of a certain type of literature produced at the end of the 19th century, or the *fin de siècle*. Literature labelled as decadent originated in France, but quickly spread throughout Europe and to the rest of the world. The characteristics of decadent writing can thus be seen in the literature of many different countries at this time, but writers have digested and realigned its forms and tropes, reflecting the individual cultures and characters of their native countries.

Decadence, however, was much more than a literary phenomenon, and it did not, of course originate in a vacuum. It was in many ways a reaction to a collision between the old and the new, which reflected a particular moment in time when people were beginning to experience the ambivalence of modernity. Transitional periods like the fin de siècle often awaken contradictory emotions; many people were pessimistic and saw signs of degeneration all around them. Others were looking forward to a

new century with hope and great expectations. At this time capitalism was flourishing and the middle class was growing. This was the peak era of colonialism, particularly in Africa and Asia. The working classes gained political power by organizing unions, and women also joined in a political movement for suffrage and equality, as is evident in the phenomenon of the "New Woman". The production of newspapers, magazines and books exploded as schools and universities opened their doors to new social groups. New inventions and scientific discoveries made life easier for the general populace. In short, the society that we know today and take for granted was quickly taking shape. Most people enthusiastically celebrated all these advances. However, in the middle of all this progress and hope for a utopian future, there were still a number of people who resisted all these changes and who longed nostalgically for the old regime and values. A few of these provocatively called themselves "decadents" (Buvik 2001, 15-17).

Understandably, the changes brought about by modernity were not entirely positive. Industrialization and urbanization had changed the fabric of society. Critics saw a working class which had grown physically weaker after leaving a rural lifestyle of physical labor behind. Similarly, capitalism had formed an elite class that was also perceived as morally weakened or corrupt due to an excess of luxury and leisure. The rise of the working class and the demands of modern women were worrying to those who resisted change. Furthermore, during the fin de siècle, many people complained that the world had grown soft and degenerate. Some of them believed that war was needed to revitalize European society; it would put an end to class struggles and unite countries in a common effort.

The ambivalence of the fin de siècle is paramount in decadent literature. Here, decadence is associated with images of disease, degeneration and rebellion. It is both radical and reactionary, and at times it is anti-democratic. Often described as an aristocratic movement, decadence is evil, fecund and sensual, but also extremely intellectual. Decadence celebrates the beautiful, but is also fascinated by the ugly, the perverse and the subversive. It is misogynistic, with a strong animosity against lesbians, while it simultaneously worships the androgynous man. Decadent heroes are usually "anti-heroes"; they are physically weak or degenerate, and mentally unstable. We observe a fascination with physical and moral degeneration, decline and corruption in decadent narratives. In contrast to the literature of the Romantic Movement, the artificial is valued more than the natural. Decadence focuses on existential themes, and it is simultaneously

religious *and* blasphemous. No wonder people have been fascinated by the paradoxes of decadence, and no wonder it is easier to describe it than to define it.

It is important to remember, however, that the characteristics of decadent writing are also evident in literature and the arts in many other periods both prior to and after the fin de siècle. Critical attention was again focused on decadent literature and art, for example, during the run up to the millennium in 2000, and the similarities between these two volatile historical periods became obvious, both in terms of societal developments and within the arts.

As we can see, the concept of decadence is extremely ambiguous and complex. Per Buvik argues:

> It is therefore important to remind ourselves that decadence not only relates to morals, culture and history, but also to art, and that it does not simply imply negative or stigmatizing content, but that it was also used to provoke and to promote the value of certain phenomena. In the last half of the 1800s it was used for example by artists and intellectuals who wanted to magnify and expose common tendencies in society in a *critical* manner. They used a type of decadence that could function as a *corrective* to the wide-spread development of decadence, which was veiled by optimistic, progressive ideology. (Buvik 2001, 25, our trans.)

Today, the fin de siècle has become an area of study within cultural studies in general. As Sally Ledger and Roger Luckhurst (2012) explain, a number of different disciplines have focused an intense interest on this historical period:

> […] cultural and social historians, urban theorists, historians of science, psychologists, literary critics, post-colonial critics, feminist writers, and gay and lesbian theorists have, in diverse ways, come to regard the late nineteenth century as a crucial moment in the formation or transformation of their object of study. (xiv)

The topic of decadence is so alluring that it recruited approximately 60 scholars from 13 different countries for an international conference held in Halden, Norway on 11th-14th June, 2014, hosted by the Faculty of Business, Languages and Social Sciences at Østfold University College. The conference participants traveled from France, the USA, the UK, Finland, Canada, Estonia, Romania, Tunisia, Morocco, Serbia, Italy, Switzerland and other cities in Norway to attend. This conference was the

second international conference held in Norway on the topic of decadence; the first was convened in the city of Tromsø in 2010 and was called "The Decadence or an Aesthetic of Transgression / La Décadence ou une Esthétique de la Transgression".[1] The convenors of that conference were Pirjo Lyytikäinen and Guri E. Barstad.

