

What Ever Happened to Babylon? Queer Aesthetics of Cinematic Decadence in
Grande Dame Guignol Cinema

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ABSTRACT

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Appearing amidst the decline of the Hollywood studio system in the 1960s, the Grande Dame Guignol cycle of horror films reimagine the history and aesthetics of classical Hollywood through the lens of decadence. Casting some of the most iconic stars of the studio system in roles that self-reflexively engage with their star personae to reimagine their glamor in terms of the grotesque, these works recall similar combinations of beauty, decay, and queer eroticism found throughout the canon of *fin-de-siècle* decadent literature.

While critical accounts of decadence tend to foreground its relation to literary modernism, this thesis instead applies this term towards cinema. Defining cinematic decadence as an aesthetic sensibility distinct from – although closely related to – its manifestation in *fin-de-siècle* literature, this term provides a valuable theoretical context to reconsider representations of queerness, temporality, embodiment, history, and misogyny within classical Hollywood cinema. Further, this cinematic decadence suggests a novel way to conceptualize the problematic but distinctly queer presentation of stardom and femininity offered by the monstrous women of the Grande Dame Guignol cycle, through four films: *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (Robert Aldrich, 1962); *Hush... Hush, Sweet Charlotte* (Robert Aldrich, 1964); *Strait-Jacket* (William Castle, 1964); and *What's the Matter With Helen?* (Curtis Harrington, 1971).

Like the texts of literary decadence at the turn of the 20th century, these works of cinematic decadence invite queer forms of subjectivity as they undermine the exclusionary, heteronormative discourses of modernity. Ultimately, this project seeks to define the sensibility of decadence as a distinct method of queering dominant culture, and to determine its largely unexplored relationship to the medium of cinema.

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The land transfigured into topographic codes.
Maps show you what is simple and true.
Try laying out a bird's eye view.
Not what he told you, just what you see.
What do you know that's not your dad's mythology?

- "Maps," from *Fun Home*, lyrics by Lisa Kron

Introduction: Locating Cinematic Decadence

And there it stood for years, stranded like some gargantuan dream beside Sunset Boulevard. Long after [...] Belshazzar's court had sprouted weeds and its walls had begun to peel and warp in abandoned movie-set disarray; after the Los Angeles Fire Department had condemned it as a hazard, still it stood: Griffith's Babylon, something of a reproach and something of a challenge to the burgeoning movie town – something to surpass, and something to live down.¹

Excerpted from the opening chapter of *Hollywood Babylon* (1975),² experimental filmmaker Kenneth Anger's infamous collection of Hollywood gossip, this passage conceives of the ornate Babylon set constructed for D.W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916) as an emblem of classical Hollywood's decadence.³ Imagining the set as it is left to rot in the decades following the release of Griffith's film, Anger frames its excess as less a marker of Hollywood's myth-making grandeur than an omen of this system's inevitable decline. As such, this image provides an appropriate introduction to Anger's book, which eschews the familiar, curated glamour generally associated with Hollywood's notable personalities in favour of their (often entirely imagined) sexual exploits, humiliations, and strange deaths.⁴ Progressing from the controversies surrounding silent-era figures like William Desmond Taylor and 'Fatty' Arbuckle towards Lana Turner, Jayne Mansfield, and other late-studio era figures, *Hollywood Babylon* purports to offer a comprehensive account of classical Hollywood's rise and fall through a chronological retelling of its scandals. Given its first publication in 1959, amidst the ongoing decline of the Hollywood studio system, Anger's book can be understood as a retrospective reimagination of this system's

¹ Kenneth Anger, *Hollywood Babylon*, rev. ed. (New York: Dell Publishing, 1975), 6.

² There have been three major iterations of *Hollywood Babylon* throughout its convoluted publication history: the original text published in France in 1959; the unofficial translated version published in the United States in 1965 (banned from publication after 10 days); and the expanded, official text published in the United States in 1975. The 1975 version remains the most widely available and is quoted throughout this thesis. R.L. Cagle, *Scorpio Rising: A Queer Film Classic* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2019), 130-133.

³ Anger's choice of Griffith to denote Hollywood's mythic height is deeply problematic, especially given that *Intolerance* was the filmmaker's follow-up to his celebration of the Ku Klux Klan, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). Anger (who once joked that his views on race were "somewhat to the right of the KKK") does not engage with this history in any way. Bill Landis, *Anger: The Unauthorized Biography of Kenneth Anger* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995), 50.

⁴ For a fact-based alternative to Anger's myth-making, see Petersen (2013) as well as film historian Karina Longworth's podcast *You Must Remember This* (2014-).

mythology, displacing Hollywood's conventional role as a site of aspirational success through its focus on immorality and decay.

One of the first words to come to mind when describing Anger's reimagination of Hollywood iconography is "decadence" – especially given this word's colloquial association, as described by decadence scholar Vincent Sherry, "with notorious characters and scandalous behaviors, which are often more than slightly tinted with the sepia of a former age."⁵ However, the affinity between Anger's text and the aesthetic of decadence is more complex than a mere shared interest in excess and decline. Sherry goes on to describe decadence as a particular understanding of history, marked by "the perception of the pastness of the present [and a sense of] perennial afterwardness."⁶ While Sherry notes that this "feeling of a declining afterward" can be identified at numerous points throughout global cultural history (offering ancient Rome, Alexandria and Byzantium as examples), he goes on to associate it most closely with the *fin-de-siècle* in Europe, given the sense of a declining old order which pervades this era:

This *décadence* [...] was coextensive through the cultural capitals of Europe, [marked by the sense of] a decaying aristocracy, an entropic cosmos, an imperial outlook losing moral confidence even as it was gaining terrain, and the emergence of 'the crowd' as a randomizing force in the experience of urban modernity.⁷

While the word "decadence" carries a variety of meanings in different contexts, Sherry's choice to situate it within the context of Europe's early modernity originates in his interest in decadence as a specific period in literary history. This artistic lineage is explored in more detail by David Weir, who discusses *fin-de-siècle* decadence as an "aesthetics of transition" which blends the "antiquarian tendency" of the urge to "return to nature" that defines Romanticism with a decidedly un-Romantic love of artificiality that connects it to the "dehumanizing hyperculturalism of modernism."⁸ As such, the formal experimentation and exaggerated eroticism that defines the corpus of literary decadence – often associated with authors such as

⁵ Vincent Sherry, *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 29.

⁶ Sherry, *Modernism*, 29.

⁷ Sherry, *Modernism*, 30.

⁸ David Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 16.

Charles Baudelaire, Joris-Karl Huysmans, Walter Pater, and Oscar Wilde⁹ – leads Weir to associate this word with a specific literary movement that bridges the gap between 19th century romanticism and 20th century modernism.¹⁰

Sherry suggests that one of the defining features of this turn-of-the-century literary movement is its ambivalence towards the nascent cultures of modernism and modernity:

[In decadence,] progress has stopped and afterward supplies the tense of imaginative interest and value. This antagonism speaks for long submerged but always growing apprehensions about the value of novelty[,] progress and [...] futurity.¹¹

Thus, decadence should be understood as more than a mere indulgence in the grotesque and macabre – rather, it articulates a substantive rebuttal of modernity by offering a mirror image of this era’s discourses of futurity and progress.

This brief overview of literary decadence enables the continuity between *Hollywood Babylon* and this period of *fin-de-siècle* literature to become clear. The decadent aesthetic of this text emerges as Anger measures his nostalgia for classical Hollywood’s glamorous, unsustainable excess against his distaste for what followed. This elegiac tone is especially prominent in the book’s final chapter, entitled “Hollywoodämmerung,”¹² which recounts the senseless murders committed by the Manson ‘family’ in 1969: “The ’69 Tate massacre was not Old Hollywood [...] Wasted lives make waste, not tragedy. This was the Benedict Canyon where Paul Bern shot himself; his noble shade now has mixed company.”¹³ The distinction that Anger draws here between ‘waste’ and ‘tragedy’ is a crucial component of what makes *Hollywood Babylon* a

⁹ These names are listed here because of their relative familiarity but are, it should be noted, all men. As a film studies thesis, there is not enough space here to foster more than a basic sketch of decadence’s place in literary history. However, for a more recent work which accounts for the shortcomings of the decadent canon, see Mahoney (2015), which endeavors to repatriate traditionally ignored female artists of decadence (such as Vernon Lee and Althea Gyles) into its history.

¹⁰ As in many academic works about decadence, Weir’s historical account is decidedly Eurocentric, focusing on the decadent tradition as it develops in Britain and France. For more recent work which aims to broaden this history, see Stilling (2018), which considers decadence within various postcolonial contexts.

¹¹ Sherry, *Modernism*, 29-30.

¹² This title (a reference to “Götterdämmerung,” [“The Twilight of the Gods”] the last segment of Richard Wagner’s Ring Cycle) is significant within the context of decadence. Wagner is closely associated with decadence (most famously in Friedrich Nietzsche’s 1889 essay “Nietzsche contra Wagner”) and is exemplary of this movement’s capacity to tie anxieties of degeneration to a fascist, eugenic system of thought. See also Nietzsche (2005).

¹³ Anger, *Hollywood Babylon*, 413.

decadent text, rather than a mere collection of debauchery – it suggests that true tragedy must be measured against the potential for mythic grandeur, and that without this underlying context, decline and excess become meaningless.

The authority which *Hollywood Babylon* claims emanates from Anger’s status as an outsider looking in on this system from a distance, free to reveal the ‘truth’ behind the manufactured images of glamour produced by classical Hollywood – even as these ‘truths’ are almost entirely fiction. The film *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (Robert Aldrich, 1962), released three years after *Hollywood Babylon*, offers a similarly decadent elegy for the passing era of classical Hollywood that is crucially produced within this system itself. This film, which casts iconic stars Joan Crawford and Bette Davis as ex-movie stars sisters whose jealousy of each other turns murderous, was a financial success, and prompted a series of similar productions which would imbue the established personae of other stars with grotesque elements. As described by fan historian Peter Shelley, this cycle of films came to be known by a variety of names, including “Hagsploitation,” “Hag Horror,” and “Psycho-Biddy.”¹⁴

Queer scholar Andrew Ross alludes to *Hollywood Babylon* as he describes the extreme emotional tenor that characterizes *Baby Jane* and its successors, suggesting a similarity with the decadent reimagination of classical Hollywood iconography and history performed in this earlier work:

[Crawford’s] Blanche spins in terror in her wheelchair, shot from above; [Davis’] Jane laughs from the belly up, her face twitching with glee. Their House of Usheresque present refracts the Babylonish history of Hollywood stardom, while it creates a new horror film subgenre for the decade.¹⁵

From this description, these films clearly fit the colloquial definition outlined by Sherry above. However, a more substantive continuity between the aesthetic of decadence and these films can be established by turning to yet another name for this cycle of films: “The Grande Dame Guignol.” Combining the aristocratic associations of the Grand Dame archetype (“an older

¹⁴ Peter Shelley, *Grande Dame Guignol Cinema: A History of Hag Horror From Baby Jane to Mother* (Jefferson NC: McFarland & Company, 2007), 1.

¹⁵ Andrew Ross, “Uses of Camp,” in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), 308.

woman of great dignity and prestige”) with the grotesquerie associated with the *Grand Guignol* (the French theatre company which supposedly judged its success by “the number of spectators who fainted or vomited”), this name conveys the uneasy allegiance between antiquity and perversion which defines the aesthetic of decadence.¹⁶ Further, this name foregrounds a sense of temporal incongruity that recalls the outline of decadence sketched above. Both the image of the elegant, ageing Grande Dame and the distinctly archaic reference to *Grand Guignol* theatre evoke a pastness that is irreconcilable to modernity, akin to the stars of Grande Dame Guignol who are defined by their connection to the declining cultural institution of the Hollywood studio system.

By foregrounding a sense of decline, the Grande Dame Guignol films present an understanding of history similar to that of decadence which, as described by decadence scholar Charles Bernheimer, is defined by the sense of “an end [...] marked by not with a poverty of history, but with its excess.”¹⁷ The Grande Dame Guignol films embody this sense of decline by highlighting the incongruity between the stars of classical Hollywood and their 1960s present. This present necessarily positions the Hollywood stars of these films as signifiers of a system which finds itself in the process of being transformed from a dominant cultural force to a distant “Babylonish history.”¹⁸ While *Baby Jane* offers the clearest example of this reimagination, with its explicit focus on Hollywood and its stars, a similar sensibility is explored by the subsequent films of the Grande Dame Guignol cycle including (but are not limited to): *Hush... Hush, Sweet Charlotte* (Robert Aldrich, 1964), with Bette Davis, Olivia de Havilland, and Mary Astor; *Strait-Jacket* (William Castle, 1964) with Joan Crawford; and *What’s the Matter With Helen?* (Curtis Harrington, 1971) with Debbie Reynolds and Shelley Winters.¹⁹

Using the films of the Grande Dame Guignol cycle as a case study, this thesis project aims to define an aesthetic of cinematic decadence that is related to – but not synonymous with – its *fin-de-siècle* literary counterpart. This introduction begins by further defining decadence, outlining how this aesthetic is informed by both the social conditions of modernity and the formal

¹⁶ Shelley, *Grande Dame Guignol Cinema*, 1.

¹⁷ Charles Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects: The Idea of Decadence in Art, Literature, Philosophy, and Culture of the fin-de-siècle in Europe*, ed. T. Jefferson Kline and Naomi Schor (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 42.

¹⁸ Ross, “Uses of Camp,” 308.

¹⁹ These are the four films discussed at length within this thesis. Other notable entries in the Grande Dame Guignol cycle include *The Night Walker* (William Castle, 1964) with Barbara Stanwyck, *What Ever Happened to Aunt Alice?* (Leo H. Katzin, 1969) with Geraldine Page and Ruth Gordon, and *Whoever Slew Auntie Roo?* (Curtis Harrington, 1971) with Shelley Winters.

qualities of modernist literature. It then extends this discussion towards cinema, considering various accounts of cinematic modernism in order to suggest the possibility of an aesthetic of cinematic decadence separate from that of literature. The introduction ends with an overview of the Grande Dame Guignol films, highlighting the elements that makes the cycle an ideal case study for the identification of cinematic decadence.

Decadence and the Modernization of Queer Identity

One of the earliest and most controversial works dedicated to exploring *fin-de-siècle* decadence is the book *Entartung* (“*Degeneration*”), published in 1892 by the journalist Max Nordau.²⁰ Nordau uses various forms of pseudoscientific analysis to argue that the popular art and literature of his time are “manifestations of more or less pronounced moral insanity, imbecility, and dementia.”²¹ Prefiguring the future rhetoric of the Nazis as he frames modern art in terms of decay, he offers these pieces of popular art as evidence of ongoing societal disintegration, brought about by “anarchism, crime, population decline, and sexual deviance.”²² Nordau’s engagement with these ideas echoes that of his teacher and mentor Cesare Lombroso, whose similarly pseudoscientific work on criminals attempted to locate a physiological basis for immorality, and thus “to totalize the manifestations of the diseased other and confine its symptoms within precisely defined bodies.”²³ In their efforts to identify specifically raced, classed, and disabled bodies (especially those of women and queer individuals) as atavistic or less evolved, Nordau and Lombroso are indicative of the exclusionary tendencies that defined the social sciences throughout early 20th century modernity.

Queer theorist Heather Love, in her book *Feeling Backward* (2007), suggests that the processes of marginalization that define this period were especially powerful for queer individuals. Following the historical model suggested by Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality* (1978-86), she suggests that the turn of the 20th century marks “the invention of homosexuality in its modern form out of the sexological, medical, and criminal discourses of late

²⁰ Nordau, whose real name was Simcha Südfeld, took this pen name to hide his Jewish background – implying that he “was blind to his own stigmatization by the discourse he wields against the other.” Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects*, 161.

²¹ Quoted in Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects*, 155. See also Nordau (1993).

²² Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects*, 156.

²³ Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects*, 143. See also Lombroso (2006).

nineteenth century.”²⁴ While Foucault’s suggestion of a clear demarcation between pre-modern and modern understandings of queer sexuality has been disputed, the general outline of his argument – that the turn of the 20th century marks a troubling reconceptualization of queerness as an illness – is supported by the medical and psychological discourses of this period that systematically reinscribe same-sex attraction as a mark of improper development.²⁵ Indicative of this developing association between queerness and backwardness are Sigmund Freud, whose writings on the castration complex position queer sexuality as the consequence of incomplete maturation,²⁶ and Lombroso, whose work on locating ‘criminal’ traits imagined “homosexuality [...] as a clear sign and symptom of hereditary taint [...] [and] of atavistic survival.”²⁷

Love suggests that this marginalization through medicalization is representative of a broader tendency for modernity to measure its progress against a supposedly less-evolved or less-sophisticated Other:

If modernization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century aimed to move humanity forward, it did so in part by perfecting techniques for mapping and disciplining subjects considered to be lagging behind [...] Not only sexual and gender deviants but also women, colonized people, the nonwhite, the disabled, the poor, and criminals were marked as inferior by means of the allegation of backwardness.²⁸

This alignment between homosexuality and backwardness is central to its close association with decadence. By subversively embracing what modernity identifies as deviant or regressive, decadence becomes a tool of resistance against a dominant culture interested in identifying and systematically eliminating non-normative sexuality.²⁹ Love describes this capacity for resistance

²⁴ Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 2.

²⁵ See Edsall (2003)

²⁶ He suggests that, if the male child cannot divest themselves of the (supposedly) universal fantasy of both men and women having a penis, they will inevitably become “[fixated on] this idea of a woman with a penis [and] unable to do without a penis in his sexual object [making him] bound to become a homosexual.” Sigmund Freud, “On the Sexual Theories of Children (1908),” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey et. al, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1959), 9:216.

²⁷ Nicholas C. Edsall, *Toward Stonewall: Homosexuality and Society in the Modern Western World* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), 134.

²⁸ Love, *Feeling Backward*, 5-6.

²⁹ As suggested by Vincent Sherry, the clearest example of this moral panic – and its effects on the ways in which literary history is written – would be the various trials of Oscar Wilde. See Sherry, *Modernism*, 23-29.

through a story recounted in Walter Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), narrating "the twilight existence of the Greek gods after the triumph of Christianity, [as they] go into hiding and live their lives out in disguise, drinking beer instead of nectar."³⁰ In this narrative, after the true identity of Apollo is discovered, the god is convinced to play a final song with his lyre. The women of the village are so entranced by its beauty that they become sick, prompting the men to exhume his grave, only to find it empty. Through this narrative, Love outlines a mode of queer resistance whose power originates in endurance and refusal rather than outright transgression, "indicat[ing] the possibility of a transformed future without ever moving towards that future."³¹ Just as Pater absents himself from his contemporary moment (and its hostility towards queerness) by returning to the idealized past of the Renaissance, Apollo's disappearance from his grave suggests a critique of modernity based on absence rather than presence.

As such, decadence is defined by its embrace of the fragmentation offered by the social discourses of modernity. This fragmentation is at the centre of the eugenic ideology of modernity – which, in fracturing society into a series of often marginalized sub-groups, seeks to define and marginalize non-normative Others in an attempt to affirm the health of society as a whole. Decadence does not subvert the processes by which homosexuality is marked as 'deviant' so much as embrace this position, offering a distinctly queer space for alienation amidst the hostile environment of modernity. Further, this embrace of fragmentation central not only to the subversion of modernity offered by decadent art, it is also at the heart of the close relationship between *fin-de-siècle* decadence and modernist literature.

Decadence and Modernism

Writing in the *fin-de-siècle*, French literary critic Paul Bourget notes the centrality of fragmentation and decomposition to the aesthetic style of literary decadence: "A style of decadence is one in which the unity of the book is decomposed to make way for the independence of the page, the page is decomposed to make way for the independence of the sentence, and the sentence makes way for the independence of the word."³² This description of decadence, stressing the fractured nature of decadent works and the threat that this dissolution

³⁰ Love, *Feeling Backward*, 61. The story comes as part of Pater's chapter on Pico della Mirandola, and is itself inspired by German writer Heinrich Heine's poem "Gods in Exile." See also Pater (2010).

³¹ Love, *Feeling Backward*, 62.

³² Paul Bourget, *Essais de psychologie contemporaine* (Paris: Lemerre, 1883), 25.

poses to the cohesive unity of the work as a whole, is notably similar to the description of modernist texts offered by Frederic Jameson in his essay “The Existence of Italy.” Jameson, like Bourget, foregrounds the tension between the whole work and its elements, understanding modernist works as a collection of “semi-autonomous sentences [that] come to provoke their own mini-interpretations.”³³ Suggesting that the total autonomy of the fragment would represent a shift into “full postmodernism,”³⁴ Jameson instead proposes that modernist texts are defined by a “constitutive tension between the episode and the totality,” as the overall meaning of such works emerges through a tension between the whole and its heterogeneous parts.³⁵ In this sense, Jameson’s semi-autonomous modernism can be understood as a mirror image of Bourget’s decadence, as the former foregrounds a constant effort to create a cohesive whole out of disparate parts while the latter celebrates the breakdown of a whole into such isolated fragments.

