



INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF DECADENCE STUDIES

Volume 2, Issue 2

Winter 2019

---

In the Shambles of Hollywood: The Decadent Trans Feminine Allegory  
in *Myra Breckinridge*

Ainslie Templeton

---

ISSN: 2515-0073

Date of Acceptance: 1 December 2019

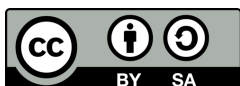
Date of Publication: 21 December 2019

Citation: Ainslie Templeton, 'In the Shambles of Hollywood: The Decadent Trans Feminine Allegory in *Myra Breckinridge*', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 2.2 (2019), 122–42.

DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.v.v2i2.1346.g1465

[volupte.gold.ac.uk](http://volupte.gold.ac.uk)

---



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

**Goldsmiths**  
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

In the Shambles of Hollywood:  
The Decadent Trans Feminine Allegory in *Myra Breckinridge*

Ainslie Templeton

Goldsmiths, University of London

When Twentieth Century Fox announced there would be a 1970 film adaptation of Gore Vidal's controversial novel *Myra Breckinridge* (1968), Candy Darling considered it her prime opportunity to break into mainstream cinema. The novel follows its titular character, an addled trans woman obsessed with the films of the 1940s, as she seeks to claim her inheritance from an uncle who runs an acting academy in Hollywood. Darling, a trans woman herself, had begun her acting career in Andy Warhol's movies, where she formed an important part of the Factory set along with other trans feminine people such as Holly Woodlawn and Jackie Curtis. But these underground films had a limited circulation, and it was Darling's deepest-held ambition to become a legitimate starlet. When she applied for the role, she was rejected in favour of the cisgender actress Raquel Welch [fig. 1]. 'They decided Raquel Welch would make a more believable transvestite', she recounted.<sup>1</sup> While Welch obviously lent the production some star power at the time, Darling's exclusion seems counterintuitive: she was about the same age as Myra in the novel and was also obsessed with vintage Hollywood, modelling herself after peroxide blonde actresses such as Lana Turner, Kim Novak, and Jean Harlow. She could recite whole passages from films such as *Picnic* (1955), demonstrating something of Myra's encyclopaedic film knowledge; in fact, Warhol thought 'she knew even more about forties movies than Gore Vidal did'.<sup>2</sup> In the novel there are several references to Myra's career as an underground film star prior to her transition that may well allude to films such as Warhol's *Flesh* (1968), a film that Darling had actually been in. She was, in other words, already engaged in the sexual avant-gardism Myra Breckinridge apparently represented, as well as what in the novel becomes a tragi-comic obsession with the Golden Age of Hollywood.



Fig. 1 (00:49:37): Raquel Welch as Myra Breckinridge (detail).

But Darling's rejection plays into a larger cultural tradition of trans women's representation, where the supposed symbolism of trans femininity obscures the actuality of trans lives.<sup>3</sup> The film and the novel that inspired it both participate in what Emma Heaney describes as the trans feminine allegory, where trans feminine figures are tasked with illuminating the functioning of cisgender sex. In her recent book, Heaney charts the emergence of the allegory in medical discourse around the *fin de siècle*, where it is portrayed as symptomatic of broader shifts and contestations in traditional gender roles.<sup>4</sup> The advent of the New Woman and the debased man are shadowed by the figure of the trans feminine invert who 'reveals' the androgyny and malleability of social codes, but also, ultimately, reinstates them. Sexologists such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing investigated the perceived social degradation of their times by extracting pathological case studies from gender and sexually non-conforming people, reasserting a new sexological norm in the face of the perverse, extreme example. The emphasis placed on narrative in these accounts

paved the way for the transmission of the trans feminine allegory into key literary texts. Heaney charts this passage, demonstrating an ongoing power dynamic that elevates cis reflections on gender norms while delegitimizing trans women as constructed foils, emergent in the extremity of modern society.

The ongoing influence of the trans feminine allegory is evidenced in the film adaptation of *Myra Breckinridge*, which tilts Myra's trans status into a postmodern endorsement of surface over depth. The dialogue with contemporaneous medical discourse is aestheticized in the central scene of her genital surgery, taking place in a silver-walled operating theatre complete with an audience in director's chairs [fig. 2]. Welch acts out a rather forced, campy pastiche of feminine codes, and she bears almost no resemblance to the actor Rex Reed, who plays her pre-transition self as Myron. The ghosting presence of Reed and his commentary on Myra's behaviour makes explicit the functioning of the allegory, casting trans womanhood as a non-specific combination of the binary sexes. The conversation between these two selves forms the centrepiece of the plot, culminating in a scene where Myron is seen to perform oral sex on Myra in a paroxysmal haze. Such a misleading representation of gender transition is embedded in the complex temporality that comes through in the film as a whole. Scenes are intercut with archive footage from well-known Hollywood classics, and there are multiple cameos from vintage screen stars, most notably Mae West, who had come out of retirement to appear in the film. The presence of old Hollywood personalities, 'exhumed in the flesh', as one review had it, alongside new ones such as Welch, made the film a special affront to the tastes of the time [fig. 3].<sup>5</sup> This affront was compounded by the portrayal of trans femininity, which, though regressive in the ways I have mentioned, was widely reviled for the fact of its inclusion. As such, the film was almost universally panned by contemporaneous critics, emblemized by a scathing review in *Time* that named it 'some sort of nadir in American cinema'.<sup>6</sup> This characterization as a new low evinces the complex temporal play in the film and its reception – dealing with cinematic tradition so closely while at the same time breaking into debased or extreme forms. I am not necessarily interested in recuperating these