Our conference in Halden gave us the opportunity to look back, in the year when the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of the Great War was commemorated, and ironically highlighted the fact that much of the optimism and belief in progress connected to the beginning of the new century was misplaced. Obviously advances have been made, but the two world wars, the ensuing Cold War, environmental challenges, and growing inequality have contradicted optimistic predictions of a brave new world and confirmed decadent diagnoses of degeneration and decline.

At the conference we were fortunate to have five keynote speakers to inspire us. The first was Pirjo Lyytikäinen from the University of Helsinki in Finland. Her lecture was ominously entitled "Sickness unto Death: The Metaphysical Tropes of Malady in Huysmans and Nordic Decadence". The second keynote speaker was Nicole G. Albert, an independent scholar working in France. Her lecture was on the work of the Swedish author August Strindberg and entitled "La tribade en majesté ou les mésaventures de la lesbienne dans l'œuvre de Strindberg: récupération et détournement d'une figure décadente". Timothée Picard, from the Université de Rennes 2, l'institut universitaire de France, was our third speaker whose lecture, "Âge d'or, décadence, régénération: un modèle fondateur pour l'imaginaire musical européen", focused on music and decadence. Two keynote speakers travelled from the United States to be with us. Yvonne Ivory, who teachers German and Comparative Literature at the University of South Carolina held a lecture entitled "Decadence and Viennese Modernism: Alexander von Zemlinsky's Adaptations of Oscar Wilde's *A Florentine Tragedy* and 'The Birthday of the Infanta'". In addition, Richard Shryock, from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University lectured on "Decadent Anarchists and Anarchist Decadents in Fin-de-Siècle France". As the topics of the keynote speakers reveal, decadence can be discussed in relationship to a wide range of subjects: literature, music, opera, history, as well as politics and societal developments.

The title of the conference, *States of Decadence,* gave contributors the freedom to draw on topics from many different fields. Most of the contributions focused on literature and art from the period between 1890

and 1920. However, others examined decadent tendencies manifested in literature, the arts and society itself both before and after this period. *States of Decadence* is divided into two bilingual volumes (French / English). Together they contain forty essays (hence the title of our introduction). These are organized in seven sections where essays are grouped in terms of common thematic concerns. Volume One contains three sections.

Section One in Volume One is entitled "Nordic Decadence", and as the title indicates, the essays included here take up aspects of decadence in writers and themes from the Nordic countries. Section Two: "Decadent Aesthetics and Reception" examines decadent literary images, tropes, and writing styles and how the public responded to them. The contributors in Section Three are concerned with "Degeneration, Hysteria and Perversions" of different kinds. Many different phenomena were diagnosed as signs of decadence at the fin de siècle, and one such symptom was *degeneration,* which was again related to both physical and mental decay, affecting both individuals and societies.

In Volume Two, Section Four is entitled "Images of Decadent Women" and comprises essays which explore the ways women and the feminine are portrayed in decadent novels, short stories and film. Section Five, "Transmedia Decadence", focuses on decadence as it is manifested in music in general and in opera in particular. But decadence also left its mark on other fields, for example on jewelry design. Section Six looks at "Contemporary Decadence" in such different contexts as modern science fiction or the paradoxical writings of Michel Houellebecq. Finally, Section Seven "Poetic Decadence", focusses on how decadence is expressed in poetry.

Volume One

Nordic Decadence

Although decadence is generally associated with France and continental Europe, its cultural influence infiltrated the Scandinavian countries as well, taking on new forms. Here the authors discuss Finnish, Norwegian and Swedish writers, focusing on aspects that might be considered as characteristic expressions of decadence in the North.

In the first essay on forms of Nordic decadence, Riikka Rossi examines various forms of melancholy in 19th century literature. She discusses a Finnish example of nineteenth century melancholy in Juhani Aho's novel *Yksin* (*Alone,* 1890, tr. in French *Seul*) and asks whether melancholy can be considered as constitutive in the cultural imagination of the North and Finnishness.

Pirjo Lyytikäinen analyzes central visions in three decadent texts in the following essay. These visions are all presented as the outgrowths of sick minds, yet all function as metaphysical revelations. She has chosen to examine the Swedish writer Ola Hansson's *Sensitiva amorosa* (1887), and works by the two Finnish authors Volter Kilpi (*Antinous* 1903) and Joel Lehtonen (*Mataleena* 1905).