This formal similarity between decadent and modernist literature has led many scholarly accounts, most notably David Weir’s *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (1995), to understand decadence in relation to the “development of the modern novel,” and as “that [which] helps us arrive at literary modernity.”³⁶ Vincent Sherry takes this argument further in his more recent account, arguing that, mere precursor for the literary modernism, decadence should be understood as a constitutive element of modernism that cannot be easily separated from its later manifestation: “What I am proposing is that we come to understand [...] the sensibility of decadence [that certain early modernist novels] demonstrate as one of the primary – earliest, most important – constituents of modernism.”³⁷ While the aesthetics of decadence and modernism employ opposing formal strategies, Sherry suggests that they both articulate a dissatisfaction with the past and foreground the fragility of the present:

Th[e] sense of the present moment being written as the memory of its possibilities of presence takes the radical meaning of modernism, or Just-Now-ism, and ties it to the root sense of *décadence* (de-cad-ere), to fall away [...] This is an understanding that helps us to reconstitute one of the original provocations and defining crises of

³³ Frederic Jameson, “The Existence of Italy,” in *Signatures of the Visible* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2007), 282-283.

³⁴ Jameson, “The Existence of Italy,” 282.

³⁵ Jameson, “The Existence of Italy,” 285.

³⁶ David Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism*, 21.

³⁷ Sherry, *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence*, 111.

modernism, which involves the raising of the absolute instant to a value it cannot realize or sustain. The moment of ultra-modernity, which is experienced as the ultimate Now in the temporal self-consciousness of modernism, is constantly sought and always lost.³⁸

As such, the sense of ennui and decay which pervades decadence is intrinsically related to the experimentation and novelty that marks modernism, prompting Sherry to discourage an understanding of these aesthetics in opposition to each other, or even as entirely separate.

Further, recognizing the intrinsic link between decadence and literary modernism allows the formal features of decadence to be understood in relation to the social discourses of modernity. The efforts of Nordau, Lombroso, and other similar thinkers to relate specific marginalized groups with degeneration can be understood as a grotesque exaggeration of Jameson's semi-autonomy, offering the health of the whole at the cost of suppressing the autonomy of its individual parts.³⁹ In this sense, the formal interest of decadence in fragmentation and heterogeneity can be understood politically, as its celebration of fragmentation challenges the discourses which code marginalized groups as a threat to the well-being of a collective society.

While the tendency to situate decadence at the turn of the 20th century thus offers valuable insight into both literary and social modernity, it should not be restricted to this specific historical context. The limitations brought about by understanding decadence *only* in relation to *fin-de-siècle* modernity are epitomized by the conclusion of David Weir's *Decadent Culture in the United States* (2008), which specifically argues that cinema is incompatible with the decadent tradition. Here, Weir turns towards *Hollywood Babylon*, dismissing the "celebrity decadence" chronicled by Anger's book and its sequel as one of the cultural sites into which legitimate literary decadence "dissipates" throughout the 20th century.⁴⁰ Weir extends this concept of dissipation into Anger's films to suggest that, while some elements of works like *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* (1954/1966/1978) and *Scorpio Rising* (1963) are reminiscent of the aesthetic qualities of decadent literature, they cannot be comfortably fit within this lineage.⁴¹ Weir largely

³⁸ Sherry, *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence*, 34.

³⁹This troubling continuity between modernism and fascism is echoed by the associations between many of this literary movement's canonical figures (Ezra Pound, W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot, and others) and anti-Semitism.

⁴⁰ David Weir, *Decadent Culture in the United States: Art and Literature Against the Grain, 1890-1926* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 193.

⁴¹ Most notably, he suggests an "emphasis on the smaller units of filmic composition at the expense of the whole," which recalls the tension between Bourget's disintegrating book and Jameson's semi-autonomous whole. Weir, *Decadent Culture*, 198-199.

attributes this irreconcilability to Anger's status as an independent, countercultural artist, whose work ultimately "mak[es] these aesthetics available for commercial exploitation" within music videos and other popular media: "[E]ven though American cinema did take over the cultural space occupied by decadent literature, all Hollywood was able to do with decadence, in the end, was what Hollywood always does: commodify, popularize, debase."⁴² While Weir does allow for the legitimate decadence of some films that hold a direct continuity with literary decadence,⁴³ he argues that true decadence becomes impossible once the era of modernity ends: "Today, [...] America offers no shortage of depravity, corruption, excess, and possibly even perversion, but never decadence: it is too late for that."⁴⁴

Given that Weir's understanding of decadence is closely intertwined with early 20th century literary modernism, it is reasonable to suggest that this particular analytical frame can only be superficially evoked when separated from its temporal context. However, it is fallacious for Weir to discount the possibility of cinematic decadence on the grounds that cinema does not coincide with the historical development of literature. If cinematic modernism is not synonymous with literary modernism, it stands to reason that cinematic decadence should be similarly independent of its literary counterpart.

To open his account of cinematic modernism, Michael Wood identifies an ongoing temptation to "argue that all films are Modernist," given the status of cinema as an "accelerated image of modernity, like the railway and the telephone."⁴⁵ However, even as it is inextricably enmeshed within the same culture of modernity to which literary modernism responds, it is an oversimplification to suggest that cinematic modernism is synonymous with its literary counterpart. Just as decadence needs to be placed within the context of a broader cultural shift in order to avoid becoming a mere descriptor for decline, modernism requires a tradition from which to break. András Bálint Kovács alludes to this problem in his account of cinematic modernism by quoting Jean-Luc Godard: "A contemporary writer knows that authors such as

⁴² Weir, *Decadent Culture*, 199-201. Weir's suggestion that Anger cannot embody decadence due to his being "not antidemocratic or elitist at all," should be complicated. While Anger – as a gay artist making overtly queer works – is certainly marginalized, he is also prototypically decadent in his misogyny and racism, as evidenced within *Hollywood Babylon* and elsewhere.

⁴³ Two examples of the 'legitimate' cinematic decadence described by Weir include the screen works of decadent-novelist-turned-screenwriter Ben Hecht and early films depicting the biblical figure and decadent icon Salome. Weir, *Decadent Culture*, 191-193.

⁴⁴ Weir, *Decadent Culture*, 201.

⁴⁵ Michael Wood, "Modernism and Film," in *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms*, ed. Peter Brooker, et. al (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 268.

Molière or Shakespeare existed. We are the first filmmakers to know that a Griffith existed. At the time when Carné, Delluc and Clair made their first films, there was no critical or historical tradition yet.”⁴⁶ As such, it is insufficient to merely re-use the same periodization of modernist literature for modernist films.

To develop an understanding of modernism specific to the medium of cinema, Miriam Bratu Hansen forwards the concept of “vernacular modernism,” suggesting that cinema serves to mediate the “experience of modernity” on a mass scale.⁴⁷ Consequently, Hansen suggests a modernist impulse throughout the entirety of the classical Hollywood era, freeing this term from a “single logic genealogy that runs [...] from Eliot, Pound, Joyce, and Kafka to Beckett and Robbe-Grillet.”⁴⁸ To this end, James Donald summarizes similar attempts to periodize cinematic modernism, beginning with Gilles Deleuze’s distinction between a (classical) pre-war movement-image and a (modernist) post-war time-image.⁴⁹ Donald goes on to cite András Bálint Kovács’ more recent account, which rejects Deleuze’s precise periodization while echoing its underlying suggestion of modernist film as “an alternative to, and to some extent a critique of, classical cinema.”⁵⁰ Finally, Donald cites the model of cinematic history offered by Frederic Jameson in his “The Existence of Italy.”⁵¹ While, as discussed above, Jameson suggests an underlying connection between literary modernism and 20th century modernity, he notes that the development of cinema does not correspond to this chronology. Instead, due to its relatively recent invention, it follows “a realism/modernism/postmodernism trajectory at a more compressed tempo,” suggesting a semi-autonomous cinematic modernism roughly between the 1950s and 1970s.⁵²

Even as Hansen, Deleuze, Kovács, and Jameson propose different accounts of Hollywood’s relationship to modernism, each recognizes a seismic shift away from classical tradition and towards modernism (however defined) that occurs in the 1960s. Notably, this

⁴⁶ Quoted in András Bálint Kovács, *Screening Modernism: European Art Cinema, 1950-1980* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 16. As in the case of Anger, Godard’s use of Griffith as a marker of great cinematic achievement should be problematized.

⁴⁷ Miriam Hansen, “The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism,” in *Reinventing Film Studies*, ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (London: Arnold, 2000), 333.

⁴⁸ Hansen, “The Mass Production of the Senses,” 332.

⁴⁹ James Donald, “Cinema, Modernism, and Modernity,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms*, ed. Peter Brooker et. al (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 506. See also Deleuze (1986-89).

⁵⁰ Donald, “Cinema, Modernism, and Modernity,” 506.

⁵¹ Donald, “Cinema, Modernism, and Modernity,” 507.

⁵² Jameson, “The Existence of Italy,” 215.

departure from ‘classical’ style coincides with the collapse of the classical Hollywood studio system as a dominant mode of production. Janet Staiger describes how the United States Supreme Court’s ruling in the 1948 antitrust Paramount case – which, amongst other things, forced studios to cede control of the theatres showing their films – exacerbated an ongoing shift away from the studios’ model of mass industrial production.⁵³ Instead of films mass-produced by the employees of a single studio, this period saw the American film market increasingly dominated by films that were distributed by studios, but produced independently:

“The [...] shift to an industrial structure of independent firms releasing through the majors fostered the development of a system of production in which film projects were set up on a film-by-film arrangement [...] By the mid-1950s, independent production had become a viable option in the Hollywood mode of production, and was dominant by 1960.”⁵⁴

This shift towards independence and the decline in the power of studios leads Staiger, alongside David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, to end their extensive account of the classical Hollywood studio system at the year 1960.⁵⁵ Of course, the reformulation of the American film industry beginning at the end of World War II is also brought about by a number of other factors – including the increasing popularity of television,⁵⁶ the weakening of the conventional star system,⁵⁷ and a general inability to keep pace with youth culture.⁵⁸ Together, each of these trends

⁵³ See Conant (1960) for a fuller account of the Paramount case and its impacts.

⁵⁴ Janet Staiger, “Individualism Versus Collectivism: The Shift to Independent Production in the US Film Industry,” in *The Classical Hollywood Reader*, ed. Steve Neale (London: Routledge, 2012), 338-339.

⁵⁵ See Bordwell, Thompson, and Staiger (1985).

⁵⁶ See Balio (1990) and Himes (1990).

⁵⁷ This shift is prompted in part by the so-called 1944 “de Havilland decision” by the United States Supreme Court. This decision ruled that “the standard seven-year contract then given to most actors could not be indefinitely lengthened by suspensions caused when an actor balked at appearing in a particular project,” allowing actors to know “exactly when their contract was up [...] [and] to look around for better scripts, directors, and projects.” Wheeler Winston Dixon, *Death of the Moguls: The End of Classical Hollywood* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 20.

⁵⁸ The studio system’s supposed social irrelevance is most often measured against the short-lived period of “New Hollywood” which followed it – whose films explicitly address “younger, hipper” audiences and incorporate non-Hollywood aesthetic influences. Derek Nystrom, “The New Hollywood,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell History of American Film* online edition, ed. Cynthia Lucia, Roy Grundmann, and Art Simon (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 3. See also Neale (1976), Tasker (1996), and Harris (2008).

enable the early 1960s to be understood as a moment marked by the erosion of the cultural and economic power of the classical Hollywood studio system.

However, Joe McElhaney suggests that even as the 1960s sees “the dominance of classical narrative cinema as an aesthetic force [...] giv[e] way to other methods that challenge this hegemony,” this moment marks neither the beginning of cinematic modernism or the end of classical cinema.⁵⁹ Drawing from the “vernacular modernism” that Hansen identifies throughout the output of classical Hollywood, McElhaney questions the usefulness of imagining the transition between classical and modernist cinema as a distinct break:

From the moment that the cinema came into existence in the late nineteenth-century, modernism was already substantially under way in the other arts. The cinema had to, in a sense, learn to be classical and modernist at once, resulting in its various modernisms very quickly perceived to be as out-of-date as its classicisms.⁶⁰

For McElhaney, recognizing the interchangeability of classical and modernist cinema opens the possibility of understanding works from across Hollywood’s history in relation to the discourses of social modernity, despite the historical distance between cinema and this turn of the century historical moment: “Modernism [in this sense] is much more strongly tied to modernity in general and is not strictly related to modernism as an aesthetic practice that challenges traditional forms and modes of understanding.”⁶¹ This is an especially pertinent point given that, as noted by David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, the classical mode of production “remains the dominant model for [American] feature filmmaking,” even modernist alternatives persist.⁶² Ultimately, instead of imagining classical and modernist cinema as two periods in an ongoing history, it is more appropriate to consider these two sensibilities concurrently, as interconnected parts of an ongoing appraisal of social modernity.

Even though the classical and modernist cinema are often formally and historically indistinguishable, the narrative of a classical cinema that loses cultural power and gives way to an

⁵⁹ Joe McElhaney, *The Death of Classical Cinema: Hitchcock, Lang, and Minnelli* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 3.

⁶⁰ McElhaney, *The Death of Classical Cinema*, 10.

⁶¹ McElhaney, *The Death of Classical Cinema*, 10.

⁶² David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge, 1985), 611.

ascendant modernism throughout the 1950s and 1960s is a profoundly influential one. Citing *Baby Jane* as one example, McElhaney describes how this narrative of decline is often dramatized within the output of late-studio era Hollywood:

During [the 1950s and 1960s,] the symbolic importance of Hollywood cinema as the great repository of ritualistic and mythical thought began to fade [...] This sense of Hollywood as a crumbling ruin began to manifest itself in films about the process of Hollywood filmmaking. *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950), *In a Lonely Place* (Nicholas Ray, 1950), *The Star* (Stuart Heisler, 1952), *The Barefoot Contessa* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1954), *A Star Is Born* (George Cukor, 1954), *The Big Knife* (Robert Aldrich, 1955), and *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (Aldrich, 1962) are all indicative of a tendency on the part of Hollywood to view its environment as one dominated by violence and chaos, as a community with apparently little conscious memory but everywhere marked by the onslaught of time.⁶³

Understood as instances of classical Hollywood reflecting the myth of its own decline back to itself, the Grande Dame Guignol films occupy a space analogous to that of literary decadence: as works which demonstrate the limitations of classical norms through exaggeration and suggest the emergence of a newfound formal modernism. Further, locating these films on the border between classical and modernist cinema offers the possibility of understanding them in relation to the ongoing navigation of social modernity that, as described above, define this relationship. In other words, even as the mid-century cinematic decadence exemplified by the Grande Dame Guignol films emerges decades after the early 20th century modernity critiqued by literary decadence, it offers a comparable challenge towards the exclusionary discourses that originated in this period through its concern with the decay of classical cinema.

Just as decadence tends to be understood as a reaction to the marginalizing discourses of modernity, critical accounts of its formal features often foreground its continuity with literary modernism. Both decadence and modernism foreground a sense of fragmentation, demonstrating the impossibility of the unitary whole which modernity offers at the cost of marginalizing and removing various Others. However, even if the interconnected sensibilities of decadence and

⁶³ McElhaney, *The Death of Classical Cinema*, 145.

modernism offer a critique of turn of the century modernity, it is possible to usefully identify them in the more recent context of classical Hollywood cinema. If decadence is defined in part by its close relationship to modernism, critical accounts that develop a cinematic modernism separate from that of literature necessarily infer the possibility of a distinct, medium-specific aesthetic of cinematic decadence. This is especially true given that, as suggested by Joe McElhaney, classical and modernist cinema are less successive periods than concurrent sensibilities, whose relationship offers an ongoing navigation of the discourses of modernity. This tension between classical aesthetic codes and modernist fragmentation is central to the Grande Dame Guignol films as they explicitly dramatize the declining cultural dominance of the Hollywood studio system through a grotesque reinvention of its stars.

The Grande Dame Guignol Cycle

Perhaps no other body of films produced in this setting capture the overriding feeling of decadence, described by Russian poet Vyacheslav Ivanov as “the feeling, at once oppressive and exalting, of being the last in a series,” more precisely than the Grande Dame Guignol cycle.⁶⁴ These films, as briefly described above, overtly dramatize the end of the studio system by casting the iconic stars of classical Hollywood in roles that combine the exaggeration of their established personae with the grotesque. Tomasz Fisiak argues that this collection of films can be understood as a collective ‘cycle’ due to their common effort to capitalize on the success of *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* in 1962: “The market was [...] flooded with *Baby Jane* follow-ups, related through plot construction, a specific (mis)representation of the female leads, and even the syntax of the titles.”⁶⁵ Further, the Grande Dame Guignol films are united by their late studio-era context – as their existence is only possible because Crawford, Davis, and the many other stars featured in this cycle were faced with decreasing employment amidst the decline of studio dominance.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Quoted in Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism*, 5.

⁶⁵ Tomasz Fisiak, “Hag Horror Heroines: Kitsch/Camp Goddesses, Tyrannical Females, Queer Icons,” in *Redefining Kitsch and Camp in Literature and Culture*, ed. Justyna Stepién (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 42.

⁶⁶ *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* in particular is closely related to a late-studio era context, as an independent production like those discussed by Janet Staiger above. Warner Brothers released, but did not produce the film - instead, Director/Producer Robert Aldrich turned to the independent Seven Arts – which in 1967 would gain a controlling interest in Warner Bros. Shelley, *Grande Dame Guignol Cinema*, 30.

The consideration of these disparate films – united only by the presence of an ageing Hollywood star in a setting that emphasizes decay or decline – as a singular cycle has proven useful as a way to discuss Hollywood’s onscreen representation of women in this period.⁶⁷ Tomasz Fisiak regards the grotesque reinvention of classical Hollywood stars in the Grande Dame Guignol films as a double-edged sword, situating these films “in stark opposition” to the second-wave feminisms of the 1960s⁶⁸ – a sentiment echoed by Molly Haskell in her scathing critique of *Baby Jane*:

This is society’s final revenge on Davis’ and Crawford’s star image and on their power: the implication, by the exaggeration of their exaggerations, that they were never real, never women, but some kind of a joke, apart from women and a warning to them.⁶⁹

While the Grande Dame Guignol films are disregarded as texts whose monstrous women merely re-inscribe misogynistic tropes, this gendered ‘exaggeration’ is central to their re-appraisal as queer texts. To this end, Lorena Russell offers an alternate reading of *Baby Jane*:

[The film] seems to go out of its way to present viewers with numerous options for bypassing any typical identification with, or desire for, female or male heterosexuality [...] It is through the film’s camp rendering of female sexuality [that it] offers queer viewers room for being ‘other’ and ‘same,’ an opportunity for abjected assimilation through a portrait of sympathetic monsters.⁷⁰

The complicated politics of representation which defines these films – as their central women exist both as vessels for conservative, patriarchal anxieties as well as sites of queer

⁶⁷ Of course, the notion of what constitutes an “ageing” star within Hollywood is related to this system’s endemic misogyny. Davis was only 54 at the time of *Baby Jane*’s release, and Crawford only 58. To compare, James Stewart (born the same year as Davis) would star in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (John Ford, 1962) in the same year as *Baby Jane*, and Cary Grant (born in the same year as Crawford) would star in *Charade* (Stanley Donen, 1963) the year later. Neither of these men would be defined by their age or supposed irrelevance in the same way as their female counterparts.

⁶⁸Fisiak, “Hag Horror,” 43.

⁶⁹ Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 342.

⁷⁰ Lorena Russell, “Queering Consumption and Production in *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*” in *Horror Film: Creating and Marketing Fear*, ed. Steven Hantke (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 240.

reinvention – offers yet another comparison point between the Grande Dame Guignol and *fin-de-siècle* literary decadence. Elaine Showalter describes the misogyny present throughout the works of the (largely male) canon of decadent writers, predicated upon their idolization of artifice and a problematic association of women with nature: “[Decadent] Antinaturalism [...] inevitably leads to antifeminism; women were seen as closer to ‘Nature,’ to the body, and to a crude materialism while men were aligned with ‘Art,’ to the intellect, and to spiritualism.”⁷¹ For Showalter, this tendency towards an essentialist view of gender – which reduces women to only their reproductive functions – further informs decadent literature’s fascination with female monstrosity: “Women reappear as objects of value in decadent writing only when they are desexualized through maternity or thoroughly aestheticized, stylized, and turned into icons or fetishes.”⁷² Thus, literary decadence offers an extremely contradictory understanding of femininity – even as these texts foreground a conservative understanding of gender, their overriding concern with monstrosity and so-called deviance allow them to *also* serve as a key cultural space for the presentation of gendered non-normativity. As discussed above, it is the focus on what modernity deems regressive that makes decadence an aesthetic of queer resistance amidst the inhospitable environment of *fin-de-siècle* society and culture.

