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Not a Comeback: The persistence of decadence in film noir

JOE GILLIS: I didn't know you were planning a comeback.

NORMA DESMOND: I hate that word! It's return!

—*Sunset Boulevard* (1950)

Introduction

“I’m ready,” Norma Desmond boisterously declares, letting loose the train of her sequined dress. It sweeps the marble steps in her wake as she descends the grand curved stairs of her crumbling mansion. Now deluded and ready for her return to film as the princess Salome, she addresses her audience of police officers and news reporters (whom she believes to be fans and film crew), “You see, this is my life. It always will be. There’s nothing else. Just us... And the cameras... And those wonderful people out there in the dark” (*Sunset Boulevard*). Salome is a decadent symbol of fear and desire, which Norma—ironically—embodies at the end of the film. As she finally steps into the character of Salome, a role she has desired for a long time, Norma is unaware of how her life has become that of the decadent princess.

This final scene of *Sunset Boulevard* shows the union of fin-de-siècle decadence and film noir in the character of Norma Desmond. Society—through the lens of reporters and their cameras—flood through the gate of Norma’s mansion and invade the space she reserved for herself and a handful of carefully selected servants. To escape the onslaught, Norma retreats into the delusion that she is filming her screenplay on Salome. After all, film sets are the only places

where Norma allows herself to be surrounded by a large number of people. As decadents retreat into an artificial paradise, Norma gradually retreats into her role of Salome throughout the film. Norma's perverse fascination with Salome manifests, as she transforms into the princess. While many noir films contain decadent elements, *Sunset Boulevard's* allusions to important decadent figures, such as Salome, lend itself to comparisons with fin-de-siècle decadent texts.

As a countercultural, anti-bourgeois movement that rose to prominence in Britain and Europe during the late nineteenth-century, decadence distinguishes itself from other fin-de-siècle works through its perversity, artifice, and contradictory relationship to commodity culture. Despite its criticism of the upper class, decadents paradoxically appreciate an artistic and intellectual superiority of their own. The fin-de-siècle decadent is often born into a high-ranking social class but flees from modernity to a life of secluded luxury. As the name suggests, decadence is marked with images of excessive luxury and consumerism that lead to decay. Karl Beckson, a scholar of decadence, argues how central figures of decadence define their movement differently: some, such as Théophile Gautier, cite the importance of exoticism while others, including Charles Baudelaire, see the movement as avant-garde and privilege artifice (xxx). Despite its close association with the fin de siècle, the decadent movement survives beyond the turn of the century. Living on in modernist literature as well as in film, decadence exists in a wide range of movies of various genres. It spans across cinema's many different genres and is present in films including noir films such as Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) to Stanley Kubrick's sci-fi drama, *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) to Tony Scott's vampire movie, *The Hunger* (1983) to Baz Luhrmann's recent adaptation of *The Great Gatsby* (2013). Though forms of decadence are apparent in films across multiple genres, the decadent interest in alienation, dark

and garish aesthetics, elements of parody or satire, and distrust of women all especially resonate with film noir.

The story of film noir began in the 1940s. While most movements are named at their birth, noir is defined in retrospect. The naming of noir changed everything for the young movement of twenty years. With its newfound sense of identity, film noir underwent a transformation and reemerged as neo-noir in the 1960s. Classical noir exists almost exclusively in the 1940s and 50s.

Film noir is particularly elusive of definition since it was named in retrospect and lacked a set of self-proclaimed noir pioneers to lay down rules and regulations for the movement. Fay and Nieland argue, “film noir is not any one thing, it has no stylistic signature that persists across time, no abiding formal unity, no aesthetic core” (183). Bould, Glitre and Tuck agree that the essence of noir is difficult to pinpoint, “...critics never quite [agree] upon whether it is a genre or a style or a theme or a mood or a form or a texture or a cycle” (3). With that said, there are components of noir that one can point to as key to the genre. For example, dark or urban settings, narratives inspired by hard-boiled fiction, and themes including betrayal and mistrust of women are common elements of film noir. Each element may not be exclusively noir; however, in the right combination and the correct context, these elements come together to form a noir film (Bould, Glitre, and Tuck, 4).

Despite the persistence of decadence in noir films, the transition from one era to the next did not perfectly preserve decadence in its fin-de-siècle form. David Weir argues, “even 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” (201). Weir draws a distinction between decadence, the original movement

from the fin de siècle and “decadence,” or what has survived of decadent aesthetics in Hollywood. This distinction demonstrates how the commodification of film, which makes decadence’s survival possible, complicates the idea of decadence as a counterculture. In gaining popularity, a decadent film does not have the same power to shock its audience. Hollywood has a set of standards to uphold that films have to obey. For example, in *Sunset Boulevard*, Norma and Joe’s relationship is mostly implied, which is a large contrast with decadent texts, such as Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s *Venus in Furs* (1870), that were much more explicitly erotic. However, decadent films are still consumed in mass culture. Grace Elizabeth Hale explains why, in the latter half of the twentieth century, a large part of white middle-class Americans, as consumers of mass culture, thought of themselves as outsiders and how this impacted American culture (1). Outsider characters in mass culture, much like the decadent, are often alienated in some way and represent an alternative ideology that subverts societal norms. Hale defines postwar mass culture and the place it has in American culture:

After World War II, intellectuals on both the left and the right used the term “mass culture,” often quite negatively, to split mass-produced varieties of expression from older popular forms. In this view, radio serials, hit songs, pulp fiction, magazines, and movies were different from other cultural forms celebrated as “folk” culture and the “higher” forms of art and learning once known simply as culture. (36)

Hale’s ideas on mass culture inform the evolution that decadence experienced between the fin de siècle and the mid twentieth-century. Film noir is forced to cater to a wider audience than was required of fin-de-siècle decadent literature. The narrative shift experienced by decadence also coincides, in part, with a cultural shift towards popular culture forms.