In the third essay in this section, Guri E. Barstad examines the enigmatic, complex and ironic novel *Hommes las* (1891 *Weary Men*), written by the Norwegian author Arne Garborg. This existential novel is set in a historical context when nation-building was paramount, rather than questions of degeneration and decline. Barstad argues that in this novel decadence can be understood as a metaphor for old, tired, over-cultivated Europe, whereas the young nation cultivates freshness and spontaneity. This contrast leads to a tension between the artificial and the authentic, a tension which ultimately ends in a form of moderation and a new orientation towards reality.

The next contributor, Per Esben Svelstad turns to the Norwegian modernist Åsmund Sveen's debut poetry collection *Andletet* from 1932 (The Face). Svelstad proposes a queer reading which aims to place the collection in the broader context of a homosexual subculture which rejects the philosophical and aesthetical current of the day referred to as vitalism. He argues that Sveen's poetry employs an ambiguous aesthetics where decay, instead of life, becomes the object of worship.

In the fifth essay of this section, Viola Parente-Čapková focuses on how fin de siècle artistic trends like decadence mingled with the local folk traditions in many countries on the margins of Europe, especially those which were experiencing a "national awakening". She concentrates on the emblematic figure of the old woman in decadent works written by writers writing in Finnish, using a gendered perspective.

The last author in this section, Nicole Albert, examines the Swedish writer August Strindberg. She explores aspects of Strindberg's misogyny, particularly in relation to lesbians. In his work (and in the work of many other decadent writers) the lesbian woman is seen as threatening the importance of the male and the prerogatives of the male artist. The subject of lesbianism was central in his private life, having disruptive effects on his first marriage to Siri von Essen, and it plays an important role in much of his work.

Decadent Aesthetics and Reception

Section Two concerns "Decadent Aesthetics and Reception". Contributors here have focused on iterant images found in decadent texts, art, and society, or on particular stylistic devices. Some of the essays also discuss how the public reacted to decadent aesthetics.

Marie-France David-de Palacio is interested in the skeleton as an aestheticized form. Here she asks how the scientific phenomenon of the X-ray was assimilated into the literary imagination of the fin de siècle. The idea of the X-ray was exploited in all types of media: e.g. the theater, cinema, in cabaret shows, as well as in literature and art. In her essay she explores the effects and consequences of this new invention across a range of French and international writing, demonstrating the fascination of being able to see degeneration in process: death within the living body.

Like Marie-France David-de Palacio, Jean de Palacio discusses the aestheticization of the skeleton and of death itself in literature and art of the fin de siècle, drawing on numerous examples. The skeleton is much more than a memento mori, reminding mankind of the inevitability of death and decomposition in these works. It serves many roles in decadent art, integrating the fragmentation and degeneration that haunted the end of the 19th century. During this period we also see a feminization of the skeleton–it is, for example, portrayed as speaking, seductive, erotic, passionate, and political.

Julia Przybos discusses how decadent writers of the fin de siècle, like the old rag-and-bone men of the past, collected and recycled remnants of discarded materials which they hoped to use in innovative ways. However, rather than collecting bits of metal, cloth, paper, wood, and the like, these writers collected and re-used cultural remnants of the past: classical and biblical images, myths, themes, legends and historical figures, in order to

transform them and renew literature itself. She draws on works by writers such as Jules Lemaitre and Bernard Lazare, before examining Albert Samain's short story ''Xanthis, ou la vitrine sentimentale'' (1888) in more detail, in order to illustrate this cultural recycling process.

Guy Ducrey focuses on a French word consisting of only three letters, used regularly by Francophone speakers all over the world, the interjection "Zut!" The interjection expresses discontent, frustration, impatience or disappointment. It can also be used to express defiance in some cases. In English one might say "Heck!", "Bother!"–or, more vulgarly–"Damnit!" in corresponding situations. Ducrey traces the etymology of the word and finds that it seems to have originated in Paris in the late 1800s. It appeared in the work of a group of young decadent poets, or "Zutists" and was later adopted in novels and other forms of literature before making its way into everyday usage.

During the late 1800s and the early 1900s, various groups styled themselves as Rosicrucian in Europe, drawing on an old secret philosophical society with roots back as far as the 1300s. These groups influenced the aesthetics of a number of decadent writers and artists. One of these was Joséphin Péladan, a French novelist, and critic of literature and art. Fanny Bacot discusses his work, which was published during a period when there was a revived interest in spirituality and mysticism in Europe. Péladan was incremental in the establishment of the Salon de la Rose + Cross in France, and his work was permeated by apocalyptic and occult themes.