Likewise, Erin Harrington suggests that the Grande Dame Guignol cycle – which similarly defines the supposed ‘monstrosity’ of its central women by their status as ageing and non-reproductive – as a site that enables the presentation of gendered non-normativity:

[H]orror films about abject barren bodies and subjects [...] offer complex sites of inquiry that may certainly subjugate women and the feminine, but they are also cinematic spaces of celebration, resistance and contestation: through an embrace of the monstrous and effusive capacities of the abject barren, they refuse to acquiesce to the strictures of the normatively, reproductively feminine and the imperative that the female body must be in service of another.⁷³

⁷¹ Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the fin-de-siècle* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 170.

⁷² Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy*, 170.

⁷³ Erin Harrington, *Women, Monstrosity, and Horror Film: Gynaehorror* (London: Routledge, 2018), 245-246.

This refusal of normativity suggests an alternative understanding of queerness than that offered by films of the same period which overly focus on homosexuality. *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane*'s release in 1962 closely follows the release of two other Hollywood productions – *The Children's Hour* (William Wyler, 1961) and *Advise and Consent* (Otto Preminger, 1962) – whose overt depictions of homosexuality went against the Hays Code's longstanding "taboo against [presentations of] 'sex perversion.'"⁷⁴ However, just as the newfound understanding of homosexuality as a specific mode of subjectivity in the early 20th century brought with it the stigmatization and pathologization of queerness, this increased visibility within Hollywood did not necessarily lead to positive representation. Julia Erhart discusses how the presentation of lesbian sexuality in *The Children's Hour* reinforces the Otherness of same-sex attraction, albeit through visibility rather than invisibility: "[*The Children's Hour*] displays profoundly little interest in lesbianism *per se*, instead it obsesses over the problem of identifying lesbians. [In it,] lesbianism is less an identity or set of practices to be explored than a condition to be apprehended."⁷⁵ As overt queerness, however visible, remains pathologized in the 1960s, the depiction of non-normative and non-reproductive femininity in the Grande Dame Guignol films can be understood as an important (albeit ambivalent) cultural space to challenge these narrow, heterosexist norms of gender and sexuality – akin to that offered by literary decadence half a century earlier.

This thesis locates an aesthetic of cinematic decadence within mid-century Hollywood cinema that offers a critique of the exclusionary discourses of modernity akin to that articulated by *fin-de-siècle* literary decadence. Using the Grande Dame Guignol cycle as a case study, this thesis studies cinematic decadence through a formal analysis of these films, informed by psychoanalytic and queer theory as well as critical studies of literary decadence. The first chapter focuses on these films' decadent sense of time, arguing that their erosion of linear temporality offers a queer deconstruction of discourses of reproductive futurity. The second chapter compares these films' presentation of their central figures as simultaneously familiar and Other to the similarly problematic alignment of women with the grotesque within decadence. The final chapter distinguishes decadence from camp as a mode of queering film texts and compares how

⁷⁴ Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*, revised edition (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1987), 120.

⁷⁵ Julia Erhart, "She Could Hardly Invent Them!" From Epistemological Uncertainty to Discursive Production in *The Children's Hour*" *Camera Obscura* 12, no. 2 (May 1995): 91.

these sensibilities differ in their presentation of history and misogyny. Ultimately, this study suggests the usefulness of decadence as a model to historicize and theorize cinematic depictions of disintegration, misogyny, and the grotesque, and to position the often-neglected films of the Grande Dame Guignol cycle as demonstrative of a key shift in Hollywood history.

Chapter 1: Cinematic Decadence and (Queer) Time

It's very difficult to keep the line between the past and the present... Do you know what I mean?

– “Little Edie” Bouvier Beale in *Grey Gardens*

Briefly turning away from Hollywood, this study of cinematic decadence begins in New York, at the titular 28-room East Hampton estate chronicled by the documentary film *Grey Gardens* (Albert and David Maysles et. al, 1976) alongside its two residents: Edith Ewing Bouvier Beale (“Big Edie”) and her daughter Edith Bouvier Beale (“Little Edie”). As the aunt and cousin of ex-First Lady Jaqueline Kennedy Onassis respectively, the Edies are adjacent to a mythic ideal of wealth and glamour that is seemingly irreconcilable with the advanced decay of their home, whose crumbling walls and overgrown gardens match the proliferation of tchotchkes, refuse and detritus inside. However, like the central sisters of *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (Robert Aldrich, 1962), the Edies are indifferent to this material decay, opting to instead live within the complex network of roads not taken evoked by the Robert Frost poem quoted at length in the film.

The Edies’ retreat from a present without a future emphatically echoes the diminishing sense of futurity that marks the post-Watergate context into which *Grey Gardens* is released.⁷⁶ As “Big Edie” sings along to decades-old recordings of herself during her brief career as a singer, and “Little Edie” ruminates on the lovers and futures that she did not pursue, the *Grey Gardens* estate becomes an isolated island, inexorably drawn backwards into a more glamorous past. Thus, within the Kennedys’ so-called Camelot, the Edies take on the role of Merlyn who, in T. H. White’s *The Once and Future King*, experiences time in reverse – first greeting the future King Arthur with a tearful goodbye, before aging backwards into a youthful vigour.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ This sense of a disappearing future is perhaps best summarized by Jimmy Carter’s 1979 “Crisis of Confidence” speech, four years after *Grey Gardens*’ release: “We see this crisis in the growing doubt about the meaning of our lives and in the loss of a unity of purpose for our nation. The erosion of our confidence in the future is threatening to destroy the social and the political fabric of America.” Jimmy Carter, “Energy Problems: The Erosion of Confidence.” *Vital Speeches of the Day* 45, no. 21, 643.

⁷⁷ Of course, the myth of Camelot also relies upon transmuting the dissatisfactions of the present into an idealization of a mythical past. This is especially true given that the link between the Kennedys and Camelot only emerges following John F. Kennedy’s assassination, as Jackie Kennedy Onassis quotes Frederick Loewe and Alan Jay Lerner’s musical *Camelot* in an interview with *LIFE* magazine: “Don’t let it be forgot, that once there was a spot, for one brief

As the Edies re-enter the past through their unruly archive of paintings, recordings, and mementos, the Grey Gardens estate seems to become a site which, like the heterotopias of time described by Michel Foucault, “accumulates indefinitely, [...] [becoming] a place of all times that is itself outside time, and protected from time’s erosion.”⁷⁸ Using museums and libraries as examples, Foucault ascribes this desire for a fixed relationship between the past and the present to modernity: “[T]he project of organizing a kind of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in a place that will not move [...] belongs to our modernity. The museum and the library are heterotopias that are characteristic of Western culture in the nineteenth century.”⁷⁹ However, the strange, decayed temporality that pervades *Grey Gardens* frustrates such a desire for permanence, seeming at once to be temporally suspended and indelibly marked by the effects of time’s passing.

As such, *Grey Gardens* represents the point at which the rational, teleological temporality of modernity verges into the dissipated temporality of decadence. Vincent Sherry characterizes this fragmented temporality by describing the “spotted time” of decadent literature.⁸⁰ Sherry’s phrase is a tongue-in-cheek inversion of the “spot of time” which, as presented in William Wordsworth’s autobiographical poem *The Prelude*, “represents an integration of the various times of the poet’s ongoing life, joining the present thoughts of the adult to the remembered experiences of the child.”⁸¹ Even as Wordsworth’s poem predates the modern discourse of Foucault’s heterotopia, this ‘spot’ similarly serves as the lynchpin of a rational, linear temporality within which the future is assured by the stability of the past. Sherry’s decadent “spotted time” inverts this dynamic, offering a past marked by lost possibilities rather than potential and replacing stability with fragmentation: “[Within ‘spotted time,’ the] grand romantic adagio of harmonized and reconciled times, which holds the moments of childhood and adulthood in a single continuum of imaginatively coherent feeling, has decayed.”⁸² This is the temporality occupied by the Grey Gardens estate, as its occupants regard their past as a refuge from their

shining moment that was known as Camelot – and it will never be that way again.” Theodore H. White, “For President Kennedy,” *LIFE*, December 6, 1963, 159.

⁷⁸ Michel Foucault, “Different Spaces,” in *Aesthetics, Methods, and Epistemology: Essential Works of Michel Foucault, 1954-1984, Volume 2*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: New Press, 1998), 182.

⁷⁹ Foucault, “Different Spaces,” 182.

⁸⁰ Vincent Sherry, *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 41.

⁸¹ Sherry, *Modernism*, 37.

⁸² Sherry, *Modernism*, 42.

disappointing present, rather than as a base upon which they can build an improved future. And yet, as the Edies attempt to return to this idealized past through their mementoes and dreamy, half-remembered reveries, it remains irretrievable –its outlines only visible by its absence.

This chapter considers how Sherry’s notion of a decadent ‘spotted time’ operates within cinema, through two films of the Grande Dame Guignol cycle: *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (Robert Aldrich, 1962); and *Hush... Hush, Sweet Charlotte* (Robert Aldrich, 1964). First, it describes how these films establish their decadent temporality by defamiliarizing the figure of the Child, and the exclusionary logic of reproductive futurity that it implies. Then, it goes on to consider how this decayed temporality shapes *Baby Jane* and *Sweet Charlotte*, as they focus on their protagonists’ incomplete and traumatic journeys from childhood to adulthood. Both of these films exemplify the eroded, irrational understanding of time that defines decadence, and thus subvert the heteronormative discourses of identity formation which are implicit in the linear temporality of modernity.

Hollywood’s Children and the Discourse of Reproductive Futurity

In her historical account of women in classical Hollywood, Molly Haskell cites the eternally childlike screen persona of Mary Pickford as an example of the “infantilism” brought about by American culture’s obsession with youth:

“The urge to return to childhood [...] is the escape valve from the responsibility and disillusionments [...] of growing up and old. From dreary adult realities, a woman reverts to childhood, the spoiled state of daughterhood, or even to adolescence, when everything was still possible and ideal, not yet delimited by sexual or domestic submission.”⁸³

Haskell argues that this cultural alignment between childhood and purity forms one side of a dichotomy, opposite Hollywood’s ‘bad’ women whose supposed ugliness and imperfection “preserv[es] the ‘good’ [...] by separating it from the ‘bad’ [...] maintaining the ideal of woman by creating her mirror opposite.”⁸⁴ As such, the idealized image of childhood personified by Pickford is part of a broader apparatus by which classical Hollywood dictates the outlines of

⁸³ Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 61.

⁸⁴ Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape*, 60.

gendered normativity, forcing women – like the Victorian literature that much of early American cinema grows out of – into polarized archetypes of innocence and impurity.⁸⁵

Haskell’s arguments are echoed by queer theorist Lee Edelman, who similarly suggests the repressive function served by the cultural images of childhood. For Edelman, this idealized figure of the Child serves as the basis of an exclusionary discourse of reproductive futurism:

“In its coercive universalization, however, the image of the Child [...] serves to regulate political discourse [...] by compelling such discourse to accede in advance to the reality of a collective future whose figurative status we are never permitted to acknowledge or address.”⁸⁶

Edelman argues that this understanding of the Child as a guarantor of futurity enables “whatever refuses this [reproductive] mandate” – most notably, the non-reproductive condition of queerness – to be construed as a threat towards “the logic of futurism on which meaning always depends.”⁸⁷ Rather than perpetuate the longstanding, problematic association between queerness and societal destruction, Edelman emphasizes the deconstructive power that queerness gains as it persists outside of the exclusionary structures governed by the narrow logic of reproduction.⁸⁸

This discourse of reproductive futurism (memorably summarized by Edelman as a “fascism of the baby’s face”),⁸⁹ is closely linked to the “misty-eyed infantilism” that Haskell ascribes to the American filmgoing public at large.⁹⁰ Both are polarizing discourses that structure human behaviour around a set of dichotomies – good/bad, pure/impure, reproductive/non-reproductive – while foreclosing all options outside of them. Just as Judith Butler suggests that dominant culture perpetuates a binary understanding of biological sex by positioning it as “prediscursive” (as “a politically neutral surface *on which* culture acts,” that is thereby taken for granted), these dichotomies invisibly delineate ‘acceptable’ forms of sexual and gender

⁸⁵ See Eisenstein (1992) for a further discussion of early American cinema’s relationship to Victorian literature.

⁸⁶ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 11.

⁸⁷ Edelman, *No Future*, 11.

⁸⁸ The association between queerness and desolation is a fraught lineage that can be traced as back to the Biblical account of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, up to and beyond the quote Edelman uses from Gary Bauer, from the homophobic Family Research Council: “those who practice homosexuality embrace a culture of death.” Edelman, *No Future*, 39.

⁸⁹ Edelman, *No Future*, 75

⁹⁰ Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape*, 61.

expression.⁹¹ Further, Edelman and Haskell's prediscursive dichotomies each share the figure of the Child as their anchor – as either a seen, performing body (as with Pickford and similar performers) or an unseen guarantor of a wide-open future – of the potential for infinite expansion offered by modernity.

Together, these accounts offer the necessary framework to consider the decadent deconstruction of temporality offered by *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* through its central figures – the now-adult, ex-child vaudeville star “Baby” Jane Hudson (Bette Davis) and her sister Blanche (Joan Crawford). This opening flashback scene establishes how Blanche – whose success as a movie star comes as Jane's vaudeville stardom fades – has her career cut prematurely short in 1935, when she is struck by a car supposedly driven by her resentful sister. The majority of the film takes place in 1962, decades after this career-ending accident, as Jane and Blanche are still mired in their rivalry. Progressing from this setup, much of the film follows Jane's physical and emotional abuse of her sister – significantly complicated by the ultimate revelation that Blanche herself, not Jane, was responsible for the accident. At the same time, the film follows how Jane's nostalgia for her childhood success in vaudeville coalesces into an ill-fated attempt at a Norma Desmond-esque comeback.

One scene midway through the film finds the adult Jane preparing for this comeback by performing her signature song as a child performer, entitled “I've Written a Letter to Daddy,” after hiring penniless pianist Edwin Flagg (Victor Buono). As Jane progresses through the choreography in a deliberate, mechanical manner the scene is intercut with the reactions of Blanche (listening from upstairs) and Edwin, whose faces signal a combination of pity and melancholy as they listen. Filtered through these reactions, the performance takes on a distinctly uncomfortable character – an emotional atmosphere deepened by the song's oddly incestuous lyrics, the decaying interior of the Hudson's home, and the clear implication that the film audience and their two surrogate spectators are witnessing a performance which has been meticulously practiced, even long after Jane's own daddy has gone.

⁹¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge Classics edition (New York: Routledge, 2006), 10.



Figs. 1-4: In 1962, Jane (Bette Davis) performs “I’ve Written a Letter to Daddy” as Edwin (Victor Buono) and Blanche (Joan Crawford) watch on.

Jane’s performance in this sequence recalls Edelman’s notion of “*sinthomosexuality*,” a term through which he considers the contentious relationship between queerness and reproductive futurity.⁹² This term originates as a portmanteau of ‘homosexuality’ and Jacques Lacan’s notion of the *sinthome* – defined as the site at which the subject “knot[s] together the orders of the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real.”⁹³ As such, the *sinthome* is both the basis for an individual’s subjectivity, as well as “the site at which [this] meaning comes undone.”⁹⁴ By aligning same-sex desire with the *sinthome*’s capacity to problematize the formation of identity, Edelman’s *sinthomosexuality* gestures towards homosexuality’s capacity to erode heteronormative narratives of identity formation:

Sinthomosexuality [...] den[ies] the appeal of fantasy, refusing the promise of futurity that mends each tear, however mean, in reality’s dress with threads of meaning [...]

⁹² The notion of *sinthomosexuality* is developed at length by Edelman in the second chapter of *No Future*. Edelman, *No Future*, 33-66.

⁹³ Edelman, *No Future*, 35. See Lacan (2016) for a further account of the *sinthome*.

⁹⁴ Edelman, *No Future*, 38.

offer[ing] us fantasy turned inside out, the seams of its costume exposing reality's seamlessness as mere seeming.⁹⁵

Just as Lacan's *sinthome* reveals the unstable network of connections by which a subject's identity is formed, so does Jane's performance reveal the seams in her identity as a child star who never grew up – but, unlike the dolls made of her likeness, entered adulthood.

As Jane's *sinthomosexuality* problematizes Jane's identity and subjectivity, *Baby Jane* offers a contrasting view of queer temporality than that theorized by José Esteban Muñoz in terms of utopia. Muñoz identifies the idealized state of queer utopia as eternally “not yet here,” as its promise of futurity nonetheless invigorates the present through its “warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality.”⁹⁶ However, Jane's performance offers the exact opposite, imagining an ecstatic horizon between the present and the (equally unrealizable) past. Despite these divergent strategies, the film's backward-facing temporality similarly serves to open the possibility of queer resistance in the present. While Muñoz's utopia assures the possibility of queerness in the present through the promise of a better future, *Baby Jane* instead foregrounds the fragility of heteronormativity by undermining its linear temporality.

Further, Jane's doomed efforts to recover her past recall Jack Halberstam's description of queer temporality as a desire for an alternative to the “seemingly inexorable march of narrative time” offered by a conventional understanding of maturation centred on a progression through “birth, marriage, reproduction, and death.”⁹⁷ Describing Michael Cunningham's novel *The Hours*, Halberstam argues that queer desire offers these emancipatory possibilities, even as inhospitable social circumstances render their realization impossible – leading to a contradictory queer time that is “both realized and ultimately disappointing in its own narrative arc.”⁹⁸ This queer time – as a utopic fantasy which is at once realized and always disappearing – recalls Vincent Sherry's description of how the efforts of literary modernism to entirely capture a present moment gives way to the dissolution that defines decadence: “In the most intense experience of Now in the radical time of modernism, however, Now is already going over into

⁹⁵ Edelman, *No Future*, 35.

⁹⁶ José Esteban Muñoz, *Queer Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1.

⁹⁷ Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 2-3.

⁹⁸ Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 3.

Then – into the temporal imaginary of decadence.”⁹⁹ By presenting Jane’s efforts to recapture the past and its lost possibilities, this scene offers a decadent variation upon queer utopia – which places its ecstatic, never-to-be realized possibilities within an idealized past, rather than the future.

This presentation of childhood as incoherent and fragmented is underscored by another performance of “I’ve Written a Letter to Daddy” earlier in the film, when Jane performs the song to a crowded auditorium as a child star in 1917. Diverging from the purity that Haskell ascribes to Mary Pickford’s childlike screen persona, these opening scenes are instead disquieting, offering an image of childhood that is irretrievable and fading rather than the stable basis upon which adult identity is formed. Karen Redrobe’s analysis of this sequence focuses on the desynchronization of Jane’s body and image – as the unmistakably adult singing voice of Debbie Burton is overlaid on the image of child star Julie Allred, posing an “intrusion into the illusion of the star’s bodily integrity [that] leav[es] us instead with two fading stars, neither fully present nor absent.”¹⁰⁰ Therefore, the image of childhood that Jane reaches back towards in her 1962 performance of “I’ve Written a Letter to Daddy” is itself an unsustainable assemblage of voice and body, already demonstrating the seams of an illusion which her adult self will go on to pull further apart.

⁹⁹ Sherry, *Modernism*, 33.

¹⁰⁰ Karen Redrobe, *Vanishing Women: Magic, Film, and Feminism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 182.



Figs. 5-8: In 1917, Jane (June Allred/Debbie Burton) performs “I’ve Written a Letter to Daddy” with her father as a theatre audience watches on.

As *Baby Jane* presents the adult Jane fruitlessly attempts to reinvigorate her present by gesturing towards her already-fractured past, it offers a clear demonstration of the decayed temporality of decadence: “[‘Spotted time’ emphasizes the] sense of disconnection between the glowing memory of childhood and the present experience of the adult [and] the condition of contemporary history unimproved by the renewing energies of youth.”¹⁰¹ Consequently, the film recalls the corrosive potential of Edelman’s *sinthomosexuality* by substituting a fixed relationship between childhood and adulthood with incoherence, enacting a destabilization of the heteronormative structure of reproductive futurity that is inherent to the linear understanding of temporality offered by modernity.

Thus, the ‘spotted time’ of decadence offers a deconstruction of the heteronormative discourse of reproductive futurity that is brought about, as described by Molly Haskell and Lee Edelman above, by idealized images of childhood within culture. As a text of cinematic decadence, *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* foregrounds this degraded temporality through its presentation of childhood as incoherent and irretrievable. However, to further develop the

¹⁰¹ Sherry, *Modernism*, 45.

connection between this film and the aesthetic of decadence, it is necessary to consider the relationship between linear temporality and the heteronormative discourses of modernity.