There is a profound narrative shift in decadent texts that accompanies the jump from late nineteenth-century literature to mid twentieth-century film noir. This shift was necessary to accommodate the latter genre's interest in hard-boiled fiction as well as the postwar emergence of mass culture. While the shift makes sense as culture changed through time and across continents, film noir's narrative voice is often rooted in the working class when fin-de-siècle decadence was deeply immersed in an upper-class setting. In this thesis, I will argue that the decadent movement survives in twentieth-century America through noir films, or what I refer to as "noir decadence." However, noir films make decadence more accessible to a wider audience through a change in perspective and more complicated depictions of class and gender. The first section of this thesis, "The Decadence of Film Noir," compares and contrasts fin-de-siècle decadence and noir decadence through the noir film *Sunset Boulevard*. This section also discusses the shift in the narrator's perspective to set up the discussion of narrative structure, characters, and how they come together to form a perspective that makes decadence accessible to mass audiences. "Narrative Structure," the second section, examines the way fin-de-siècle decadent narratives are constructed and how that relates to noir decadence. The third section, "Primary Characters," discusses the noir detective archetype, the fin-de-siècle decadent dandy, and the shared character of the "femme fatale." Finally, the conclusion extends noir decadence into the twenty-first-century and examines the perseverance of decadence in neo-noir films.

Decadence resonates aesthetically, stylistically, and thematically with noir and, later, with neo-noir. Noir and neo-noir often depict excess or aesthetically ornate images, especially in films such as Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard*. Wilder's film, a classic noir comprised of visually ornate and dynamic frames, tells the story of Norma Desmond, a psychotic silent film actress who faded from the limelight when "talkies" rose to prominence. The film is told from the

perspective of Joe Gillis, an out of work screenwriter, who serendipitously finds himself in Desmond's crumbling mansion. Desmond employs Gillis as an editor for her screenplay about Salome—a Biblical figure who, remade into an icon of dangerous female sexuality, emerges the favorite femme fatale of the fin-de-siècle decadent. The promise of money holds Gillis captive to Desmond's manipulation, which leads to his ultimate demise. Many of the scenes in *Sunset Boulevard* brim with motion, sound, and detail to engage as many of the viewer's senses as possible. Aesthetically and thematically noir and neo-noir films resonate with decadence. While film, as a medium, may appear to confine the audience to visual and sonic engagement, decadent film noir, much like decadent literature, uses detail to engage the audience's imagination. Decadent works lead their audience through a fragmented narrative that demands the viewer or reader to engage and make assumptions of their own. They aim to shock their audience, test limits, and violate repressive norms—both aesthetic and social.

Section 1: The Decadence of Film Noir

One of the largest differences between modern decadence and nineteenth-century decadence lies in its approach to upper class subjects. Weir defines fin-de-siècle decadence as “largely aristocratic in spirit if not in fact; the social trajectory of the decadent is always upward, away from the democratic masses of the bourgeois world: his is a counterculture of elites” (199). Weir goes on to explain the class shift in decadent film. He argues that this form of decadence “separates itself from the bourgeoisie by moving down the social scale into an alternative, bohemian world that is not antidemocratic or elitist at all” (199). What Weir observes is visible when comparing nineteenth century decadent literature to twentieth and twenty-first-century decadent film.

Both fin-de-siècle decadence and what I am calling “noir decadence” are able to critique the privileged elite from the inside and outside. They both often come from an outside perspective, but have insight into the life of a decadent antihero. The primary difference is that the fin-de-siècle narrator often tells the story in third person, while the noir decadent narrator is complicit in the action and tells the story from a first person perspective. The fin-de-siècle narrator follows the decadent antihero as he or she seeks to escape from the ugliness and materialism of modern culture, often fashioning a life of secluded luxury that asserts their intellectual and artistic superiority. Noir narrators, by contrast, are part of the middle or working class and find themselves associated with the upper class, often by chance. This is the case with *Sunset Boulevard*, in which Norma Desmond is the decadent antihero even though the story is narrated by Joe Gillis. Gillis tells the story of Norma Desmond, but his account of her life is influenced by his presence in the action. In short, the fin-de-siècle narrator is not present like the noir narrator. Because of this, the fin-de-siècle narrator is closer to the story of the decadent antihero because the narrator is not telling a first person narrative in which they must account for their own story. Even though decadent noir films tell the decadent’s story from an outside perspective, the story of the decadent antihero—no matter the era—tends to be the same: seclusion, perversity, and luxury in excess.

The change in perspective between fin-de-siècle and noir decadence reflects the more democratic sensibilities of postwar American culture. Film scholar J.P. Telotte explains how personal voice acts as a “testimony” to “the repressive force of mass culture in the postwar era”:

For in championing the personal voice and the consciousness it denotes, in privileging such evidence of individuality, these narratives fundamentally underscore the individual’s function as a mirror and measure of his culture. Through their human narrators, such

films privilege the impressionistic as an alternative to the objectivity we implicitly attribute to classical narrative. And in so doing, they speak a nagging concern with the place of the self in modern American society and with the ability of the individual voice to be heard in this world. (17)

Telotte goes on to say that these alternative voices allow one “to sound out other, normally stilled voices, to test whether his is simply a solitary, dissenting voice within the cacophony of mass culture.” (17) This explains how alternative narratives, such as decadent ones, are able to survive in mass culture. Alternative narratives reflect the desire for a unique identity felt by American viewers. This desire for individuality emerged in a mass culture where there is little identification between consumers of mass produced and wide reaching films. Telotte’s discussion of the “personal voice” also accounts for the common occurrence of third party, first person narratives in film noir. In these decadent noir narrations, the narrator is personified and made a character in the film, which creates more distance from the decadent antihero than is common in fin-de-siècle narration. Film noir’s first person narration contrasts the often third person narratives in fin-de-siècle literature that are slightly closer to the antihero.

Joris-Karl Huysman’s *Against Nature* was originally published in 1884 under the title *À Rebours*. Decadent critic Arthur Symons refers to *Against Nature* as “the breviary of the Decadence” (qtd. in Beckson, XXI). Huysman’s novel is an exemplary decadent text that also demonstrates the tendency of decadent literature’s narrator to retreat from aristocratic society to seclusion shrouded in artifice. *Against Nature* tells the story of decadent antihero Jean des Esseintes, who comes from noble lineage and detests the modern society in which he lives. Des Esseintes constructs his own artificial world that allows him to dwell in antiquity and aestheticized luxury. In his constructed paradise, he celebrates art and literature with a superior

collection of literature and paintings. However, Des Esseintes lifestyle depletes his health and forces him to quit his utopia and rejoin society and the modern world. The narrator of *Against Nature* describes Des Esseintes philosophy after he removes himself from society:

[H]e had resolved to allow nothing to enter his hermitage which might breed repugnance or regret; and so he had set his heart on finding a few pictures of subtle, exquisite refinement, steeped in an atmosphere of ancient fantasy, wrapped in an aura of antique corruption, divorced from modern times and modern society. (50)