Etienne Wolff discusses a novel entitled *La Vandale*, written by the little known writer Magali Boisnard in 1907. Her historical novel takes up a particularly decadent theme, the dissolution of the Roman Empire, and follows the fate of a young woman from a Vandal tribe in North Africa during the mid-400s, during the sack of Rome. The Vandals were East Germanic tribes who moved around Europe, establishing kingdoms in Spain and later North Africa, who have often been blamed for the fall of Rome due to their furious attacks and destruction. Wolff notes that Boisnard's novel was described as decadent by contemporary reviewers. She discusses typically decadent themes and motifs and goes on to describe the novel's use of decadent language and style in terms of both lexis and syntax.

Alina Ioana Bako devotes her essay to the case of decadence in Romanian literature. This literature relies on a triple construction of identity: the country as part of Central Europe, as part of the East, and as a part of the Balkans. Consequently it has drawn on literary trends from different national cultures at different times creating a unique mélange of styles. Bako discusses the work of Mateiu Caragiale, who was an amateur heraldist, genealogist and graphic artist in his youth, and drew on the aesthetics of the generation of the 1880s in his writing rather than on contemporary trends. Dandyism–a typical trait of this generation and the decadent protagonists these writers created, is also central in his work, as Bako demonstrates.

Marguerite Bordry turns to two novels from the fin de siècle that portray the city of Venice–a city considered to be the city of decadence par excellence. She discusses Gerolamo Rovetta's *Sott'acqua* (1883) and Gabriele D'Annunzio's *Il fuoco* (1900). In both novels Venice is used as a symbol of decadence, even though the city is portrayed in very different ways by Rovetta and D'Annunzio respectively. However, both authors appear to use typically decadent motifs in order to *distance* themselves from an unambiguously decadent image of Venice.

Degeneration, Hysteria and Perversions

The idea of degeneration and the various maladies associated with it are central in decadent literature. The concept of degeneration was also central in psychiatry in the late 19th century. Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (1892), for instance, used degeneration and depravity as descriptors in his contemporary "analysis" or "diagnosis" of the writers and tendencies of the day. Psychiatrists working at the fin de siècle founded their ideals on the values of the patriarchal bourgeoisie of the day: family, patriotism, democratic institutions, reason, enlightenment and respect for traditions. What was considered "healthy" or "normal" relied on these values, and anything or anybody perceived as threatening these norms risked being labelled as "degenerate". Many of the writers and artists of the period wrote on themes that were considered to be unnatural or abnormal. Sexology was also a budding science at the fin de siècle, often associated with Sigmund Freud's work on sexual development and abnormalities and studies of hysteria. The essays in this section explore the pervasive idea of degeneration and the hysteria and perversions that accompanied it.

The first contributor in this section, Anna Gural-Migdal, examines Octave Mirbeau's novel *L'Abbé Jules* (1888). Mirbeau was a journalist, novelist and playwright. In this novel, the eponymous hero, the Catholic priest Jules Dervelle, becomes the author's vehicle for exploring the mental and bodily degeneration of a man who rebels against social oppression and the corruption of the Catholic Church at the end of the 19th century.

Karen Patrick Knutsen discusses British writer Pat Barker's use of decadent tropes in her historical epos of the Great War, the *Regeneration* trilogy (1997). Barker's characters are not only entrenched on the Western front, but are also participating in the moral "war on decadence" ignited by Oscar Wilde's trial and incarceration in 1895 after he was found guilty of acts of indecency. The pervasive feeling before the war was that British society was suffering from increasing physical, moral and mental decay and that getting involved in the Great War was just the remedy needed to combat this degeneration and rejuvenate British society.

Patrick Bergeron analyzes the character Peter Kien in Elias Canetti's novel *Auto-da-fé* (1935) and asks whether he might be classified as a decadent hero. Many decadent heroes were portrayed as cerebral aesthetes; they were narcissistic, socially inept and bereft of feelings. In literature the decadent hero is often the last surviving member of a family line. Here Canetti's protagonist is compared to some of the typical heroes in decadent literature.

In the next essay, Hermeline Pernoud discusses sado-masochistic horrors in ten French fairytales from the period 1880-1895. She has chosen fairytales written by Catulle Mendès, Marcel Schwob, Jules Ricard, Gustave Claudin and Daniel Darc. These tales are full of torture and violence and often end with the suicidal death of the masochist, ending the sado-masochistic relationship.

Maxime Foerster examines how French writers associated with decadence offered a critique of the budding science of sexology at the fin de siècle by means of parody. He focuses specifically on the representation of the heterosexual couple consisting of the male doctor and the purportedly mad woman to illustrate this critique. The essay is based on analyses of Charles Baudelaire's short story "Mademoiselle Bistouri" (1866) and Rachilde's novel *La Jongleuse* (1900).