Decadent Temporality: *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*

Within the *fin-de-siècle milieu* with which decadence is most commonly associated, this aesthetic emerges alongside a collection of psychological and medical discourses that aim to systematically identify and remove the causes of so-called ‘social degeneration.’ Representative of this trend is psychoanalysis’ efforts to comprehensively track the development of ‘proper’ forms of sexuality. As developed at different times by Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, psychoanalysis attempts to differentiate proper and improper forms of sexuality and subjectivity through the imposition of totalizing narratives of individual maturation – specifically, the castration complex described by Freud¹⁰² and the mirror stage proposed by Lacan.¹⁰³ While each of these formulations will be explored in further detail below, they share a tendency to suggest same-sex desire an indication of improper or incomplete maturation, as noted by Heather Love: “In a Freudian psychoanalytic framework, homosexuality is often seen as a result of a failure of maturation [...] associated with narcissism and infantilism as well as with incomplete or failed gendering.”¹⁰⁴ This understanding of homosexuality as a “failure of maturation” is notable for mapping a compulsory heterosexuality onto a linear understanding of temporality. Considered alongside these historical discourses, the erosion of rational temporality which defines decadence can be understood as an attempt to disrupt the marginalization and pathologization of same-sex desire.

What Ever Happened to Baby Jane? exemplifies this dynamic. In between the two performances of “I’ve Written a Letter to Daddy” described above, the film offers another, private performance of childhood by Jane. Midway through the film, Jane finds herself drawn into a nostalgic reverie of her years as a vaudeville star late one night, repeating a childish rhyme in front of her mirror. Upon speaking the words, “Now I’d wish that you would tell me, because

¹⁰² Sigmund Freud, “On the Sexual Theories of Children (1908),” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey et. al, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1959), 9:205-226.

¹⁰³ Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function,” in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink, Héloïse Fink, and Russell Grigg (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 76-81.

¹⁰⁴ Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 21-22.

I'm much too young to know..." catches a glimpse of her adult body in the mirror and stops, prompting a scream that implies the violence with which she has been pulled out of her fantasy.



Figs. 9-12: *In 1962, a mirror shatters the adult Jane's fantasy of childhood*

In her essay "The Double Standard of Aging," Susan Sontag describes a similar moment in Richard Strauss' opera *Der Rosenkavalier*, as the Marschallin (the opera's protagonist) looks at herself in a mirror: "Alone in her bedroom she sits at her dressing table, as she does every morning. It is the same daily ritual of self-appraisal practiced by every woman. She looks at herself and, appalled, begins to weep. Her youth is over."¹⁰⁵ Thus, as Jane confronts the apparent irreconcilability of her fantasy and her corporeality, her mirror displays not only the woman/star/actor Bette Davis, but the countless other women, in the Hollywood industry and elsewhere, to embody an impossible, contradictory ideal (including the demand Haskell identifies for eternal childhood and youth).¹⁰⁶

Even though *Baby Jane* does not explicitly include any form of queer sexuality within its text, Jane's experience of feeling alienated from her own image resonates with a long history of

¹⁰⁵ Susan Sontag, "The Double Standard of Aging," in *Susan Sontag: Essays of the 1960s & 70s*, ed. David Rieff. (New York: Library of America, 2013), 751.

¹⁰⁶ Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape*, 61.

queer shame and isolation.¹⁰⁷ Heather Love explores this history through Radclyffe Hall's 1928 novel *The Well of Loneliness*, which follows the upper-class Stephen Gordon as she realizes and explores her lesbian identity. While this work is among the first to overtly chronicle what was then termed 'sexual inversion,' Love notes that it remains particularly controversial for its intense evocation of negativity: "The novel's association with internalized homophobia, erotic failure, and a stigmatizing discourse of gender inversion has allowed it to function as a synecdoche for the worst of life before Stonewall."¹⁰⁸ Given the irreconcilability of Hall's novel to any historical project of queer pride, Love suggests that this work should be understood as a cultural artifact of a painful lineage of suppression, characterizing it as a "representation of loneliness as a queer structure of feeling."¹⁰⁹ By mapping these feelings of alienation and loneliness onto the historical experience of queer individuals, Hall's novel offers a means to identify the queerness within ostensibly straight texts that access such feelings, such as *Baby Jane*.

Baby Jane's resonance with this history is especially clear in the scene of traumatic self-spectatorship described above, as Love describes an almost identical scene which unfolds in Hall's novel:

"Stephen's confrontation with her image proves to be intensely alienating. Unlike the child in Lacan's mirror scene, Stephen does not see an image that is ideal or complete but rather one that is at odds with her desired self-image [...] At once lacking and too complete or self-sufficient, this 'desolate body' exists for Stephen as an object of pity rather than admiration."¹¹⁰

That Gordon is not only alienated from her own image, but from the supposedly universal process of identity formation outlined by psychoanalysis (here, Lacan's mirror stage) is essential to note. Lacan's account of the mirror stage centres on the moment when a fragmented, incomplete subject sees an image of themselves as an idealized whole within the mirror.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁷ It is worth noting that *The Killing of Sister George* (Robert Aldrich, 1968) –directed by Aldrich six years after *Baby Jane* and written by the same screenwriter (Lukas Heller) – explores many similar themes through a lesbian relationship.

¹⁰⁸ Love, *Feeling Backward*, 101.

¹⁰⁹ Love, *Feeling Backward*, 104.

¹¹⁰ Love, *Feeling Backward*, 115.

¹¹¹ Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage," 78.

However, in Love's description of Hall's novel above, this process breaks down as Gordon's sense of fragmentation extends to her reflection as well. Further, Lacan suggests a connection between a subject's spectatorship of their idealized self-image and their entrance into a linear conception of time, and with it, a teleological understanding of identity formation: "This development [...] decisively projects the individual's formation into history: the mirror stage is a drama [progressing] from insufficiency to anticipation – and, for the subject [produces] fantasies that proceed from a fragmented image of the body to [...] its totality."¹¹² Here, the subject's self-image serves the same function as the idealized image of the child in a discourse of reproductive futurity: to anchor a subject's identity by establishing a linear temporality that is oriented towards futurity. As such, Jane's traumatic self-spectatorship, like that of Gordon, serves to not only shatter her own sense of identity but to unsettle her relationship to time – by forcing her childhood and adult selves to exist uncomfortably alongside one another, the mirror reveals the incoherence of Jane's identity, rather than serving as the agent of its coalescence.

As established by Lacan's description of the mirror stage, a linear understanding of temporality is closely associated with a heteronormative account of identity development. By presenting the mirror as a site of trauma, and childhood as less a stable base upon which adult identity is formed than an ongoing site of ideation which is impossible to fully separate from adulthood, *Baby Jane* offers a decadent deconstruction of the interconnected discourses of heteronormativity and linear temporality.

Decadent Identity: *Hush, Hush... Sweet Charlotte*

More than merely neglecting or sidelining queer forms of subjectivity, psychoanalytic accounts of identity formation often actively stigmatize non-heterosexual individuals. This tendency is exemplified by Sigmund Freud's 1908 essay, "'Civilized' Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness," which characterizes reproductive heterosexuality as 'healthy,' and all other forms of sexuality as indicators of pathology:

"As a result of [...] disturbances of development two kinds of harmful deviation from normal sexuality – that is, sexuality which is serviceable to civilization – come about [...] the different varieties of *perverts* [...] and the *homosexuals* or *inverts*, in whom, in a

¹¹² Lacan, "The Mirror Stage," 78.

manner that is not yet quite understood, the sexual aim has been deflected away from the opposite sex.”¹¹³

For Freud, the symbolic cornerstone of the process by which ‘pathological’ and ‘normal’ sexuality are distinguished is castration. In “On the Sexual Theories of Children,” also published in 1908, he suggests that all young boys (largely ignoring the question of female subjectivity) “attribute[e] to everyone, including females, the possession of a penis.”¹¹⁴ He goes on to suggest that, if this childish fantasy is not discarded, a subject risks becoming “‘fixated’ [on] this idea of a woman with a penis [and] unable to do without a penis in his sexual object [making him] bound to become a homosexual.”¹¹⁵ Like Lacan’s account of the mirror stage, Freud’s castration complex assigns a logic of futurity to an individual’s sexual development – as a child must cast aside the supposedly “universally held” fantasy of the female penis to move forward into a mature (hetero)sexuality.¹¹⁶

From this narrative of individual maturation, Freud posits a broader account of societal development, suggesting that as a subject narrows their sexual desires to the point that “only *legitimate* reproduction is allowed as a sexual aim,” they sublimate their energies into the development of civilization: “The forces that can be employed for cultural activities are thus to a great extent obtained through the suppression of what are known as the *perverse* elements of sexual excitation.”¹¹⁷ Given the link Freud draws between perversion and same-sex desire, this model infers that the so-called “developmental disturbance” of homosexuality is diametrically opposed to the forward progress of both individuals and societies.¹¹⁸ As such, by lending a logic of futurity to heterosexuality, Freud assigns a backwards temporality to homosexuality, as that which draws the adult back to their “infantile fixation[s].”¹¹⁹

The alignment of forward-facing temporality and compulsory heterosexuality within psychoanalytic theory is essential to the deconstructive power of decadent temporality. As Jane

¹¹³ Sigmund Freud, “‘Civilized’ Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness (1908)” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey et. al, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1959), 9:189.

¹¹⁴ Freud, “Sexual Theories,” 9:215.

¹¹⁵ Freud, “Sexual Theories,” 9:216.

¹¹⁶ Freud, “Sexual Theories,” 9:216.

¹¹⁷ Freud, “‘Civilized’ Sexual Morality,” 9:189.

¹¹⁸ Freud, “‘Civilized’ Sexual Morality,” 9:189.

¹¹⁹ Freud, “‘Civilized’ Sexual Morality,” 9:189.

insists upon the inextricability of childhood and adulthood through her repeated re-enactments of her vaudeville act, she refuses Freud's mandate for the fantasies of childhood to be put aside in order to 'successfully' enter sexual maturity. This challenge towards the conjoined constructions of linear temporality and compulsory heterosexuality is further developed by the film *Hush... Hush, Sweet Charlotte* (Robert Aldrich, 1964). Released two years after *Baby Jane* and produced by much of the same cast and crew, this film focuses upon Charlotte (Bette Davis), who has lived her entire adult life in the shadows of a murder that she wrongfully believes herself to have committed in her youth. The film begins in 1927, as John Mayhew (Bruce Dern) is forced to break off his relationship with Charlotte by her father – and is murdered shortly thereafter. The film then jumps forward several decades, finding the adult Charlotte alone in her father's now-decaying Louisiana plantation, playing with a music box given to her by Mayhew shortly before his death.¹²⁰ Like Jane, Charlotte's life is dictated by nostalgic fantasies centres upon the time before her traumatic transition to adulthood, as Mayhew's music box offers a catalyst for her to imagine the future that she could have had, had she been able to leave her father's plantation with Mayhew.

Further, *Sweet Charlotte's* opening scenes recall those of *Baby Jane* as they establish the incoherence of Charlotte's identity through the use of multiple performers. When Charlotte is first seen, she is played by Bette Davis, with her face in shadow – even as this sequence is set almost five decades before the remainder of the film. However, once Mayhew is killed and Charlotte emerges into her father's crowded party covered in blood, she is now played by a stand-in – though, once she speaks, her voice is still unmistakably that of Davis. Thus, as is the case in *Baby Jane*, the childhood self that the adult Charlotte fantasizes about is presented as fragmented and compromised. Instead of an idealized image of childhood innocence that has been lost in the shift to adulthood, each of these films presents a confused temporality in which there is no meaningful distinction between childhood and adulthood.

¹²⁰ The film completely ignores the immense history of racism that is inferred by this setting, preferring to instead evoke classical Hollywood's own version of this history through the casting of Bette Davis – whose role as a 'southern belle' recalls *Jezebel* (William Wyler, 1938) – and Olivia de Havilland – whose presence *Gone With the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939). This erasure, as well as the film's related relationship to the Southern Gothic subgenre, is notable but largely outside of the scope of this study.



Figs. 13-16: In 1927, Charlotte shifts from being portrayed by Bette Davis to a stand-in, as her lover John Mayhew (Bruce Dern) is killed and her father (Victor Buono) sees her bloodied dress

What is especially notable about *Sweet Charlotte*'s opening scenes is how they specifically attach the fragmentation of Charlotte's identity to her process of coming-of-age. Unlike *Baby Jane*, in which Blanche and Jane's transition from childhood to adulthood occurs within the ellipses created as the film jumps between various time periods, *Sweet Charlotte*'s opening scene explicitly demarcates Charlotte's transition between childhood to adulthood through the image of her bloodied dress. Although diegetically inferred to be the result of Charlotte cradling Mayhew's dismembered head in her lap, one possible way to read this image is through the symbology of menstruation or vaginal bleeding, a problematic formulation offered by Peter Shelley in his analysis of the film: "When Charlotte appears at the dance, a blood stain on the front of her dress suggests the deflowering of a virgin."¹²¹ Beyond overlooking the socially constructed nature of virginity, Shelley's reading of this scene points to a symbology that is insufficient to account for the complexity of this moment within the broader context of the film's narrative. As it coincides with Mayhew's death, which Charlotte will spend much of the

¹²¹ Peter Shelley, *Grande Dame Guignol Cinema: A History of Hag Horror From Baby Jane to Mother* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2009), 58.

following decades mourning, it is tempting to understand this image as a decisive rupture point between an innocent childhood and a compromised adulthood. However, given the instability of Charlotte's identity in these opening scenes (through the amalgamation of the already-adult Davis and her younger stand-in), this scene cannot be understood through this linear narrative of maturation.

An alternative approach would be to view the image of Charlotte's bloodied dress through the more appropriate, albeit equally problematic, symbology of castration. Just as Jane's alienation from her reflection frustrates the narrative of Lacan's mirror stage, Charlotte's bloody 'castration' undermines the totalizing narrative of Freud's castration complex. As discussed above, Freud situates the image of the phallic woman as the lynchpin of the (supposedly universal) distortions in children's understanding of sexuality. As such, the disavowal of this fantasy through the image of the castrated woman is related to a child's successful entry into a 'mature' (hetero)sexuality which "is serviceable to civilization."¹²² If understood as a mark of female castration, the image of Charlotte's bloodied dress offers an inversion of Freud's temporal logic: rather than marking Charlotte's disavowal of childish fantasy and her entry into a 'healthy' adult sexuality, it instead marks the *beginning* of her nostalgic ideation. While Freud assigns a logic of futurity to his account of the 'mature' sexuality attained through female castration, Charlotte's sexual fantasies as an adult instead lead her backwards, as she fantasizes about what could have been had Mayhew lived. Thus, the moment of Charlotte's 'castration' erodes the interconnected constructions of futurity and compulsory heterosexuality, by aligning her with a queerness that stands outside of the totalizing, linear narrative of identity formation offered by Freud.

The film returns to the image of Charlotte's bloodied dress in a later dream sequence, suggesting a further deconstruction of the heteronormative narrative of maturation offered by psychoanalysis. Sitting in front of her harpsichord alone at night, Charlotte plays the first few bars of a love song written for her by Mayhew. This song draws her back to the night of Mayhew's murder, fulfilling her romantic longing as she imagines herself dancing with him. However, this moment of realization is interrupted by the appearance of her father, which prompts the dissolution of Charlotte's idyllic vision: Mayhew's head and hands disappear

¹²² Freud, "Civilized' Sexual Morality," 9:189

(recalling the mode of his fatal dismemberment), the crowd disappears from the room, and – most tellingly – each of the mirrors in the room shatter.



Figs. 17-20: *Charlotte's fantasy is interrupted by her father – prompting Mayhew to disappear and the room's mirrors to shatter*

Recalling the sequence in *Baby Jane* in which Jane's nostalgic fantasy of childhood is interrupted by the sight of her adult self in the mirror, this moment highlights how Charlotte's fantasies fail to successfully overwrite the past. These moments of incomplete and frustrated dreaming are central to these films' refusal of the linear narrative of maturation offered by psychoanalysis. Rather than presenting a subject's self-spectatorship in a mirror and the image of castration as moments of clear rupture – between childhood and adulthood, fantasy and reality, and non-linear and linear temporality – these films instead position these moments as indicators of a descent into incoherence and dissatisfaction.

Sweet Charlotte expands upon the fragmented, decadent temporality of *Baby Jane* as it invokes the imagery of castration only to demonstrate the insufficiency of the narrative of maturation which it implies. As such, Charlotte – like Jane before her – occupies the cinematic equivalent to the “spotted time” of decadent literature, as her present stands “unimproved by the

renewing energies of [the] youth” towards which she constantly reaches back.¹²³ Both of these films are representative of how the Grande Dame Guignol cycle enacts a queer deconstruction of the interconnected constructions of linear time and heteronormativity established in the discourses of modernity – and, more specifically, by psychoanalysis. Thus, just as decadent literature emerges at the turn of the century to open a space for a queer ambivalence towards the hostile environment of modernity, these mid-century decadent films offer a valuable deconstruction of such discourses as they exist within classical Hollywood’s cinema.

Finally, it is worth noting how each of these films end as their titular protagonists realize that they are not responsible for the violent acts that have defined their entire adult lives: that Blanche, not her sister, had been driving on the night of her accident; and that John Mayhew had in fact been murdered by his jealous wife (Mary Astor). Each of these revelations bring with them a sudden recognition of the emotional cost of the suspended temporality of decadence, as when Jane faces her dying sister, and asks, “You mean, all of this time we could have been friends?” As decades pass in the space of a single sentence, Jane is pulled out of an atemporal existence defined by the constant slippage between the past, the present, and the futures she and her sister could not realize. However, even as her past is brought into sharper view, it still does not carry the regenerative powers of Wordsworth’s spot of time. Instead, as in the equivalent moment in *Sweet Charlotte*, the past becomes a burden, as Jane is forced to confront the emotional and material costs of time’s passing.

Even as these films do not explicitly present same-sex desire, this painful realization evokes the agony which Heather Love suggests defines the queer literature of early modernity, of the “painful negotiation of the coming of modern homosexuality [...] [and] the corporeal and psychic costs of homophobia.”¹²⁴ Jane and Charlotte are representative of this dark legacy, as they are forced to contend with being a denied ‘proper’ passage into maturity, and the resulting alienation from their adult selves.

¹²³ Sherry, *Modernism*, 45.

¹²⁴ Love, *Feeling Backward*, 4.

Chapter 2: Cinematic Decadence and the Body

*It is hard to laugh at the need for beauty and romance, no matter how tasteless, even horrible, the results of that need are. But it is easy to sigh. Few things are sadder than the truly monstrous.*¹²⁵

Excerpted from Nathaniel West's 1939 novel *The Day of the Locust*, these words come as newly-hired Hollywood screenwriter Tod Hackett reflects upon the tacky architecture of his suburban Los Angeles neighborhood. Describing the ahistorical assemblage of "Mexican ranch houses, Samoan huts, [and] Mediterranean villas" which surround him, he imagines a connection between their outward vulgarity and the methods of their construction: "When he noticed that they were all of plaster, lath and paper, he was charitable and blamed their shape on the materials used. Steel, stone and brick curb a builder's fancy a little [...] but plaster and paper know no law, not even that of gravity."¹²⁶ These ruminations on the illusory nature of Hollywood serve as an introduction to a novel that dramatizes the downfall of this system, culminating with an apocalyptic riot in which the assembled citizens of Los Angeles (the titular 'locusts') overwhelm and destroy this frail architecture.

In his analysis of West's novel, Martin Rogers suggests how this architectural metaphor – using faulty methods of construction to suggest Hollywood's coming collapse – is problematically extended towards the novel's presentation of those living on the margins of Hollywood's glamour industry. Throughout the novel, the "ivy leaguer, classicist" Tod "perceives his fellow *angelenos* in terms bestial and atavistic,"¹²⁷ imagining their bodies as markers of Hollywood's ongoing decline in the same manner as its "truly monstrous" architecture.¹²⁸ This dehumanizing gaze disproportionately falls upon marginalized persons: for instance, Rogers notes how the novel introduces the Mexican-American Miguel by listing his body parts in isolation from each other, positioning him as "a disordered arrangement of textures

¹²⁵ Nathaniel West, *The Day of the Locust* (1939; repr. London: Penguin English Library, 2018), 4.

¹²⁶ West, *The Day of the Locust*, 3.

¹²⁷ Martin Rogers, "Monstrous Modernism and *The Day of the Locust*," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 44, no. 2 (2011): 377.