Des Esseintes's disdain for modernity is represented in words such as "repugnance" and "regret;" belonging to such a society disgusts him. However, in his new world, he seeks to surround himself with images of "refinement," "fantasy," and "antique corruption." The artifice implied by "fantasy" and the rebellion in "corruption" set Des Esseintes apart from the aristocracy because these words represent a departure from a realistic decorum that the aristocracy venerates. This allows Des Esseintes to critique his former society while enjoying his wealth to a greater extent. Des Esseintes sees his society as deeply rooted in modern times and seeks refuge in the "antique" where he can be "divorced from modern times." These references to antiquity hearken back to the fall of Rome, the "origin" of decadence. In nineteenth-century decadent literature, it is common for a character of noble birth to evade the society they belong to only to continue a life of luxury in the pursuit of an ideal. The pleasure that decadence finds in excess and luxury works to critique and subvert the aristocracy as such imprudence goes against the carefully cultivated manners of high society.

In Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard*, Joe Gillis finds himself, by happenstance, involved in the life of a reclusive actress who, much like Des Esseintes, surrounds herself by luxury to please her every whim. When Gillis first enters Norma's crumbling mansion—its state of decay

symbolizing the similar decline of its owner—he is struck by the detail and extravagance. The walls are full of high art, tables lined with photos of Norma Desmond, and she has a butler and a car so luxurious that Cecil DeMille wants to borrow it for one of his films. All of these extravagances, however, cannot compete with the funeral Norma is preparing for her recently deceased pet chimp (a topic I explore in more detail below). The similarities between Des Esseintes and Norma extend beyond their decadent lifestyles. Des Esseintes has a lavish library of books similar to Norma Desmond's impressive collection of films, though she is the star of many—if not all—of the films in her possession. Gillis explains that Norma requires him to watch a movie with her “two or three times a week” and he notes, “they were always her pictures.” Norma and Joe would watch the movies “right in her living room. So much nicer than going out, she'd say. The plain fact was she was afraid of that world outside” (*Sunset Boulevard*). The screen is hidden behind a large oil painting, which was even more luxurious when the film was released, in 1950, than it is today. This demonstrates the way that Desmond surrounds herself with everything she could need from the outside world so that, like Des Esseintes, she can enjoy life without leaving her house and without any sacrifices. A movie screen the size of an oil painting, much less the oil painting, is a luxury that few people can afford.

To return to Desmond's pet chimp—this pet is another signifier of Desmond's decadence. Her companionship with the chimp references the animalistic primitivism often associated with fin-de-siècle femme fatales. In addition, the possession of such a creature is rather eccentric, which is furthered by the way that the narrative first presents the chimp as though it were human. His body is small under an ornate tapestry and appears to be that of a child. Desmond's interaction with the corpse reinforces the idea that it is a child. Desmond says,

“I put him on the massage table in front of the fire. He always liked fires and poking at them with a stick” (*Sunset Boulevard*). This is a rather child-like image—playing with sticks and fire—and her reminiscence of his pastimes contains as much nostalgia as Norma can manage to feel for something that is not her career. The way Norma speaks of the chimp makes him sound like a person—like a companion—which makes it all the more surprising and perverse when she reveals her deceased friend as a primate. After she reveals the species of her companion, Norma Desmond unflinchingly continues on to say, “I want the coffin to be white, and I want it specially lined with satin” (*Sunset Boulevard*). She raises her arms slowly and dramatically as she speaks this, flourishing her fingers as she says “satin” to emphasize the lavish elegance she wishes to bestow upon the chimp.

The funeral preparation for Desmond’s chimp bears a strong resemblance to Des Esseintes and the death of his pet turtle. The narrator of *Against Nature* describes the turtle after its death: “Accustomed no doubt to a sedentary life, a modest existence spent in the shelter of its humble carapace, it had not been able to bear the dazzling luxury imposed upon it, the glittering cape in which it has been clad, the precious stones which had been used to decorate its shell like a jeweled ciborium” (Huysmans 49). While the jewels were inlaid on the turtle during its time amongst the living, that luxury caused the creature’s untimely death, causing the adornments to become its coffin—similar to the chimp’s satin lined one. *Sunset Boulevard* does not directly link the death of the chimp to a decadent lifestyle in quite the same way that *Against Nature* does. However, it can be inferred that the primate did not thrive in an environment so alien and so invested in artifice. The way that Norma forces the chimp into a human role as her companion is perverse. The film uses visual details—massage tables, Norma’s elegant robe, and rococo furnishings—combined with dramatic gestures to communicate the sumptuousness of Norma’s

world that the chimp occupied. Confined to words, Huysmans's novel uses diction to highlight Des Esseintes's decadent extravagance. Des Esseintes makes the turtle into a piece of art that contrasts the turtle's original "modest existence" in its "humble carapace" (Huysmans 49). Everything about what the turtle was—in exception to its "sedentary life"—contrasts the life of Des Essentes. To welcome the turtle into his world, the decadent antihero gives his pet a "glittering cape" of "precious stones" that turn his shell into "a jeweled ciborium" (49). The use of "ciborium" carries sepulture undertones and parallels the satin coffin of Norma's chimp. Both the turtle of Des Essentes and the chimp of Norma Desmond were adopted by decadent antiheroes whose luxurious and "unnatural" lifestyles abbreviated the creatures' already short lifespans.

Much like Des Esseintes's turtle or Norma's chimp, Gillis forgets his origins and grows accustomed to living in Norma's constructed paradise. He lives in her mansion under the pretext of working on her screenplay of *Salome*—a feminine figure of transgression who inspired many decadents including Oscar Wilde, Aubrey Beardsley, and Gustave Moreau. *Salome* was a princess who tried to seduce John the Baptist. When he rejected her, she demanded his head on a platter—similar to Norma Desmond, who is prepared to kill a lover that spurns her. Norma's screenplay is another acknowledgement of her character's decadent nature. She plans to play the role of *Salome* when her screenplay is filmed. Even though Norma has faded from prominence in Hollywood and she is too old to play the part of the young princess, she desires to star in her screenplay because of her admiration for *Salome*. Norma muses, "What a woman. What a part—the princess in love with a holy man. She dances the dance of the seven veils. He rejects her, so she demands his head on a golden tray, kissing his cold, dead lips" (*Sunset Boulevard*). Norma is drawn to the idea of youthful beauty capable of seducing a "holy man," which is reflected in her interest with "the dance of the seven veils." Norma slows her speech as she speaks the final

sentence and holds her hand in front of her face, as though to kiss the severed head of John the Baptist. Norma's summary of Salome's story becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Like Salome, Norma kills Joe after she tries to seduce him and he rejects her. Norma's fascination with Salome and consequent murder of Joe also exemplifies the decadent fascination with necrophilia. Throughout *Sunset Boulevard*, Norma proves that there is no actress better suited to play Salome as Salome's tenacity is met in Norma Desmond.

