Table of Contents

Introduction

This project consists of ten essays, each on a different film, all of which center around the idea of highlighting the presence of decadent art in the cinematic medium. As each essay is intended to function as its own distinct piece on each film and the themes of decadence within it, I intend to use this introductional segment to walk you, the reader, through how each piece fits into a wider project.

Fellini Satyricon, by Italian filmmaker Federico Fellini, feels in some ways like ground zero for the modern cinematic depictions of decadence this collection focuses on. While it is far from the first instance of such themes being explored through the cinematic medium, it feels like an important and essential starting point for having proper context on this collection and its contents.

The Damned, another Italian film this time by Luchino Visconti, is representative of the essential body of work of Visconti, perhaps the filmmaker most interested in decadent art in the medium's history. Combining opulent grandeur with psychological and psychosexual malaise, Visconti directs in the tradition of how such decadent writers as Huysmans wrote. Essential.

The Beguiled, the first American film featured, is director-actor duo Don Siegel and Clint Eastwood's attempt at tackling the subject matter, creating a sweaty and nerve wracking piece of sexual repression and sweaty Southern opulence.

Salo, or the 120 Days of Sodom by Pier Paolo Pasolini is the most viscerally upsetting work featured, and also simply one of the most viscerally upsetting films ever made. Telling a tale of fascist aristocracy and sexual abuse, the film is one of the rawest presentations of the subject matter of decadence imaginable, and perhaps the most confrontational work in this collection.

With 1998's *The Celebration,* I jumped forward over a decade to another incredibly raw and powerful work, this one fitting in the Dogme 95 movement's oeuvre. It's a distinct work within this collection for its minimalism and hyperrealism but through that it finds a way to subvert traditional works of decadent fiction and create something affectingly different.

Kubrick's masterwork *Eyes Wide Shut* is as haunting as it is lushly designed and directed, telling an equal parts unsettling and beautifully mesmeric story of bourgeois complacency in the face of true evil.

Mary Harron's Bret Easton Ellis adaptation *American Psycho* provides a more explicitly satirical outlook on the themes of decadence and opulence, at once functioning as a pitch-black comedy and a legitimately frightening and masterfully aestheticized horror film.

Perhaps the most strictly individualized, psychological entry in this collection, Steve McQueen's *Shame* is a distinctly early 2010s- feeling exercise in decadent fiction.

As loud and bombastic as it is disgustingly opulent and excessive, Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street* manages to be at once one of the most pop-accessible and cynically angry entries in this canon.

Albert Serra's *The Death of Louis XIV* is a real throwback entry to earlier works in this collection like *The Damned.* It centers on literalizing the rot of the upper class through the bodily rot experienced by King Louis XIV as a result of his gangrene. Watch it with Nobuhiro Yamashita's short *The Rotting Woman* for full effect.

Fellini Satyricon (1969)

"Rome. Before Christ. After Fellini."

- *Fellini Satyricon*'s Official Poster

Italian filmmaker Federico Fellini followed a similar career trajectory to many of his peers in the world of Italian cinema like Pier Paolo Pasolini and Luchino Visconti in that while he began making films as a part of the movement of Italian neorealism (works like *La Strada (The Road)* and *Nights of Cabiria),* he soon moved away from realism to focus on more lush, extravagant filmmaking that didn't shy away from creating a sense of unreality. Neorealism's form, however, continued to strongly influence his work, no matter how pointedly anti-realist it became: take, more than maybe anything else in his filmography, his 1969 adaption of the classic prose-poem/ early novel the *Satyricon.* Compare *Fellini Satyricon* to a classic work of neorealism like, for example, De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* or Pasolini's *Accattone* (my personal favorite film to come out of the movement). Note how in all three efforts, the camera tends to linger, the filmmaker functionally setting up the shot and allowing it to run with minimal and infrequent cutting and editing.

Fellini Satyricon's opulent partyland fantasia, though, is a clear point of divergence from the slice-of-life sensibilities of neorealism. While Fellini may employ the formal techniques he picked up on works like *La Strada,* he completely leaves behind the subject matter, creating a fascinating converange of realist techniques being used to portray often unreal and sometimes borderline surreal imagery and subject matter. Fellini almost positions himself as a god here, much like the poster's comparison of himself to Christ, abiding over his unending

sea of ancient debauchery and festivity, forsaking traditional narrative in favor of atmospheric elements and image composition, winding through the massive, almost labyrinthine landscape he creates.

