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Decadent Scenography

Angel Rose Denman, Hollywood Goth

ABSTRACT This article considers how decadence manifests and takes on meaning and significance in artistic practice today by focusing on the scenographic work of the Anglo-American artist Angel Rose Denman. Denman's scenographies are informed by decadent style as it emerged in Europe during the fin de siècle, when decadence was associated with decay, obsolescence, and the refinement of that which others might find distasteful. However, she also draws inspiration from a broader range of genres and personalities from the twentieth century including disco, divas, goth subculture, and kitsch. Where decadence at the dawn of modernity was a reaction to instrumentalism in capitalist industry and the bourgeois tastes that emerged from its ascendancy, it is stagnating economic growth and productivity in postindustrial societies that contextualize decadence today, alongside changing attitudes toward gender and sexuality and the progress that these attitudes are understood to represent. This demands a shift in how we identify decadence if it is to be at all legible in a twenty-first-century context. The politics of Denman's "decadent scenography" in two of her short films—*The Green Carnation* (2012) and *The Rose* (2014)—is rooted not in the unconventional bodies and things found in the environments she crafts, but their arrangement. Her practice disturbs binaries that underpin hierarchies of taste and value including function and filigree, productivity and lethargy, essence and pose, and newness and antiquation. Ultimately, I find value in its lack of fit in a twenty-first-century context, both "of" its time and a time long past, and in how Denman's decadent scenographies disorient the regulation of gender, sexuality, and taste.

KEYWORDS Angel Rose Denman, decadence, scenography, design, dandy, Oscar Wilde

This article considers the scenographic worlds imagined and realized by the Anglo-American artist Angel Rose Denman. It conceptualizes the "decadence" of these worlds, and elaborates the aesthetics and political significance of "decadent scenography." Decadent scenography disorients how tastes and values attach to bodies and things, and invites alternative ways of experiencing and passing time. It upsets what is taken to be in and out of place, appropriate or inappropriate. More specifically, decadent scenography matches craft and refinement with decay and morbidity, and identifies the discarded, obsolete, incongruous, or useless as treasure. It also prizes ornamentation above functionality, and approaches style as a basis for fashioning identity. This is what makes decadent scenography political, as it presents a challenge to hierarchies of taste and value in social and cultural contexts that reduce things and people to use and function.

Denman describes herself as a "daughter of decadence," and acknowledges the importance of decadent artists and writers in shaping her artistic outlook, especially

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Oscar Wilde.[1] Wilde's influence is foregrounded in Denman's film *The Green Carnation* (2012), which makes explicit reference to Wilde's play *Salomé* (1893), although she eschews his text in favor of a more playful and intertextual rendering of its eponymous character. In Wilde's play it is Iokanaan (John the Baptist) who is beheaded at the behest of Salome so that she might finally kiss his lips. In Denman's film it is Salome who suffers decollation, with her own severed head appearing contentedly louche atop a silver charger dripping with fruit, as if it were strange or even tedious to draw attention to it as a concern.

In her parodic repositioning of Salome and Iokanaan, Denman refuses the gilding or elision of her demise in art and literature of the fin de siècle. Her Salome appears some time after her murder at the end of Wilde's play, at a point when her body already bears the marks of decomposition. However, she also extends the gendered and sexual dissidence that drew many decadent artists and writers to Salome in the first place, including Wilde. Salome is crushed beneath the shields of soldiers at the end of Wilde's play, but his text also emphasizes her self-assuredness and willingness to stop at nothing to achieve erotic fulfilment. Denman's switching of who is decapitated plays with this tension, taking the violence Salome suffers not as a conclusion, but as a basis for refusing to follow its script. Also, instead of localizing misogyny or gendered and sexual dissidence in a particular historical interpretation of Salome, Denman chooses instead to explore how a more promiscuous range of subjects have been caught in similar states of tension, be they divas of stage and screen or vampish goths. What emerges is an approach to decadence that is both too antiquated to "fit" in the twenty-first century, and yet not "of" the nineteenth or twentieth centuries either.

Wilde's play is usually categorized as a symbolist drama, but it is also closely associated with decadence, particularly in literary studies, where it stands as a kind of urtext for decadence alongside works by Aubrey Beardsley, Joris-Karl Huysmans, Jean Lorrain, and Rachilde (Marguerite Vallette-Eymery). Etymologically, the word "decadence" derives from a medieval Latin verb that means "to decay" (*decadēre*, literally "to fall down"). As a form of decay, it might be viewed as a problem: social decline, physical degeneration, moral depravity, creative exhaustion, and so on. This was certainly the case when the negative connotations of decadence were circulating with increasing frequency in the nineteenth century everywhere from the popular press to political speeches and scientific treatises, particularly toward the century's end. Max Nordau's pseudoscientific diatribe *Degeneration* (1892) catalogs many of these negative connotations, castigating Wilde as an author who epitomizes "[t]he ego-mania of decadentism, its love of the artificial, its aversion to nature, and to all forms of activity and movement."[2] When decadence emerged as a stylistic tendency in Western Europe in the late nineteenth century, however, it was also deliberately refined by artists and authors. In their hands, decadence

1. Angel Rose Denman, video call with the author, December 19, 2023. The epithet "daughter of decadence" is also the title of a relevant anthology. See Elaine Showalter, ed., *Daughters of Decadence: Stories by Women Writers of the Fin-de-Siècle* (Virago, 1993).

2. Max Nordau, *Degeneration*, 5th ed., trans. George L. Mosse (D. Appleton and Company, 1895), 317 and 325.

served as an aesthetic or literary mode that reacted to or retreated from modernity, including forms of progress associated with a voracious appetite for industry and the utility of things and people, as well as the bourgeoisie and the tastes and attitudes that they favored as a dominant class. It was not so much that their work conformed to a clearly defined style or genre; rather, they finessed what David Weir identifies as "decadent taste": "an uncommon sense that finds delight in things that people who have normal taste react to with revulsion."[3] Salome's "decadent tête-à-tête" with Iokanaan appeals to decadent taste, merging aesthetic and erotic predilections in a transgressive, climactic union.[4]

Decadence as the stylized refinement of decay or the distasteful provides artists and writers with a provocative basis for revealing or resisting the relationships, prejudices, and positions of power that support hierarchies of taste, favored tempos, and the establishment of a right and proper use of one's time, energy, and resources. Cultivating a taste for decadence can enable alternative ways of being and doing in the world, realigning identities and desires in reaction to capitalism's shaping of goals and opportunities. Decadence can also make the socially sanctioned appear contingent rather than necessary and inevitable, be it the incessant intensification of productivity, or the reification of norms that define acceptable expressions of identity and orientation. In mining the past for treasures deemed obsolete or redundant, the appearance of there being no alternative to the way things are is called into question.

Industrial capitalism provided a foil for decadents in the nineteenth century, when decadence was conceived as the antithesis of industrial progress, but capitalism today is not what it was. So-called "advanced" capitalist economies have been de-industrialized. The initial contexts that once made decadence legible are largely a thing of the past in postindustrial societies, which makes it an antiquated concept. However, it is also a pertinent frame for considering the work of many live and visual artists today *because* it is antiquated. The fact that it is outmoded takes on value and significance in cultures of disposability and planned obsolescence, and that strive to accelerate into a future that valorizes debilitating tempos and intensified productivity, rather than questioning the desirability of that future.

If scenography is understood as the process through which light, sound, costume, and scenery are "scored" through "ongoing processes of 'worlding,'"[5] as Rachel Hann suggests, then scenography is an ideal starting point to begin thinking about the "place" of bodies and things in space, time, and mind, including a sense of their being out of place, or out of sync with the rhythms of our time. "Decadent scenography" might then give a name not just to the positioning or scoring of useless or outmoded things and bodies in processes of worlding, but to their disorienting qualities, too.