¹²⁸ West, *The Day of the Locust*, 3.

and surfaces” rather than a complete being.¹²⁹ As Tod extends his disdain for Hollywood’s “monstrous”¹³⁰ architecture towards the city’s inhabitants, Rogers understands West’s novel as a reflection of the widespread popularity of eugenic discourses in 1930s America: “The invocation of screen monsters in *Locust* dramatizes, among other things, the desire to control or assimilate the massive influx of immigrants, cultures, and humanity into the Los Angeles of the 1930s.”¹³¹ Thus, as West’s novel imagines tacky architecture and marginalized individuals alike as grotesque markers of decline, its vision of Hollywood on the brink of collapse offered by West’s novel is inextricably tied to insidious notions of the inferiority and frailty of marginalized and disabled individuals.

This aesthetic focus on fragmentation (in Hackett’s heterogeneous neighborhood, as well as the problematically formulated bodies of the ‘locusts’) offers a valuable starting point to understand the relationship between modernity and decadence in the early 20th century. Fragmentation is at the centre of Frederic Jameson’s notion of “semi-autonomous” modernist texts, which he defines by suggesting the capacity for individual fragments of a work (such as individual sentences, shots, or sequences) to “provoke their own mini-interpretations” independent from the overall work they exist within.¹³² Jameson argues that these fragments still must be understood through their relationship to the work as a whole, given that their full autonomy would prompt a shift into full postmodernism: “we can decide to rewrite these books as postmodern texts by heightening the silences around their sentences [...] [or] to misremember modernist films by jumping from ‘image’ or frame to the next in a properly discontinuous or heterogeneous fashion.”¹³³ While Jameson infers that this postmodern act of “misremember[ing]” necessarily risks meaninglessness – as the independence of a text’s fragments precludes any possibility of considering the text as a unified whole – the project of fragmentation which defines postmodernism is anything but ideologically empty.

¹²⁹ The passage in question is as follows: “[Miguel was] toffee colored, with large Armenian eyes and pouting black lips. His head was a mass of tight, ordered curls. He wore a long haired sweater, called a “gorilla” in and around Los Angeles, with nothing under it. His soiled duck trousers were held up by a red bandanna handkerchief. On his feet were a pair of tattered tennis sneakers. Quoted in Rogers, “Monstrous Modernism,” 377.

¹³⁰ West, *The Day of the Locust*, 4.

¹³¹ Rogers, “Monstrous Modernism,” 378. See also Smith (2014).

¹³² Frederic Jameson, “The Existence of Italy,” in *Signatures of the Visible* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2007), 282-283.

¹³³ Jameson, “The Existence of Italy,” 284.

As suggested by Jane Flax, the displacement of textual authority which defines postmodernism – the notion that “no text has a meaning or authority to which a reader must defer” – is mirrored by the political discourses of postmodern thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Jean-François Lyotard: “[Such authors’] skeptical and disrespectful polemics are partially strategic devices meant to disrupt and erode the power of grand ‘normalizing’ discourses that put into action and legitimate patterns of domination characteristic of the post-Enlightenment Western states.”¹³⁴ Meaghan Morris offers a similar suggestion in a discussion of Lyotard, characterizing postmodernism as an expansion of possible meanings of a work instead of a signifier of superficiality: “‘Postmodernism’ is [...] a galvanizing principle, a critical dynamic which ensures that events can still occur meaningfully [...] without being grounded in a legitimizing meta-narrative.”¹³⁵ As such, the erosion of modernist rationality that defines postmodernism is fundamentally constructive, offering a variety of new starting points for political discourse rather than a marker of its impossibility.

Postmodernism serves as a useful comparison point for the aesthetic of decadence which, contrary to the democratization of meaning discussed above, erodes modernist coherence through a descent into radical meaninglessness. This tension between coherence and incoherence is thematized in the concluding moments of *The Day of the Locust*, as the titular outcasts coalesce into a violent mob. As a destructive whole made of a heterogeneous collection of individuals, this mob enacts the dissolution of Jameson’s modernist semi-autonomy as it literally dismantles the infrastructure surrounding it – offering the image of a societal whole overwhelmed by its component parts. The novel does not characterize the mob’s destruction as a postmodern act of politically generative democratization so much as a descent into chaos. Rather than the decentering of “grand, ‘normalizing’ discourses,”¹³⁶ this final sequence presents a devolution of meaning akin to Paul Bourget’s description of decadence in terms of endless fragmentation: “A style of decadence is the one in which the unity of the book is decomposed to make way for the independence of the page, the page is decomposed to make way for the independence of the sentence, and the sentence makes way for the independence of the word.”¹³⁷ Rather than offering

¹³⁴ Jane Flax, *Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, & Postmodernism in the Contemporary West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 39

¹³⁵ Meaghan Morris, *The Pirate’s Fiancée: Feminism, Reading, Postmodernism* (London: Verso, 1988), 235

¹³⁶ Flax, *Thinking Fragments*, 39.

¹³⁷ Paul Bourget, *Essais de psychologie contemporaine* (Paris: Lemerre, 1883), 25.

a new set of possibilities, as is the case in postmodernism, the novel's so-called 'locusts' – true to their metaphorical namesake – end up leaving nothing in their wake.

This chapter uses the onscreen construction of specific bodies to understand how the radical incoherence which defines decadence operates within cinema. To further explore how decadence problematically formulates certain bodies as fragmented and incoherent, this chapter begins by describing how this aesthetic often presents women's bodies as monstrous, grotesque objects against which an idealized male subjectivity establishes itself. Then, through a discussion of the abject, it considers decadence as a site which can also complicate this limited, problematic understanding of femininity. Finally, through two case studies – *Strait-Jacket* (William Castle, 1964) and *What's the Matter with Helen* (Curtis Harrington, 1971) – this chapter considers how the Grande Dame Guignol films simultaneously perpetuate and problematize the onscreen presentation of women as monstrous. Considering these contexts, this chapter argues how the radical meaninglessness which defines the decadent tradition undermines the process by which a normative male subjectivity establishes itself through the construction of women as monstrous and grotesque.

Decadence and Abjection

To understand the relationship between decadence and embodiment, it is necessary to recount the reconceptualization of the imaginary surrounding non-normative bodies that occurs during the *fin-de-siècle*. In her account of the female grotesque, Mary Russo suggests that early 20th century modernity marks, within artistic and sociopolitical discourses,¹³⁸ a shift away from “discernable grotesque figures or style [...] [and a] modern turn towards a more active consideration of the grotesque as an interior event.”¹³⁹ Russo characterizes the pre-modern conception of the grotesque through Mikhail Bakhtin's description of the carnivalesque, within which the “discursive formation [of the grotesque] is understood as historical and locatable [...]

¹³⁸ In addition to the psychoanalytic framework described in this chapter, Russo supports her argument of a modern 'surface and depth' understanding of the grotesque through the discourses surrounding criminality. To demonstrate this connection, she cites a conflation of these two terms in Arthur Conan Doyle's 1908 Sherlock Holmes story “The Adventure of Wisteria Lodge” (“You will recognize how often the grotesque has deepened into the criminal”). This description serves to reinforce the understanding of the grotesque that Russo identifies in her study of psychoanalytic literature – of a 'normal' exterior which obfuscates the non-normativity (and in this case criminality) within. Quoted in Russo, *The Female Grotesque*, 7.

¹³⁹ Russo, *The Female Grotesque*, 7.

within a certain nexus of space and time, marked by dates, material events, and exteriority.”¹⁴⁰

She then notes how the pre-modern understanding of the grotesque in terms of material corporeality gives way to a ‘surface and depth’ model at the turn of the 20th century: “[At this time,] the grotesque [...] moves inward towards an individualized, interiorized space of fantasy.”

¹⁴¹ She suggests that Sigmund Freud’s accounts of the neuroses that lie within the “normal-looking” citizens of Vienna are indicative of this newfound understanding – as the grotesque is hidden behind a normative surface, rather than visibly written onto a non-normative body.¹⁴²

Each of these divergent understandings of the grotesque hold a distinct relationship to the process of identity formation, which can be theorized through the differing functions of the object and the abject. As suggested by Julia Kristeva in her *Powers of Horror*, the object is that which, in its total difference from the subject, “settles [them] within the fragile texture of a desire for meaning.”¹⁴³ The object’s function recalls Russo’s description of the pre-modern understanding of the grotesque, as the non-normative, “open, protruding, irregular, secreting” bodies of the carnivalesque assist in turn establish the norms of the idealized “classical body” as “closed, static, [and] self-contained” – and thus aid the “rationalis[t], individualis[t], and normalizing aspirations of the bourgeoisie.”¹⁴⁴

Meanwhile, Kristeva defines the abject through its difference from this normalizing object. For Kristeva, the abject is a thing of disgust which the subject nonetheless finds impossible to separate themselves from due to its underlying familiarity. Instead of helping to establish identity and subjectivity, the abject “draws [the subject] toward the place where meaning collapses.”¹⁴⁵ As the abject rouses simultaneous feelings of disgust and identification in the subject, Kristeva suggests that it undermines the process of their identity creation, as in her account of disgust at spoiled milk:

‘I’ want none of that element [...] ‘I’ do not assimilate it, ‘I’ expel it. But since food is not an ‘other’ for ‘me’ [...] I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the

¹⁴⁰ Russo, *The Female Grotesque*, 7. See also Bakhtin (1984).

¹⁴¹ Russo, *The Female Grotesque*, 8.

¹⁴² Quoted in Russo, *The Female Grotesque*, 9.

¹⁴³ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 1-2.

¹⁴⁴ Russo, *The Female Grotesque*, 8.

¹⁴⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 2.

same motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish myself [...] I give birth to myself amidst the violence of sobs, of vomit.¹⁴⁶

While the object’s obvious difference from the subject is reassuring, the abject problematizes their identity because it cannot be fully separated from them. As such, the abject provides a useful construct with which to conceptualize the disruptive potential of the “surface and depth” model of the grotesque that Russo ascribes to modernity.¹⁴⁷ Like the abject, this understanding of the grotesque as an “interior event” frustrates the construction of identity, as the ostensibly ‘normal’ subject can no longer separate themselves from the supposedly ‘grotesque.’¹⁴⁸

The radically defamiliarizing potential of the abject can be related back to decadence through the work of philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. This philosopher is one of the sources Russo invokes as she develops her account of the pre-modern, exteriorized mode of the grotesque. Specifically, she turns towards *The Gay Science*, in which Nietzsche takes the figure of Baubo from Greek mythology (“the obscene crone impudently displaying her genitals as an ironic smile”)¹⁴⁹ to conceive of women as purely superficial:

One should have more respect for the *bashfulness* with which nature has hidden behind riddles and iridescent uncertainties. Perhaps truth is a woman [...] [whose] name is – to speak Greek – *Baubo*? ...Oh those Greeks! They knew how to *live*: what is needed for that is to stop bravely at the surface [...] Those Greeks were superficial – *out of profundity!*¹⁵⁰

For Russo, Nietzsche’s reduction of women to their surface is indicative of a problematic conception of femininity, which positions them as objects to be seen and interpreted by an idealized male subject: “In Nietzsche, woman is literalized in the manner of the famous grotesque alphabets, to be analyzed in detail but never allowed to make words.”¹⁵¹ Here, the function of the

¹⁴⁶ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 3.

¹⁴⁷ Russo, *The Female Grotesque*, 6.

¹⁴⁸ Russo, *The Female Grotesque*, 7.

¹⁴⁹ Russo, *The Female Grotesque*, 6.

¹⁵⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. Bernard Williams and trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 8.

¹⁵¹ Russo, *The Female Grotesque*, 6.

grotesque (as personified by women) recalls Kristeva's notion of the object, as something whose total difference from the subject serves to "settl[e them] within the fragile texture of a desire for meaning."¹⁵² Thus, Nietzsche's misogyny exemplifies the role that the creation and Othering of the grotesque plays in the construction of subjectivity and a rational structure of meaning.

However, Nietzsche's later writings on the concept of decadence demonstrate how the identity-affirming capacity of the grotesque object breaks down as the boundaries between the self and the Other become increasingly unclear. Charles Bernheimer identifies the bifurcated nature of the philosopher's engagement with decadence by comparing the various writing fragments collected in the posthumous collection *The Will to Power*. In one of these fragments, written in March/June 1888, Nietzsche conceives of 'decadence' as a natural, inevitable phenomenon:

The concept of decadence – Waste, decay, elimination need not be condemned: they are necessary consequences of life, of the growth of life [...] [O]ne is in no position to abolish [decadence] [...] Even at the height of its strength [a society] has to form waste and refuse materials.¹⁵³

However, in another fragment from the same period, the philosopher conceives of the supposedly natural phenomenon of decadence is something to be overcome: "Thesis: the *instincts of decadence*, which [...] want to become master over the instinctive morality of strong races and ages, are [...] the instincts of the weak and underprivileged [and] those habituated to suffering, who need a noble interpretation of their condition."¹⁵⁴ Bernheimer suggests that this apparent contradiction – between decadence as something inevitable and natural, and also as something to be overcome – is indicative of Nietzsche's efforts to "extricate himself from decadence."¹⁵⁵ While Nietzsche elsewhere declares himself to be decadent,¹⁵⁶ he also credits himself with the

¹⁵² Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 2.

¹⁵³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kaufmann and trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 25. See also Bernheimer (2002).

¹⁵⁴ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 228-229.

¹⁵⁵ Charles Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects: The Idea of Decadence in Art, Literature, Philosophy, and Culture of the Fin-de-Siècle in Europe*, ed. T. Jefferson Kline and Naomi Schor (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 15

¹⁵⁶ In the autobiographical text *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche ties his self-diagnosis of decadence to his efforts to overcome this supposed weakness: "Setting aside the fact that I am a *decadent*, I am also its antithesis. My proof of this is, among other things, that in combatting my sick conditions I always instinctively choose the *right* means: while the

necessary will to overcome these instincts and retain the philosophical objectivity necessary to make such “unequivocal diagnoses [of decadence].”¹⁵⁷

The complications created by Nietzsche’s simultaneous critique and identification with decadence are further explored by Daniel W. Conway who, like Bernheimer, understands the philosopher’s engagement with this concept through the tension between his subjectivity and his desire for objectivity:

Abandoning the pose of the detached physician of culture and along with it the pretense of a transcendent, ahistorical standpoint, he now immerses himself in the decadence of his age. Emboldened rather than humbled by the forfeiture of his ‘objectivity,’ he [...] pronounce[s] his own decay [alongside] the completion of his period of ‘convalescence.’ He is now sufficiently healthy that he can resist – though not throw off – the decadence that besets him.¹⁵⁸

In Conway’s reading, decadence serves for Nietzsche the exact opposite purpose of the grotesque figure of Baubo in *The Gay Science*. While the latter serves as an object against which the subject can establish their identity, the relationship to decadence evidenced in the passages above instead recalls the relationship between the subject and the abject. Even as Nietzsche condemns decadence, his identification with it poses the same risk described within Kristeva’s account of the abject – that an individual’s underlying similarity to that which is abjected risks compromising their efforts to assert their own identity: “I expel *myself* within the same motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish *myself*.”¹⁵⁹ Thus, while the grotesque object forms the basis for a rational, idealized subjectivity, the underlying familiarity of the abject fundamentally undermines the possibility of such a subjectivity.

Decadence – and its capacity to undermine the creation of subjectivity – offers a valuable pretext within which to understand the unsettling relationship between the abject and the subject within the more contemporary setting of cinema. Barbara Creed suggests that horror films are

decadent always chooses the means harmful to him.” Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1979), 40.

¹⁵⁷ Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects*, 14.

¹⁵⁸ Daniel W. Conway, *Nietzsche’s Dangerous Game: Philosophy in the Twilight of the Idols* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 10.

¹⁵⁹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 3.

particularly well-suited to this analysis, as they often directly dramatize the subject's encounter with the abject, and their consequent efforts to extricate it from themselves: "The horror film attempts to bring about a confrontation with the abject (the corpse, bodily waste, the monstrous-feminine) in order finally to eject the abject and redraw the boundaries between human and non-human."¹⁶⁰ The abject category of the monstrous-feminine is particularly central for Creed, as it highlights the gendered, patriarchal aspects of this normative identity formation: "[W]oman is represented as monstrous in a significant number of horror films. [...] [However, t]he presence of the monstrous-feminine [...] speaks to us more about male fears than about female desire or feminine subjectivity."¹⁶¹

Like Nietzsche's Baubo, the monstrous-feminine represents the efforts of an idealized male subjectivity to establish itself by formulating women as grotesque, Othered objects. However, even as Creed conceptualizes horror films as representative of this effort to "separate out the symbolic order from all that threatens its stability, particularly the mother and all that her universe signifies," she also recognizes the difficulties posed by the monstrous-feminine's status as abject: "[A]bjection by its very nature, is ambiguous; it both repels and attracts. Separating out the mother and her universe from the symbolic order is not an easy task – perhaps it is, finally, not even possible."¹⁶² As such, even as the monstrous-feminine is central to these films' construction of normative gender identity, this figure's status as abject necessarily undermines these efforts.

While Creed's analysis of the construction of women as abject in horror cinema largely rests upon misogynistic anxieties surrounding fertility and menstruation, Erin Harrington has recently extended this critical framework towards the rare and often-neglected cinematic depictions of menopause and aging. Focusing upon the Grande Dame Guignol cycle, she highlights how these films' protagonists prove unable to be subordinated into an exclusionary male subjectivity:

[T]he barren body (perhaps like other female or feminine autoerotic bodies) is for itself. It refuses to be co-opted into a system that positions female bodies [...] as a necessary

¹⁶⁰ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993), 14.

¹⁶¹ Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 7.

¹⁶² Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 14-15

part of the creation of a male/masculine subject, and thus it sits outside of the phallogentric order.¹⁶³

The boundary which this exclusion reifies, to use Kristeva's terminology, is the same narrow structure of reproductive futurity that served as the focus of the previous chapter of this thesis. Just as Lee Edelman's *sinthomosexuality* reveals and unravels the ubiquitous notion of a 'healthy' reproductive heteronormativity, Harrington suggests that aging, menopausal, and otherwise non-reproductive bodies are constructed as abject for their "failure to comply to a reproductive imperative that positions self-sacrificing motherhood as the ideal form of ideologically complicit female subjectivity."¹⁶⁴

Thus, the onscreen construction of women as monstrous offers a complicated site for the creation and dissolution of subjectivity equivalent to Nietzsche's much earlier exploration of decadence. Each of the interconnected concepts outlined above – decadence, the grotesque, the abject, and the monstrous-feminine – suggest how an idealized male subjectivity seeks to establish itself by designating certain female bodies as Other. However, as the Grande Dame Guignol films portray their central figures through an abject mixture of familiarity and otherness, they undermine this normative subjectivity and, in doing so, pose a decadent challenge towards the discourses of rationality offered by modernity. To further explore how cinematic decadent texts undermine an exclusionary, normative subjectivity, this chapter considers embodiment within two Grande Dame Guignol films: *Strait-Jacket*, and *What's the Matter With Helen?*

Grotesque Stardom: *Strait-Jacket*

If *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (Robert Aldrich, 1962) used its proliferation of mirrors to suggest the irreconcilability of its aging stars' fractured identities, the opening moments of *Strait-Jacket* do the same, albeit with much less subtlety. The film begins with the image of a shattering mirror, followed by a quick succession of images and sounds: the anguished screams of Lucy Harbin (Joan Crawford); a newspaper depicting Lucy in a furious rage; and an authoritative voice announcing that "Lucy Harbin was declared legally insane today." These opening moments introduce Lucy as a monstrous, abject body. Creed suggests that "that which

¹⁶³ Erin Harrington, *Women, Monstrosity, and Horror Film: Gynaehorror* (London: Routledge, 2018), 225.

¹⁶⁴ Harrington, *Women, Monstrosity, and Horror Film*, 225. See Also Edelman (2004), as well as the previous chapter.

crosses or threatens to cross the ‘border’ is abject,” describing a number of different borders that horror cinema uses to construct female bodies as excessive, including those between “good and evil [and] between normal and abnormal sexual desire.”¹⁶⁵ In this way, the headline that Lucy is introduced alongside (“LOVE SLAYER INSANE”) rules her as abject multiple times over – as ‘insane,’ as a murderer, and as a woman whose sexual desire has apparently translated into violence.

This problematic depiction of Lucy continues to develop throughout the remainder of this prologue sequence, as the same voice that describes Lucy “insane” goes on to narrate the details of her crime – after coming home to find her husband with another woman, she murders each with an axe, while her daughter Carol looks on, horrified. As the scene ends, the image becomes overlaid with the sight of Harbin in her titular strait-jacket, proclaiming her innocence in between anguished yells – a superimposition which literally recalls Russo’s description of the grotesque body as “doubled, [...] excessive, and abject.”¹⁶⁶



Figs. 21-24: “LOVE SLAYER INSANE:” Strait-Jacket’s opening sequence

¹⁶⁵ Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 11.