Worth noting also is Fellini's 1976 work *Fellini's Casanova*, a sort of spiritual successor to *Fellini Satyricon,* but a much more up close and personal approach than one may sometimes expect from the decadent subject matter on display. Casanova's own mental state contrasts with his boisterous lifestyle, displaying to us the casualties of the grand bombastic debauchery on display in *Satyricon.* It's almost the *Fort Apache* to *Fellini Satyricon*'s *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon.* Watch the two together, or pair them with Visconti's *The Damned* and *Death in Venice,* respectively. Your call.

The Damned (1969)

Luchino Visconti, the Italian director of 1969's *The Damned,* is the reason I had to impose upon myself the rule of writing about one film per director for this project. I found myself torn between five different films of his: *The Leopard* (1963), his "German trilogy-" *The Damned* (1969), *Death In Venice* (1971), and *Ludwig* (1973) as well as *The Innocent* (1976), his last film. Each of these films tell stories of bourgeois excess and debauchery: *The Leopard* is the story of a wealthy Sicilian family coping with the social changes brought about by the unification of Italy, *Death in Venice* a sort of *Lolita*-esque story of pederastic desire within the German upper crust, *Ludwig* the story of tortured Bavarian king Ludwig in the 1800s, and *The Innocents* a narrative of an aristocrat locked in a loveless marriage who finds his attraction to his wife reinvigorated by the revelation of her infidelity to him. Ultimately, though, I settled on *The Damned,* a story of illicit homosexuality, incest, naziism, and the old German industrialist class being pushed out by the nouveau riche young industrialists.

The Damned is, without question, the most textually dense of Visconti's works, dealing with sexual and moral transgression, reveling sometimes in Visconti's own conflicted and tortured Catholic morality. It's easy to read *The Damned*'s portrayal of homosexuality as illicit or transgressive sexual action as homophobic, but to do so is to ignore Visconti's own homosexuality. *The Damned,* like many great and compelling texts, is one of internal contradictions, some of which are arguably irreconcilable, all of which are endlessly interesting to dig into.

If there's one film in this entire collection you should watch to truly understand what decadent fiction in cinema looks like, it's *The Damned,* which renders it almost impossible to write about.. Weaving an epic tale of shifting power structures, interfamilial traumas and fascist collaboration, Visconti channels maybe the most direct influence from the works of authors like Huysmans. Worth reading is Henry Bacon's book *Visconti: Explorations of Beauty and Decay,* a far more comprehensive and fully realized exploration of Visconti's filmmaking than I could hope to fit into this collection.

The Beguiled (1971)

By the time they made *The Beguiled* in 1971, director- actor duo Don Siegel and Clint Eastwood had already put out first two of their five collaborations together (*Coogan's Bluff* and *Two Mules For Sister Sara* in 1968 and 1970 respectively, the duo would then go on to finish out the five with *Dirty Harry* later in 1971 and *Escape From Alcatraz* in 1979). Of the pair's collaborations, their two 1971 efforts are the most textually dense and interesting. *Dirty Harry* has a kind of ugly, politically dense and confusing nature which has led to its labeling as anything ranging from a fascist to an anti-fascist text (placing it closer to another 1971 effort, Sam Peckinpah's *Straw Dogs* than to any of the other Siegel-Eastwood pictures) while *The Beguiled's* psychosexual, sweaty, down-south melodrama/ psychodrama has been called both misogynist and feminist, conservative and left-wing, and just about anything else you could read a movie about sexual tension and depravity as being. Where does it truthfully lie? Probably none of those places and all of them at once.

Based on the novel by Thomas P. Cullinan, *The Beguiled* concerns an injured Union soldier during the American Civil War taken in by an all-girls boarding school in Mississippi in order to heal. While the soldier, John McBurney (Eastwood) is there, sexual tensions flare up between him and many of the girls, beginning as a kind of chauvinistic sexual fantasy and slowly and steadily creeping into a darker and more dangerous reality for McBurney. The aura of excess drips down and saturates every inch of the film like the moist, sweaty Mississippi air the characters breathe in: the sexual and emotional repression high society has imposed upon many of the girls comes ripping away to reveal often dark, twisted, psychosexual natures lying beneath the surface. It may be a more minor entry in the decadent

cinematic canon but *The Beguiled*'s visual language in regard to the ornate and opulent feels so festering and sinister it's hard not to justify including.