3. David Weir, "Afterword: Decadent Taste," in *Decadence and the Senses*, ed. Jane Desmarais and Alice Condé (Legenda, 2017), 221.

4. Petra Dierkes-Thrun, *Salome's Modernity: Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetics of Transgression* (University of Michigan Press, 2011), 43–44.

5. Rachel Hann, *Beyond Scenography* (Routledge, 2019), 2.

The next section contextualizes decadent scenography in light of scholarly approaches to decadence in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, on the one hand, and scenography and material culture, on the other. The article then moves on to consider two films by Denman: *The Green Carnation* and *The Rose* (2014). What are we to make of the eclectic environments that feature in these works, in which an array of archaic objects seem at once incongruous and artfully placed? How is the body placed and oriented in these worlds? Who are the dandies that populate her videos, and why are they so bored? And why might a feminist practitioner choose to embrace decadence given the fact that decadence is more usually thought to question, undermine, or react to the idea of "progress"?

DECADENT SCENOGRAPHY: DISORIENTING ARRANGEMENTS AND THE POTENCY OF ROT

There have been several studies exploring decadent art and literature in the wake of the European fin de siècle and beyond. Liz Constable, Dennis Denisoff, and Matthew Potolsky's edited collection *Perennial Decay: On the Aesthetics and Politics of Decadence* (1999) laid important groundwork. It focuses on decadence during the fin de siècle, although it does include chapters that consider the films of Peter Greenaway, decadent subcultures, and reflections on opera and disease during the AIDS crisis, albeit in modes that establish how the nineteenth century holds "a mirror up" to anxieties and issues in more recent years.[6] Decadence as a foil for European modernism has also piqued the interest of scholars. Some, like Kate Hext and Alex Murray, argue that decadence and modernism "are not diametrically opposed but mutually constitutive."[7] Others hone in more tightly on the generational interplay between the Victorian and post-Victorian periods. Kristin Mahoney's *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence* (2015) is an example, exploring the "critical function" of decadence as a "rebellious spirit of critique."[8] This spirit cut across periods that were both immersed in and a reaction to modernity and industrial progress—the first half of the twentieth century, and a past not long passed, the 1890s—and that continued to influence how decadence was explored in artistic and literary practice.

I share Mahoney's interest in the critical function of decadence. However, where the artists and authors she considers (Max Beerbohm, Vernon Lee, Baron Corvo, Althea Gyles, and Beresford Egan) were working in the shadow of nineteenth-century forebears like

6. Liz Constable, Dennis Denisoff, and Matthew Potolsky, *Perennial Decay: On the Aesthetics and Politics of Decadence* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 27.

7. Kate Hext and Alex Murray, "Introduction," in *Decadence in the Age of Modernism*, ed. Kate Hext and Alex Murray (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), 2. See also Vincent Sherry, *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).

8. Kristin Mahoney, *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 3. See also Kristin Mahoney, *Queer Kinship after Wilde: Transnational Decadence and the Family* (Cambridge University Press, 2022). Compare with Kate Hext's take on "belated cosmopolitan decadence" in cinema in "Victorians in the Closet: Oscar Wilde's Monstrous Hollywood Legacy," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 49, no. 4 (2021): 712.

Beardsley and Wilde—in many cases knowing them personally or through mutual acquaintances—artists in the twenty-first century bear no such relation to the fin de siècle. Twenty-first century artists also tend to be more selective in what and who they choose to engage with, and are limited by artefacts and names that have survived the passage of history. For instance, although Denman is drawn to the critical function of decadence and its distaste for the values of the present—drawing inspiration from Wilde, especially—the European fin de siècle is just one ingredient in an eclectic mix of influences.

Denman's intertextual decadence is the postmodern progeny of bygone eras from the fin de siècle to the late twentieth century. Although Mahoney is clear to point out that the term "post-Victorian" evokes the term "postmodern" given their shared preoccupation with parody, pastiche, playfulness, irony, and anachronism,[9] Denman's decadent style is not *grounded* in the aesthetics and poetics of fin-de-siècle decadence, at least not specifically. It is not proximate to that period. It is more gregarious in how it codifies and materializes decadence. This is also what distinguishes Denman's idiosyncratic decadence from "neo-decadence," which is more relevant to her practice, although limited by what tends to be an emphasis on re-fashioning the styles and poses of the 1890s in relevant scholarship.[10] Denman draws on a wider range of periods and contexts, and puts them into dialogue with an equally wide range of genres and styles such as disco, Gothicism, and kitsch. In *The Green Carnation*, Diana Ross, Edgar Allan Poe, Gerritt Vandersyde, and Oscar Wilde all stand on an equal footing, alongside several "monstrous" references that are not so immediately apparent: Orlan's *Woman with Head* (1996), Vampira, and Kembra Pfahler.

Another important distinction between decadence as it tended to be explored in the late nineteenth century compared with the present moment has to do with its relation to pessimism. As Alice Condé observes, artists today tend to embrace decadence more as "an act of resistance against sliding backward into a less progressive, closeted, and bigoted worldview."[11] At first glance this would seem to demand revision of some of the most basic features of fin-de-siècle decadence, such as its association with decay and decline, as well as sickness, morbidity, and ennui.[12] However, Denman pulls these themes to the foreground by grounding her work in a dynamic rendering of decadence and Gothicism. For Denman, "decadence is when you're rotting, and gothic is when you're rotted but keep going on," ready for the next cycle of decay and endurance.[13] Here, the decompositional potency of rot is understood as an agent of change. Some things might be left to

9. Mahoney, *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence*, 23.

10. See A.C. Evans, *Angels of Rancid Glamour: Notes on Neo-decadence* (Stride Publications, 1998).

11. Alice Condé, "Contemporary Contexts: Decadence Today and Tomorrow," in *The Oxford Handbook of Decadence*, ed. Jane Desmarais and David Weir (Oxford University Press, 2022), 98. Other scholars have also pointed out that some writers associated with decadence in the nineteenth century "made the case that Decadent principles could serve as a progressive force." See Matthew Potolsky, "Decadence as Politics," in *Decadence: A Literary History*, ed. Alex Murray (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 162.

12. For more on connections between decadence, sickness, and morbidity, see Barbara Spackman, *Decadent Genealogies: The Rhetoric of Sickness from Baudelaire to D'Annunzio* (Cornell University Press, 1989). See also Pirjo Lyytikainen, "Decadent Tropologies of Sickness," in *Decadence, Degeneration, and the End: Studies in the European Fin de Siècle*, ed. Maria Härmänmaa and Christopher Nissen (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 85–102.

13. Angel Rose Denman, video call with the author, December 19, 2023.

rot, others might be made to rot, and rot itself might be luxuriated in as a facet of becoming something . . . other.

Transitional forms like rot and decomposition invite engagement with the substance of decadence in material culture. Fashion and style are markers of being "civilized," but a decadent approach to material culture is concerned with undoing regimes that discipline civilized appearances and behaviors. For instance, as Caroline Evans writes of experimental fashion, the design of decadence can explicitly "act out what is hidden culturally," or it can at least offer "mute resistance" to dominant tastes and values.[14] This need not be a "cynical or knowing decadence," as Evans characterizes the term[15]; rather, a central claim underpinning my argument is that decadent scenography decomposes or disorients regimes that shape how bodies and things are apprehended. As John Potvin recognizes, fashion and design actualize subjects by orienting bodies and things in relation to one another; they "care for, protect, extend, enhance, detract, postpone, conform to, confirm and/or limit the contours of the embodied self."[16] Decadent scenography (which might include fashion and design) can certainly reveal what it means to conform to, confirm, or limit the embodied self, but it also dwells on those other characteristics that Potvin highlights: extending, enhancing, detracting, or postponing the reification of subjects by way not just of identity formation, but deformation and disorientation, too.