‘unseemly seams’, as David Scott Diffrient has done, in a reparative vision of the joy in the film’s ‘badness’.<sup>7</sup> Rather, what interests me is the special fact of the film’s perception and self-stylization as an exposé of degraded extremity – what is intimately tied to a sense of general social deterioration and to a vision of the newly-forged trans feminine body as a hallmark of that deterioration. The very concept of a cultural nadir urges examination of cultural precedents, and in this case the sense of decadence surrounding Myra’s trans feminine body provides a critical starting point.

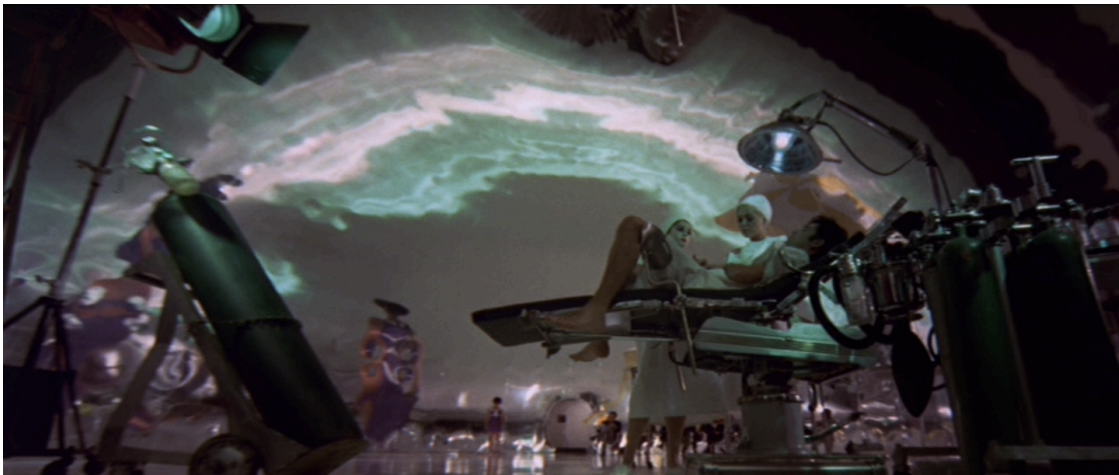


Fig. 2 (00:01:09): The operating theatre.



Fig. 3 (00:55:11): Mae West (detail).

## The Decadent Connection

The term *decadence* carries a host of unstable connotations, but I am seeking here to draw a line between the decadence represented by Vidal's Myra and literary decadence – a cultural tendency that first became common in the late nineteenth century, carrying with it a sense of social decline emphasizing what is degraded, fallen, or late – not a movement per se, but a working between other literary traditions, with many decadent works having fluctuating relationships with romanticism, symbolism, naturalism, aestheticism, and later, modernism. Critics such as David Weir and Vincent Sherry have convincingly demonstrated the intimate relationship of decadence to the 'newness' of early twentieth-century modernism, complicating the basic temporal valence of both literary modes. Weir says that 'decadence is transition, a drama of unsettled aesthetics, and the mixture of literary tendencies constituting that transition is at once within and without tradition and convention'.<sup>8</sup> Sherry claims a connection of decadence to gender non-conformity, most explicitly in the queer personage of Oscar Wilde, that contributed to its elision in critical accounts of the development of modernism.<sup>9</sup> So in the years following the *fin de siècle*, the simultaneous influence and erasure of trans feminine presence that Heaney explores in the work of modernist authors is in fact mirrored in the characterization of decadence that soon became current: an uncomfortably fey or passive presence, disavowed by modernists even as it informed their work.<sup>10</sup>

The influence of decadence was also keenly felt in Hollywood, as a generation of screenwriters emerged in the twenties and thirties who were profoundly influenced by decadent literature. Most notable among these is Ben Hecht, who would pen many of the screenplays for the forties movies that Myra is transfixed on, thus providing a passage of influence into Vidal's novel. For Weir, 'the decadent Hecht' is suggestive of a point partly elaborated on here: 'that the various dilutions of European high decadence [...] eventually trickled down into American popular culture through the medium of the movies'.<sup>11</sup> In a later work he also argues that cinematic decadence 'was not so much a transformation as a deformation: decadence disseminated into the

broader culture was also decadence dissipated'.<sup>12</sup> Many cultural products containing decadent tropes from the fin de siècle incorporate those tropes in new ways. *Myra Breckinridge* the novel is therefore partly a recuperation of literary decadence, presenting a vision of social decline and injecting that with an emphasis on sexual variance. But Myra departs from decadent languor in a self-declaration of herself as an 'activist', intent on reforming social codes in crisis rather than passively luxuriating in them.<sup>13</sup> Transformation and deformation become explicit themes in the novel, as it takes the body of the 'transsexual' – not medically described in full until the mid-twentieth century – and twists her towards a more active, but still decadent, allegorical purpose that finds expression in a sort of campy postmodernism.