Despite Gillis's initial reluctance to dwell in Norma's world—serving as her lover and working on her screen play—he grows to depend so heavily on her money that he gives up the freedom to produce work of quality and the freedom to love a woman, like Betty, for whom he cares. When Betty finds out about Norma, she goes to Norma's mansion and demands Gillis pack up his things:

BETTY: Now get your things together and let's get out of here.

JOE GILLIS: All my things? All my eighteen suits and my custom-made shoes and the six-dozen shirts and the cufflinks and the platinum key chains and the cigarette cases?

BETTY: Come on, Joe.

JOE GILLIS: Come on where? Back to a one-room apartment I can't pay for? Back to a story that may sell and very possibly will not?

BETTY: If you love me, Joe--

JOE GILLIS: Look, sweetie, be practical. I've got a good deal here. A long-term contract with no options. I like it that way. Maybe it's not very admirable. Well, you and Artie can be admirable. (*Sunset Boulevard*)

This exchange between Gillis and Betty demonstrates Joe's transformation away from his early reluctance to reside in Norma's world. He is a budding decadent, as is indicated by the above exchange. Joe's list of all that Norma has given him—shirts, custom-made shoes, cufflinks, etc.—contrasts with the small apartment and “story that may well sell and very possibly will not.” Furthermore, when Betty suggests Gillis pack up his “things,” Gillis proceeds to innumerate all of the “things” in his possession. Gillis sees Betty's use of the word “things” as reductive and trivializing of the possessions that he wishes her to appreciate. All of the “things” he owns are more than objects to Gillis; they are symbols of the superior taste he is acquiring. Gillis's pride in his possessions reveals his burgeoning dandyism as he takes pleasure in fashion and comes by money easily.

Gillis's companionship to Norma makes him a kept man, which he acknowledges when he says, in the above exchange, “Maybe it's not very admirable” (*Sunset Boulevard*). Though Gillis is still technically employed as Desmond's editor, his primary occupation is to be her lover and companion and enjoy the idle life she has built in her secluded mansion. He realizes that living off of Norma in exchange for companionship is not normal or proper and that Betty should continue with her engagement if she wants something more respectable than to be involved with a man whose job is a glorified form of prostitution. Joe's acknowledgement of what is “admirable” and his realization that Betty would be happier with someone more “admirable,” like Artie, shows that Gillis still has a sense of ethics despite his corruption. His moral awareness is what leads to his undoing as he tries to escape Norma's artificial paradise. This reveals how a shred of morality forces the contrived walls of a decadent paradise to come crumbling down. Joe's interest in his “things” and his desire to stay with Norma over his feelings for Betty show

his callousness. Gillis's sense of morality only trumps his cold-heartedness once it is too late for him to leave.

In addition to forsaking the freedom to write his own stories and the freedom to live a more "admirable" life, Gillis gives up his independence in exchange for wealth. In the above conversation, when Betty speaks of love, Gillis thinks of practicality—his "deal," and his "contract." He even abandons his reputation. He recognizes that what he is doing is "not very admirable" and sets himself apart from the respectable ordinary people. This is reinforced by the longstanding quality versus quantity debate between Gillis and Betty. Initially Betty wants to produce films of quality, and Joe cares more about churning out scripts that will sell as quickly as possible so he can make the most money. If Betty represents what is standard and respectable in culture, Gillis comes to represent the opposite. He realizes that he can retain his cultural superiority while making money if he works for Desmond. Joe's unwillingness to part with his riches contributes significantly to his death. He refuses the chance to make higher quality art, he refuses what is "admirable," and he refuses love so that he may continue to enjoy Norma's wealth. This is why Norma is the true decadent of the story. Even though Joe eventually takes after Norma, he is ultimately more driven by money than most decadents. Norma, by contrast, is more concerned with art and her image than money and, by contrast to Joe, she possesses no trace of morality. While Joe is not the decadent antihero of *Sunset Boulevard*, Norma's lifestyle—which he is seduced by—leads to his undoing. Gillis's decision to choose Norma's decadent life over Betty's respectable one leads to his death once he realizes that he made the wrong decision and tries to leave. Joe is not fully aware of the extent of Norma's madness until it is too late. He had the chance to run away with Betty, but he missed his chance of escape when he hesitated to leave out of his reluctance to part with his riches. The story then comes full circle

as Joe is killed by Norma's perverse paradise—similar to her chimp. She kills him because he no longer wishes to be an object in her possession and a boy toy—a prop for her glamorous life.

Section 2: Narrative Structure

The composition of noir and neo-noir films follows the aesthetic fragmentation of decadent narratives. For example, while examining Gustav Klimt's painting *Jurisprudence* (1903-1907), critic John Robert Reed observes that the painting's "restlessness or agitation is characteristic of Decadent style, especially when it offers no relief or resolution. The breaking up of the composition in such a way that it can be properly reassembled only in the mind is a form of almost insolent tantalization" (147). Reed's essay often discusses the fragmented composition of decadent art that is realistic in its parts, but must be assembled by the viewer. Because decadent art works to capture the same narrative style of decadent literature, this fragmentation can also be applied to literature. The idea of fragmentation in narrative is reminiscent of the presentation of scenes in noir films. In decadent literature and noir films, the narrative invites the audience to solve the plot along with the protagonist. This style also invites viewers into the narrative so that the viewer feels more present in the text and engaged with the issues presented. Each episode in a decadent work is rich, ornate, and unique like the treasures that fill the homes of decadent heroes.