Weir and Jane Desmarais's edited volume *The Oxford Handbook of Decadence* (2022) has done much to advance the study of decadence in material culture. It features chapters on interior decoration and decadent design by Jessica Gossling, the styling of decadent fashion by Catherine Spooner, and chapters exploring decadence and the senses that extend some of Desmarais's earlier collaborative work with Condé.[17] A journal associated with the British Association of Decadence Studies, *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, has also published special issues on "Decadence and Performance" (2021) and "Decadence and Fashion" (2023), which have helped in expanding decadence studies as an interdisciplinary field.[18] However, scenography *per se* is largely absent in studies of decadence and material culture.[19] This is a missed opportunity, as scenography considers not just things that populate material spaces, but bodies, too—be they present in the space, behind its design, or interpreting what confronts them.

Scenography enables a relational appreciation of decadence in material culture. As Joslin McKinney and Scott Palmer explain, scenography is first and foremost "a mode of encounter and exchange founded on spatial and material relations between bodies, objects and environments."[20] Scenography might therefore apply not just to theater

14. Caroline Evans, *Fashion at the Edge: Spectacle, Modernity, and Deathliness* (Yale University Press, 2003), 6.

15. Evans, *Fashion at the Edge*, 6.

16. John Potvin, "The velvet masquerade: fashion, interior design and the furnished body," in *Fashion, Interior Design and the Contours of Modern Identity*, ed. Alla Myzelev and John Potvin (Ashgate, 2010), 9.

17. Desmarais and Weir, *The Oxford Handbook of Decadence*; Desmarais and Condé, *Decadence and the Senses*.

18. For these issues and more see https://volupte.gold.ac.uk.

19. An exception can be found in my earlier monograph, which introduced "decadent scenography." See Adam Alston, *Staging Decadence: Theatre, Performance, and the Ends of Capitalism* (Bloomsbury, 2023), 46 and 61–63.

20. Joslin McKinney and Scott Palmer, "Introducing 'Expanded' Scenography," in *Scenography Expanded: An Introduction to Contemporary Performance Design*, ed. Joslin McKinney and Scott Palmer (Bloomsbury, 2017), 2.

design, but to an expanded range of material and indeed immaterial environments ranging from interior design to virtual reality. As Hann suggests in the quote above, scenography *scores* relationships between bodies and things in ongoing processes of worlding, along with the atmospheres and sensory attunements that the relations between bodies and things might constitute or arouse. Scenography is therefore not just spatial and relational, but temporal, too.

Decadent scenography emphasizes how the design elements underpinning scenography can disorient hierarchies of taste and value, not least through decomposition. In this it runs closer to what Hann describes as "scenographics," which have the potential to disrupt or irritate how orders of world-building are scored. For Hann, "scenographics are interventional acts of place orientation."[21] More specifically, "a scenographic trait enacts a perceptual provocation that calls attention to the broader thresholds of worldly encounter: of how orders of world orientate action and regulate behaviour."[22] This will become a key point of exploration in the sections that follow, which focus on Denman's practice. Ultimately, I will be arguing that Denman's scenography is decadent to the extent that the scenographic arrangement of things and bodies in her films *disorients* existing regimes of world-building. These regimes include the prizing and disciplining of bodies as productive and capable, and the mores that shape the dominance of particular tastes and values, especially with regard to the forms of gendered expression and sexual orientation that derive from them.

MORBID GLAMOUR: SALOME AS DIVA IN *THE GREEN CARNATION*

Denman is a British-born artist who grew up in Los Angeles, studied in London and Hastings in the United Kingdom, and at the time of writing is based in New York City. She has been making work since 2010 that cuts across film, performance, music, and print media, and her practice borrows from numerous periods and contexts ranging from fin-de-siècle decadence and aestheticism, to gothic subcultures and disco. She also makes work both collaboratively and as a solo artist. For instance, *Meditation on Diana Ross* (2013) was a solo work in which she danced to Ross's song *Love Hangover* (1976) 108 times consecutively "as a form of active meditation in pursuit of a heightened awareness via disco delirium."[23] Her professional practice also carries over into a carefully composed and idiosyncratic sartorial style worn day to day. She once referred to this look, somewhat paradoxically, as "disco goth," but she now favors "Hollywood goth," a term that implies both glamour and salaciousness once Kenneth Anger's *Hollywood Babylon* (1965) is recognized as an influence.[24] However, this article focuses on her collaborative practice as an artist who nonetheless strives for and celebrates the vaunted position of "diva."

21. Hann, *Beyond Scenography*, 28.

22. Hann, *Beyond Scenography*, 28.

23. Documentation shared courtesy of the artist. For more on Denman's interest in club culture, see Oozing Gloop and Angel Rose, *The Serious Fun Funzine* (A. Rose and O. Gloop, 2014).

24. Angel Rose Denman, video call with the author, December 19, 2023.

The Green Carnation premiered in April 2012 at The Last Tuesday Society in London before film screenings and installations were shared between 2012 and 2023 at the Centre Pompidou in Paris; the Simon Oldfield Gallery, ICA, and British Film Institute in London; and at the Superchief Gallery in Los Angeles on the film's ten-year anniversary in 2022; as well as at Queen Mary University of London, as part of the Staging Decadence project in May 2023.[25] The film was directed by Denman in collaboration with Nikolia Galitzine. Denman also wrote the lyrics, acted as its central performer, and led on the scenography, although she was joined by a team of designers including Mika Jack Daniel Johnson (makeup) and the fashion designer Kim Denman (costume and styling), who is also Angel Rose Denman's mother and a collaborator on several of her early works.

The Green Carnation is as much an homage to Wilde as it is to a gaudy mode of imagining the 1970s, when the ambitions of countercultural youth movements and the early days of disco gave way to the excesses of their commercial iterations in popular culture. As it opens, a synthesized and super-slowed karaoke track for Ross's *Ain't No Mountain High Enough* (1970) accompanies the image of a hot-pink candle shot close up and set against magenta curtains.[26] Cross-fade to a table strewn with objects made to look haphazard, but clearly curated: cigarettes and a few red pills—possibly jelly beans—scattered here and there; a gilt-silver compact and a gilded carmine case; a crystal glass held in the fingers of an upturned mannequin's hand, gloved in white satin, fitting *just so*; an antique bottle of Russian Samovar vodka, empty; and a copy of an old, worn paperback with an image of Wilde on the front cover, Lewis Broad's *The Truth About Oscar Wilde* (1957), long out of print, and crowned with a dated epigraph: "His genius brought honour and success; his folly infamy and ruin."[27] Cut to a mass-produced poster of "Nina" by the painter and illustrator Gerritt Vandersyde, who died the same year that Ross's anthem was released. Vandersyde was a child of the fin de siècle who came to fame in the mid-twentieth century. We might understand him today as a pioneer of kitsch. Reproductions of his images could be purchased in Woolworths—long before that stalwart of the British high street was dissolved as a victim of the 2008 credit crunch.

This sets the scene for a vampish Denman, who reclines on a chaise longue dressed in black. Her face is painted green and is crowned with enormous black feathers, but due to the use of close-up in the opening moments we do not realize at first that her head is severed. It is not Iokanaan's head that is brought to Salome on a silver charger; in its place, a dandyish disciple presents the head of Salome on a fruit-laden dish. The doomed fate of a *femme fatale* is queered, presenting audiences not with a mute object—the severed head is a rare exception in "a play almost entirely devoid of stage props"[28]—but

25. Staging Decadence began as a two-year fellowship funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AH/T006994/1). The project has since developed into an ongoing platform for collaboration and dissemination. See www.stagingdecadence.com.

26. "Ain't No Mountain High Enough" was written by Nickolas Ashford and Valerie Simpson in 1966, and recorded as a single by Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell in 1967. Diana Ross covered the song in 1970.