### **Decadence and Sexology**

The mobilization of trans feminine figures as allegories of extremity symptomatic of cultural decline has precedent in decadent texts, evincing a dialogue with medical discourse earlier than the one Heaney charts in her analysis of primarily modernist novels. The view of decadence as a proto-modernist tendency in late nineteenth-century texts is thus supported by the presence in those texts of allegorized trans femininity. Rachilde's *Monsieur Vénus* (1884) is probably the most explicit example, detailing the systematic feminization of a young male artist, Jacques, at the hands of the decadently perverse heiress Raoule de Vénérande. She takes the masculine role in their affair, using him for her own pleasure. When Jacques surpasses the feminized bondage in which he is placed, seeking to bed Raittolbe, an alpha male companion of Raoule's who finds himself irresistibly attracted to the youth, she engineers a duel between the two, and thus the murder of her lover. In the novel's notorious closing scene, 'armed with silver pincers, a velvet-covered hammer, and a silver scalpel', she removes Jacques' teeth, hair, and eyelashes so that a German artisan can incorporate them into a wax model of his body.<sup>14</sup> As the title suggests, she has him made into a sort of anatomical Venus, a wax medical model that was common in the nineteenth century. Such models were ordinarily of vivisected women, eerily eroticized with long flowing hair, make-up, and

sometimes strings of pearls.<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, Raoule regularly visits the sumptuous chamber housing her creation and takes her pleasure of it, via a hidden spring that ‘animates the mouth’ and ‘spreads apart the thighs’.<sup>16</sup>

*Monsieur Vénu*s enacts decadence in dialogue with sexology, the novel forming one picture in the ‘portrait gallery of types of perversions’ that Melanie Hawthorne identifies in Rachilde’s oeuvre.<sup>17</sup> This is part of a broader trend within decadent literature as a whole, which Maxime Foerster has examined as one of parody, eroticizing and subverting the doctor-patient relationship, among other foundational tenets of scientific medical enquiry.<sup>18</sup> The use of the extreme trans feminine example is common to both decadent and sexological literature and is tied to a broader vision of social decline. And so Raittolbe is one of a series of Raoule’s male acquaintances who are panic-stricken by their attraction to Jacques’ feminine beauty. His becoming involved in the scandalous affair is explained only by the fact that ‘the *century weighed on him*, an infirmity impossible to analyse other than by this phrase alone’.<sup>19</sup> The aside points to a nineteenth-century crisis of masculine sexual identity in response to the presence of trans feminine and same-sex-attracted inverts in the metropolis, increasingly visible due to their involvement in street-based sex work, and to the emergence of apparently masculinized New Women such as Raoule. The perceived newness of Jacques’ and Raoule’s behaviour is integral to the threat they represent, as it is part of their decadent charm. Upon the text’s publication, Verlaine congratulated Rachilde on the invention of a new vice.<sup>20</sup>

Trans feminine undertones also appear in decadent novels such as Théophile Gautier’s *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835) – despite depicting a woman disguised as a man, the action of the plot is as much about the feminization of a perceived male and the male narrator’s crisis of attraction for that person. There is also the ‘Miss Urania’ episode in J.-K. Huysmans’s *À Rebours* (1884), where Des Esseintes is drawn to a muscular circus performer, and later to a female ventriloquist who is able to speak in many unnatural, placeless voices.<sup>21</sup> In such examples trans femininity is in easy slippage with other forms of perversity, turned outwards into a general sign of artificiality and



sexual-moral decay. This trend is replicated in sexological texts: Krafft-Ebing, for example, posited a sliding scale of inversion through his case studies, with the milder examples of masculine men who are same-sex attracted giving way to extreme sexually-compulsive trans femininity. Likewise, he presents a sliding scale between same-sex-attracted women and those afflicted by trans masculine ‘viraginity’.<sup>22</sup>

This sliding-scale model was contested in early homosexual-rights writing, most of which necessarily engaged sexology in order to depathologize same-sex attraction between cis people. The healthy, upstanding, masculine homosexual was repeatedly contrasted with the pathologically effeminate invert by writers such as Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, Edward Carpenter, and André Gide. The term *Homosexualität* [homosexual] was actually coined in an 1868 letter to Ulrichs in order to differentiate masculine men who desire men from trans feminine inverts.<sup>23</sup> In *Uranisme et unisexualité* (1896), the decadent sexologist Marc-André Raffalovich, an associate of Wilde and Walter Pater, charts for ‘uranisme’ an ornate and dramatic lineage from classical antiquity and early Christianity. In the process he advocates for the ‘superior invert’ who embodies ‘virilised homosexuality’ at the expense of the fatally effeminate ‘weak’ type.<sup>24</sup>

The works of Wilde also contain echoes of the decadent trans feminine, and there is evidence he was influenced by Rachilde – *Monsieur Vénus* in particular. He apparently spoke about the novel for several hours in front of Raffalovich, and there are several textual allusions to it in early versions of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). In those early versions, the book that corrupts Dorian was originally called ‘Le Secret de Raoul [*sic*]’ by ‘Catulle Sarazzin’.<sup>25</sup> The fictionalized author has been taken as an allusion to a member of Rachilde’s decadent circle, Catulle Mendès, but also recalls Balzac’s 1830 novella, *Sarrasine*, about a man who falls in love with a castrato singer named La Zambinella.<sup>26</sup> These traces indicate a tradition of feminized gender non-conformity Wilde was activating in the work that would become so influential in transmitting decadence into the twentieth century.