¹⁶⁶ Russo, *The Female Grotesque*, 9.

This grotesque presentation of Lucy is in line with the film's advertising campaign, which positions Joan Crawford/Lucy Harbin at the rupture point of another border – that between reality and fiction. The film's posters presented the image of a furious, axe wielding Crawford alongside the taglines “WARNING! *Strait-Jacket* vividly depicts axe murders!” and “Just keep saying to yourself: ‘It’s only a movie... It’s only a movie... It’s only a movie... It’s only a... It’s only... It’s....’”¹⁶⁷ In this advertising campaign, Crawford/Lucy is formulated as a transgressive, destabilizing figure whose grotesquerie stems from the disjunction between the star's glamorous public image and the abject nature of the character she is playing. As personified by the spectator implied in the above tagline that is increasingly unable to tell what is “only a movie,” and what is reality, the strange amalgamation of Crawford/Lucy serves to disrupt a subject's capability to view her as either entirely familiar or entirely Other.

Crucially, the grotesque construction of Crawford/Lucy (both inside and outside of *Strait-Jacket*) relies upon her status as a public figure. Instead of portraying Lucy directly, the film introduces her as she is sensationalized within a newspaper. The presentation of her body as spectacle is mirrored by the in-person appearances made by Crawford to promote *Strait-Jacket* during its initial release, further confusing the boundary between star and role.¹⁶⁸ In each of these cases, Crawford/Lucy recalls Russo's description of “the female transgressor as public spectacle,” which she aligns with the pre-modern notion of the grotesque as specifically locatable and “connected to the rest of the world.”¹⁶⁹ Further, this presentation of Lucy recalls Nietzsche's description of female superficiality, as the ‘meaning’ of the supposedly grotesque feminine body is closely tied to its positioning as an object to be read and interpreted by its spectators, rather than existing in and of itself.

While *Strait-Jacket*'s opening scenes imagine Lucy through the lens of the grotesque, the remainder of the film problematizes this construction. Following its opening prologue sequence, the film jumps forward in time to find Lucy as she returns to her family home after twenty years of institutionalization. As the film shifts towards portraying Lucy directly (rather than as she is sensationalized through the media), she emerges as an entirely different character. Instead of the abject grotesquerie of her public persona, she now exudes a gentle and calm demeanor. Here,

¹⁶⁷ Peter Shelley, *Grande Dame Guignol Cinema: A History of Hag Horror From Baby Jane to Mother* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2009), 47.

¹⁶⁸ Shelley, *Grande Dame Guignol Cinema*, 47

¹⁶⁹ Russo, *The Female Grotesque*, 61-63

Lucy's simultaneous familiarity and Otherness rule her as abject in another sense – as her family are forced to reconcile her present, genteel self with the famous, grotesque image of her past. The film exacerbates this tension by offering a proliferation of images of Lucy's past – upon her arrival home, Lucy's now-adult daughter Carol (Diane Baker) presents her mother with a sculpture of Lucy's pre-institutionalized appearance and urges her to buy the clothes and wig necessary to re-create this past self. Further, the film suggests a correlation between Lucy's attempts to re-embody her past self and the re-emergence of her violent behaviour as a string of murders occur that echo the details of her original crime.

Instead of the overtly grotesque figure presented in the film's opening sequence, these later scenes present Lucy in terms which recall Russo's description of a modern, "surface and depth" model of the grotesque.¹⁷⁰ After returning home, Lucy's violent, murderous potential is reframed as an "interior event" obscured by her banal exterior appearance, which is nonetheless always in risk of resurfacing as she attempts to re-embody her past self.¹⁷¹ The film emphasizes the abject nature of this construction when Lucy's psychiatrist visits to assess her recovery, and confides to Carol that he is unable to identify her as either ill or 'cured.' Instead, he notes how Lucy seems to exist on both sides of the boundary between her present and her murderous past: "Today, I saw a different Lucy – a woman who is trying to act as if those 20 years never existed. A woman who is trying to recapture her past. But for her, the past is dangerous!" As such, while the film's initial presentation of Lucy can be easily fit into the problematic imaginary of the monstrous-feminine, its later presentation of her as an abject figure that may or may not be monstrous undermines this construction. While Lucy initially assists in establishing the confines of 'proper' embodiment through her non-compliance with these norms, the difficulty that Lucy's psychiatrist experiences in interpreting whether or not she has been 'cured' is suggestive of the capacity of the abject to draw "[the subject] to the place where meaning collapses."¹⁷² Instead of assisting in the construction of meaning (as a grotesque object), Lucy embodies the capacity of the abject to problematize the structures by which a normative subjectivity establishes itself.

However, this understanding of Lucy as abject is further complicated by the film's conclusion – which reveals Carol, not her mother, as responsible for the film's murders. Wearing a latex mask of her mother and intentionally recreating her crimes, Carol has been exploiting the

¹⁷⁰ Russo, *The Female Grotesque*, 6.

¹⁷¹ Russo, *The Female Grotesque*, 7.

¹⁷² Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 2.

public perception of her mother as a grotesque in order to draw attention away from herself. This conclusion entirely reshapes the preceding film. As suggested above, the film's plot is predicated upon the tension between Lucy's surface and depth – and the fears expressed by her psychiatrist and family of Lucy's violent past surfacing. Further, the film invites its audience to share these fears, as Lucy's moments of emotional distress coincide with the appearance of dead bodies – most notably, when the psychiatrist's recommendation that Lucy be re-institutionalized is shortly followed by his murder. However, the film's conclusion instead suggests that these supposed moments of 'resurfacing' are the results of Carol's attempts to gaslight her mother.

While the modern, "surface and depth" understanding of the grotesque is unsettling insofar as it is impossible to fully distinguish from normalcy, this model still fundamentally offers a sense of coherence.¹⁷³ Like Frederic Jameson's account of semi-autonomous modernist texts, the individual's inner consciousness, however fragmented, still serves to establish the identity of the whole. Mary Russo uses Sigmund Freud's case studies to suggest an underlying rationality to the modern grotesque, noting that even as the "uncanny, grotesque body" moves inward, it is understood as a "prop" through which the individual articulates their various psychoses, and is thus still legible as an accurate "projection of an inner state."¹⁷⁴ However, as *Strait-Jacket* reveals that the tension between Lucy's surface and depth has been the wholesale creation of Carol, it replaces this fundamentally rational understanding of the individual with incoherence.

Ultimately, the presentation of Lucy in *Strait-Jacket* undermines the process described above, by which an idealized male subjectivity establishes itself by constructing women as a grotesque, monstrous Other. While the film initially presents Lucy through the problematic lens of the monstrous-feminine, it complicates this construction over the course of the film. As Lucy is revealed as the film's victim rather than its villain, *Strait-Jacket* belies a structure of meaning organized around the management of her supposedly transgressive body. As such, she can be better understood through the lens provided by Kristeva's description of the abject, or Nietzsche's description of decadence – as both familiar and Other, and thus profoundly disruptive towards the construction of normative subjectivity. As such, rather than a familiar story of female monstrosity, *Strait-Jacket* ultimately reveals itself as something far more troubling – a

¹⁷³ Russo, *The Female Grotesque*, 6.

¹⁷⁴ Russo, *The Female Grotesque*, 9.

dramatization of the process by which Lucy is constructed as monstrous, and an account of the psychic damage that this construction wreaks.

Object Stardom: *What's the Matter With Helen?*

As the films of the Grande Dame Guignol cycle problematize the process by which an idealized male subjectivity is formed in opposition to a female body, they fundamentally undermine the processes of film stardom itself. Even as *Strait-Jacket* significantly complicates Lucy's relationship to the grotesque, this construction is in part made possible by blurring the boundary between Crawford and her character, as outlined in the above description of the film's promotional campaign. To further explore this connection, this thesis now turns towards *What's the Matter With Helen?* which directly engages with the construction of stardom within its text.

Like *Strait-Jacket*, *What's the Matter With Helen?* begins with a prologue that introduces its two central characters – Adelle Bruckner (Debbie Reynolds) and Helen Hill (Shelley Winters) through the lens of the grotesque. The film opens with a mock newsreel, establishing the film's depression-era setting through the logo for Hearst Metrotone News and two stories about Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt.¹⁷⁵ Adelle and Helen are introduced in the newsreel's third story, as the mothers of two men who have just been convicted of murder in what the narrator deems “one of the century's grisliest murder trials.” This narrator goes on to extend this tone of sensationalism towards the two women themselves: “During the sensation-packed days of the trial, Mrs. Bruckner and Mrs. Hill have been subjected to as much public curiosity as their sons.” Like *Strait-Jacket*, *What's the Matter With Helen?* initially declines to present its central figures directly, instead presenting them as they are sensationalized within the public imagination. This description of Adelle and Helen as objects of “public curiosity” aligns them with the outwardly visible understanding of the grotesque which Russo associated with pre-modernity, presenting them (like Nietzsche's Baubo) as objects to be seen and interpreted by the film's viewers. This opening sequence further embraces this problematic formulation when, at its conclusion, the image becomes broken up into a series of interlocking jigsaw pieces – literally presenting Adelle and Helen as puzzles to be solved. The film further emphasizes the newsreel's artificiality as the image's fragmentation is accompanied by a shift from nostalgic sepia tones towards colour –

¹⁷⁵ The historical pastiche presented by this opening represents a significant departure for the Grand Dame Guignol films, which tend to focus upon melancholic, past-oriented individuals in the present, rather than being directly reimagining the past itself.

signalling a movement away from its mediated view of Adelle and Helen and towards a direct portrayal of them.



Figs. 25-28: *Construction and fragmentation: What's the Matter With Helen's opening sequence*

Following this opening prologue, Adelle and Helen decide to change their names and move to Hollywood, hoping (like *Strait-Jacket's* Lucy) to disassociate themselves from the infamous connotations of their past. However, unlike *Strait-Jacket*, this film explicitly connects this construction of identity to the processes of stardom as Adelle bleaches her hair in order to mimic the appearance of Jean Harlow, her favorite film star.

Film stardom, as described by Richard Dyer, relies upon a similar disjunction between surface and depth to that Russo's ascribes to the modern grotesque, as it "posit[s] [...] a 'real' that is beneath or behind the surface represented by 'the individual' as a discursive category."¹⁷⁶ Regardless of the actual (often doubtful) existence of this inner authenticity, Dyer argues that the *idea* of a truth underneath the artificial surface of stardom serves to anchor it as a construct: "[W]hat is behind or below the surface is [constructed within these discourses as] unquestionably

¹⁷⁶ Richard Dyer, "A Star is Born and the Construction of Authenticity" in *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, ed. Christine Gledhill, (London: Routledge, 1991), 140.

and virtually by definition, the truth.”¹⁷⁷ Further, Dyer historically situates the emergence of this notion of an invisible authenticity within the ideological context of modernity, alongside the same psychoanalytic discourses of identity upon which Russo builds her historical narrative of the grotesque.

The compatibility of film stardom and the grotesque offers a starting point to situate *What’s the Matter With Helen?* within an aesthetic of cinematic decadence. Stardom and the grotesque, in their common focus on the compartmentalization brought about by separating surface and depth, each recall Jameson’s account of semi-autonomous modernist texts by positioning this fragmentation as constitutive of an entire, rational whole. For instance, Dyer describes the underlying rationality of stardom through the various, “mutually reinforcing” levels of Joan Crawford’s star image:

[I]f the existential bond [...] between Crawford and Crawford/Le Sueur in [a] movie or pinup is perceived to be distorted (deauthenticated) by the manipulation of the film-making or photographic process (glamour lighting, clever editing and so on), then we can always go and get photos of her doing the chores at home and cuddling baby Christina. [...] And so on in an infinite regress by means of which one more authentic image displaces another. But then they are all part of the star image, each one anchoring the whole thing in an essential, uncovered authenticity, which can then be read back into the performances, the roles, the pin-ups.¹⁷⁸

This description of stardom as a series of separate yet harmonious layers recalls Jameson’s description of “a constitutive tension between the episode and the totality” in modernist texts.¹⁷⁹ Further, this fragmented yet consistent totality is reminiscent of Russo’s psychoanalytically-informed account of the modern understanding of the grotesque – as a person’s imagined images of “uncanny, grotesque bod[ies]” offer an entrance into their psyche, suggesting a consistency between their interiority and exteriority.¹⁸⁰ Each of these systems perceive a fragmented totality –

¹⁷⁷ Dyer, “*A Star is Born*,” 140.

¹⁷⁸ Dyer, “*A Star is Born*,” 140.

¹⁷⁹ Jameson, “The Existence of Italy,” 285.

¹⁸⁰ Russo, *The Female Grotesque*, 9.

whether it be the assorted materials of stardom, an episodic text, or a grotesque interiority at odds with an outer ‘normalcy’ – and imagine it in service to a coherent, unitary whole.

However, as *What’s the Matter With Helen?* presents the gradual breakdown of Adelle and Helen’s new identities, it offers decadent incoherence in the place of this modernist coalescence. While *Strait-Jacket* dramatizes this tension between surface and depth by centering its plot on the perceived risk of Lucy’s inner monstrosity bubbling towards the surface, *What’s the Matter With Helen?* creates a similar conflict through the opposition it draws between Adelle and Helen. As described above, Adelle attempts to suppress her past by embracing the illusion of stardom, effacing herself of her history as the mother of a murderer and recreating herself as the head of a dance studio. Meanwhile, Helen remains defiantly resistant towards Hollywood’s artificial aesthetics. As Adelle engages with the public, dating Lincoln (Dennis Weaver) and teaching classes at the studio, Helen becomes increasingly isolated in the upper floor of their shared home.

The film’s delineation between its two central characters recalls the two modes of the grotesque outlined by Russo: Adelle is demonstrative of a surface-and-depth model in her embrace of artifice, while Helen is problematically figured as grotesque in her authenticity. The film emphasizes this difference as Helen begins raising rabbits in the apartment, suggesting a dehumanizing conflation with animals and – in her particular choice of animal – an alignment with the reproductive function of motherhood which Barbara Creed suggests is central to horror films’ presentation of women as abject.¹⁸¹ Further, while Adelle seeks to forget the past, Helen finds herself inexorably drawn to it as she begins to have visions of the women murdered by her son. From this set up, much of the film centres on Helen’s escalating inability to hide the secret of the pair’s past – and Adelle’s subsequent efforts to keep her from public view, lest her new identity be compromised. The resulting dynamic is best represented in a scene midway through the film, at a recital for Adelle’s dance students.¹⁸² As Adelle performs with her students on-stage, Helen is overwhelmed by a hallucinatory vision of their sons’ victim – prompting a scream

¹⁸¹ Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 14-15.

¹⁸² Much of the choreography of these numbers amounts to a chorus line comprised of children – providing an uncomfortable combination of youth and sexualization that echoes the similarly uncomfortable performance of “I’ve Written a Letter to Daddy” in *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane*. Further, given the context of this study, the connection between this particular mode of choreography and modernity, as noted by Siegfried Kracauer (who deemed it “a delightful Taylorism of the arms and legs”) should be noted. Quoted in Miriam Bratu Hansen, “America, Paris, the Alps: Kracauer (and Benjamin) on Cinema and Modernity,” in *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, ed. Leo Carney and Vanessa R. Schwartz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 371.

loud enough to be heard by the audience of Adelle's performance. This moment is representative of how the film conceives of these two women as linked halves of a whole – as Helen comes to stand in for the grotesque past that Adelle must suppress in order to recreate herself.

Ultimately, the film presents Adelle, unable to fully extricate herself from her partner, as the subject to Helen's abject. Towards the end of the film, as Adelle has confined Helen in her room, the pair has a revealing exchange. Helen recognizes the challenge she poses to Adelle's normalcy: "I know why you're keeping me here. [...] You're afraid of me. That if I speak, you will be damned too." This recognition prompts Adelle's curt response: "All I want you to do is to get well, as soon as possible – and then I want you to go away as far as possible." Recalling Kristeva's description of the abject, Helen "does not cease challenging" Adelle "from her place of banishment," even as Adelle attempts to assert her normalcy by separating herself from Helen.¹⁸³ The women's inextricability is confirmed at the end of the film when Adelle reveals her plans to marry Lincoln and, faced with the prospect of their separation, Helen murders her.

Ultimately, *What's the Matter With Helen?* does not have the same radical potential as *Strait-Jacket* to disrupt the problematic construction of the female grotesque. Where this earlier film undermines the viewer's capacity to understand Lucy as monstrous – and, by extension, the idealized male subjectivity this construction allows – *What's the Matter With Helen?* instead invites and encourages viewers to perceive Helen as out-of-control and excessive. Nonetheless, this film helpfully reveals the intersections of stardom, the grotesque and psychoanalysis as discourses which each, as suggested above, rely upon the division between a normative surface and its hidden depths. Further, while these discourses suggest a consistent identity which can be read across these pieces – in line with Frederic Jameson's notion of a modernist semi-autonomy – *What's the Matter With Helen?* instead offers identity's dissolution. By dramatizing this disjunction between surface and depth through two separate women, the film offers decadent dissolution rather than modernist coalescence – and thus can be considered within the broader project of decadence to undermine the exclusionary structures of modernity.

¹⁸³ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 2.

Chapter 3: Cinematic Decadence and Camp

Through the analysis of four films from the Grande Dame Guignol cycle, this thesis has so far endeavored to locate a cinematic equivalent to literary decadence. Organized around the themes of time and body respectively, the previous two chapters have suggested how this corpus of films dramatizes the end of the classical Hollywood era by eroding the problematic and exclusionary formal structures which underpin this mode of production. As such, these works can be understood as a mid-century analogue to decadent literature, which emerges in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as an expression of queer alienation amidst the oppressive environment of modernity. Understood as a counter-lineage to modernity and modernist aesthetics,¹⁸⁴ decadence serves to open a space for queer negativity within this history, along the lines of the melancholic affect identified by Heather Love within the queer literature of early modernity: “Texts that insist on social negativity [...] describe what it is like to bear a ‘disqualified’ identity, which at times can simply mean living with injury – not fixing it.”¹⁸⁵ By situating the Grande Dame Guignol films within this historical and aesthetic framework, their sense of finality, dissipation, and fragmentation can be understood as a mediation upon the contentious relationship between queerness and the rationalizing discourses of modernity.

This final chapter will depart from close cinematic analysis in order to address decadence’s status as a theoretical framework distinct from camp. Camp, defined by Susan Sontag as a “way of seeing the world [...] not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization”¹⁸⁶ is closely associated with queer taste, sensibility, and style¹⁸⁷ and has generally served as the most common theoretical approach towards locating queerness within the arts, and Hollywood cinema in particular.¹⁸⁸ Camp and decadence are often seen as interchangeable, as demonstrated by the works of Sontag, Andrew Ross and others. This chapter

¹⁸⁴ See Sherry (2015)

¹⁸⁵ Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 4.

¹⁸⁶ Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject – A Reader*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 54.

¹⁸⁷ The anthology *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject – A Reader*, edited by Fabio Cleto offers a fairly comprehensive historical and theoretical overview of camp’s relationship to queerness (and is the source of many of the critical sources used in this chapter).

¹⁸⁸ While Richard Dyer’s work will be discussed later in this chapter, he provides useful accounts of camp and classical Hollywood’s historical and aesthetic convergences in his readings of Rock Hudson (2002) and Judy Garland (2004).

instead highlights the difference between these two aesthetic and theoretical frameworks. First, it focuses on the histories of camp and decadence, highlighting their common status as aesthetics of queer survival amidst inhospitable sociocultural circumstances. After contextualizing these terms, this chapter discusses their differences, focusing upon two key points of contention: their differing understanding of the relationship between the past to the present, and their affiliation with misogyny.

Decadence and Camp

As suggested by Phillip Stephan, decadence relies heavily upon the hierarchies of taste and morality which predate its emergence within late 19th and early 20th century modernity: “Decadent thinkers accepted Rousseau’s idea that nature is good and civilization bad, yet they enthusiastically preferred the artificial: such perverse enjoyment of what is thought to be evil characterizes decadence.”¹⁸⁹ The choice of decadent thinkers and artists to actively celebrate what is conventionally ruled as ‘evil’ is central to this movement’s alignment with the historical project of queer survival. As discussed in previous chapters, the emergence of decadence at the turn of the 20th century coincides with “the invention of homosexuality in its modern form,” as a distinct but nonetheless “damaged or compromised [form of] subjectivity.”¹⁹⁰ As modernity reimagines same-sex attraction as a marker of incomplete or improper development, the embrace of the supposedly improper and immoral within decadence becomes a way of subversively undermining the authority of these discourses.¹⁹¹

If decadence relies upon actively transgressing yet nonetheless maintaining the discourses by which queerness is marginalized, the subversion of camp operates in precisely the opposite way. Rather than upholding these cultural structures of power, camp completely dissolves them by inviting a (conventionally) queer spectator to wrest the images of popular culture away from their original contexts as an act of postmodern democratization.¹⁹² In her “Notes on Camp,”

¹⁸⁹ Phillip Stephan, *Paul Verlaine and the Decadence, 1882-1890* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1975), 19.