Fragmentation in narrative can be observed across decadent literature. Each chapter of *Against Nature* has a micro focus on an element of Des Esseintes's life so that each element must be assembled in the reader's mind to view the work as a whole—much like looking at a painting, except the audience is forced to view each aspect of the work close up before stepping back to take in the larger image. This style can also be observed in Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's *Venus*

in Furs (originally published in 1870). Sacher-Masoch's novella is a story inside a story that follows decadent antihero Severin who falls in love with a woman named Wanda. Severin is obsessed with the goddess of Venus, whom he believes Wanda to resemble, and submits himself completely to Wanda. Sacher-Masoch's novella focuses on gender dynamics and the relationship between pain and love. *Venus in Furs* follows a style of fragmentation similar to what is observed in *Sunset Boulevard*. Sacher-Masoch's novella makes several jumps across time without so much as a chapter break to signify the shift. Still, the novel is comprised of many distinct scenes that work together to form the larger narrative.

Sunset Boulevard is quick to engage the audience as it begins at the crime scene where its narrator was murdered. The film begins at the end of the story with Joe Gillis narrating through voiceover. To frame the story, he begins by stating that he wants to give the audience the facts before the story comes out through the press. Gillis addresses the audience from beyond the grave, as news reporters photograph his body floating in Norma Desmond's lavish pool. Gillis's pursuit of luxury, even in the face of being a kept man, found him dead in the pool that he desired, which demonstrates the decadent combination of sex and death. In the film's conclusion, Gillis laments, "Well, this is where you came in. Back at that pool again-- the one I always wanted" (*Sunset Boulevard*). This shows that the viewer's understanding of the story, as well as Gillis's pursuit of wealth, has come full circle. The pool is a small representation of the wealth that Gillis exploited in his companionship with Norma. The viewers first see him drowning in the symbol of his avarice. These jumps in time invite the audience to try to understand the circumstances of Gillis's murder along with him.

Each scene in *Sunset Boulevard* works in the film to establish something about the story so that the audience can only gain a full understanding of Wilder's film upon reaching the end.

Noir scholar Andrew Spicer argues, “The sexual politics of film noir are mapped out in hard-boiled fiction in the aggressively masculine, even misogynist viewpoint... Women are desired and feared as beautiful but duplicitous femme fatales, and males are admired for their self-contained completeness as embodied in the private eye.” (Spicer 125) With Gillis as the narrator—controlling the way the story is relayed—he was able to slant the story in his favor, rather than Norma Desmond’s. In the male controlled narrative, Desmond is portrayed as monstrous, narcissistic, and homicidal. However, the final scene, allows for a deeper understanding of Desmond’s psyche. As Gillis narrates, “Life, which can be strangely merciful, had taken pity on Norma Desmond” (*Sunset Boulevard*). It is highly debatable that life took “pity” on the film’s femme fatale, however this scene acknowledges the deep delusion Norma lived under. After the final scene, which depicts Norma willingly submitting to arrest because she believes she is starring in a film, the audience is able to sympathize with Desmond as well as Gillis. While the film works to paint a complete picture, instead of placing judgment or blame on one character, it demonstrates that each character can assume some of the blame for the tragedy that unfolds. No one is innocent.

Section 3: Primary Characters

The shift in narrative voice and archetypal characters between fin-de-siècle decadence and noir decadence reflects the evolution of culture through time. Noir’s protagonist is often a private eye or someone performing a murder investigation, while decadent literature tends to follow a bored and alienated aristocrat. This is where the rift between fin-de-siècle and noir decadence takes shape. In order to discuss the male lead in decadent works, however, it is necessary to discuss the female lead as well because of the complicated approach to gender in

decadent texts. The “femme fatale,” a nineteenth-century term that returns in film noir, describes the female lead in both fin-de-siècle and noir decadence. While decadent literature and film noir have some differences in archetypal characters, these primary characters share many of the same qualities.

The Detective

First, it is important to establish that the private eye character in noir is often a detective, but not exclusively. Telotte notes that, in some noir films, the idea of a private eye has come to “represent an alternative knowledge, an individual nearly alienated perspective on the world that challenges, through its implicitly greater access to truth, a prevailing view of things” (16). Telotte refers to this as the “private I” (16).” This explains noir narrators such as Joe Gillis who, as a character, is not removed and omniscient; however, as a narrator speaking from beyond the grave, he has a degree of remove from society and experience that allows him to recount his story from an “alienated perspective” and with “greater access to truth.” Though he is not free of bias, he is telling a story that already happened and has a wider view.

Telotte’s idea of an “alienated” noir narrator who “represent[s] an alternative knowledge” (16) resembles the narrator of fin-de-siècle literature. According to Brian Stableford, “[T]he Decadent does not bother to seek the trivial goal of contentment, whose price is willful blindness to the true state of the world. Instead, he must become a connoisseur of his own psychic malaise (which mirrors, of course, the malaise of his society)” (7). Stableford’s description of the fin-de-siècle decadent corresponds with the narrators and protagonists of noir films. To use the example of Joe Gillis, the pressure to obtain wealth weighs heavily on his psyche and drives him to accept money in any form-- even when it is in exchange for playing the lover of a stereotypically

difficult actress (*Sunset Boulevard*). Gillis reflects the plight of writers who struggle to find jobs and who are not paid as handsomely as actors. Even more generally, Gillis's ambitions speak to the Hollywood industry and the struggle to stay relevant. The difference between Norma Desmond and Joe Gillis is that Gillis seeks wealth while Desmond, for whom wealth is no longer an object, pursues celebrity making Desmond the true decadent of *Sunset Boulevard*.

The Dandy

The fin-de-siècle dandy has many similarities with the protagonists of noir and neo-noir films. Charles Baudelaire discusses different representations of gender and aesthetics in *The Painter of Modern Life*. On the subject of his idea of dandyism, Baudelaire says, “[L]ove is the natural occupation of the idle. The dandy does not however, regard love as a special target to be aimed at. ... [M]oney is indispensable to those who make a cult of their emotions; but the dandy does not aspire to money as to something essential” (27). This resonates with the detective who is drawn into a dangerous case by a woman for whom he quickly develops feelings. He allows himself to be swept up and money often fades as an object. Baudelaire also sees the dandy as “The man who is rich and idle, and who, even if blasé, has no other occupation than the perpetual pursuit of happiness” (26). Gillis's character often references the characteristics of the dandy, but more so in a way that is playful. *Sunset Boulevard* plays with gender roles so that Norma corresponds more with dandy descriptions than Gillis. Money is no object for her, a fact she often mentions. She also acts according to her emotions. For example, she attempts suicide on New Years Eve after Joe says that he does not want her love. Still, the film acknowledges that, as the male, Gillis should be the callous dandy that gilts the leading female character. Even

though Gillis is employed by Desmond to help her with her script, he is mainly paid to be her lover, which represents his pursuit of happiness through wealth at any moral cost.