## A Female Dorian

Wilde was a significant decadent influence on Hollywood, even if the stigma surrounding his trial and death had dramatic consequences for the fate of decadence in public life and later in the historical record. *Myra Breckinridge* is linked with Wilde through the work of Myra's favourite film critic, Parker Tyler, whose interpretation of the 1945 film adaptation of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is alluded to in the novel and establishes a precedent for the construction of Myra's allegorical trans femininity.<sup>27</sup>

Tyler's *Magic and Myth of the Movies* (1947) is a hallmark of Myra's worldview, providing impetus for fervent statements like: 'between 1935 and 1945, no irrelevant film was made in the United States'.<sup>28</sup> Tyler wrote the book when he was living in Greenwich Village, associating with the likes of decadent modernists such as Djuna Barnes, at a time that saw the 'queer commingling of decadence with modernism'.<sup>29</sup> Tyler examines a range of films in chapters whose titles reveal a fascination with psychoanalysis and sexual transformation, such as 'Finding Freudism Photogenic' and 'Magic-Lantern Metamorphoses I'. The latter examines the 1945 *Picture of Dorian Gray* against the original novel, criticizing the vulgarization of Wilde 'in the shambles of Hollywood' for eroding the carefully constructed homosexual subtext.<sup>30</sup> 'Wilde was the prince of an alien and socially aggressive aesthetic philosophy', Tyler argues. Dorian is the primary vector of this philosophy, a sort of invert who perverts the 'stuffiness' of British culture.<sup>31</sup> The character is 'more loved than loving', carrying 'within himself the seeds of the gross decay of the sexual [...] that Wilde saw everywhere around him in the vulgar and stupid rather than imaginative and aesthetic pursuit of women by men'.<sup>32</sup> Seeking to supplant heterosexual desire for women in the name of art, Tyler's reading of Dorian reiterates what Sally Ledger calls the novel's 'aestheticisation of homoerotic desire'. Ledger highlights the nineteenth-century decadent tendency to cast femininity as an embellishment of aesthetic life in contrast to the debased and hopelessly corporeal counterpoint of the woman's body. She sees Dorian as more aesthetic than substantial, having 'little corporeal

reality', at least compared to Sibyl Vane, the woman he pursues and then jilts for her literal approach to their love affair.<sup>33</sup> But Tyler glosses this misogyny, at the same time emphasizing just what a threat Dorian's beautiful body and 'hermaphroditic[,] monstrous' personality, represents to society, to the point that his corporeality must be made to reflect the dangerous femininity of his interior.<sup>34</sup> And so his portrait rendering in the homophobic film is a sort of 'Frankenstein', crawling out 'of the American moral jungle'.<sup>35</sup>

Dorian's gender non-conformity is further clarified in Tyler's conclusion, where he praises two films dealing with 'the possession of a woman's body by a man's spirit'.<sup>36</sup> Both employ cinematic magic to make a different voice speak from an actor's body, allegorical devices which Tyler likens to the heart of falsity represented in Dorian. The effect of the films is paralleled

in cases of highly false acting personalities such as Veronica Lake, created half by the beauty parlour and half by stupidity, [...] devising a mannequin, a feminine symbol, a female Dorian, who is not a real woman but who imitates being one and, through beauty, maintains the illusion of reality.

Tyler's allegorized trans femininity thus extends to a general misogyny directed at cis women as well, as he characterizes Lake as 'outside of nature' in *I Married a Witch* (1942).<sup>37</sup> This misogyny is therefore not exclusively connected with an 'authentic' woman's body. *Magic and Myth of the Movies* is both a transmission and distortion of a nineteenth-century decadent sensibility, tellingly focusing on sexual variance, which Vidal's novel heightens in elaborating a trans feminine monster lurking in the post-1940s American psyche.

### **Decadent Myra and Trans Body Narratives**

Myra's decadence picks up where Tyler's leaves off in her vision of a degraded social and cultural milieu of which she herself is nonetheless symptomatic. 'I exist entirely outside the usual human experience', she says, referring to her trans status, 'outside and yet wholly relevant for I am the New Woman whose astonishing history is a poignant amalgam of vulgar dreams and knife-sharp realities' (p. 4). Myra engages tropes of medicalized trans femininity and combines these with

references to second-wave feminist movements. 'I am Myra Breckinridge whom no man will ever possess', reads the first sentence of the novel, recognizing the threat she poses to the sexual social order (p. 3). Myra's ailing American empire is defined by its increasing expansion and proliferation of automobiles, televisions, and people: reproductive sex being the root of all social problems. In the opening pages of the novel she describes Sunset Boulevard, 'filled with noisy cars, barely moving through the air so dark with carbon monoxide that one can almost hear in the drivers' lungs the cancer cells as they gaily proliferate like spermatozoa in a healthy boy's testicles' (p. 7). Her views on population control are later explicated when she says that 'Malthus had been right', that global human population has to be decreased according to the availability of the food supply, in order for culture to flourish (p. 126).