Salo, or the 120 Days of Sodom (1975)

Pier Paolo Pasolini's works were no stranger to a sort of playful extremity and transgression- odd, perhaps, for a devoted Catholic, maybe less so for a queer communist counterculturalist and self-styled provocateur- but the hints of a wink and a nudge in previous films like *Pigsty, The Decameron,* and even *Theorem* are not even remotely present in his final film, 1975's *Salo, or the 120 Days of Sodom,* adapted from the Marquis De Sade's unfinished novel *The 120 Days of Sodom, or the School of Libertinage.*

Bordering on pure horror, *Salo, or the 120 Days of Sodom* is the disturbing and sickening story of a group of Italian facist officials during the second world war who take a group of young people hostage and spend four months brutally abusing them with sexual exploitation, horrific violence, and psychological torture.

It's a movie about facism, obviously, but *Salo* is also just generally a film about the consequences of unchecked power, representing the oppression and abuse of totalitarian forms of governance through the microcosm displayed onscreen by Pasolini.

It's an enduringly controversial work, and unquestionably not one for the easily upset or nauseated, and that's exactly the way Pasolini intended *Salo, or the 120 Days of Sodom* to be received, sickening and alienating and profoundly upsetting to anyone who may come across it. In said regard, it may be the truest work of transgressively decadent fiction featured in this collection, albeit one I have a hard time recommending that anyone unprepared for one of the most visceral upsetting works of art ever produced watch in good conscience.

The Celebration (1998)

Danish filmmaker Thomas Vinterberg, director of *The Celebration,* is one of the creators of Dogme 95, a rulebook for filmmaking designed to minimize cinema to it's barest of essentials. Seen as a reaction by its creators to increasingly ornate and overblown cinematic landscape, Dogme 95 outlaws things like special effects, genre, incidental music, and action deemed "superficial" while necessitating films be shot on location, set in the present, and photographed on Academy 35mm film. *The Celebration* is one of the few films (alongside Lars Von Trier's *The Idiots* and Harmony Korine's *Julien Donkey-Boy*) to use Dogme not as a hypothetical thought experiment but as a real rulebook for filmmaking, and the results are enormously fascinating.

The Celebration follows a wealthy Danish family coming together at the hotel owned by their father, Helge, to celebrate his sixtieth birthday. The hugely disfunctional clan is at one another's throats from essentially the start: bickering and jabbing at one another they almost seem to revel in their own unpleasantness, berating their spouses for trivial mistakes and haraunging daughter Helene's afro-danish boyfriend Gbatokai with the racist Danish children's song "Jeg har set en rigtig negermand" ("I have seen a real negro man."). But things come to a head when son Christian accuses Helge of sexually abusing both him and his twin sister Linda in their childhood.

Some might anticipate that a filmmaking approach as intentionally, calculatedly minimalist as Dogme might mix with themes of decadence and opulence like oil and water, but Vinterberg's stripped down methodology actually works perfectly for the story of *The*

Celebration, his raw and unpolished camerawork and lo-fi aesthetics work to bring a new angle to the story that would otherwise not exist.

Let me explain. The theme, most centrally, of *The Celebration,* is that of trauma ripping through the veneer of high society, of repressed horrors exploding through the canvas of opulence and luxury. The twins' abuse- which lead to Linda's earlier suicide and Christians's severe mental troubles in adulthood- has been covered up and smoothede over with a layer of niceity and high-faluting wealth. So much like Christian's trauma comes crashing into his family's nice, pleasant birthday celebration, Vinterberg's raw, almost primitive filmmaking technique crashes it's way into the aesthetics of the highbrow, gaudy hotel owned by the family.

Eyes Wide Shut (1999)

Stanley Kubrick's final film, *Eyes Wide Shut,* is his best, so it stands to reason that it was received, upon initial release, as being far and away his worst. It may be a departure from his previous subject matter (although by how much is debatable- *Barry Lyndon* from nearly three decades before *EWS* was another serious consideration for this collection) but the films plodding, steady pace and widescreen camerawork are as Kubrick as ever, and the best utilization of the director's iconic style ever put to screen.