Franck Orban's essay focuses on the discourse of the decline or degeneration of the French nation. The sentiment of decadence is naturally mirrored in the collective conscience of a nation that nostalgically looks back on the grandeur of a lost past. Orban draws on historical events and authors who have been involved in this recurrent topic in intellectual and political debates in France in his discussion.

Daphné Vignon's essay examines the discourse of decline in one particular era in France, namely the reign of King Louis XIV. Symptoms of decadence were overwhelming at the French court: luxury, intemperance and moral turpitude. Vignon discusses a didactic French novel, *Les aventures de Télémaque* (*The Adventures of Telemachus*), from 1699, written and published anonymously by Fénelon, Archbishop of Cambrai and tutor to the seven-year-old Duc de Bourgogne (grandson of Louis XIV and second in line to the throne). Fénelon's book is a political fable which preaches the art of good governance. It denounces war, luxury and selfishness and was seen as a scathing criticism of the king's autocratic rule. Wars and taxation of the peasantry had left the population indigent while the corrupt elite lived in luxury.

Volume Two

Images of Decadent Women

The image of the femme fatale has existed in the human psyche and in literature from the beginning of time. She is the sensual woman that no man can resist, but at the same time she is associated with evil and with death itself. As a literary motif, we see her in figures like Calypso in Homer's *Odyssey*, and the whore of Babylon and Salomé in the *Bible*, before the figure had a revival in Romantic literature. The contradictory, dual vision of woman is also popular in decadent literature, mixed with the fears associated with the New Woman, who demanded the same rights as men and the freedom to develop her own intellect, sexuality and individuality (See e.g. Buvik, 2001, 117-121; J. de Palacio, 1994).

Britt W. Svenhard discusses the representation of Sue Bridehead in Michael Winterbottom's film adaptation of Thomas Hardy's novel *Jude the Obscure* (1896). She argues that Winterbottom's reworking of the novel for the medium of film (*Jude* 1996) challenges our modern reading of the New Woman's decadent characteristics, problematizing audience reception and the conventions of the medium itself.

In the second essay, Vesna Elez discusses Gustave Flaubert's eponymous heroine in *Salammbô* (1862). She argues that this character, with her voluptuousness, beauty, and inaccessibility is the incarnation of the paradoxical essence of decadence. In this novel, beauty is mixed with agony. Images of mutilation, carnage and decomposition are intermingled with the passionate encounters between the heroine and Mâtho.

The third essay in this section is concerned with the emblematic decadent figure Salomé. Maïa Varsimashvili-Raphael discusses different configurations of this figure across cultures and argues that when placed in a national context it demonstrates the duality of modern art; the figure creates an international artistic sensibility, but it also accentuates certain national idiosyncrasies.

The fourth essay centers on decadence and the feminine mystic. Michela Gardini asks why and how the figure of the mysterious woman was so attractive to decadent writers and what they gained through their ambivalent representations of the feminine–between sensuality and spirituality; desire and ascesis.

Elizabeth Emery carries out a close reading of Rachilde's short story "La Dent" (1892), showing how the author's clever satire thematizes the fin de siècle preoccupation with death, epitomized in the obsession for macabre relics, fashionable cemeteries, and elaborate tombstones. The story exhibits many of the contradictory aspects of decadence, and the main character, a pious bourgeois woman is gradually transformed into an unexpected paragon of decadence through the everyday experience of losing a tooth.

At the end of the 19th century, homosexuality was looked upon as a vice, and a sickness, and even as a crime in medical and judicial discourses. Psychiatrists like Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Albert Moll elaborated on theories which classified homosexuality as pathological, due possibly to hereditary degeneration. In the final essay in this section, Marie-Gersande Raoult discusses the topic of sexual inversion, particularly lesbianism, drawing on two novels from the fin de siècle, Catulle Mendès' *Méphistophéla* (1890) and Rachilde's *Madame Adonis* (1888).

Transmedia Decadence

Section Five comprises six essays that explore how decadence is manifested in a number of different media. Critics have discussed the inter-dependence of the various arts of the 19th century, especially music and literature. But in terms of inter-art aesthetics decadence seems not only to float from one medium to another, but also from one age to another, as the authors in this section demonstrate.

Timothée Picard focuses on the field of music in his contribution to this volume and chooses the time of Wagner as his point of departure. He traces the genealogy of the relationship between music and decadence, proposing six episodes as particularly representative, starting from the fin de siècle and working his way up to contemporary music. Picard discusses the music of composers such as Wagner and Debussy, among others, but also covers the genres of jazz and rock in drawing up this genealogy.