The student body of her uncle's acting academy is emblematic of such problems, portrayed as a never-ending stream of youths, 'bland, inattentive, responsive only to the bold rhythms of commercials'. Their reading and writing ability tends to be stunted, being just 'able to write their name, or "autograph" as they are encouraged to call it' (pp. 25–26). This cultural decline finds locus for Myra in the fading of 1940s Hollywood:

In the Forties, American boys created a world empire because they chose to be James Stewart, Clark Gable and William Eythe. By imitating godlike autonomous men, our boys were able to defeat Hitler, Mussolini and Tojo. Could we do it again? Are the private eyes and denatured cowboys potent enough to serve as imperial exemplars? No. (p. 35)

The degraded pantheon of cinematic gods causes Myra to affirm a belief that the only way to solve social problems is the renovation of sexual mores, the remaking of the sexes so that reproduction is curbed and 'the race' is preserved. In the sequel to the novel, *Myron* (1974), Myra's eugenic and racist views find more explicit expression as she, like Raoule, takes on the role of surgeon. She endeavours to castrate and forcibly transition straight cis men in order to create a 'race of sterile fun-loving Amazons', beginning with a Native American man she seduces (p. 342).<sup>38</sup>

Myra's darkly parodic engagement with trans surgeries extends to a generalized satire of medical discourse and medicalized trans autobiography. In many ways, the novel comes in the

wake of biographies and autobiographies of trans women such as Christine Jorgensen that began to appear in the twentieth century, holding literary as well as medical value in their recourse to a ‘wrong body’ narrative. This narrative was a development of nineteenth-century sexological frameworks that formulated trans feminine people as ‘women trapped inside the bodies of men’, thus possessing corporealities that needed to be rectified through medical intervention. In the twentieth century, the recitation of the ‘wrong body’ narrative would become imperative for trans people seeking social and institutional legibility, as well as access to the technologies of hormones and surgery. Jay Prosser has examined how nineteenth-century sexology continued to hold sway in the increasing ‘biographizing’ of trans patients: establishing an authentic narrative of trans inauthenticity became necessary because, ‘for the sexologist, the body of the invert was by definition an unreliable text’.<sup>39</sup> Inverts professed a different gender from the one they were assigned at birth, and so their self-narrative became one that was symptomatic of their perceived pathology. Thus from Krafft-Ebing’s case studies to the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, accounts of sexual and gender non-conformity continued to be highly sought-after because they reinstated normality through its obverse, the spectre of extreme perversion. Such accounts coincided with dramatic upheavals in the public understanding of sex and gender roles in general.

*Myra Breckinridge* capitalizes on fears of general social decline by exploiting the genre of trans feminine (auto)biography. The diary entries that comprise it, written by Myra’s fictional hand, exist in a parodic relationship to sexological discourse, having been motivated by a ‘Dr. Randolph Spenser Montag, my analyst friend and dentist, who has proposed that I write in this notebook as therapy’ (p. 4). Dr. Montag is an eccentric whose combined professions exploit the rhyme between ‘mental’ and ‘dental’. He earnestly reminds Myra, ‘Good dental health means good mental health’, emphasizing a relation between physical normality (a ‘Hollywood smile’) and being a reasonable, well-adjusted patient (p. 111). Myra is decidedly not well-adjusted, and we are told that Montag, though instrumental in her transition, was against it. ‘In the great tradition of neo-Freudian analysis, Dr. Montag refuses to accept any evidence that does not entirely square with his

preconceptions', Myra says. Because of this, her gender transition was a 'traumatic experience for us all'. Now that Myra has begun to live as a woman, Montag's worldview has been shaken, and he 'almost believes those stories his younger patients tell him of parties where sexual roles change rapidly [...] stories he used to reject as wish-fulfillments' (p. 91). The parody of psychoanalytical dismissal of sexual variance, including homosexuality, is clear, but Myra's status as a trans feminine allegory remains intact, where she is aligned with the new sexual counterculture.<sup>40</sup> She does, in fact, attend an orgy thrown by one of the students, mostly observing as she deflects snatches at her off-limits panties. Reflecting on the experience, she admits:

[A]ccess to this sort of pleasure in my adolescence would have changed me entirely. Fortunately, as it turned out, I was frustrated. If I had not been, Myra Breckinridge would never have existed [...] something we, none of us, can afford at this time. (p. 94)

Even in parody of psychoanalysis she remains an expression of the unconscious desires of the cis straight men at the orgy. At another party, she also parodies the nineteenth-century connection between hashish and inversion, invoked by both Krafft-Ebing and Rachilde. Myra smokes a joint and is soon immobilized in 'gaudy reveries' in a bathtub with two rings, 'one light, one dark, his and hers' (p. 49). She is depressed by the vision, continuing to plot the realignment of the sexes in her journal, an act which itself perverts the efficacy of the 'talking cure'.