27. Lewis Broad, *The Truth About Oscar Wilde* (Arrow, 1957).

28. Ellen Crowell, "The Ugly Things of *Salome*," in *Decadence in the Age of Modernism*, 51.

Still from *The Green Carnation* (2012) by Angel Rose Denman; courtesy the artist.

an all-singing, all-dancing diva. She sugarcoats rot. Those with decadent taste find sweetness in rot, and it is Salome who invites us to savor its flavor.

Denman narrates against Ross's backing track with increasingly impassioned declamations, addressing her audience in the second person: "You thrilled me / And filled me with fantastic terror I've never felt before / And I wondered / Would you stand beside me at death's door?" These lyrics are gothic kitsch. Indeed, the song begins with the opening lines of Poe's poem "The Raven" (1845): "Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary." However, unlike Poe's chilling poem, Denman's gothic kitsch shuttles from gleeful morbidity to Dionysian pleasure that languishes somewhere between sincerity and pastiche: "So come down with me / Deep into that darker place / And together we will find / Something even greater than mankind / Daughters of Babylon! / Sons of Sodom! / We reign this toilet earth!"[29] And down we go, joined by a genderqueer dandy (Josh Quinton, a regular collaborator) who seems to have been employed by Denman to wait upon her, but who also seems bored by the situation they find themselves in. They hold Denman's head aloft on its platter as her acolyte, but they labor queerly. It is as if they are unaware of what they are doing—indifferent, yawning occasionally, their mind elsewhere.

While strewn with evocative portents throughout, the death of Salome is given only a single stage direction at the end of Wilde's play: "*The soldiers rush forward and crush beneath their shields* SALOMÉ*, daughter of HERODIAS, Princess of Judaea*."[30] It is not the travesty of her murder, but the "dance of the seven veils" as a sensuous primer for her

29. "... this toilet earth" is a reference to a 1994 album of the same name by the shock-rock band Gwar. The lyrics in *The Green Carnation* also feature in another video created by Denman and Josh Quinton titled *Terrormisu!*, which premiered at the Last Tuesday Society in London in April 2012.

30. Oscar Wilde, *Salomé*, in *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, Vol. II: Plays* (Heron Books, 1966), 255.

necrophiliac encounter with Iokanaan that found infamy in Wilde's interpretation.[31] In contrast, Salome's having *survived* death is Denman's starting point in a parodic reimagining of Salome as a lurid but fabulous diva. She is green and a little rotten. Her decay is beautified, but she also calls the shots. In this, her approach aligns with feminist scholars who have engaged in radical readings of the relevance of decadence to feminist art practice in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. For instance, Julia Skelly's book *Radical Decadence: Excess in Contemporary Feminist Textiles and Craft* (2017) references but also revises tropes of "monstrosity" and the "grotesque" in feminist art practice and criticism, offering a more complex engagement with decadence as a resistant or subversive art of decay and excess that centers the contributions and concerns of women.[32] We might also add to this a more complex engagement with gender, too, by acknowledging more recent work by Skelly that focuses on work by trans artists.[33]

To borrow a phrase from Jack Halberstam, we might say that Denman's Salome has gone "gaga." She is "a maestro of media manipulation" attuned to a kind of feminism that celebrates "the joining of femininity to artifice," and that refuses "the mushy sentimentalism that has been siphoned into the category of womanhood."[34] I am mindful of the fact that Halberstam's book *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal* (2012), and Denman's *The Green Carnation*, were both published and released in 2012 when Lady Gaga was at the height of her superstardom. In Halberstam's reading of Lady Gaga, "there is some relation in her work between popular culture, feminine style, sound, and motion that hints at evolving forms of sex and gender at a moment when both are in crisis."[35] Much the same might be said of Denman's Salome. Both sit at the intersection between pop- and high-cultural experimentation; both appropriate figurations of monstrosity and the "diva"; and both delight in a play of surfaces, excess, and the cultivation of a sartorial style that refines that which others might regard as distasteful.

Salome has been read as a quintessential "idol of perversity."[36] Although *The Green Carnation* presents a hyperrefined aesthetic of decay that delights in looks and behaviors that may once have been considered transgressive and perverse, those looks and behaviors are no longer so. Instead, the film indulges the stylized *appearance* of taboo. Far from

31. For more on travesty as a negotiation of material draperies and gendered violence, see Heidi Brevik-Zender, "Undressing the Costume Drama: Catherine Breillat's *Une vieille maîtresse*," *Adaptation* 5, no. 2 (2012): 205.

32. Julia Skelly, *Radical Decadence: Excess in Contemporary Feminist Textiles and Craft* (Bloomsbury, 2017). For two of the most influential studies of monstrosity and the grotesque in feminist art and film see Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (Routledge, 1993); Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (Routledge, 1994). For a selection of essays exploring the contributions of women to decadence during the fin de siècle, see Katharina Herold and Leire Barrera-Medrano, eds., "Women Writing Decadence," *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies* 2, no. 1 (2019).

33. Julia Skelly, "Queer Decadence and Decadent Ecologies in Laurence Philomène's Photography," *Esse arts + opinions* 106 (2022): 82–85. See also Susan Stryker's groundbreaking work on transsexuality and monstrosity, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage," in *When Monsters Speak: A Susan Stryker Reader*, ed. McKenzie Wark (Duke University Press, 2024), 133–50.

34. J. Jack Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal* (Beacon Press, 2012), xii–xiii.

35. Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism*, xiii.

36. Bram Dijkstra, "Gold and the Virgin Whores of Babylon; Judith and Salome: The Priestesses of Man's Severed Head," in *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (Oxford University Press, 1986), 352–401.

Still from *The Green Carnation* (2012) by Angel Rose Denman; courtesy the artist.

limiting the film's decadent credentials, what we find here is a fascinating evocation of a culture's willingness to absorb "perversity" and "transgression." The film locates a dynamic of perversity and incorporation in a way that rejects the essentialist notion of a body that escapes enculturation.[37] Instead, the film's aesthetic no less than the politics of the film's scenography is all about surface and shine, witchy bedazzlement and shameless artifice. Denman's Salome peacocks in the face of her own redundant perversity. Her relationship to perversity is characterized not by shock but indifference. There is nothing shocking about *The Green Carnation*. Its aesthetic is characterized by a delightful glam that flirts with stylized morbidity.

One of the most striking scenographic features of Denman's *The Green Carnation* is the garish green face paint applied thickly over the whole of her face, aside from her painted crimson lips and fuchsia eye shadow. Most obviously the green face paint is a reference to the carnation that has become so closely associated with Wilde. Wilde's green carnation was the consequence not of nature, but aniline dye.[38] It was a celebration of beautiful artifice, which begins to hint at the "decadence" of the color green. Yellow gave its name to a publication and period that became synonymous with decadence in fin-de-siècle Britain—*The Yellow Book* and the 1890s, or "yellow '90s"—but green represents decadence just as well. Green is the color of absinthe and *l'heure verte*, and of molds and mildew, of sickness and phlegm. Green is the color of "a negative yet natural process," as Denisoff suggests, but "natural" in the decadent sense: inflected by the allure

37. See Jonathan Dollimore's notion of the "perverse dynamic." For Dollimore, the naming of perversity "inheres within, and is partly produced by, what it oppresses." Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2018), 63–64.

