ENGL 41920

Fall 2015

Professor Benjamin Morgan

[bjmorgan@uchicago.edu](mailto:bjmorgan@uchicago.edu)

**Aestheticism and Decadence**

This seminar surveys the aesthetic and decadent movements in art and literature in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. With a primary focus on Britain and France, we will examine the work of writers, artists, philosophers, and musicians who both responded to and helped create a mode of historical consciousness called “modernity” by arguing that the experience of art or beauty, in all of its ephemerality, should be considered the highest human value. Our readings will understand this turn to the aesthetic as closely imbricated with a widely-felt sense that the end of the European nineteenth century was a moment of decadence or cultural decay: Victorian promises of unchecked human progress seemed empty, the global institutions of empire were under considerable pressure, and some argued that modern cultural and artistic trends were symptoms of neurological degeneration induced by an excessively refined civilization. We will explore this paradoxical situation in which decadence and degeneration became highly generative, powering artistic and literary movements that embraced the stylistic richness of decay, decline, and backwardness; that animated new artistic possibilities across media (essays, novels, poetry, book arts, paintings, posters, opera, philosophical writing); and that set in motion the long history of European modernism. Throughout, we will understand the aesthete and the *décadent* not only in the historical terms outlined above, as characters who inhabited the period between about 1850 and 1920, but also as historically-recurrent affective dispositions—and as accusations—whose political force and difficulties have purchase today.

**Required Books – you must purchase these exact editions. Use ISBN if ordering online.**

Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. Keith Waldrop (Wesleyan) 0819568007

Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature* (Penguin) 0140447636

William Morris, *News from Nowhere* (Oxford) 0199539197

Walter Pater, *The Renaissance*, ed. Donald Hill, (U of California Press) 0520036646

Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Norton) 0393927547

Oscar Wilde, *Salome* (Broadview) 1554811899

Course reader, available for purchase at Auxiliary Services in Social Sciences 103

Digital course reserves with optional readings at <https://uchicago.box.com/ad15>

Discussion notes, and handouts at <https://uchicago.box.com/ad15>

**Teaching Philosophy**

This seminar prioritizes sustained daily engagements with the reading over short bursts of intensive work. A substantial portion of your final grade will therefore be determined by your performance on day-to-day preparation, including your reading notes and weekly email posts. A primary goal of this model is to foster scholarly habits of research and analysis. The classroom is a discussion-based seminar environment in which students are largely responsible for framing, generating, and exploring questions. My role in the classroom is not primarily to convey information, but to structure, moderate, and deepen a discussion driven by students. I therefore require substantial, focused, and demonstrated preparation on the part of students prior to each class meeting.

**Requirements**

1. *Discussion preparation notes.* (20%) At each class meeting I will collect the notes you have taken to prepare for that day’s meeting. For the first half of the course I will ask you to follow a template that I will give you (this will involve identifying formal features of a text, defining key terms, close reading, and using some designated research resources). For the second half of the course I will continue to collect notes but you won’t be required to use the template. You must turn in at least twelve of these (meaning that you may skip five, since we have 17 sessions with readings). They may be handwritten or typed but I want a hard copy in class. Graded check/plus/minus.
2. *Discussion question to email list*. (15%) Each week you’ll submit a discussion question to the class email list, [ad15@lists.uchicago.edu](mailto:ad15@lists.uchicago.edu). These should propose and begin to explore a question that you want us to think through as a group. They should cite the assigned text. You may respond to a classmate’s post as your post. I will bump your grade if you thoughtfully respond to a classmate’s post or if you submit at least a day early. You must submit eight of these (meaning you may skip one). These must be submitted by **Sunday at 5pm**—but you can send any time during the week and I encourage you to do so.Graded check/plus/minus.
3. *Two presentations*. (20%) You will be responsible for identifying, researching, and speaking to the class about two objects: an aestheticist/decadent book or object in Regenstein Library’s Special Collections Resource Center (SCRC); and an aestheticist/decadent image or object in the Smart Museum of Art (on campus). I will ask you to turn in notes on your research and presentation. Presentations will be about 5-10 minutes each and may be done in pairs or groups, depending on course enrollment. Letter graded.
4. *Two papers*. (15%, 30%) You will write two papers for this course. The first will be a close reading, explication, or thick description of one of the texts under discussion of about 4 pages. The second will be a 7-9 page argumentative paper. Letter graded.
5. *PhD students*. Instead of the above assignments, PhD students may choose to write one 20-25-page seminar paper. You will still be responsible for weekly discussion questions and presentations at SCRC and the Smart Museum. Letter graded.