¹⁹⁰ Love, *Feeling Backward*, 2.

¹⁹¹ This process is discussed at length in Chapter 1 of this thesis, which discussing the marginalizing discourses of Sigmund Freud’s Castration Complex and Jacques Lacan’s Mirror Stage. For a more comprehensive account of modernity’s oppressive, marginalizing tendencies, see Brenkman (1993).

¹⁹² In her account of feminist camp, Pamela Robertson summarizes the connection between this sensibility and postmodernism. She notes that Frederic Jameson argues for Camp’s political meaninglessness by likening it to an empty “postmodern pastiche,” comparing his account to Linda Hutcheon’s description of this radical democratization as “critical and subversive.” That said, Robertson notes how Hutcheon suggests a certain disregard

Susan Sontag suggests that this disregard for underlying cultural structures is one of the central differences between camp and the era of decadence that precedes it: “The dandy [...] was dedicated to ‘good taste’ [...] Camp – Dandyism in the age of mass culture – makes no distinction between the unique object and the mass-produced object.”¹⁹³ Even as camp deploys a strategy of democratization – opposite to the *ethos* of flagrant transgression which defines decadence – the resulting effect is no less political,¹⁹⁴ as noted by Richard Dyer: “What I value about camp is that it is precisely a weapon against the mystique surrounding art, royalty and masculinity: [...] it demystifies by playing up the artifice by means of which such things as these retain their hold on the majority of the population.”¹⁹⁵ Thus, like decadence, the camp sensibility serves as a tool of queer survival amidst inhospitable sociocultural and historical circumstances – including both the pre-Stonewall erasure of queer sexuality and the violent homophobia which followed post-Stonewall visibility.¹⁹⁶

Despite their opposing strategies, the fact that camp and decadence perform a similar function at different moments in time leads most historical accounts to see these sensibilities as historically separated, yet largely interchangeable. For instance, David Weir ends his account of the decadent tradition in America with a suggestion that 20th century camp is little more than a “dissipated” copy of *fin-de-siècle* decadence, using Sontag’s “Notes on Camp” to highlight this continuity: “[Sontag’s essay], dedicated to Oscar Wilde, makes abundantly clear that the sensibility she describes descends in large measure from *fin-de-siècle* decadence [...] but, at the same time, this new dissipated ‘decadence’ cannot quite replace the [...] original.”¹⁹⁷ Here, Weir only mentions camp briefly and dismissively, ignoring any functional difference between it and decadence. The critical literature surrounding camp often exhibits the same tendency in reverse –

for camp, as she distinguishes it from “high postmodern parody.” Pamela Robertson, *Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp From Mae West to Madonna* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 4. See also Hutcheon (1989) and Jameson (1991).

¹⁹³ Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” 63.

¹⁹⁴ While Sontag’s “Notes on Camp” remains one of the most cited chapters regarding this aesthetic, her most controversial claim – that camp is “apolitical” – has been thoroughly repudiated by most others who build upon her account. Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” 54.

¹⁹⁵ Richard Dyer, “It’s Being So Camp As Keeps Us Going,” in *The Culture of Queers* (London: Routledge, 2002), 50.

¹⁹⁶ Dyer, “It’s Being so Camp,” 52.

¹⁹⁷ The 1969 Stonewall uprising is suggested as such a rupture point in Camp’s history by Ross (1999 [1989]), amongst others.

¹⁹⁷ David Weir, *Decadent Culture in the United States: Art and Literature Against the Grain, 1890-1926* (Albany: State of New York University Press, 2008), 201.

as Andrew Ross refers to the "nineteenth-century camp intellectual" as "prodecadence"¹⁹⁸ or Linda Mizejewski uses Sally Bowles' famous proclamation ("Divine decadence, darling!") as a starting point to develop a historical narrative of camp.¹⁹⁹ Even as the respective critical literatures of decadence and camp suggest a historical and theoretical distinction between these two terms, there is a common tendency to view one in terms of the other – to either view decadence as a precursor to camp, or camp as an echo of decadence.

While the significant overlap between camp and decadence makes the tendency to combine the two more of an oversimplification than an inaccuracy, this conflation has nonetheless significantly restricted analysis of decadence on its own terms. The somewhat broad sense in which decadence is treated within critical accounts of camp can be partially explained by the exclusion of decadence from literary and cultural histories. Discussing this phenomenon, Vincent Sherry traces an ongoing effort to "writ[e] decadence [...] forcibly out of the critical account," as this controversial sensibility is renamed and transmuted into a number of other movements (most notably *symbolisme* in France).²⁰⁰ Sherry argues that this transformation renders decadence itself invisible: "For reasons that range from the political to the moral [literary critics and historians] elaborate and in fact radicalize the difference, turning *symbolisme* into the better angel of [decadence,] its erstwhile twin, its increasingly disapproved double."²⁰¹ He suggests that one of these "moral" reasons is the close association between decadence and queerness: "This identification [between decadence and queerness] works to some extent to redress the omission of decadence from the modernism under construction in the scholarship of the mid-century."²⁰²

Beyond fostering a more nuanced understanding of literary modernism, the repatriation of decadence to cultural history allows for a more nuanced account of queer history, as suggested by Heather Love in her description of early modern queer texts:

These dark, ambivalent texts register these authors' painful negotiation of the coming of modern homosexuality. Such representations constitute a crucial [...] account of the

¹⁹⁸ Ross, "Uses of Camp," 317.

¹⁹⁹ See Mizejewski (1992).

²⁰⁰ Vincent Sherry, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 3.

²⁰¹ Sherry, *Decadence*, 9.

²⁰² Sherry, *Decadence*, 24.

corporeal and psychic costs of homophobia [...] These feelings are tied to the experience of social exclusion and to the historical ‘impossibility’ of same-sex desire²⁰³

Thus, decadence should not be understood as a mere precursor for camp, but instead as a distinct albeit linked sensibility. In fact, the sobering melancholy which Love associates with this period provides a solution to one of the primary problematics of camp – the tendency towards flippancy and irony, as noted by Dyer: "Camp seems often unable to discriminate between those things that need to be treated for laughs and style, and those that are genuinely serious and important."²⁰⁴ By opening a historical space for melancholic affect, decadence addresses a distinct set of concerns than camp – foregrounding the alienation underneath the latter’s joyous, artificial surfaces.

While the critical literatures surrounding decadence and camp tend to collapse these two terms together, differentiating them enables a more nuanced understanding of their aesthetic strategies. As suggested by Susan Sontag and Andrew Ross above, camp serves as an act of postmodern democratization, allowing queer spectators to create a cultural space for themselves by wresting the images of dominant culture from their intended function and re-inscribing them in their own image. Decadence offers a similar opportunity for queer resistance, but through an opposite strategy. Instead of negating the cultural discourses which marginalize queerness, artists of decadence subversively embrace homosexuality’s associations with ‘evil’ rather than dissolving this problematic structure altogether. While this may seem a fine distinction, these differing models of queer resistance entail two very different understandings of history.

Decadence and Hollywood History

One aspect in which the differences between camp and decadence are made especially clear are their divergent understandings of the relationship between the present and the past. For camp, Andrew Ross conceives of this relationship in terms of disposal, rediscovery, and labour: “for the camp liberator, as with the high modernist, history’s waste matter becomes all too available as a ‘ragbag,’ [...] Camp, in this respect is more than just a remembrance of things past, it is the *re-creation of surplus value from forgotten forms of labor.*”²⁰⁵ Using *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* as an example, Ross locates this relationship between value, time, and

²⁰³ Love, *Feeling Backward*, 4.

²⁰⁴ Dyer, “It’s Being so Camp,” 59-60.

²⁰⁵ Ross, “Uses of Camp,” 320.

labour within the production context of Hollywood. Ross understands the closing moments of the film, as Jane performs her “blithe child-star routine [...] surrounded by an oblivious group of teenagers,” as a metaphor for the moment when classical Hollywood stars are no longer able to “produce and dominate cultural meanings.”²⁰⁶ Instead, the teenagers watching Jane – unaware of her past as a child star in vaudeville – write over her, prompting their “redefinition” of Jane “according to contemporary modes of taste.”²⁰⁷ Thus, in Ross’ understanding, the decline and fall of classical Hollywood becomes a generative moment, as the onus of labour shifts away from those within the system and towards its spectators as they rediscover and reinvent its discarded cultural objects.²⁰⁸

In his account of queer utopia, José Esteban Muñoz suggests the temporal logic of this camp reinvention. He notes that, as Camp reinscribes cultural objects which have lost their relevance for a younger audience, it also serves to “resituat[e] the past in the service of politics and aesthetics that often critique the present.”²⁰⁹ In this sense, Camp is closely related to Muñoz’ overall project of conceptualizing queerness as “an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future.”²¹⁰ Here, the temporal logic of camp suggests an effort to use the past to create both a more hospitable present for queer individuals, and to ensure the futurity of this subjectivity. This process of re-writing the past to ensure the future of queerness is closely related to Dyer’s description of camp in terms of survival: “All the images and words of the society express and confirm the rightness of heterosexuality. Camp is one thing that expresses and confirms being a gay man.”²¹¹

Meanwhile, decadence serves the exact opposite purpose by offering the dissolution of the present and the corresponding impossibility of any kind of future. One example of this decadent temporality is that of Kenneth Anger’s *Hollywood Babylon*. At first, this text seems to be performing a similar act of re-evaluation and redefinition as camp. Like *What Ever Happened to*

²⁰⁶ Ross, “Uses of Camp,” 311-312.

²⁰⁷ Ross, “Uses of Camp,” 312.

²⁰⁸ Notably, Ross also argues that this model of camp reinvention also provides a way for these cultural objects to continue meeting the demands of capitalism – By definition, as these stars are made relevant again, they are also once again made profitable. This process is part of the broader process by which queer camp is able to be integrated into mainstream culture as it enables queer audiences to be isolated as a distinct market to be catered to: “Today’s gay male is the ‘new model intellectual’ of consumer capitalism [...] [T]he sexual freedoms won by the liberation movements are often inseparable from the commodification of sex.” Ross, “Uses of Camp,” 315.

²⁰⁹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 163.

²¹⁰ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.

²¹¹ Dyer, “It’s Being so Camp,” 49.

Baby Jane? this text first appears near the end of the classical Hollywood era, purporting to mourn this system's passing while simultaneously rehabilitating its aesthetics and iconography for a new, younger audience. In this way, the book's form can be best understood as an excessive productivity, as it takes elements of Hollywood's past (specifically, the deaths and scandals surrounding specific stars) and spins a wide-ranging web of speculation, florid description and outright fabrication around these often-scant pieces of history. However, while *Hollywood Babylon* certainly fits Ross' description of camp as it laboriously re-imagines long-outdated Hollywood stars, this model cannot account for Anger's consistent focus on classical Hollywood's self-destructiveness and the impossibility of its future. This tendency is exemplified by the final image of the book: "They have restored the Hollywood sign, just the first nine letters [...] by accident or design, the remaining four original letters (LAND) have been junked or rotten away. The thirteenth letter, the final D, is no longer there to tempt a new Peg Entwistle."²¹² While camp ensures the continued viability of discarded cultural objects through their acts of rediscovery and reinvention, Anger's decadent reimagination of Hollywood instead offers an endless sifting through of the past which denies the possibility of futurity.

Hollywood Babylon's understanding of history – combining an endlessly-accumulating sense of history with a present in decline – is similar to that identified by Charles Bernheimer in one of the canonical novels of decadence, Gustave Flaubert's *Salammbô*. As Flaubert reaches back towards the Mercenary Revolt in Ancient Carthage after the First Punic War, his novel recalls Anger's much later work as it provides an intricate re-imagining of history with an emphasis on detailed, almost grotesque descriptions of sexuality and violence. As such, it develops what Bernheimer suggests as a fundamentally decadent understanding of history through its "taste for the bizarre debris of history at the expense of any vision of historical causality and evolution."²¹³ However, unlike Anger's account, Flaubert's recreation of the past is meticulously sourced and fact-checked with then-available historical materials. Bernheimer suggests that the ultimate effect is that detail and ornamentation take the place of a sense of progression and futurity: "Flaubert feels himself to be at the end [...] but he associates this ending not with a poverty of history, but with its excess [...] History for Flaubert is no more than

²¹² Kenneth Anger, *Hollywood Babylon*, rev. ed. (New York: Dell Publishing, 1975), 416-417.

²¹³ Charles Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects: The Idea of Decadence in Art, Literature, Philosophy, and Culture of the Fin-de-Siècle in Europe*, ed. T. Jefferson Kline and Naomi Schor (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 41.

its objects and exists nowhere else than in its objects.²¹⁴ One further parallel between these texts is how they use history to comment upon their authors' present – as Flaubert recreates Carthage's decline in order to “compar[e] an ancient civilization on the brink of collapse to contemporary French society.”²¹⁵ While Flaubert's exploration of an ancient era represents a much further historical reach than Anger's mythologization of classical Hollywood, both of these works gesture towards an ornate and decaying past in order to suggest the dissipation of their own present and the impossibility of a future.

While decadence and camp both rely on dragging the cultural detritus of the past into the present, these sensibilities each offer an entirely different understanding of history. Ross summarizes the relationship that camp imagines between these retrieved cultural objects and the present through the notion of the “camp effect,” which, as described through the example of *Baby Jane* above, “is created [...] when the products (stars, in this case) of a much earlier mode of production, which has lost its power to create an dominate cultural meanings, become available, in the present, for redefinition according to contemporary modes of taste.”²¹⁶ Thus, as camp retrieves otherwise-forgotten cultural objects, it de-contextualizes them so that they can be understood and marketed to younger audiences. Meanwhile, decadence suggests an overwhelming overabundance of history and a sense of dissipation and finality. *Hollywood Babylon* demonstrates that this decadent understanding of history can remain meaningful even as it is transplanted to an entirely different setting than the *fin-de-siècle* Europe with which decadence is most closely associated.

If *Hollywood Babylon* translates the lack of futurity which marks decadent literature for classical Hollywood, the Grande Dame Guignol cycle extends this understanding of history to the medium of cinema itself. While these films fulfill Ross' notion of the camp effect as they retrieve classical stars and recreate their personae in terms of grotesque horror, they also suggest a continuity with *Hollywood Babylon*'s lack of futurity. To expand on this idea, it is necessary to shift focus away from the labor of these films' audiences and creators (as they recreate, reimagine, and repurpose the images and stars of the past), and towards the way in which labour is imagined within these films' diegesis.

²¹⁴ Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects*, 42-43.

²¹⁵ David Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 27.

²¹⁶ Ross, “Uses of Camp,” 312.

Each of these films conceive of their central star bodies as sites of re-inscription. For instance, consider how *Strait-Jacket*'s Lucy and *What's the Matter With Helen*'s Adelle and Helen attempt to write over their violent pasts by creating entirely new personae for themselves. However, this act of recreation is a far cry from Ross' image of the "camp liberator" whose reinvention creates surplus value and thereby renews the past.²¹⁷ The clearest demonstration of the challenge these films pose to the generative relationship between the present and the past offered by camp are Blanche and Jane, the two sisters at the centre of *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* whom Jodi Brooks suggests represent "two types of relation to the commodity-image."²¹⁸

First, there is Blanche (Joan Crawford), who is drawn backwards in time through her role as a film spectator. The first time audiences are introduced to Blanche as an adult, she is watching one of her old films on television (in fact, an excerpt from Crawford's own *Sadie McKee* [Clarence Brown, 1934]). Just as Jane's position is undermined by the instability of her future, Blanche's present is marked as inferior by the comparable coherence of her past. Deborah Levitt describes this sense of an evaporating present as she writes about a similar moment in *Intervista* (Federico Fellini, 1987) in which Anita Eckberg, playing herself, watches her younger self in *La Dolce Vita* (Federico Fellini, 1960) on television:

[This moment presents] a story of time's passing. Its pathos comes [not only] from the pathos of aging itself with its implication of the inevitability of death, [...] but also from the relationship between the "real" and the cinematic body—the former's subjection to the vagaries of time, decay, and death only amplified by the latter's silvery, luminous vitality.²¹⁹

In the same way, Blanche's moment of self-spectatorship in *Baby Jane* establishes her (and, by extension, Crawford's) corporeal vulnerability against the idealized, constructed and most importantly permanent image of her past cinematic self.

²¹⁷ Ross, "Uses of Camp," 320.

²¹⁸ Jodi Brooks, "Performing Aging/Performance Crisis (For Norma Desmond, Baby Jane, Margo Channing, Sister George – and Myrtle)," in *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations*, ed. Kathleen Woodward (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 235.

²¹⁹ Deborah Levitt. "Animation and the Medium of Life: Media Ethology, An-Ontology, Ethics." *Inflexions* 7 (March 2014), 119.

While the accumulation of the past brought about by Blanche's self-spectatorship suggests the dissipation of the present, her sister – aging child vaudeville star Jane (Bette Davis) – simultaneously implies the impossibility of the future. Instead of the spectator, Jane takes on the role of the displayed body, as much of the film focuses on her efforts to stage a comeback. Crucially, the film conceives of this effort to recreate the past as doomed from the start as she, like Norma Desmond before her, attempts to re-mount her previous act while ignoring the massive shifts in culture since the height of her fame: “She is a figure arrested *in time* [...] oblivious to the fact that she is no longer in the limelight, [she] continues to operate as if she were.”²²⁰ Jane only attains visibility at the end of the film, as she dances for a crowd of teenagers after she has murdered her sister – the moment which Ross identifies as that when she ceases to be able to write herself and is consequently written over by a younger public. However, even as these final scenes mark Jane's camp reinvention, they also necessarily suggest her loss of agency over her own image. This double meaning – as Jane's dance not only the moment of her camp reinvention, but also the moment which marks the final impossibility of her attempted comeback – reveals the differences in how camp and decadence understand time and history.

Ultimately, camp relies on a negation of the distance between past and present, while decadence foregrounds a sense of obsolescence. As a form of irony, camp allows queer spectators in the present to remove past cultural objects from their original context and rewrite them, in Ross' words, “according to contemporary modes of taste.”²²¹ Meanwhile, as a term closely associated with bygone historical eras, the decadent sensibility emphasizes the outdated nature of these objects for spectators as it dramatizes the decay of past cultural forms. In other words, if Ross describes camp as the “*re-creation of surplus value from forgotten forms of labor*,” then the decadence exemplified by *Hollywood Babylon* and the Grande Dame Guignol films could be said to represent *surplus labor without value*, as they laboriously and intricately recreate a past with no future.²²²

Decadence and Misogyny

However, the negative and fatalistic nature of decadence begs the question of why a return to this sensibility is worthwhile. Questioning the usefulness of decadence is especially

²²⁰ Brooks, “Performing Aging/Performance Crisis,” 236.

²²¹ Ross, “Uses of Camp,” 312.

²²² Ross, “Uses of Camp,” 320.

pertinent given the ambivalent politics of this aesthetic. While decadence historically served to carve out an essential space for queer subjectivity amidst the hostile environment of modernity, it often *also* served as a vessel for anti-progressive, anti-feminist resentment. Elaine Showalter highlights the contradictory, often hostile, place of women within decadent literature through her analysis of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). She focuses on the suicide of Sybil Vane, the novel's main female character: "Women, as Lord Henry explains to Dorian, are not capable of noble and intellectual love; they are too fleshy and material [...] They can reenter the 'sphere of art' only by killing themselves and becoming beautiful objects."²²³ While it would be a problematic oversimplification to suggest that the novel's same-sex attraction necessitates a hostility towards women, it is doubtlessly true that the ambiguity and negativity of decadence is often predicated on the removal of female subjectivity, and the transformation of women into objects, monsters, or, in some cases, dead bodies.

Once again, Kenneth Anger's *Hollywood Babylon* exemplifies this tendency. While Anger's reimagining of classical Hollywood's iconography through the lens of decline offers a queer critique of the exclusionary modernity of this system, this act of recreation relies in part on the dehumanization and degradation of women. One episode which exemplifies this tendency is the chapter recounting the life and death of Lupe Vélez. As the book describes Vélez' marriage to Johnny Weissmuller, its subversive queer gaze comes at the cost of aestheticizing Weissmuller's abuse of Vélez, as it is folded into a broader context of a 'rough' relationship: "Their most public tiff occurred when Johnny tossed a food-laden table at Lupe's meowing puss. The love-hate madness of their intense passion often left Lupe marks on Weissmuller's godlike torso, [...] annular bites on his perfect pecs, eloquent scratches on his ivory back."²²⁴ Here, the animalistic terms with which Anger describes Vélez (most overtly in his demeaning description of her genitalia) exemplifies this chapter's broader tendency to dehumanize her, culminating in its infamous (and entirely invented) final image – of the star's botched suicide and subsequent death by drowning in a toilet bowl: "The huge dose of Seconal had not been fatal in the expected fashion. It has mixed retch-erously with the Spitfire's Mexi-Spice Last Supper [...] she slipped on the tiles and plunged head first into her Egyptian Chartreuse Onyx Hush-Flush Model Deluxe."²²⁵ Here, the recognizably decadent qualities of the chapter (its exaggeratedly detailed

²²³ Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin-de-Siècle* (New York: Penguin, 1990), 176.