Eyes Wide Shut, basically, is a film about the complacency of wealth. It centers around an upper class couple who, upon finding themselves on the edge of a murderous sex cult of the elite and powerful, instead opt to return to the comfort of their wealthy lives when things get too scary for them

But the real draw here is Kubrick's immaculately realized aesthetic. No movie feels as tonally sinister yet as a visually gorgeous as *Eyes Wide Shut.* It's the perfect aesthetic distillation of decadence, so perfectly visually realized even describing it feels silly.

American Psycho (2000)

"There are no more barriers to cross," explains protagonist Patrick Bateman (Christian Bale) in a monologue towards the end of *American Psycho,* director Mary Harron's 2000 adaptation of the novel by Bret Easton Ellis, "All I have in common with the uncontrollable and the insane, the vicious and the evil, all the mayhem I have caused and my utter indifference toward it I have now surpassed." Bateman's incorrect, of course: the murderous impulses he's show to carry with himself throughout the movie is still there in him. But he raises an interesting and important point that's worth considering when we talk about the transgressive and decadent in art: *at what point will transgression transgress back into the acceptable?*

It sounds like an odd question, but it's a more plausible occurrence than some may estimate. Many social critics may argue, for instance, that as violence in mass media becomes more and more prevalent, it becomes less and less shocking to the average consumer. Violence in the average contemporary American film is more frequent than in the 1940s, yet the cold and subliminal violence of something like Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt* feels more weighted and shocking than any Marvel Cinematic Universe set-piece does today. Patrick Bateman's crossed over the line. He's lost the thrill of his debauchery and his depravity. Once he has become desensitized to it, it lacks any of the pleasures it once held for him.

It's currently in vogue to, when talking about the text of *American Psycho,* make a point of stating it to be satire, so as to avoid being lumped in with some imaginary group of douchebag dudebros who idolize and quote Bateman. This is obviously a nonexistent threat,

but those who categorize it as social satire are, at the very least, not *in*correct. The film skewers Bateman and his Wall Street friends in their greed, selfishness, cruelty, machismo, and hypocrisy (in one scene, Bale's brutal serial murderer protagonist chastises a friend for his casually anti-Semetic jokes at a dinner, his sensibilities apparently more hurt by a social faux-pas than brutal violent crime). But to only engage with Harron's adaptation as social satire is to rob it of the analysis it deserves as a more serious work.

One can interpret Bateman's serial murdering and what it stands for as any number of things: an expression of a macho 1980s mysoginy, a representation of the everyday violence inherent to the existence of people like Bateman, a tongue-in-cheek representation of a psychopathy we praise in the business world but forbid in other aspects of life, etc. But what's worth considering is this: maybe Harron and Ellis are simply here to inform us that the ruling class, the group of people in our modern society who lord over us at every turn financially and socially, desire and enjoy the death of their fellow human beings. Maybe it really is just as simple as that. And what I'd ask you is this: would they be wrong?

Shame (2011)

Shame is likely British filmmaker Steve McQueen's most controversial, debated work (his arguably equally transgressive *12 Years a Slave* more widely regarded as "important" by the critical mainstream, and not unfairly) so it stands to reason that it's the film of his I would contend is his best work to date. Following upper-class New York sex addict Brandon, played brilliantly by McQueen's frequent collaborator Michael Fassbender, the film is perhaps as explicitly psychological as decadent fiction can really get, zooming in on Brandon's isolation in the midst of excess and luxury, a man surrounded by a world of just total vaucousness attempting to fill the void through meaningless, emotionless sex.

When Brandon's sister Sissy, a singer, comes to visit him and becomes involved with his coworker, however, Brandon's world is turned to some degree upside down, and the resurging memories of what McQueen implies to be some manner of childhood trauma shared by him and Sissy come back to haunt both the siblings, culminating in Sissy's attempted suicide and Brandon's attempt to finally set aside his sex addiction. The film ends on maybe the most ambiguous note of McQueen's career: as a woman silently flirts with Brandon on the subway, he stares off, an empty pain behind his eyes, seemingly as unsure as the audience of whether or not he will relapse to his previous ways.