38. See Charles Nelson, "'Beautiful Untrue Things': Green Carnations and the Art of Dyeing," *The Wildean*, 48 (2016): 96.

of what Paul Bourget calls "the phosphorescence of decay."[39] Théophile Gautier recognized something of this phosphorescence in the writing of Charles Baudelaire, which he described as "language of the later Roman Empire, already mottled with the green hues of decomposition and a little gamy,"[40] and Wilde's essay "Pen, Pencil and Poison" (1891) is subtitled "A Study in Green" (and was inspired by the English artist, dandy, and suspected serial killer Thomas Griffiths Wainewright, who is purported to have poisoned his victims).[41] For Wilde, green "is always the sign of a subtle artistic temperament"—even while the personalities and artworks that derive from that temperament might tend toward audacity, or in Wainewright's case, depravity—"and in nations is said to denote a laxity, if not a decadence of morals."[42]

As Charlotte Ribeyrol notes in an article on the colors of decadence:

> The term "greenness" (*verdeurs*) in its plural form may have had a particular appeal to decadent authors because it suggests both the energy of youth . . . and the discoloration brought about by disease or the "ravaging" process of maturation. The choice of the color green is equally revealing in that the hue was always a *couleur maudite*, a color of subversion and disorder long shunned by dyers for its chemical instability.[43]

After Wilde's incarceration for "gross indecency" in 1895, a green carnation worn in a buttonhole came to signify homosexuality. Johnson's makeup design for Denman references this queerness, but it also brings the color much closer to the body by applying paint liberally on the skin. This gives her a goblin- or witch-like appearance that embodies the subversiveness of a *couleur maudite* or "cursed color." Faces should not look like this. The face we are presented with is out of place and out of sync with what we expect to appear, with the hint, or threat, that "a decadence of morals" might just seduce us into thinking and doing and being like Denman. However, the power of the makeup design is not that it *does* signify moral corruption or degeneracy, but rather that it calls into question how morality, "good" taste, and "appropriate" appearance come to be established and recognized as such. Denman appears sexy and extravagant, but she also embodies decline as a diva who is both glamorous and gangrenous. It is the bringing together of sexy glamour and moldy decay that appeals to a decadent sensibility.

Denman might be green and a little gamy, but she is also *fabulous*. She evinces what Baudelaire, in his essay "The Painter of Modern Life" (1863), describes "as a sublime deformation of nature," and in her embrace of glamour in decline she captures something

39. Dennis Denisoff, *Decadent Ecology in British Literature and Art, 1860–1910: Decay, Desire, and the Pagan Revival* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), 9. Denisoff is quoting Paul Bourget. See Paul Bourget, *Essais de psychologie contemporaine*, trans. Dennis Denisoff (Plon-Nourrit, 1908 [1878]), 19.

40. Théophile Gautier, "Charles Baudelaire," trans. Chris Baldick, in *Decadence: An annotated anthology*, ed. Jane Desmarais and Chris Baldick (Manchester University Press, 2012), 80.

41. Oscar Wilde, "Pen, Pencil and Poison: A Study in Green," *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, Vol. III: Poems, Essays and Letters* (Heron Books, 1966), 285–300.

42. Wilde, "Pen, Pencil and Poison," 288.

43. Charlotte Ribeyrol, "*Verdeurs*: Oscar Wilde, Dorian Gray, and the Colors of Decadence," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 49, no. 4 (2021), 754.

of Baudelaire's praise of the "magical and supernatural" power of cosmetics.[44] But where Baudelaire was making a case for the ephemerality of fashion and rapidly evolving aesthetic tastes in the modern period, Denman's intertextual approach to dramaturgy and scenography pulls together various anachronisms: 1890s drama, 1970s disco, twentieth-century divas, and a twenty-first-century dandy. She freezes ephemerality in an idiosyncratic sartorial style. *The Green Carnation* is both of the moment and behind the times. Also, where Baudelaire's praise of cosmetics objectifies female adornment in the context of a project advocating for the ephemerality of modern life, pitching "artificial" beauty as superior to "savage" nature, Denman hyperbolizes how "a sublime deformation of nature" might be understood. Denman's green makeup is significant not only because of its apparent investment in Baudelaire's decadent championing of adornment; it is significant because it also undermines Baudelaire's eulogizing of an artificially beautified feminine "ideal." Denman and Johnson do not champion cosmetic beauty in this film; they delight in the refinement of gaminess.

Kim Denman's costume design also plays a central role in defining the aesthetic, not least in the styling of Quinton as the film's exquisitely garmented dandy. They wear a close-fitting turquoise doublet (this was actually a garment that Quinton brought with them onto set), cuffs trimmed with frilled white lace and adorned with an enormous diamante brooch in the shape of a peacock. White filigreed tights protrude from knee-length purple leggings. Their fingernails are painted pink, blue, and green—an homage, I later learned, to the delightfully garish and kitsch Madonna Inn in San Luis Obispo, California[45]—and a large ring to match the brooch crowns their finger. They wear a black wig that they preen in front of the camera, the lens serving as a surrogate mirror. They yawn throughout.

To describe this dandy as "effeminate"—or even as a dandy—risks misinterpreting just who or what this figure represents. As Elizabeth Wilson points out, "dandyism is sometimes misunderstood to refer to overdressed effeminacy—and in the eighteenth century the 'Macaronis' had been fops whose dress had been an exaggeration of frills and brocade, powder and paint."[46] Macaronis embodied excess in the eyes of their critics in eighteenth-century Britain: sartorial style characterized by excessive ornamentation; narcissistic preoccupation with the self and self-presentation; effeminacy; and homosexuality. They were too much: too much concerned with image, artifice, sensation, and sensationalism, and too little concerned with propriety. Dandies in the nineteenth century were different. Dandies were also highly focused on appearance and especially sartorial style, but where fops had a Baroque interest in filigree and ornamentation, dandies were preoccupied with fit and the quality of a well-composed garment. Where fops celebrated overstatement, dandies valued ultrarefined understatement. Foppish behavior was conspicuous, whereas dandies cultivated the appearance of indifference. However, as

44. Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. Jonathan Mayne (De Capo Press, 1964), 33.

45. Angel Rose Denman, interview with the author, London, January 11, 2024.

46. Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (University of California Press, 1985), 180.

Wilson suggests, "the blasé pose was of course arresting. There was both revolt and classic chic in the dandy style."[47] The dandy was at once revolutionary and reactionary, heroic and indifferent, both "of" and "against" modernity in their sartorial fashioning of the self. No wonder both Beardsley and Wilde were drawn to dandyism; it rendered life as an artwork in ways that were both thoroughly modern and anachronistic. Read alongside their denigration as a symptom of modernity's debilitating impact on an overrefined civilization, it is also no wonder that the dandy has come to be seen as the embodiment of decadence *par excellence*. The irony is that the productivity of artists and writers like Beardsley and Wilde undercut their identification as a dandy, for the "true" dandy did nothing. Dandies threatened productivity, save for the extent to which they invested time and effort in the stylized crafting of the self.

While Quinton's dandy might *look* like a fop in the sense outlined by Wilson, they *act* like a dandy. Their clothes imply pep, their behavior ennui. This is what characterizes their queerness, where "queerness" is understood as a disruption of singular identities that opens out to a plurality of desires that might not always be neatly compatible with one another,[48] and that might be out of sync with the tempos and demands of normative forms of productivity and reproductivity. Quinton's dandy stylizes a queerly incongruous look, a clash of opposites that is in fact carefully crafted. They threaten productivity through their indifference and languor. After all it is Angel Rose Denman who wrote and led the scenography for the film in collaboration with Kim Denman, Galitzine, and Johnson. Quinton performs as if they have turned up without knowing what to do, going along for the ride without fully committing to anything other than a captivating performance of listlessness. In this, they refuse homonormativity, of being the good gay who adheres to the legitimizing function of a "productive working body."[49] They perform servitude *excessively* poorly, and take on something of the decadent sensibility articulated by Kirsten MacLeod. They replace professionalism with a studious embrace of the dilettante, a *refined* dilettantism that withholds the full extent of their capabilities.[50] Their decadent taste makes dilettantism an art.

Alongside Johnson as makeup designer and her mother as stylist, Denman led on the art direction and scenographic composition of the piece. The table adorned with those eclectic objects that open the film imply that we have entered the boudoir of her Salomanian diva: the book, a stylized image of herself, a glove, a carmine cylinder perhaps encasing some rare powder or incense, alcohol, pills, cigarettes. . . . And yet, placed as they are—deliberately and meticulously—they also give the impression of a museum display. This is a world of relics and ephemeral things that make peace with redundancy and anachronism. Denman's decadent scenography finds treasure in obsolescence, holding on

47. Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*, 182.