From the beginning of *Sunset Boulevard*, Joe Gillis seems opposite of a dandy. He is a relatable character that allows the audience a point of entry into the film. He merely needs money as a means of getting by. His pursuit of money was not decadent so much as it was necessary to keep his car from being repossessed. He thinks practically. As Gillis develops a desire for money, he starts to find all the more luxury that it is associated with. Gillis eventually finds himself wearing the finest clothing and wandering idly through life, as any good dandy would. In regards to the dandy's appearance, Baudelaire says, "Dandyism does not even consist, as many thoughtless people seem to believe, in an immoderate taste for the toilet and material elegance. For the perfect dandy these things are no more than symbols of his aristocratic superiority of mind" (27). This excerpt of Baudelaire's philosophy only describes Gillis when Norma dresses him and, as a result, Baudelaire's idea speaks more to Norma's character than Gillis's. The way that Gillis develops the characteristics of a dandy through his association with Norma is best illustrated by the scene in the men's clothing store:

SALESMAN: "Here are some camel's hair, but I'd like you just to feel this. It's vicuna. Of course, it's a little more expensive.

JOE GILLIS: The camel's hair will do

SALESMAN: Well, as long as the lady's paying for it, why not take the vicuna? (*Sunset Boulevard*)

As the salesman speaks the last line, Gillis snaps his head towards him and studies the salesman's face. Then Gillis faces the camera again and his expression changes from sullen to

contemplative. This marks a turning point for Gillis as he realizes the opportunity he has to obtain wealth. Gillis could have realized this earlier, as Desmond bestowed upon him different clothes and things. In this moment, however, Gillis sees exactly what Desmond is offering. The salesman's words, "Well, as long as they lady's paying for it..." sparks the realization that she is willing to trade money and treasures (as is indicated by the clothing Desmond insist Gillis must have) in exchange for companionship (as is evident by the fact that Norma is willing to go into town with Gillis's company). In this moment, Gillis realizes that this arrangement could fit in with the plan he decided on when he offers to work as her editor. As a result, two scenes later, we see Gillis dressed in his tuxedo for the New Years Eve event that Norma mentioned at the fitting. Joe wears this evening dress reluctantly while Norma is dressed in an evening gown and adorned with so many jewels they seem to melt off her like the wax drips from the candles in her candelabras. Norma Desmond's reclusive idleness, shrouded in the finest gems and precious metals, reveals her proximity to dandyism in comparison to Gillis. This highlights the complex gender roles at play in *Sunset Boulevard*.

The fact that Gillis is not a decadent character demonstrates the shift in narrative voice. In noir decadence, the narrators often associate with a decadent character. But even if the narrator aspires to some aspect of the decadent life (money, status, superior taste, etc) something in their nature often keeps them from transcending into a decadent lifestyle—much like Gillis and Norma. Norma, by contrast, becomes increasingly melancholic, hysterical, and psychotic as the film progresses. Such distance from decadence in the narration makes the film more accessible to postwar consumers. Norma is punished more than Joe; and, even after his death, Joe is able to narrate the story. This provides the viewer some comfort, as the victim has control over the story. In this way, noir decadence—including films like *Sunset Boulevard*—caters to a mainstream

consumer culture through less daring narrative voices than are found in “classic” decadent works.

Femme Fatales

There is a shared idealization and demonization of women between noir and fin-de-siècle decadence, reflected in the revival of the femme fatale. Untrustworthy female characters punctuate decadence. The femme fatale, much akin to decadent heroines, drives the story’s action as she lures the protagonist into danger under a pretext and often ensnares the protagonist with her sexuality. However, noir decadence does not have the same impulse to undercut feminine power in such a conclusive way. Feminist scholar, Julie Grossman argues that “Feminist film critics have long recognized the ideological power of the “femme fatale”: first in terms of her role as a projection of male fear and desire; later, as a politically forceful symbol of unencumbered power” (21). Norma Desmond reflects this developing depiction of femme fatales. Her constant devotion to her beauty and the sexual undertones in *Sunset Boulevard* allude to this older idea of a femme fatale that objectifies women; however, Norma’s madness and gruffness show that she is still a projection of male fear. Norma is more powerful than fin-de-siècle femme fatales and is a symbol of this “unencumbered power.” While the femme fatale is often interpreted as using her sexuality to lure the detective into danger and further the plot, Grossman invites audiences to examine the femme fatale as a character with as many nuances and complexities as her male counterpart.

Film noir often echoes fin-de-siècle decadence’s mistrust of women in the shared figure of the femme fatale, the noir female lead who uses her sexuality to lure the protagonist into trouble, often for her own gain. However, film noir—and neo-noir to an even greater extent—

allow for more nuance in readings of dangerous female characters. Film critic Julie Grossman adds to the definition of the femme fatale that “Most “femmes fatales” are sexual, but that’s not their main appeal—if it were, *Sunset Boulevard*’s Norma Desmond wouldn’t be the central figure in film noir that she is. It is the leading female’s commitment to fulfilling her own desires, whatever they may be... at any cost” (3). While the femme fatale is frequently read as a sexual character, Grossman adds that she is most dangerous because of the relentless manner in which she pursues her desires.

Noir decadence appears less anti-woman than its fin-de-siècle counterpart and, as a result, lends itself more readily to feminist interpretations. Still, misogyny exists in both fin-de-siècle and noir decadence. For example, the female leads in noir decadent texts are often the most outwardly decadent. In *Sunset Boulevard*, Norma Desmond introduces Joe Gillis to a life of exuberance. She lures him in to her world, so alluring with the promise of wealth, that Gillis cannot refuse or escape. Additionally, she is portrayed as overly emotional, delusional, and psychotic as her need for praise causes her to latch on to Gillis the moment he recognizes her. She tries to kill herself when she learns that Joe does not love her and she kills Joe when he tries to leave. However, psychosis was of particular interest to French decadents. Matei Calinescu writes on the subject of the Goncourt brothers in his chapter on decadence. Calinescu explains, “The Goncourt brothers speak, in 1864, of a “modern melancholy,” which they see as a result of the unbearable strain put on the mind by the demands of society in a rage for “production” in all senses” (167), which is strongly reminiscent of Norma Desmond’s “moments of melancholy” (*Sunset Boulevard*). These moments of melancholy are a result of Norma’s need to stay relevant and to meet “the demands of society.” Her screenplay on *Salome* even reflects a need to please the “rage for “production” because making another movie is the only way that Norma could truly

remain relevant. Until then, her only fan letters come from her servant and former husband, Max von Mayerling. Noir decadent texts often portray women as gateways into a life of excessive consumption. After all Norma is the true decadent in *Sunset Boulevard*, while Joe is only decadent in habits he learns from Norma. However, noir femme fatales like Norma often have more power than their fin-de-siècle counterparts. Norma uses Joe as a means of pleasure. Men are dispensable to her—especially if they do not comply with her desires. Max is evidence of this. She left him for another man, but kept him in her life as her servant because of his willingness to submit to her.