Yvonne Ivory examines Austrian composer Alexander Zemlinsky's 1917 opera *Eine florentinische Tragödie* which is based on a dramatic fragment written by Oscar Wilde between 1893 and 1895. She argues that Zemlinsky's opera speaks to the continuity between late nineteenth-century decadent and early-twentieth century modernist impulses. Instead of reaffirming the notion of some great caesura between the exhausted ennui of the decadent moment and the energetic forward-looking tempo of European modernism, this transmedia adaptation shows the critical productivity of decadence well into the twentieth century.

Anne-Marie Le Baillif discusses a five-hour long spectacle consisting of dance, song and recitation, written by Balthazar de Beaujoyeulx in 1581. It was commissioned by Queen Louise de Lorraine for the celebration of the marriage of her sister, Marguerite, to the Duke of Joyeuse and based on an episode from Homer's *Odyssey,* namely the story of Odysseus' encounter with the beautiful witch-goddess Circe, who drugs a band of his men, turning them into swine. Le Baillif connects *Le Balet comique de la royne* to the accelerating decay of the authority of the monarchy at this time.

Florence Cheron's essay centers on the art of decadence in the films of Laurent Boutonnat (born 1961). This filmmaker had his debut at the age of 17 and has numerous films on his list of merits. Cheron argues that Boutonnat cultivates a type of dark romance in his films which is quite provocative. Boutonnat's decadence follows an "ethics of pessimism"– rebellion is necessary, even when it fails. Cheron experiences Boutonnat's

ambiguous works, with their delusion and deregulation as expressing the very essence of decadence.

Emeline Chauvet addresses decadence in two different postmodern media, the new novel (Nouveau Roman) and photography, and is particularly concerned with the transgressive motif of pornography. She has chosen Alain Robbe-Grillet's novel *Souvenirs du Triangle d'Or* (1978) and Michel Houellebecq's *Les Particules élémentaires* (2007), along with photography created by the Frenchman Édouard Levé (*Reconstitutions* 2003) and the American Cindy Sherman (*Sex Pictures*, 2013) as the corpus for her discussion. She argues that if decadence is synonymous with decline, then the postmodern body is also a body in extremity, and these postmodern works mirror the fin de siècle aesthetics of sexuality; the pornographic body is fragmented, dehumanized and degenerate in a dystopian world of decadence.

Cyril Barde's essay centers on an emblematic figure who renewed French decorative art at the fin de siècle and thereafter–the jewelry designer and maker of glassware René Lalique (1860-1945). His jewelry was associated with decadent aesthetics, and he was particularly known for his use of semi-precious gems, enamels, ivory and other hard stones. The designs were often opulent, and deemed by some to be ostentatious. But Lalique designed jewelry for such major houses as Cartier and Boucheron and was internationally renowned. Barde discusses the kinship between Lalique's Art Deco and Art Nouveau designs and literary decadence.

Contemporary Decadence

As noted, decadence does not confine itself to the fin de siècle. Writers both before the end of the 19th century and long after that period have drawn on decadent tropes and figures, as the essays in the previous sections illustrate. Here we concentrate on contemporary works; the authors describe aspects of decadence in modern day science fiction, in the controversial work of the French novelist Michel Houellebecq, as well as in novels by Spanish authors writing before and after the millennium.

Robert Mikkelsen explores common sources of inspiration for both science fiction and the decadent: the fin de siècle itself, the preceding Romantic period, especially its Gothic facet, and the development of Social Darwinism. Here he turns to the influence of these currents of thought on the science fiction novel *Neuromancer* (1984) by William

Gibson. Tracing these currents in the novel, he also outlines the connection between the decadent and post-modern science fiction, especially in terms of the concept of repetition, as found, for example in Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981).

Ludvine Fustin has chosen the highly topical and controversial French contemporary writer Michel Houellebecq as the subject of her essay. She argues that there are major similarities between his novels and those of authors writing in the decadent style at the end of the 1800s. Like these writers, Houellebecq believes that an epic has come to a close. But Houellebecq also revitalizes connections to realism by burrowing into some of society's deepest chasms. The paradoxes in his work are what connect him to the decadents: realism and idealism; melancholy and irony; cynicism and lyricism. His reactionary, subversive novels are self-contradictory and challenge some of the fundamental values of contemporary society.