**Policies**

*Attendance.* You must come to every class. If you miss more than one class, your final grade will drop one level (e.g. B to B-) for each class missed. If you miss more than three classes, you may be given an incomplete. If you miss a class, consult <https://uchicago.box.com/ad15> for that day’s discussion notes and speak to another student. In general, I am not able to go over missed material individually.

*Office Hours.* My office hours are **by appointment**, M/W 12-1pm. I will make additional office hours available prior to paper due dates and I can meet at other times if you have a regular conflict. You must make an appointment at <http://bjm.ycb.me>.

*Technology.* I do not allow laptops or other devices in class. Phones must be turned completely off before class begins.

*Online Submission Policy.* Papers for this course are submitted by email. Within 2 hours of the deadline, I will send you a receipt confirming that I have received and opened your paper/response. Until you have a receipt, the paper is not turned in. If you have not received a receipt within 2 hours of the deadline, contact me immediately. I will also respond to discussion questions with a grade, but this may take longer.

*Late Papers.* If your paper is late, it will lose a half grade (e.g. B -> B-). The grade will continue to drop every 24 hours. I give extensions only in case of major life events/emergencies.

*Formatting.* Papers must be double spaced, in Times New Roman typeface, with 1-inch margins, numbered and include a header and title in MLA format. Papers must also include a works cited page in MLA format.

*Grading*

Presentations: 15%

Weekly email questions: 15%

Discussion prep notes: 20%

Paper 1: 20%

Paper 2: 30%

**Academic Dishonesty and Plagiarism**

It is your responsibility to ensure that all of your written work conforms to accepted standards of academic honesty. Plagiarism is not only copying others’ work; any improperly documented use of ideas can constitute plagiarism. Please consult the discussion of plagiarism and academic honesty in *Doing Honest Work in College: How to Prepare Citations, Avoid Plagiarism, and Achieve Real Academic Success*. If you were not given this book in your core humanities class, you may consult it on reserve at Regenstein library. It is crucial that you are familiar with these standards, and it is your responsibility to familiarize yourself with them. If these standards are in any way unclear to you or if you are uncertain about best practices with regards to note-taking please consult with me.

Any undocumented use of another person’s ideas constitutes plagiarism. This includes copying another text word for word. It also includes summarizing and paraphrasing an original source with similar language and/or syntax, or presenting as your own an argument that you heard in another class or from another person. Please note as well that copying non-copyrighted material (such as Wikipedia or a non-copyrighted webpage) also constitutes plagiarism. Unintentional copying also constitutes plagiarism.

Academic dishonesty includes buying papers online, outsourcing your academic work to someone else (paid or unpaid), and submitting the same paper to more than one course. This is not an exhaustive list of the practices that constitute academic dishonesty and plagiarism. If you are uncertain about how or whether to cite your sources, please contact me. It is crucial that you do so before handing in work.

**Academic dishonesty is a very serious offense, even if it is unintentional. Any form of plagiarism may result in immediate failure of this course and disciplinary action.**

**Schedule**

\* Optional (Required for PhD students). Online reserve at <https://uchicago.box.com/ad15>

CR Course Reader (purchase in Social Sciences 103)

Discussion notes and handouts will be available online at <https://uchicago.box.com/ad15>

*In the first four weeks of this seminar, we address major formulations and instances of aestheticism and decadence, developing a historical and conceptual framework*.

Week 1: Definitions and origins

9/28 Some preliminary definitions of decadence and aestheticism (in class): Oscar Wilde, Paul Bourget, Friedrich Nietzsche, Arthur Symons, Théophile Gautier, Walter Pater, etc.