48. See Fintan Walsh, *Performing the Queer Past: Public Possessions* (Bloomsbury, 2023), 9, and Amelia Jones, *In Between Subjects: A Critical Genealogy of Queer Performance* (Routledge, 2021), xvi.

49. Dan Irving, "Normalized Transgressions: Legitimizing the Transsexual Body as Productive," in *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, ed. Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura (Routledge, 2013), 16–17.

50. Kirsten MacLeod, *Fictions of British Decadence: High Art, Popular Writing, and the* Fin de Siècle (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 29.

to a temporal moment that the very ideas of fashion and modernity forever strive to surpass. (For William Hazlitt, in typically snooty style: "fashion lives only in a perpetual round of giddy innovation and restless vanity."[51])

The strange untimeliness of Denman's decadent scenography gives it a recalcitrant quality in which the past disrupts the present. By aestheticizing glamour from another time in this way, the thrust of modernity and the fashions that reside at its cutting edge, and which so often seem to contradict modernity as a project, reveal how the appeal and excitement of the new is always haunted by the prospect of loss. Denman, as the severed head of Salome, might at first glance seem to embody Walter Benjamin's assertion that fashion is "the parody of the decked-out corpse, the provocation of death through the woman, and (in between noisy, canned slogans) the bitter, whispered *tête-à-tête* with decay,"[52] but *through* her recalcitrance, her backward glance, her penchant for anachronism, spatialized and materialized in the environment that surrounds her, she emerges as a subject who curates and delights in the "artifice" and "transience" that adorns her. She has made peace with modern antiquity: those inevitable ruins that form the necessary underside of innovation and "progress."

DECADENT DOMESTICITY IN *THE ROSE*: STYLING THE SELF, QUEERING THE FAMILY

Two years after making *The Green Carnation*, Denman created a new piece, *The Rose*, which draws together her stylistic interest in decadence and Gothicism more explicitly. *The Rose* is actually a title given to two separate films that were made in quick succession. The first was presented at the British Film Institute in London in January 2014 as part of a Study Day exploring "Gothic Style." The film is based around one of Denman's poems and ruminates on the significance of the rose as a floral namesake. However, it is the second version of *The Rose* that pulls focus in this section, and to which all subsequent references refer.

The Rose (version II) premiered as part of the festival A Shaded View on Fashion Film, which was held at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in November 2014. Although it was directed by Sam Stringer, the creative vision is Denman's, with costume design (as on *The Green Carnation*) by Kim Denman. Its aesthetic is reminiscent of films made by Anger and by Jack Smith in the mid-twentieth century, particularly Anger's *Puce Moment* (1949) and Smith's *Normal Love* (1963–65). Like Smith's films, *The Rose* seems already to be antiquated at the time of production, the film medium appearing faded and worn—sepia-like—and with its different environments populated as if at the hands of a kleptomaniac with a penchant for fabricated luxury, costume jewelry, and junk shop discoveries that might once have been useful (vases, ornate boxes) but that now appear shorn of all use, as spectacularly decorative. These environments and the objects within them are at once the product of an aristocratic, gothic, and bohemian eclecticism: obsolete, and yet reveling in the delightful sensuousness of once useful things.

51. William Hazlitt, "On Fashion," in *Selected Writings*, ed. Jon Cook (Oxford University Press, 1991), 149.
52. Walter Benjamin cited in Evans, *Fashion at the Edge*, 136.

Still from *The Rose* (2014) by Angel Rose Denman; courtesy the artist.

The film begins with a clothbound copy of Ralph Nevill's *The World of Fashion: 1837–1922* (1923) resting open across the cheek of Denman as she reclines on a salmon pink chaise longue in rococo style, her gloved hand, clad in a pink leather glove, pressed loosely against its spine. Faded lens glare floats across the screen like smoke. Her face is powdered white, her eyes shaded with a deep black, and her lips, as ever, are painted crimson. She wears a black choker about her neck, a pendant dangling beneath it depicting an angular black spider. The scene cuts to the face of a figure wearing a Venetian carnival mask, heavily ornamented with golden rococo swirls and curls, and studded with sparkling diamanté. We see a close-up of a table with a pastel green telephone—the old-fashioned rotary kind—alongside a lamp dripping with clear glass beads. The camera shifts from scene to scene, table to table, face to face, in similar fashion throughout, with many objects familiar from *The Green Carnation* (Broad's *The Truth About Oscar Wilde*, perfume bottles, the gilded case) and some that seem both incongruous and yet completely at home in this world (a Bryan Ferry EP, a signed photo of Marlene Dietrich, a menagerie of taxidermy birds, an anemic mannequin with its face painted a greenish-blue and wearing a black fur hat and coat).

The people in the film initially appear on their own, and seem to be in a state residing somewhere between flirtation and ennui, but as the film progresses they do so in strange pairings and finally a trio: their genders often undistinguishable or ambiguous, their gazes distant, their dress either gothic with filigreed beading and stitching and elaborate feathered headdresses or wigs, or draped in finessed turquoise dresses with black satin gloves. This is where the relevance of Anger's *Puce Moment* shines through most strongly. As with Anger's film, as well as Baudelaire's writing on bodily ornamentation,[53]

53. Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," in *The Painter of Modern Life*, 33.

Still from *The Rose* (2014) by Angel Rose Denman; courtesy the artist; image by Emily Rose England.

the dressed body is valued above its fleshiness. But where we might read a misogynistic thread running through Baudelaire's writing on cosmetics and the adornment of "woman," Denman and her dandy kin work with artifice in unconventional ways that reject standardized models of beauty in favor of more unusual and idiosyncratic forms of expression. In terms advanced by Catherine Spooner, theirs is a "decadent fashion . . . whereby sartorial expression is used to make oneself into a work of art."[54] These are fabricated bodies expressing meticulously stylized identities, in which the decorative, as Potvin recognizes, "operates as a formidable and inevitable ingredient in the subject's agency."[55] They are subsumed by decor, but they also insert themselves into each scene not as objects but subjects in charge of their appearance.

Together, the menagerie of bodies and objects in *The Rose* coalesce into what Potvin describes as an "ensemble": not simply a set of furnishings and people, but an assembly that "constructs the illusion of a complete, whole image, an entire designed lifestyle."[56] Potvin is describing here how the 1920s "deco dandy" approached the arrangement of sartorial looks and interior design, in which the dressing of bodies and spaces form a cohesive whole that is more than the sum of its parts. He is also describing a period in history when the dandy, "unlike his forefathers" in the Belle Époque, were "at once

54. Catherine Spooner, "Fashion: Decadent Stylings," in *The Oxford Handbook of Decadence*, 417. Contrast this with Roland Barthes's lauding of the "healthy" functionality of costume. Roland Barthes, "The Diseases of Costume," in *Theatre and Performance Design: A Reader in Scenography*, ed. Jane Collins and Andrew Nisbet (Routledge, 2010), 204–10.

55. Potvin, "The velvet masquerade," 12–13.

56. John Potvin, *Deco Dandy: Designing Masculinity in 1920s Paris* (Manchester University Press, 2020), 11.

fashionable and fit. This was a dandy reimagined by war, eager to shed any negative associations of the previous century," including decadence, effeminacy, excess, and listlessness.[57] In contrast, the dandies in Denman's scenographic constellations seem to have turned their backs on the rigors of athleticism. They are entirely without pep and vigor. Her scenographic arrangements are also retrograde. In place of tact and moderation, the terms of their coherence are ambivalent: meticulous and calculated, on the one hand, and associated with a theme—decadence—that is more readily associated with excess and decomposition, on the other.