Xavier Escudero argues that there has been a resurgence of decadent aesthetics in contemporary postmodern Spanish novels. This is particularly evident in the way authors writing at the end of the 1900s and the beginning of the 2000s have embraced the category of the eccentric character, revisiting modified versions of the dandy of the fin de siècle. In his essay, Escudero illustrates this trend with examples from the novels of Juan Manuel de Prada, Roberto Montero Glez and Enrique Vila-Matas. Their protagonists are often Bohemian eccentrics, on the margins of society. Eccentricity, distortion, transgression, subversion, deformation and the "esperpentizaciòn" of text and characters are signs of the new decadence in contemporary Spanish literature.

Poetic Decadence

In this section, contributors examine aspects of decadence as it is manifested in poetic language. Jules Laforgue's poetry is the subject of the first essay. The second goes back in time to poetry of the late 16th century, an earlier fin de siècle and points to characteristics and themes that mirror those of the 1890s. We then return to the latter fin de siècle to examine poetry written by the Cuban-born French poet José-Maria de Heredia. Finally, we look at the relationship between decadent poetry of the fin de siècle and more contemporary Spanish and French work.

Aurélie Briquet has chosen to focus on the Franco-Uruguayan poet Jules Laforgue (1860-1887). This poet was influenced by the American poet Walt Whitman and was one of the first French poets to write in free verse. His poetry influenced that of later Modernist poets like Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot. In her essay Briquet analyzes three versions of the same text on the subject of the aquarium, where an underwater universe is described and then compared analogously to the human condition. The different versions of the text break down the borders between form and genre; between poetry and prose and between poetry and the short story.

As previously mentioned, the end of a century is a volatile era, with mixed emotions: both fears and hopes mark the transition. Olfa Abrougui argues that much French poetry written at the end of the 16th century expresses anguish over perceived decline. Whereas we generally associate the 16th century with the Renaissance and the growth of Humanism, the flowering of the arts and a belief in the potential of the human being, the autumn of the Renaissance was perceived as a counter-Renaissance, or even a "black" Renaissance. The civil war had weakened the nation, and epidemics and famines raged during this period, reducing men to the level of beasts. Abrougui illustrates how the sentiments of decadence and despair are manifested in poetry of the day, touching on the work of Théodore Agrippa d'Aubigné, Pierre de Ronsard and Jean-Baptiste Chassignet, among others.

Wassim Seddik analyzes the decadent sensibility of the poetry of the Cuban-born French poet José-Maria de Heredia (born 1842). He was one of the poets who associated with Charles Leconte de Lisle, whose group were given the name "les parnassiens". Seddikk notes two eminently decadent motifs in de Heredia's sonnets: misogyny and teratology. Both are evident in his poem "Sphinx", which dwells on a mythical creature with physiological abnormalities and simultaneously represents the female as monstrous.

Much poetry written during the period 1970-2000 was characterized by melancholy and disillusionment. However, this feeling of crisis was simultaneously harnessed with efforts to quell pessimism. Decadence found in writing of the 20th century carries on an intense dialogue with the decadence of the previous fin de siècle. Vincent Zonca argues that comparing poetry from these two periods sheds new light on decadence. He examines the Spanish poet Luis Antonio de Villenas' work, comparing his Spanish "decadence" with that of the French filmmaker and "situationist"

Guy Debord. Zonca argues that the dialogue between different "decadences" leads to deeper insight on both fin de siècle decadence and later styles of writing, for example postmodern and "post-avant-garde" writing.

Notes

[1] The proceedings from the conference "The Decadence or an Aesthetic of Transgression / La Décadence ou une Esthétique de la Transgression" (2011), edited by Guri E. Barstad and Pirjo Lyytikäinen, are available on the *NORDLIT* website: http://septentrio.uit.no/index.php/nordlit/issue/view/187.

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IMAGES OF DECADENT WOMEN

DECADENCE REVISITED IN MICHAEL WINTERBOTTOM'S *JUDE*

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From Novel to Film

Jude the Obscure stirred great controversy when it was published in 1895. Although a few reviews were favorable to what was to become Thomas Hardy's last novel, most of the establishment and their newspapers considered it obscene (Page [1977] 2012). The story is about Jude Fawley, a young stonemason with academic aspirations, who falls in love with his free-spirited and intellectually superior cousin, Sue Bridehead. After his university ambitions are thwarted, his relationship with Sue, which is a union of equals, is based on a political creed of free-love ideals and a resistance to conventional and religious marriage laws. They start a family without a marriage license, but under the pressures of poverty and social disapproval, their relationship deteriorates and finally ends in tragedy when their children die. Sue reverts into religious orthodoxy and Jude dies from alcoholism before the age of thirty.