Film noir's femme fatale is reminiscent of characters such as Wanda from *Venus in Furs*. After the first time that Wanda whips Severin, he awakes the next morning and thinks, “[H]er cruelty filled me with delight. Oh, how I loved her, how I worshiped her! Ah, none of this even remotely expresses what I felt for her, how thoroughly devoted I was to her. What bliss to be her slave!” (Sacher-Masoch 43). This excerpt demonstrates the decadent idea that women possess an evil, animalistic vein—a dangerous edge—that man must mistrust as the word “cruelty” represents. Additionally, his desire to “worship” Wanda parallels the sexuality that ensnares noir protagonists. More than worship her, Severin wants to be Wanda’s “slave.” However, Severin attempts to deny Wanda power in the end. She declares her love for him in a letter and he remarks, “[W]oman, as Nature has created her and as she is currently reared by man, is his enemy and can be only his slave or his despot, *but never his companion*” (Sacher-Masoch, 119). Severin comes to the realization that Wanda’s permitting him to worship her is paradoxically a demonstration of her succumbing to his desires. Though, he feels foolish for letting her dominate him. He attempts to reclaim power by denying her love. This is similar to the way Norma Desmond sadistically keeps, her ex-husband, as her butler even as she entertains other love

interests, such as Joe. Max explains to Joe, “It was I who asked to come back, humiliating as it may seem. I could have continued my career, only I found everything unendurable after she left me. You see, I was her first husband” (*Sunset Boulevard*). Max becomes a servant to Norma much like Severin was a servant to Wanda—they are both so enraptured by these women that they would do anything to be in their lives. Max’s devotion demonstrates the power that Norma holds over men. Furthermore, the fact that Norma agreed that Max be her servant—her willingness to submit an ex-husband to such emotional torment—displays her perversity tinged with the coldness of a dandy. The difference between *Venus in Furs* and *Sunset Boulevard* is that Max served Norma loyally to the end while Severin left Wanda and was humiliated to think that he ever loved a woman. This difference highlights the changing role of women in decadent texts between the fin de siècle and the beginning of film noir.

Though Norma hardly has a happy ending, she has a certain control over her life throughout *Sunset Boulevard* that Sacher-Masoch’s Wanda does not have. When Severin reflects on his relationship with Wanda compared to his relationships with his “peasant girls” and concludes that women are man’s “enemy and can be only his slave or his despot” (Sacher-Masoch 119), he reveals the ideology that women have less power in a relationship compared to men. This is not true for Norma who makes men her slave. She has absolute power over the men in her life such that they must obey her (like Max), be dismissed on her terms (like her former husbands), or dead by her hand (like Joe). This is not feminist in the sense that women are equal to men, but Norma does possess power not afforded to the fin-de-siècle femme fatale.

As Grossman says, Norma Desmond exemplifies the increasing complexity in dangerous, decadent female characters (3). Billy Wilder’s female lead moves beyond the typical sexualized femme fatale to reveal the femme fatale’s central pursuit of desire. In addition to this nuance,

Desmond's character also represents the decadent fascination with women involved in show business. The main difference is that noir decadent performance focuses on cinema while fin-de-siècle decadent performance focuses on theater and prostitution. Baudelaire is also interested by women in theater in his works, which is particularly relevant to Norma Desmond, who worships herself and would do anything to see her desires to fruition. On the subject of women involved in performance, Baudelaire says,

“She has her own sort of beauty, which comes to her from Evil always devoid of spirituality, but sometimes tinged with a weariness which imitates true melancholy... These reflections concerning the courtesan are applicable within certain limits to the actress also; for she too is a creature of show, an object of public pleasure.”
(37)

Baudelaire's comments on the actress's presence in the public eye resonate with Desmond. A woman having “her own sort of beauty” that is “sometimes tinged with weariness which imitates true melancholy,” which parallels Desmond's “moments of melancholy” that Max mentions to Gillis in regards to Norma's suicide attempts. Additionally, Desmond is a slave to her own image; she worships at the altar of Norma Desmond several times a week during the movie screenings where she and Gillis watch her old films. Since Desmond rose to prominence in the era of silent film, she is especially aware of beauty ideals since the silent movies placed more emphasis on faces. As Desmond says, “We didn't need dialogue. We had faces!”

In comparison to the dangerous women of fin-de-siècle decadence, the femme fatale is similarly dangerous and has a sort of siren call. Noir scholars Borde and Chaumeton state, “The [film noir] heroine is vicious, deadly, venomous, or alcoholic. The hero lets himself be led astray...” (Borde and Chaumeton 12). The character traits that comprise a femme fatale parallel

a decadent mistrust of women. To refer back to the example of *Venus in Furs*, Wanda's beauty holds a power over Severin and he allows himself to fall under her charm despite his low opinions of women. Wanda is able to attract and enslave Severin at his own request. Decadence observes a power dynamic between men and women where the men believe that they hold power or importance over women. Decadent women, by contrast, demonstrate an ability to use their beauty or intelligence to satisfy their desires and often use the male protagonist in their pursuits. Additionally, from the observed transformation that occurred between the late nineteenth-century and mid to late twentieth century, the femme fatale—though still a trope—is comparatively more nuanced. The fin-de-siècle femme fatale was highly aestheticized and regarded more as a work of art than a human. The increasingly human femme fatale is, in part, a result of authors and directors who have worked to put ultimate judgment in the hands of the audience rather than the text's male protagonist.