Myra's parody of medical discourse is extended in the novel's most notorious scene, where she 'renovates' a hyper-masculine student called Rusty by anally raping him. The premise of the scene is a medical examination, with Myra playing teacher-nurse, ticking off items on a chart: she traces his spine, records height and weight, obtains a urine sample, and takes his temperature – through the rectum. The rhythm of the scene engages BDSM, with Myra threatening to 'punish' him for disobedience, clamping his nipples with tongs and spanking him (p. 138). After intensive cross-examination and a thorough inspection of Rusty's 'equipment', Myra takes out a strap-on dildo and completes her humiliation of him on the surgical table (p. 152). She congratulates herself on 'destroying totally [...] a man's idea of himself in relation to the triumphant sex', calling herself 'the god Priapus personified' as well as 'one with Bacchae, with all the priestesses of the dark

bloody cults, with the great goddess herself for whom Attis unmanned himself [...] the eternal feminine made flesh' (pp. 156–57). The scene is the culmination point of the various discourses operating in the novel, parodying the medical examination of trans people on the operating table and 'opening up' the immobilized alpha male for medical inspection. Myra's raptures also force a decadent alignment of the world of classical debauchery with the present moment, her reference to the self-castrating Greek deity Attis providing a possible echo of Wilde's 'The Sphinx' (1894): 'Atys with his blood-stained knife were better than the thing I am'.<sup>41</sup> Myra is the meeting point of these discourses held in allegory: though her actions parody the medicalization of gender variance, the scene is equally an examination of the depth of her perversion, centrally orientated around her castrated genitals, here reinstated by the stereotypical feminist weapon of a strap-on dildo. In the film, this scene was enacted with Welch in a stars-and-stripes leotard and cowboy hat, explicating the decadent social critique at play [fig. 4].

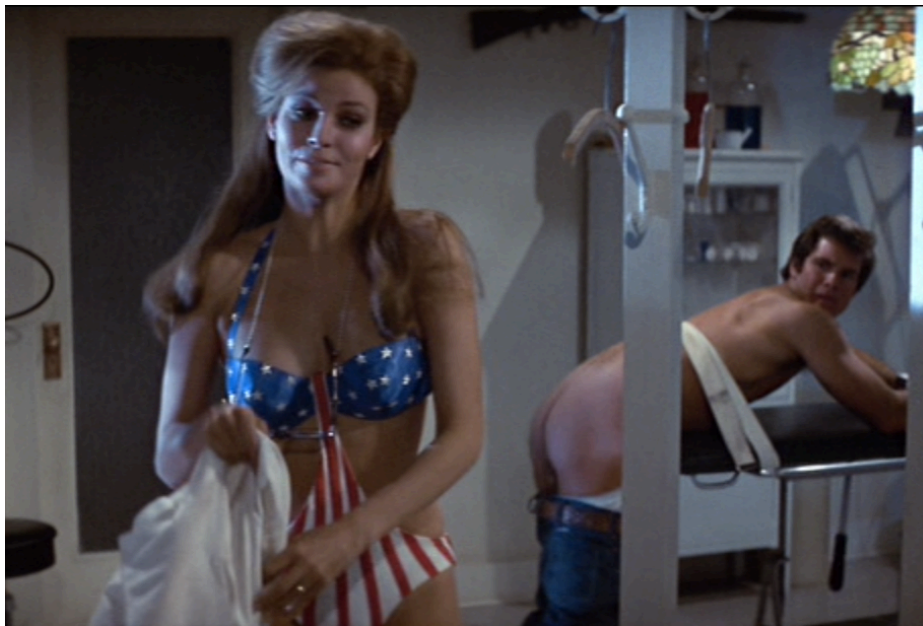


Fig. 4 (01:09:39): The notorious rape scene (detail).

### **Campy Postmodernism**

The apparent fluidity with which Myra embodies competing discourses is rooted in the novel's postmodernist deconstruction of an authoritative narrator. As a sexologically 'unreliable text', she

repeatedly bemoans the ‘treachery and inadequacy’ of language, claiming ‘that there are no words to describe for you *exactly* what my body is like’. Her trans status provides the occasion to draw on poststructuralism and ‘the French New Novelists’ in contesting the authority of her own voice (pp. 10, 117). Her voice is further subverted in her rapid switches from ‘a careful low-pitched voice, modelled on that of the late Ann Sheridan’, to a whisper ‘like Phyllis Thaxter in *Thirty Seconds over Tokyo*’, to several other vocal registers, anticipating the montage sequences of the film, moving rapidly between scene segments taken from Hollywood classics. When Myra is hired to take classes at the academy while working out the inheritance dispute with her uncle Buck, she teaches Empathy and Posture, suggestive of an untrustworthy trans performativity that is paradoxically valued at the Drama and Modelling Academy. Several of the students take on fake southern accents, embodying an ‘anonymous blur’, a ‘fitful, mindless shuffling of roles’ (p. 34). Buck’s accent likewise ‘switches from Cheyenne to Pomona [...] one could go mad trying to define its provenance’, and Myra’s journal entries are interspersed with transcriptions of his personal voice memos, reading like telegrams or Joycean monologues in their lack of punctuation, often broken up with grocery lists and expressions of delight aimed at a hardworking masseuse (p. 41). These touches may be postmodern in their fragmentation of identity, but they also embody a sort of comedy that amounts to an aestheticization of perversity, embodied in Myra’s steady description of herself as an agglomeration of screen starlets. In one such instance, she claims to resemble ‘Fay Wray [in] left three-quarter profile if the key light is no more than five feet high during the close shot’ (p. 3). As in the film, her newness is belied by the fact that she is more of a combination of existing cultural reference points, a sort of remix that is as confronting as it is compelling.