Because of the novel's critique of the institution of marriage and its attack on religion, it was seen by many as an addition to the radical New Woman fiction. Accordingly, in his 1996 screen adaptation *Jude*, Michael Winterbottom has his female character reflect these women's political and social demands for a new morality and new codes of sexual ethics and behavior. But the screen representation of Sue Bridehead is also conditioned by the adopted perspective of the male protagonist. A considerable part of this paper relies on a comparative analysis of the interplay between thematics and narrative structures in both texts. However, because Hardy's visual structures also constitute a highly cinematic method of conveying meaning (Lodge 1981; Berger 1990; Bullen 1986), the discussion is not mainly concerned with the transfer of elements from one sign system to the other, or with the historical contexts of different literary and film developments, but applies instead broader

film theories and frameworks in an attempt to shed light on the narrative complexity of the novel and the film's adaptational solutions.

Due to the limited scope of this article, only certain aspects of the social critique and a few of the many points of narrative convergence between Hardy's narrative visual structures and the medium of film, many of which are elegantly recreated in *Jude*, will be treated here.[1] In the context of fin de siécle decadence, my focus will be on the way Hardy's criticism of the precarious situation of Victorian women is intrinsic to the narrative visual structures of his novel, and on how Winterbottom's modulations of this dual relationship signals a different and modern understanding of female sexuality. These modulations relate predominately to discussions of the heritage film genre, the subject of the Gaze and the Image, and the issue of cinema's conventional treatment of female characters. I argue that Winterbottom's process of reworking Sue's character in order to convey modern free-love ideals that appeal to cinema audiences, shows us how modern Western applications of the Gaze and narrative conventions like sexual rapport, paradoxically, seem to continue to sustain Victorian views of female sexuality and women's roles in society.

Fidelity of Transformation–reproducing the "spirit" of the original

In Dudley Andrew's definition, the distinctive features of adaptation are the matching of the cinematic sign system to prior achievement in some other system, and the insistence on the cultural status of the model (Andrew 1992, 421). He divides adaptations into three categories: *borrowing, intersection*, and *fidelity of transformation*. The first category treats the original text as an archetype which forms a basis for creative reworkings of it, whereas the second sets out to confront the aesthetic form of the original with the specificity of cinema. *Fidelity of transformation*, on the other hand, ambitiously attempts to reproduce the essence or the "spirit" of the original text. However, whereas certain narrative aspects like setting and point of view can be easily adapted from literature to the screen, Andrew argues that it is more difficult to find for instance the stylistic equivalents of tone, values or imagery in film. Thus, belief in the possibility of narrative convergence in this form of adaptation requires that we "presume the global signified of the original to be separable from its text" (Andrew 1992, 424), and that even though the elements are not equivalents their positions vis-à-vis their different domains may be. One example is narrative codes like words and images which function at the

level of implication or connotation, and therefore are potentially comparable in a novel and a film. But Andrew also cites E. H. Gombrich's caution that although artistic adaptations are possible, "every artwork is a construct of elements built out of a traditional use of a system" and therefore analyses require "the study of both art forms in their proper historic context" (Andrew 1992, 425).

Although this paper aims for a similar comparative analysis of novel and film, its limited scope unfortunately does not allow an exhaustive and balanced study of both texts. It will focus on the way Winterbottom "necessitates" the adaptation, i.e. the way he chooses to deal with the original text and its historical aspects in order to imbue it with contemporary relevance (Andrew 1992, 428).

The Paradox of the New Woman in an Anti-Heritage Film

Before discussing adaptation and convergence, it is necessary to explain why out of the numerous filmatizations available of Hardy's work, *Jude* is of particular interest. The reason is Winterbottom's declared goal of challenging and disrupting the highly popular heritage film and television productions of the previous two decades. According to Pamela Church Gibson (2000), the majority of these adaptations depicted Victorian and Edwardian manners and mores, but developed a heavy and fetishist focus on historical clothing and on the visual splendor of the past, often to the detriment of the social critique of the originals. Winterbottom, on the contrary, set out to highlight the relevance of the past and to "destroy the heritage film from within" (qtd. in Gibson 2000, 119). Accordingly, there are no elaborate costumes in *Jude* that can fetishize Sue or the past, and the actress Kate Winslet, who plays Sue, is realistically dressed in simple print frocks and wears no make-up. Winterbottom's choice aims to accentuate Sue as a New Woman and he selects dialogues and situations that allow her to express ideas in line with Hardy's gender themes and arranges her with props typically associated with the New Woman.

But the task of conveying Hardy's critique of the suppression of women using the voice of a radical New Woman character is not as straightforward as it might seem. Although Sue became associated with the decadent traits and opinions of the threatening New Women, Hardy's descriptions of her seem to be based more on the characteristics of the intellectual Girl of the Period of the 1860s (Gittings 2001, 469). The Girl of the Period had demanded greater intellectual and social freedom, and