²²⁴ Anger, *Hollywood Babylon*, 329.

²²⁵ Anger, *Hollywood Babylon*, 342.

imagery, its inversion of glamour, and its focus on death) are predicated upon the sensationalization of Vélez' dead body – in a humiliating image which combines vicious misogyny and racism, given Vélez' status as a Mexican-born actor amidst the overwhelmingly white landscape of Hollywood.

Anger's transformation of Vélez from a living historical figure into a dehumanized, metaphorical object represents a mid-century update of the misogynistic tropes of *fin-de-siècle* decadence. As such, Anger's problematic formulation of Vélez (as well as the numerous other women that *Hollywood Babylon* presents in similar terms) is comparable to the presentation of Salome throughout the decadent canon. The biblical figure of Salome – the princess who, after dancing for King Herod, demands and receives the head of John the Baptist – personifies the love of evil that defines decadence, as well as the tendency for this love to centre on the images of women. Recalling Anger's description of the marks left by Vélez on Weissmuller's "perfect"²²⁶ body, Charles Bernheimer argues that the reason for Salome's ubiquity within the decadent canon is her performance of an excessive sexuality combined with this sexuality's ties to a perceived danger towards the masculine subject: "She is a predator whose lust unmans man, a castrating sadist whose victims can best survive her violence either by finding masochistic pleasure in submission or, better, by ridding the world of this purveyor of vice and degeneracy."²²⁷

Bernheimer's description of Salome as a castrator (with John the Baptist's head serving as a clear phallic symbol) is particularly representative of this figure's problematic construction. Barbara Creed argues that, while psychoanalysis tends to imagine women as "a castrated creature [and] man's lacking other," the opposing image of the female castrator speaks to the gendered fears that underlie patriarchal structures: "Fear of the castrating mother may also help to explain the ambivalent attitude in which women are held in patriarchal societies – an attitude which is also represented in the various stereotypical discourses of feminine evil that exist within a range of popular discourses."²²⁸ Doubtlessly one of these representations of "feminine evil," Salome is both a representation of deep-seated misogynistic fears as well as a radically destabilizing figure who demonstrates the shortcomings of modernity's narrow understanding of gender and sexuality. Bernheimer suggests that this contradiction reveals the ambivalent politics of decadence as a whole: "Hence the crucial role of castration as the foremost trope of decadence: it

²²⁶ Anger, *Hollywood Babylon*, 329.

²²⁷ Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects*, 104.

²²⁸ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993), 164-165.

is at once naturalizing and denaturalizing; it insists on the most retrograde misogynist ideology, yet it opens a radically new view of the operations of negativity in the psyche.”²²⁹

If the viciousness of *Hollywood Babylon*'s depiction of Lupe Vélez is any indication, it would be impossible and irresponsible to attempt anything resembling a feminist recovery of decadence as a whole. However, the fragile male subjectivity revealed by Salome assists in suggesting how the misogyny of decadence is predicated upon a separate set of concerns than that of camp. As argued by Pamela Robertson, a persistent issue surrounding the camp sensibility is its tendency to marginalize a female subjectivity:

Most people who have written about camp assume that the exchange between gay men's and women's cultures has been wholly one-sided [...] This suggests that women are camp but do not knowingly produce themselves as camp [...] Women, by this logic, are objects of camp and subject to it, but are not camp subjects.²³⁰

As such, Robertson conceives of camp as the creation of a (queer) male subjectivity at the cost of women – and her account goes on to argue that women are just as capable of appropriating masculinity to create their own queered subjectivity. As such, what is at issue in both a conventional, male-oriented narrative of camp as well as in Robertson's reimagination of it is the *creation* of subjectivity – while what decadence and Salome invite is subjectivity's *destruction*.

The Grande Dame Guignol films offer an ideal site to consider the distinction between camp and decadence in this regard. For instance, the previous chapter outlined how *Strait-Jacket* stages a confrontation between the popular conception of Lucy Harbin, its protagonist, as a grotesque, and her sympathetic private self who wishes to suppress this element of her persona. The furious, violent Harbin (and by extension, Joan Crawford) presented in the opening scenes of the film and promotional materials exemplifies the risk that Robertson identifies of camp's images of female excess verging into misogyny.²³¹ Further, this presentation of Crawford/Lucy is demonstrative of Ross' camp effect as it effaces Crawford of her accumulated cultural meaning

²²⁹ Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects*, 117.

²³⁰ Pamela Robertson, *Guilty Pleasures*, 5.

²³¹ While Robertson discusses the tendency for some forms of camp to “prefe[r] images of female excess that are blatantly misogynistic,” she in no way argues that camp is an inherently flawed model. Instead, she argues that camp's gender parody can be “reclaim[ed] as a political tool,” and reconciled with the political project of feminism, granted female subjectivity and misogyny are considered within this model. Robertson, *Guilty Pleasures*, 5-7.

and reinvents her as a grotesque for younger audiences – as proven by the reappearance of this image of an out-of-control Crawford furiously wielding an axe in the biopic *Mommie Dearest* (Frank Perry, 1981). However, as discussed in the previous chapter, *Strait-Jacket* significantly complicates the viewer's capacity to regard Crawford/Lucy in solely monstrous terms. Instead, by presenting Lucy as an abject, liminal figure (whose so-called 'monstrosity' is constructed by her daughter) the film undermines the misogynistic, excessive image of femininity upon which its initial presentation of Crawford/Lucy depends. As such, Lucy can be understood as a Salome figure for more than the fact that her story hinges upon her decapitation of a man – she presents a fundamental risk towards an idealized male subjectivity by refusing to fit cleanly within a symbolic order in which women are the passive, "castrated" objects against which this subjectivity establishes itself.²³²

However, decadence does more than merely reveal the fragility of a masculine subjectivity. In his analysis of Stephen Mallarmé's retelling of the Salome story, Bernheimer focuses upon a moment in which the princess (here renamed Hérodiade), looks at herself in a mirror, and "does not find her image reassuringly composed as a whole[, but] rather, [as] a surface constituted of metallic gleams."²³³ Instead of Jacques Lacan's understanding of the mirror as the agent that catalyzes a subject's awareness of themselves,²³⁴ Hérodiade's perception of herself as an illusory surface suggests that she "does not perceive herself as the subject of a look but as the object of a gaze."²³⁵ Bernheimer suggests that this moment instead offers the inverse of Lacan's account, as it trace "the subject's erasure rather than its constitution."²³⁶ Thus, while more overtly misogynistic accounts of Salome are predicated upon the supposed threat that her desire and agency poses towards a male subjectivity, Mallarmé's more sympathetic reading suggests the impossibility of any kind of subjectivity at all.

As discussed in the first chapter to this thesis, this erosion of subjectivity is central to the overall project of decadence to deconstruct the exclusionary, heterosexist norms of temporality and maturation which define modernity. However, this erosion is also central to the misogynistic tendencies of this sensibility, as well as its difference from camp. If, as described by Robertson,

²³² Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 165.

²³³ Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects*, 107.

²³⁴ See Lacan (2006), as well as Chapter 1 of this thesis.

²³⁵ Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects*, 108.

²³⁶ Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects*, 107.

the appropriation of femininity in camp is often associated with the creation of a queer subjectivity, decadence offers the opposite. While it employs misogynistic tropes in its erosion of subjectivity (such as its invocation of Salome as a castrating woman), it is useful insofar as it radically defamiliarizes the structures upon which the heterosexist, patriarchal norms of modernity rest.

While this cannot be called anything close to a feminist project, the gendered discourse of decadence does offer a way to understand the elements of the Grande Dame Guignol films that cannot be accounted for by camp. Rather than following camp's model of gender parody – by which conventional norms of masculinity and femininity are destabilized through exaggeration – the Grande Dame Guignol films instead focus their attention on the anguish that results from the unattainability of these norms. Erin Harrington reflects upon this focus on gender negativity by considering how the films of this cycle consistently place their central star bodies in opposition to images of their past selves – both within their diegesis (such as Carol Harbin's latex mask of her mother) and self-reflexively (such as Blanche Hudson's 'self' spectatorship of old Crawford films):

The women, then, are never too far from images of their younger selves [...] We are persistently reminded of the boundary from which the present-day failure to conform to normative ideals of vital femininity is expelled, but we are also reminded of the fictionalised, constructed, never-real nature of this deadened youthfulness.²³⁷

As such, the erosion of both futurity and subjectivity in decadence can be understood to serve a common purpose – to suggest the impossibility of a future built upon the exclusionary, heterosexist norms of modernity.

While the bodies of literature surrounding camp and decadence tend to conflate these terms, they offer two distinct theoretical approaches. While each serve to establish an essential space for queer expression amidst their respective historical circumstances they do so in markedly different ways, and for divergent purposes. As camp foregrounds the redefinition of past cultural objects for the present, it represents an effort to ensure a more hospitable present and a utopic future for queer individuals. Meanwhile, decadence erodes both the possibility of a

²³⁷ Erin Harrington, *Women, Monstrosity, and Horror Film: Gynaehorror* (London: Routledge, 2018), 253.

future as it suggests the overwhelming, unmanageable excess of history. Further, while each of these sensibilities have a problematic tendency to position women as dehumanized, monstrous objects, camp does so in the name of gendered parody and exaggeration while decadence suggests the incoherence of gender as a whole. Therefore, more than an earlier form of the queer positivity of camp, decadence enables a more nuanced understanding of how queerness is imagined within classical Hollywood cinema through its focus on negativity.

Rather than existing *only* as an archive of images to inspire queer cultural production in the present, the Grande Dame Guignol films also serve as a historical artifact of the contentious relationship between queerness and the processes of modernity. Instead of mapping a way towards a better future, these works register the isolation and alienation that marked the past and, as such, provide the historical understanding necessary to better contextualize these feelings in the present.

Conclusions

In his often-cited book *Decadence: The Strange Life of an Epithet* (1979), Richard Gilman expresses an anxiety that this titular term “has been debased into a label” as it has entered the popular vernacular, losing any meaning it once had as it is applied to any number of phenomena: “We indulge in such random and inappropriate usages with ‘decadence’ these days, applying it [...] to eating habits, interior decoration, styles of dress, and of course many crepuscular sexual practices and tastes.”²³⁸ One strategy employed by many later theorists of decadence has been to emphasize the relationship between this aesthetic and the specific historical context of early modernity, mitigating Gilman’s prescriptivist panic by understanding decadence as a reflection of a specific place and time.²³⁹ While this effort to situate decadence within the context of the *fin-de-siècle* has been essential in framing it as an aesthetic of queer resistance amid an inhospitable modernity, this thesis has argued that decadence can be observed within other historical contexts without falling into the risk of meaninglessness that Gilman perceives. Following this argument, the Grande Dame Guignol films can be considered decadent for more than their superficial interest in decay and the grotesque. Their erosion of exclusionary norms of sexuality, embodiment, and temporality suggest a kinship with literary decadence, given historical significance not by the *fin-de-siècle*, but by the decline of the classical Hollywood studio system.

However, the regime which follows the classical era in a conventional periodization of Hollywood – the so-called New Hollywood – did not last particularly long. Despite the fact that, as noted by Derek Nystrom, “there have been many New Hollywoods [i]n an industry whose only constant has been change,”²⁴⁰ this term usually refers to the period between the late 60s²⁴¹ and the mid-1970s, when “a gifted group of auteurs [...] crafted a politically subversive and aesthetically challenging body of cinema.”²⁴² The collapse of the classical studio system is

²³⁸ Richard Gilman, *Decadence: The Strange Life of an Epithet* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), 16-17.

²³⁹ See Weir (1995), as well as the introduction to this thesis.

²⁴⁰ Derek Nystrom, “The New Hollywood,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell History of American Film* online edition, ed. Cynthia Lucia, Roy Grundmann, and Art Simon (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 1.

²⁴¹ While the ‘starting point’ of New Hollywood is contested, Mark Harris convincingly suggests 1967 as a specific starting point this year’s Academy Award nominees for Best Picture, which combine some of the definitive touchstones of New Hollywood cinema with the products of a studio system desperate to maintain relevance. See Harris (2008).

²⁴² Nystrom, “The New Hollywood,” 3.

generally thought to have afforded this era's familiar pantheon of (generally white and male) *auteurs*—Dennis Hopper, Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, and so on— with the freedom to create more overtly idiosyncratic, personal, and political films that would be unthinkable within the classical regime.²⁴³ The relative shortness of this period—brought to an end by, amongst other factors, the blockbuster model offered by *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975)—is part of its myth: “this narrative is [...] attractive: the story of a brief but vibrant efflorescence of Hollywood cinema more oriented to aesthetic, political and/or personal concerns rather than those of the box office, [...] which was ultimately crushed by the big-budget spectacles of the modern blockbuster.”²⁴⁴

But, can the decline of New Hollywood into the blockbuster-based Hollywood which followed it be conceived of in the same decadent terms as the collapse of the classical studio system?

To this end, it is useful to consider two films which came out in the same year that *Jaws* spelled out the end of the New Hollywood—*Shampoo* (Hal Ashby, 1975) and the film adaptation of *The Day of the Locust* (John Schlesinger, 1975). *Shampoo*, starring Warren Beatty, presents a vision of political and social decay that is much closer to its own present. The majority of the film takes place on November 5th, 1968—the day on which Richard Nixon was elected as President of the United States, marking the end of the countercultural movement personified by Beatty in *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967) one year earlier. However, this social upheaval is presented only on the film's margins, through television screens and half-heard conversations. Instead, the film focuses on the various romantic exploits of George, the hairdresser played by Beatty.²⁴⁵ While the film's presentation of individual self-interest overtaking their political awareness seems to fit exactly into the description of decadence outlined in this thesis, it is also distinctly *un*-decadent as it centres upon George's defiantly normative heterosexuality. As described by Beatty himself, the central ‘joke’ of the film is that George “pretends to be gay, but he's really getting more action than anybody.”²⁴⁶ As George uses the ‘cover’ provided by his

²⁴³ For a more detailed overview of the aesthetic qualities, industrial context, and general cultural value attached to the New Hollywood, see Neale (1976) and Tasker (1996).

²⁴⁴ Derek Nystrom, “The New Hollywood,” 3

²⁴⁵ George's occupation as a hairdresser echoes Jay Sebring, late classical Hollywood's famous make hairdresser who was amongst the victims of the various Manson Family murders in 1969—another popular reference point for the ‘end of the 60s’ which *Shampoo* places itself immediately before.

²⁴⁶ Quoted in Mark Harris, *Pictures at a Revolution: Five Movies and the Birth of the New Hollywood* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 136.

performance of queerness, the film does not serve decadence's project of carving out a historical space for queer subjectivity so much as read compulsory heterosexuality backwards in time. Thus, rather than the emancipatory reimagination offered by decadence, the vision of the past offered in Ashby's film takes on the tone of moralistic critique – blaming the various transgressions and injustices of the Nixon administration on the failure of the younger generation to translate their politics into action.

Schlesinger's largely faithful film adaptation of Nathaniel West's *The Day of the Locust* offers something closer to the model of cinematic decadence outlined in this thesis, returning to the 1930s to dramatize the literal collapse of Hollywood's artifice. However, the various problematic elements of West's novel (as outlined in this thesis' second chapter) are not alleviated by the fact that the audience's entry point into this narrative is, like *Shampoo*, a normative white male. As in Ashby's film, the marginalized, queer subjectivity of decadence is once again replaced by questionable, heterosexist sexual politics as the protagonist Tod Hackett (William Atherton) sexually assaults the story's female lead Faye Greener (Karen Black) midway through. Even as the film treats this incident with ambivalence, the film recalls the moralistic tone of *Shampoo* as it fills the margins of its story with ignored headlines and newsreels regarding Hitler's rise to power in Germany. Therefore, rather than offering a subversion of problematic categories of 'deviance' and 'normalcy,' it instead folds these pre-existing categories into its political critique – as the supposed immorality of classical Hollywood becomes representative of American culture's inability to focus upon matters of political consequence in the lead up to World War II.

One of this thesis' primary goals has been to contest the idea, posed by David Weir, that decadence cannot be meaningfully identified outside of a *fin-de-siècle* context:

Looking backward now, we can only be nostalgic for that vanished age when depravity and corruption actually meant something [...] Today, of course, America offers no shortage of depravity, corruption, excess, and possibly even perversion, but never decadence: it is too late for that.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁷ David Weir, *Decadent Culture in the United States: Art and Literature Against the American Grain, 1890-1926* (Albany: State of New York University Press, 2008), 201.

Given its argument for a flexibility in this definition, it is perhaps odd to conclude this thesis with two examples of what is *not* cinematic decadence. But this conclusion describes these films at length in order to once again demonstrate that decadence requires more than a mere situation of historical decline. Instead, decadence requires an embrace of the identities and subjectivities which are marked as ‘immoral’ or pathological by the dominant, repressive discourses of modernity. Where the two films described above only turn to non-normative forms of sexuality to mourn the decline of dominant culture, decadence is pervaded by the feeling of alienation that comes with living within this marginalization.

While this project has focused upon the Grande Dame Guignol cycle, and its dramatization of the decline of classical Hollywood, this is by no means the only place to locate cinematic or any other type of decadence. As briefly mentioned in the introduction, Frederic Jameson’s essay “The Existence of Italy,” suggests the possibility of two separate trajectories between realism, modernism, and postmodernism for silent and sound cinema, in turn offering the possibility of a separate decadent erosion of modernism within silent film that lies outside the scope of this narrow study.²⁴⁸ Further, it is not a requirement that films be produced within a context of institutional decline in order to meaningfully adopt a decadent style. Countless films could provide a valid starting point for such a study – including texts that dramatize recognizably decadent source material, such as *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* (Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1975), or works which dramatize junctures of historical decline, like *The Scarlet Empress* (Josef von Sternberg, 1934) or *Marie Antoinette* (Sofia Coppola, 2007).

Over forty years ago, Richard Gilman suggested that the legacy of decadence should only be to “go on recommending itself to the shallow, the thoughtless and imitative, the academically frozen: monkey-minds.”²⁴⁹ More than anything else, this thesis argues for a return to this term not as a mere descriptor of decline and debauchery, but a self-sufficient theoretical framework which is capable of uncovering and focusing upon the oft-neglected melancholy and pain which comes with the realization that one has no future to look forward to. Within such apparently bleak circumstances, the condition of being “shallow [...] thoughtless and imitative”²⁵⁰ can, in fact, be profoundly emancipatory.

²⁴⁸ Frederic Jameson, “The Existence of Italy,” in *Signatures of the Visible* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2007), 216-217.

²⁴⁹ Richard Gilman, *Decadence: The Strange Life of an Epithet* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1979), 180.

²⁵⁰ Gilman, *Decadence*, 180.

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Filmography

Advise and Consent (Otto Preminger, 1962)
Bonnie and Clyde (Arthur Penn, 1967)
Charade (Stanley Donen, 1963)
The Children's Hour (William Wyler, 1961)
The Day of the Locust (John Schlesinger, 1975)
La Dolce Vita (Federico Fellini, 1960)
Gone With the Wind (Victor Fleming, 1939)
Grey Gardens (Albert and David Maysles, et. al, 1976)
Hush... Hush, Sweet Charlotte (Robert Aldrich, 1964)
Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome (Kenneth Anger, 1954/1966/1978)
Intervista (Federico Fellini, 1987)
Intolerance (D.W. Griffith, 1916)
Jaws (Steven Spielberg, 1975)
Jezebel (William Wyler, 1938)
The Killing of Sister George (Robert Aldrich, 1968)
The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance (John Ford, 1962)
Marie Antoinette (Sofia Coppola, 2007)
Mommie Dearest (Frank Perry, 1980)
The Night Walker (William Castle, 1964)
Sadie McKee (Clarence Brown, 1934)
The Scarlet Empress (Josef von Sternberg, 1934)
Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom (Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1975)
Scorpio Rising (Kenneth Anger, 1963)
Shampoo (Hal Ashby, 1975)
Strait-Jacket (William Castle, 1964)
What Ever Happened to Aunt Alice? (Lee H. Katzin, 1969)
What Ever Happened to Baby Jane? (Robert Aldrich, 1962)
What's the Matter With Helen? (Curtis Harrington, 1971)
Who Ever Slew Auntie Roo? (Curtis Harrington, 1972)