The off-colour humour that permeates the novel enacts a postmodern engagement with tropes of decadence that may also be productively examined through the lens of camp. The characters’ exaggerated social posturings, the emphasis on artificiality and surface, Myra’s easy embodiment of a range of feminine stereotypes, her ‘camp nostalgia’ for the films of the 1940s, and the Wilde connections, all position *Myra Breckinridge* as a kind of campy twentieth-century



transmutation of nineteenth-century decadence.<sup>42</sup> The dialogue with contemporaneous sexology is also maintained, and Karin Sellbeck has noted the resonances between 1960s sexologists such as John Money and the character of Dr. Montag. Money was a proponent of a socially-constructivist view of sex, arguing for the ‘transpositioning’ of subjects in culture, where trans bodies are seen as fields for the reception of various influences, revealing the malleability of sex and gender in general. Identity ‘may fluctuate and the body thus becomes a territory contested by two oppositional sets of social/hormonal influences’.<sup>43</sup> This sexological discourse becomes ripe for a campy postmodern deconstruction of authenticity and voice, especially in light of the play on words that may exist between Montag, Money, and Sontag (Susan).<sup>44</sup> The influence of Tyler’s criticism, what he refers to in his conclusion as a ‘Comedy of Critical Hallucination’, and the emphasis on gender-crossing voices and body swapping, further highlights the campy postmodernist operations that allegorize trans femininity into a multidirectional social critique, not a valid social position. Such considerations are consistent with David Scott Diffrient’s effort to recuperate the film adaptation in an exercise in ‘camp criticism’ that highlights its ‘transgressive pleasures’.<sup>45</sup>

Gregory W. Bredbeck’s work casts an important light on the genesis of influence from Wilde via Tyler (and, as I suspect, from Rachilde also) in understanding the debt owed to Wilde in the development of camp as an aesthetic sensibility. Advocating a lack of sincerity in order to develop space both ‘within and against the emerging languages of sexology’, Wilde was able to assert a gay male identity through the language of camp, ‘turning the gazer into the gazed, the subject into the object’, so muddling ‘an ability to know who is attracted to what’.<sup>46</sup> Bredbeck discusses how after his trial and death, Wilde’s work was treated with the nineteenth-century sexological emphasis on narrative, confusing ‘textual inversion and sexual inversion’.<sup>47</sup> Bredbeck’s analysis is unfortunately limited by his perpetuation of the tendency to elide trans femininity and homosexuality, failing to account for the importance of the extreme trans feminine example in shaping respectability politics surrounding cis same-sex attraction.

## Man Revealed

*Myra Breckinridge* also participates in the elision between trans femininity and same-sex attraction, mobilizing Myra's body as a weapon against the straight society that ridiculed her pre-transition self, the campy gay film buff Myron, as a 'fag'. When she eventually enacts the customary trans 'reveal' of the 'scar where cock and balls should be', Buck has a revelation that the 'awful low voice she sometimes uses [...] now I recognize is a mans [*sic*] voice' (p. 190). Winning the inheritance dispute as a result of this reveal, and intimidating her uncle in the process, Myra presents the ultimate vessel with which the campy gay man can enact his revenge, slipping his voice inside of her body [fig. 5]. After her confrontation with Buck, Myra is hit by a car, placed in a full-body cast, and is forced to de-transition when hospital staff deny her access to hormones. Her breasts are non-consensually removed in surgery (chapter 41 contains only her horrible exclamation, 'Where are my breasts? *Where are my breasts?*') and she begins to sprout facial hair (p. 222). Echoing Money's sexological model, a transformation of her personality ensues and Myron is reborn, now heterosexual. He marries Rusty's ex-girlfriend Mary-Ann, has a phallus reconstruction, and begins writing TV screenplays. This re-inscription of traditional gender roles reverses the formula of the 'wrong body' narrative, replacing 'a woman trapped inside the body of a man' to position trans femininity as the reverse. It comes with Myron's final chilling assertion that 'happiness, like the proverbial bluebird, is to be found in your own backyard if you just know where to look', completing the satirical mobilization of Myra as a decadently scandalous dream visited upon the normatively sexed body (p. 225).

Contemporaneous critics were able to identify the allegorical functioning of Myra's trans femininity, reading her as a platform upon which social anxieties about the fate of American masculinity play out. Purvis E. Boyette's article 'Myra Breckinridge and Imitative Form' provides a key example:

No pop psychology in the world can persuade us that allowing one's penis to be cut off is anything but desperate and hysterical insanity, however articulate. The transsexual Myra is [...] the archetypal pervert[,] the image of a debased and debauched society.