The decadence of Denman's scenography in *The Rose* has less to do with the dressing of bodies and spaces *per se*, than it does with how particular scenographic arrangements intervene within a domestic environment. For instance, toward the end of the film, Denman rests on the arm of a black and gold cabriole sofa flanked by two half-dressed goth-chic and dandyish accomplices who languish on settees on either side of the screen. They preside over a gigantic array of flowers as if attending a wake; white pillar candles protruding prominently; and effigies of John the Baptist, Jesus, and the Virgin Mary looming over them. What we find in this scene is a depiction of queer family: a gathering of three people in a domestic setting, albeit an unconventional one, reclining as though they have known one another all their lives. This queer family also extends to the Catholic effigies behind them (a religion to which decadence and kink alike owe a great debt). Denman and the dandies appear *with* these effigies. They are equally motionless, equally sanctified, as if they, too, have become ornamental.

We might read this interior and their presence within it not merely as a "reflection" of the self in space, but as a process of "reflecting" on what it means to be present in and with a stylized interior. I am borrowing the distinction between narcissistic "reflection" and critical "reflecting" from Michael Hatt,[58] but where Hatt considers the design and crafting of the "House Beautiful"—Wilde's library at 16 Tite Street in Chelsea, designed by Edward William Godwin, is one of the examples he considers—it is more accurate to say that Denman and her collaborators *adapt* the domestic interior. They intervene within it by modulating its scenography as "a queer project of reimagining life worlds," to borrow from Halberstam.[59] This is not the lifeworld of a familiar domestic scene; it is a kind of domesticity that displaces the homonormative family unit, piecing together alternative modalities of dwelling and relationality in its place.

This is an important distinction as the house in which they reside was once the home of Denman's parents in Hastings on the south coast of England. It was designed in Gothic Revival style by the Regency architects James and Decimus Burton, with interior decor stylized lovingly by her parents: Denman's collaborator-mother Kim Denman, and father Paul Denman, the bassist with the influential sophisti-pop band Sade.[60] Cornicing crafted from molded plaster and fireplaces made from sandstone meet the eye as

57. Potvin, *Deco Dandy*, 13.

58. Michael Hatt, "Space, Surface, Self: Homosexuality and the Aesthetic Interior," *Visual Culture in Britain* 8, no. 1 (2007), 125–26.

59. Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism*, 125.

60. See "Gothic Glamour," in *Wealden Times: The lifestyle magazine for Kent & Sussex*, 2018, 82–107.

Still from *The Rose* (2014) by Angel Rose Denman; courtesy the artist; image by Emily Rose England.

permanent fixtures, and yet they are imitation, as are the flowers draped over tables or sprouting from vases. The house is crafted in decadent style, if we are to understand decadent style in terms of "improbable juxtapositions": "elaborate, highly artificial, highly ornamented," and filled with "sumptuous exoticism" capable of arousing "exquisite sensations."[61] Ellis Hanson is describing literary style in this quote, but, as Jessica Gossling recognizes, the same could be applied to interior design. Gossling also locates the roots of decadent design in the gothic, citing the crumbling house in Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1839) and the color-themed rooms in *The Masque of the Red Death* (1842) as examples.[62] Each room is maximalist, eclectic, and also reminiscent of the decadent poet Gabriele D'Annunzio's palatial home-cum-artwork Vittoriale degli Italiani on Lake Garda in Italy. A reproduction of Giovanni Boldini's *Marchesa Luisa Casati with a Greyhound* (1908) hangs by the fireplace, Casati being one of D'Annunzio's most eccentric and extravagant lovers, and the figure most revered by Robert de Montesquiou, who was synonymous with decadent dandyism during the fin de siècle.[63]

The fact that at the time of filming this really was a domestic space inhabited by parents and an itinerant daughter should perhaps undercut the extent to which we might read *The Rose* as a film exploring queer domestic relations. Nonetheless, the design of

61. Ellis Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism* (Harvard University Press, 1997), 2.

62. See Jessica Gossling, "Interior Decoration: Designing Decadence," in *The Oxford Handbook of Decadence*, 442–43. See also Edgar Allan Poe, "The Philosophy of Furniture," *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine* VI, no. 5 (1840), 243.

63. Christopher Bedford, "Maurice de Rothschild's 'Remembrances of Things Past:' Costume Obsession and Decadence, the Collection of a *Belle Époque* Dandy," in *The Places and Spaces of Fashion, 1800–2007*, ed. John Potvin (Routledge, 2009), 81.

these rooms, and their repopulation with characters who delight in their ambiguous gendering, does still lend this work to consideration of alternative and ambiguous familial relationality. These characters take charge of their own self-formation, underpinned by artifice and pose. As Denisoff suggests, "artifice and pose have frequently been presented as decadent phenomena" because of the challenge they pose to ideas of naturalness and essence.[64] In Denman's queering of familial relations, and in line with Denisoff's argument, there is no binary opposition between identity and pose so much as a jettisoning of the logic that gives credence to such binaries in the first place. Identity formation is the product of self-stylization.

The objects in each environment invite the viewer to imagine their textures, their weight, and their smells. They embrace the eye and feel as though they might reach out and touch us: satins, velvets, gauze, glass, shiny plastic phones, a taxidermy crow, the pointed skull of an antelope affixed to the wall by a bed draped with heavy folds of curtain and tassels. They present what film theorist Vivian Sobchack aptly describes as "the carnal foundations of cinematic intelligibility," foundations that enable us as viewers to both "touch and be touched by the substance and texture of images; to feel a visual atmosphere envelop us."[65] In this context, the "visual atmosphere" in which the viewer is enveloped is more precisely a *decadent* atmosphere aroused by scenography: at once seductive and artful, but also tinged with death. The scenographic constellation of elements with which Denman and her family work is "decadent"—evocative hues, a faded medium, once useful objects that have forgotten their use, objects that invite delight in their static and beautiful redundancy—and it is this decadence that we, as viewers, are invited to touch and be touched by.

The objects in each environment are not folded into cycles of renewal and replenishment. Capital does not move in this space. This is where capital comes to die, and Denman finds a peculiar fascination and pleasure in that morbidity. But this place is also home to hoarders who reject the cult of the new in favor of the antiquated, the discarded, and the forgotten—which is a privileged position to be in. Her parents are working class, but they made their fortune in the cultural industries. They have chosen this way of life.

Denman's embrace of opulence is therefore of a very different ilk to the kind vaunted in *Paris is Burning* (1990), Jennie Livingston's influential documentary about the drag ball scene in New York City in the 1980s, in which emcee Junior LaBeija declares the immortal line: "Opulence: you own *everything*!" As Pepper LaBeija points out in the same documentary: "a lot of those kids that are in the balls, they don't have two of nothing."[66] The glamour they embrace and embody as disenfranchised African American and Latinx queens casts "a *spell* of opulence—a representational device utilising illusion" in accordance with the more archaic sense of glamour as *gramarye*, or magic, to borrow

64. Dennis Denisoff, "Posing a Threat: Queensberry, Wilde, and the Portrayal of Decadence," in *Perennial Decay*, 98.

65. Vivian Sobchack, "What My Fingers Knew: The Cinesthetic Subject, or Vision in the Flesh," in *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (University of California Press, 2004), 59, 65.

66. *Paris is Burning* (1990) by Jennie Livingston; Off White Productions / Academy Entertainment. DVD.

from essayist and DJ Terre Thaemlitz.[67] The house in *The Rose*, in contrast, is filled with things. There is a different relationship to capital going on compared with the queer Black and Latinx subjects in *Paris is Burning*, who dedicate their skill and limited resource to the crafting of a garment or look.