The survival of “alternative” narratives—especially in societies with mass culture—is explained by Telotte's idea that audiences have a need to feel unique in a culture where so little seems novel (17). Similarly Hale writes, “Romanticizing outsiders enabled some middle-class whites to see themselves as different and alienated too. They learned to use mass culture—understood as the American way of life and as their culture—to critique mass culture” (6). Hale's idea of using mass culture “to critique mass culture” echoes decadence's use of elitism to critique elitism. Much like decadents, the modern film viewer can use decadent films to feel like an outsider and dwell in an artificial world—though often imaginary.

Conclusion

As discussed earlier in this essay, neo-noir is the continuation of film noir starting around the 1960s and extending into modern day. Because noir was given its name in retrospect, neo-noir sets itself apart from noir through the self-awareness afforded by the naming of the movement (Bould, Glitre, and Tuck, 5). That is to say, neo-noir builds off an understanding of film noir and benefits from new developments in film and technology. With knowledge of what is traditional and expected of the genre, neo-noir can manipulate common themes with more intention. In addition, modern technology allows cinematographers to film neo-noir films in color, though many still opt for dark lighting and colors tend to be more muted than vibrant. This understated manipulation of color, which allows the films to have a hint of color without being technicolor, is a modern luxury that is done intentionally to allude to noir films while film noir had no option but to film in monochrome.

Despite the change observed across American noir and neo-noir, some noir scholars believe that the international existence of film noir affected as much self-awareness and ideological progress as neo-noir is credited with. Jennifer Fay, a scholar of literature and film studies, and Justus Nieland, a scholar of modern literature, conduct an international survey of film noir and argue that the international existence of film noir has made it “new” just as neo-noir is thought to have done. They say, “global film noir since the 1930s has always been self-aware, intertextual, and hybrid in terms of both genre and media... When noir is considered as an international phenomenon, the distinction between edgy, “authentic” noir and decadent, commodified neo-noir ceases to explain very much” (109). Though Fay and Nieland’s idea of decadence refers more to a cultural and national consumerism than it refers to an artistic or philosophic movement. Because of the international presence of film noir, the difference

between noir and neo-noir might not be as great as it would appear if one were to only watch American noir films. Though noir is credited with being “edgy” and “authentic,” neo-noir still holds some of those properties as it continues to present alternative ideologies and depictions of society. Similarly film noir is as “commodified” as neo-noir because of its existence on a wide scale and because of its ability to entertain masses early on. Regardless of which school of thought you identify with, most strongly, neo-noir is the continuation of film noir and retains the ability to offer large audiences alternative narratives.

Film noir, and neo-noir to an even greater extent, have an ability to critique society through alternative narratives. Neo-noir has blended with other genres, such as comedy, horror, and science fiction, much like decadence is present across multiple genres of film. For example, Mary Harron’s black comedy, *American Psycho* (2000); Ridley Scott’s sci-fi, *Blade Runner* (1982); and David Lynch’s psychological horror film, *Blue Velvet* (1986) are all examples of neo-noir films. Spicer explains the fusion of noir with other genres through the example of *Blade Runner*. He notes that *Blade Runner* is “a highly influential “future noir” that combined retro elements, such as Harrison Ford’s trench-coated blade runner, with a dystopian vision of Los Angeles in 2019” (217). *Blade Runner* also exemplifies the perseverance of decadence, similar to *Sunset Boulevard*. This futuristic world depends heavily on artifice and the apocalyptic themes in the film underline the perversity of a society that tolerates the enslavement of creations made nearly indiscernible from humans. *Blade Runner* also exemplifies the aesthetics discussed earlier in this paper: the film takes advantage of color technology, but the shots are still often steeped in darkness or cast in shadow—in line with classical noir aesthetics. Yet the frames are detailed and dynamic with references to ancient Rome—as is common in decadent film.

Additionally, *Blade Runner* contains decadent themes such as praise of artifice, perversity, and criticism of refined society. The film's main character, Deckard, a "replicant" hunter, falls in love with Rachel, a replicant, who is designed to appear especially human in a brand of artificially intelligent beings deemed "more human than human" (*Blade Runner*). Deckard's love for Rachel displays sexual perversity, as he desires something, or someone, that he knows is not human and that he kills for a living. In addition to his relationship with a woman who is not human, Deckard is aware that Rachel, as a replicant, likely only has four years to live. In this way, his desire to be with her is almost masochistic as he develops such a strong devotion to someone who, he knows from the beginning, will not live long. Her impending death denotes a decadent eroticization of death. Deckard's love for Rachel also demonstrates the importance of artifice in the film. As a newer model of replicant, Rachel is even more human than most. Still, she benefits from the superior strength and ability of replicants.

Blade Runner questions the ethics of corporations and, by extension, the refined and powerful corners of society through the company Tyrell. Tyrell expresses poor ethical judgment in its creation of products that look, act, and think like humans. Tyrell's willingness to test the boundaries of the human condition expresses modernist concerns about technological advancements and treatment of lower-level employees as the replicants are used as "slave labor" on other planets.

The relatable narrator of noir decadence allows a point of entry into decadent worlds in a way that makes the film more accessible to postwar viewers. Even though mass culture makes it nearly impossible for noir decadence to exist as a counterculture, the widespread consumption of "counterculture" allows for the introduction of alternative ways of thinking to the masses. While one might watch a decadent film as a way of seeing him or her self in a unique light, one must

contemplate the commentary on class structure and social norms. Both *Sunset Boulevard* and *Blade Runner* critique the larger institutions, or “refined society,” relevant to their story. In *Sunset Boulevard*, Norma’s startling madness and monstrosity reveal the strain imposed by societal expectations. Similarly, *Blade Runner* questions the power possessed by corporations. The presence of private eye narrators also affords some introspection for the viewer, who is supposed to relate to the antihero. This feeling of commonality allows the viewer to experience the uniqueness that they seek while questioning their role in the world around them.

Noir decadence is significant due to its ability to shock audiences, similar to the function of fin-de-siècle literature. Spicer argues that “noir’s significance rests not so much on its extent as on its continued capacity to startle and provoke audiences, to deal with difficult issues including psychological trauma, dysfunctional relationships, existential dread, the lure of money, and the power and indifference of huge corporations and governments” (xlix). The shock that an audience experiences while watching a decadent noir film leads the viewer to question other aspects of the world around them. Noir decadence is especially important because of its place in mass culture where art is mass produced and widely consumed. Through film noir, the decadent movement continues to provide political and social criticism into the modern era.

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