9/30 Charles Baudelaire, “To the Reader,” “Correspondences,” “Beauty,” “The Ideal,” “Giantess,” “Jewels,” “Hymn to Beauty,” “The Head of Hair,” “Carrion” “Evening Harmony,” “Spleen (I-IV),” “Obsession,” in *Fleurs du Mal* (1857)

\*Paul de Man, “Anthropomorphism and Trope in the Lyric,” in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*

Week 2: Modernity, shock, experience

10/5 Charles Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life” (1863) CR

Charles Baudelaire, “The Clock,” “The Swan,” “In Passing,” “Gamblers,” “Dance of Death,” “The Soul of the Wine,” “A Martyr,” “Allegory,” in *Fleurs du Mal*

Algernon Charles Swinburne, “Ave Atque Vale” CR

Algernon Charles Swinburne, Review of *Fleurs du Mal* CR

10/7 Walter Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” CR

\*Benjamin, “Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire”; “Exchange with Adorno on the Flâneur section”

Week 3: The aesthetic impression

10/12 Walter Pater, “Conclusion,” in *The Renaissance* (1873)

Walter Pater, “The Child in the House” (1878) CR

10/14 Walter Pater, “Preface,” “Two Early French Stories,” “Leonardo da Vinci,” in *The Renaissance*

\*The rest of *The Renaissance*

\*Hegel, Introduction, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art* (Especially pp. 69-90)

\*Schiller, Letter 15, *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*

Week 4: Inversion, degeneration, and the failure of organic form

10/19 Joris-Karl Huysmans, *À Rebours* (1884)

Max Nordau, selections from *Degeneration* CR

Arthur Symons, “The Decadent Movement in Literature” CR

10/21 Joris-Karl Huysmans, *À Rebours*

Nietzsche, “The Case of Wagner” CR

\*Charles Bernheimer, “Nietzsche’s Decadence Philosophy,” in *Decadent Subjects*

*In weeks 5 and 6, we turn to two “case studies” that allow us to develop and complicate our framework: Oscar Wilde’s exploration of the affective modes of decadence and aestheticism in* Dorian Gray*, and William Morris’s utopian account of the politics of art in* News from Nowhere.

Week 5: Decadent affect: style, desire, sex, and ennui in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

10/26 Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890/1)

10/28 Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

\*Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Introduction: Axiomatic” and “Some Binarisms (II): Wilde, Nietzsche, and the Sentimental Relations of the Male Body,” in *Epistemology of the Closet*

**10/30 (Friday), Paper 1 due, 5pm, via email to** [**bjmorgan@uchicago.edu**](mailto:bjmorgan@uchicago.edu)

Week 6: Aestheticist politics: socialism and material practice

11/2 William Morris, *News from Nowhere* (1890)

11/4 William Morris, *News from Nowhere*

\*Jacques Rancière, “The Distribution of the Sensible: Politics and Aesthetics” and “Artistic Regimes and the Shortcoming of the Notion of Modernity” in *The Politics of Aesthetics*

\*Rancière, “The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes”

*In weeks 7-10, we move to questions of media, materiality, and performance as they pertain to aestheticism and decadence, shifting from written accounts and expressions of these movements to their instantiations in objects, images, sound, and performance.*

Week 7: Materiality: print and object cultures of aestheticism and decadence

11/9 *Meet in Special Collections Resource Center*

Student presentations on decadent and aestheticist books and periodicals.

11/11 *Meet in Special Collections Resource Center*

Alice Meynell, *London Impressions*

\*Jerome McGann, “‘Thing to Mind’: The Materialist Aesthetic of William Morris,” in *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism*

Week 8: Performance and perversion

11/16 Oscar Wilde, *Salomé* (1891)

11/18 Oscar Wilde, *Salomé*

Charles Bryant and Alla Nazimova, *Salomé* (1922) (I will let you know how to access)

\*Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*

**11/20 (Friday, 3-5pm): Screening: Strauss, *Salome***

Week 9: Listening to decadent modernism

11/23 Richard Strauss, *Salome* (1906)

Alex Ross, “The Golden Age,” in *The Rest is Noise*, pp. 3-11 (online reserve)

Musical explanations at: http://www.therestisnoise.com/2007/01/chapter-1-the-g.html

Ken Russell, *Salome’s Last Dance* (selections in class)

Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp” CR

\*Vincent Sherry, “Introduction,” *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence*

11/25 THANKSGIVING

Week 10: Visual cultures of aestheticism and decadence

11/30 Aubrey Beardsley, *Salomé* illustrations (Online)

Gustave Moreau, *Salomé* images (Online)

12/2 *Meet at Smart Museum*

Artwork presentations at Smart Museum

**12/5 (Saturday) – Final paper due, 5pm, via email to** [**bjmorgan@uchicago.edu**](mailto:bjmorgan@uchicago.edu)