The importance of disco in drag ball scenes should also prompt reflection on Denman's idealization of the diva, particularly her embrace of Diana Ross. Disco began as an eclectic genre in lofts and underground clubs that welcomed Black and Latinx queers from 1970 onward, with roots stretching back through the 1960s, although by the end of the 1970s both highbrow critics and conservative commentators were deriding disco as "decadent." A white cultural elite set their sights on disco's complicity with a degenerating culture industry. Alongside this, as William Rees points out, conservative journalists and broadcasters regarded disco as a "symptom of cultural decline, exhibiting artificiality and moral decay; it was decadence in the pejorative sense," too tainted with sexual promiscuity, and ultimately giving rise to the derogatory slur "Disco Sucks!"[68] The reclamation of opulence in the drag balls of the 1980s and '90s was therefore a particularly meaningful attempt to salvage queer-of-color nightlife from the dustbin of history.

Consideration of decadence and opulence as bases for a queer and/or subversive aesthetic therefore needs to account for the material contexts that shape access to their riches, although this does not bar the prospect of compelling alliances. Denman's reclamation of decadence does not consider the "fatal collision"[69] of queerness and Blackness, but it remains committed to celebrating the work of Black icons of the disco scene, especially Ross, as well as a queerly feminist politics that salvages the subversive bite of decadence from its hegemonic use as a pejorative. We might therefore find synergies and allegiances across different manifestations of decadence in ways that set them against disparaging slurs that condemn gendered and sexual dissidence alongside arts of subversion.

Denman's seemingly frivolous film also invites us to think about what the significance of uselessness and obsolescence might be in a society that values use, growth, and intensified productivity above all else. Her rejection of use and instrumentality, alongside her staging of a delightful resistance to intensified productivity and the uncommon valuing of that which is deemed obsolete in the societal context of a fast-paced cycle of production and consumption, are all part and parcel of what makes this film compelling. Furthermore, most of the things in this home are not priceless commodities, but junk shop discoveries. Both *Paris is Burning* and *The Rose*, albeit in very different ways, invite us to challenge assumptions that connect decadence to the spectacular display of luxury. As Denman puts it, decadence "is about *luxuriating*, rather than luxury,"[70] which

67. Terre Thaemlitz, "Viva McGlam? Is Transgenderism a Critique of or Capitulation to Opulence-Driven Glamour Models?," Comatonse, 2004, www.comatonse.com/writings/vivamcglam.html.

68. William Rees, "'Le Freak, c'est Chic:' Decadence and Disco," *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies* 3, no. 2 (2020): 131. See also Adam Alston, "Dancing Decadence: Disco-mania," *Staging Decadence Blog*, March 23, 2023, www.stagingdecadence.com/blog/disco-mania.

69. Calvin Warren, "Onticide: Afro-pessimism, Gay Nigger #1, and Surplus Violence," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 23, no. 3 (2017): 393.

70. Angel Rose Denman, interview with the author, London, January 11, 2024.

makes the accumulation of a mass of things a subsidiary or unnecessary facet of a decadent sensibility. Physical things help to "score" decadent scenography, but the kind of thing in question has more to do with a curatorial disposition or taste that makes peace with junk shops as much as with treasure salvaged from the street, or whatever else might be available or sought out by unconventional or illicit means.

What makes *The Rose* "decadent," then, are the peculiar arrangements of incongruous bodies and things—its scenographic orientations—and particularly the undoing of hierarchies that order bodies and things: religion; the patriarchal family unit; heteronormativity; binary gender; bourgeois taste and aesthetic sensibility; and the prizing of the natural over the composed, stylized, and artificial.[71] In this, the decadence of Denman's scenography resonates with how Hann articulates the terrain of the "scenographic": an expanded reading of scenography that considers the intersection between different constellations of elements, or "assemblages," which includes both material environments and the construction of various aspects of identity, including gender. For Hann, scenographics are always plural and they are, above all else, orienting practices.[72]

Decadent scenography is more specifically a practice of disorientation or reorientation. It is the consequence of a self-fashioned, self-determined order that deliberately falls away from established tastes and commonplace forms of presentation and behavior. This understanding of decadent scenography builds on a reading of decadence that acknowledges the importance of materiality in fabricating identities and orienting proclivities, while at the same time uncoupling decadence from the necessity of its being linked to the ownership of specific things. Understood in this way, decadent scenography has as much to offer to how we understand Denman's experimental films as it does to the self-stylized looks in the House of LaBeija—and indeed the invitation to continue exploring decadence in this more capacious way remains my hope for those reading this article who might harbor such an interest.

CONCLUSION

The Green Carnation draws inspiration from decadent aesthetics and literary preoccupations that were articulated and explored in the 1890s, particularly the work of Oscar Wilde, but it also situates that context alongside many others that have little to do with it. The film invites us to acknowledge the European fin de siècle as a formative context for the decadent imagination, but it also invites us to reflect on the significant amount of time that has passed since then, and how that passing should be factored into how we identify, analyze, and evaluate decadence in the twenty-first century. *The Green Carnation* is not just an homage to Wilde; it is a love letter to divas, broadly conceived, and to twentieth- and twenty-first-century pop culture, Gothicism, and kitsch. The Victorian period therefore serves as an illuminating context for identifying and understanding

71. Juliane Rebentisch's writing on "camp materialism" explores a similar perspective. See Juliane Rebentisch, "Camp Materialism," *Criticism* 56, no. 2 (2014): 241–42.

72. Rachel Hann, "Gender-Assemblages: The Scenographics of Sin Wai Kin," in *Analysing Gender in Performance*, ed. J. Paul Halferty and Cathy Leeney (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 295.

decadence, but it is not the only one. Decadence metamorphoses in ways that become increasingly distant from Victorian progenitors—to the point, in fact, where the influence of Victoriana is difficult to discern aside from a few esoteric references.

The Rose continues Denman's eclectic historical scavenging and includes some familiar elements—nods to Wilde and the diva, preoccupation with morbidity and Gothicism—but it also shifts the focus more firmly toward the sensual presence and relationships between objects and bodies in space. Those who collaborate with Denman in her films work with artifice and curatorial practice to fashion forms of expression that fabricate and communicate identity while at the same time adapting a meticulously crafted context for understanding that fabrication. The people who appear in *The Rose* present a queer family that cherishes that which fails to keep up. Domestic space is reimagined along with familial ties, and peculiar arrangements of bodies and things become imbued with unconventional beauty. The apathy and despondency of those within this space would not seem to equip them well for involvement in perpetual and exhausting productivity. Equally, what emerges through this film is not the abandonment of purpose or creativity, but rather an abundantly excessive commitment to worldmaking, which is as relevant to the upwardly mobile as it is to disenfranchised publics forced to make do with the scavenged, salvaged, or appropriated.

The politics of Denman's decadent scenography is rooted not in the unconventional bodies and things found in each of these environments, but in their arrangement. It is the consequence of decadent taste: refined and idiosyncratic. A work might look like the lap of luxury, but there is no essential connection between decadence and the wealth implied in having access to a particular kind of object. Fabricating an artificial paradise that we might recognize as "decadent" is first and foremost an art of relationality, more than it is an art of materiality. It is an art to be found in how looking and feeling are guided and shaped.

Denman's decadent scenography invites reflection on how instrumentalism and functionality feed into one's own relationship to productivity and consumerism, creating and repurposing, as well as their impact on desire, sociality, and creativity. Its decadence stems from the unusual positionality of things and bodies in relation to one another, inviting us to understand creativity as an act of reorientation or disorientation: celebrating filigree over function, embracing the obsolete and antiquated, and disrupting or reimaging propriety, social units, and the conventions that establish what counts as "productive" or "valuable." These are the hallmarks of decadent aesthetics, but they are also the hallmarks of a decadent scenography that finds pleasure in the redundancy of its own aesthetic: not modern and yet not modern enough, a product of the twenty-first century and yet ill-fitted to it, and for those reasons all the more appealing as a challenge to the prevailing winds of taste, propriety, and progress. ■

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