While *Shame* may not be the most original exploration of the vacuousness and emotional repression inherent to uppercrust life ever put to celluloid, McQueen's clearheaded direction, Fassbender's stunning and mesmerizing performance, and the script's ability to steer clear of feeling like pseudointellectual psychobabble makes it well worth its inclusion here.

The Wolf of Wall Street (2013)

If there's one thing Martin Scorsese really excels at, it's his ability to drum up empathy for the truly reprehensible. His filmography is filled with morally disagreeable characters, ranging from violent sadist gangsters like in *GoodFellas* or *Casino* to more tragic psychotics like *Taxi Driver*'s Travis Bickle. His ability to show truly and utterly loathsome individuals for what they are and still maintain a degree of empathy for them among the audience is nearly unmatched. Although we watched the same character torture a man by sticking his head in a vice and squeezing his skull earlier in the film, when Joe Pesci is killed in *Casino* we still can't help but wince at the brutality and savagery of the act. Although *Cape Fear*'s Max Cady is a violent murderous psychopatic rapist, it's hard not to listen to his arguments regarding the unfairness and corrupt nature of the American criminal justice system and not feel like they're kind of hitting the nail right on the head. Even Daniel Day-Lewis's violent, sadistic xenophobic Bill "The Butcher" Cutting is met with a certain degree of empathy despite his hateful rage. So it's really saying something to say that Martin Scorsese truly hates Jordan Belfort.

Belfort, of course, is the real-life scam artist played by actor Leonardo DiCaprio in Scorsese's 2013 effort *The Wolf of Wall Street.* The character tears his way through a mountain of debauchery, hiring sex workers en masse and stuffing his every orifice of his body with as large a portion of drugs and alchohol as humanly possible. The entire time, Scorsese shoots him and his friends/ accomplices like absolutely maniacal little goblins, destroying and desecrating anything in their path, exploiting those around them at every turn.

It's not the most recently made film in this collection, but in a great deal of ways, *The Wolf of Wall Street* feels like the most modern take on the decadent themes explored in it's fellow titles, which is odd given that textually it may have more in common with works by filmmakers like Visconti (*The Damned,* plus titles like *The Leopard* and *Death in Venice).* Aesthetically, though, this is completely new and flashy and shiny in a way that feels out of place within Scorsese's filmography: *The Wolf of Wall Street* manages to surpass even *The Departed* in loudness and vulgarity, its glimmering vibrating neon debauchery pounds the viewer until they're as intoxicated and numbed as Belfort and company.

But Scorsese never loses sight of the dark underbelly to the blaring party of Belfort's life: he never lets you forget that this is fundamentally built on the exploitation and scamming of other human beings, and he never lets DiCaprio's demonic partyman forget it either. His loathing of the character permeates every frame, rendering the strange finance-bro following it has almost comically oblivious. But here's the greatest irony of the *Wolf of Wall Street:* the real life Jordan Belfort thinks it's just about the coolest thing in the world.

The Death of Louis XIV (2016)

Albert Serra's masterpiece *The Death of Louis XIV* contains within itself a beautifully sickening microcosm for what watching the film as a whole feels like: the foot of the titular French king, propped up in his bed of fine white linens, festering, infected, gangrenous and blackening. As we see the Sun King's foot rot away from his very body, we watch the man himself rot and wither away amidst the opulence he lived accustomed to, slowly giving in to the gangrene eating away at his foot. The physical decomposition of his body mirrors a decomposing and decaying aristocratic system, portrayed by Serra as in the earliest stages of its own death alongside the king.

Serra is no stranger to the subgenre of slow cinema (a style pioneered throughout Europe and Asia defined by filmmakers like Bela Tarr, Tsai Ming-liang, and Lav Diaz) and it shows here: his camera lingers over every ornate detail of the king's bedchamber, lingering on every detail of the disgustingly opulent and ornate space, making the dying, gasping king even more jarring as he appears on screen.

Fundamentally, *The Death of Louis XIV* is a film about rust among gold, about decay among the decadent, about literalizing the social rot essential to decadent art through physical, human rot. It's sickening, but kind of beautiful in a way.

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