Fig. 5 (01:26:25): The film rendering of Myra's genital reveal.

Her rape of Rusty is understood as 'a figurative rendering of the destructive power Hollywood has over the innate strength of [...] American stock'. Boyette goes on to say that '[i]nverted sexuality' is an excellent symbolic vehicle for 'the cultural and spiritual distortions of contemporary American society [that] represents a metaphorical conflation of sexuality and society'. He adds that '[t]his symbolic equation is by no means new'.<sup>48</sup> Though Boyette draws attention to eighteenth-century satirists such as Pope and Swift – one thinks of William Blake's 'Mr. Femality', a probable caricature of the trans feminine spy and duellist Chevalier d'Eon, from *An Island in the Moon* (1784) – a line may also be drawn to include the decadent trans feminine. The rhetoric employed by Boyette seems to echo many nineteenth-century concerns about national decline, sexual degradation, and 'the race'. The article demonstrates how the apparent newness of the perversion represented by Myra's decadently transsexual body, with its justification in 'pop psychology' and exacerbation in the spectacle of Hollywood, is as fabricated as the allegorical trans feminine subject herself.

The article is also representative of the relatively warm reception that the novel enjoyed both critically and with the general public, becoming one of Vidal's bestselling works. The

discrepancy between the relative success of *Myra Breckinridge* the novel and the dismal failure of the film version – effectively ending the career of director Michael Sarne – is a point of interest that turns on the difference between what allowed the novel to be considered an effective parody of sexual mores and the film to be considered an unsightly disfigurement of cinematic form and a perversion of good taste. Where the film ends in Myron and Myra performing a cabaret-style number on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, the novel's perfect recantation of its trans content and much more stable plotline may have contributed to its palatability. The immobilization of the trans feminine body, like Jacques being made into a Venus or Dorian being made into a portrait, effectively contains the threat it represents to the established social order. Allegorization thus works in tandem with objectification, as trans feminine corporeality is spirited away via Myra-cum-Myron's full-body cast. There is certainly a Frankenstein element in both the novel and the film, as we see the ghost of Myron rising from the dead and Myra rising from the operating table. But instead of moving in a visible bricolage of reanimated body parts, the pair does so in snippets of Hollywood films.

The final image of Myron penning screenplays in the suburbs also contains another possible reading which is more subversive, given that he is now a participant in the media machinery that attended his former sexual inversion at every stage. The implication is that Myron's apparent normality only masks a form of sexual extremity that is now allowed to subliminally seep into screen culture, decaying it from the inside. In the film, this process is reflected in the casting of Reed, an actual film critic and author of *Do You Sleep in the Nude?* (1968), an anthology of celebrity interviews. There is potential for an unsettling realization that the formal challenge represented by Myra's disfiguring of sexual and cultural references is in fact indistinguishable from the Hollywood culture that produced her. As I have shown, there is a strong cultural precedent for the construction of the decadent trans feminine as a symptom, an allegorical playing-out of social anxieties. Her arrival as a new low, a new form of sexual extremity, is then a function of that

sense of decline. It is the same threat that arrives again and again, with an all-too-familiar face – in this case, that of Raquel Welch, not Candy Darling.

---

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Bob Colacello, *Holy Terror: Andy Warhol Close Up* (New York: Harper Collins, 1990), p. 84.

<sup>2</sup> Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, *POPism: The Warhol Sixties* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1980), p. 170. Footage of Candy reciting lines from *Picnic* are to be found in the documentary *Beautiful Darling: The Life and Times of Candy Darling, Andy Warhol Superstar*, dir. by James Rasin (Corinth Films, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> The practice of selecting cis actors over trans actors to play trans roles is depressingly consistent up to the present day, with Candy herself portrayed by Vince Gattin in a 2006 play, *Candy and Dorothy*. Television productions such as *Pose* and *Transparent* are notable exceptions that have initiated shifts in representation in recent years. I use the word ‘trans’ interchangeably where ‘transgender’ or ‘transsexual’ or ‘transvestite’ could be used. Because of the historical scope of my analysis there is slippage between these words, subject to many factors, so I prefer to use a curtailed version because it is flexible and current. Taking my cue from Heaney, I use ‘trans feminine’ to denote femininity that goes against birth assignment, a slightly more expanded version of such labels that is sensitive to historical anachronism.

<sup>4</sup> Emma Heaney, *The New Woman: Literary Modernism, Queer Theory, and the Trans Feminine Allegory* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Judith Crist, ‘Mal de Merde, or Myra in the Mire’, *New York Magazine* (13 July 1970), 55–54 (p. 54).

<sup>6</sup> ‘Some Sort of Nadir’, *Time* (6 July 1970), 70–72 (p. 72).

<sup>7</sup> David Scott Diffrient, ‘“Hard to Handle”: Camp Criticism, Trash-Film Reception, and the Transgressive Pleasures of Myra Breckinridge’, *Cinema Journal*, 52 (2013), 46–70 (p. 54).

<sup>8</sup> David Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), p. 14.

<sup>9</sup> Vincent Sherry, *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 27.

<sup>10</sup> See also Kate Hext and Alex Murray, eds, *Decadence in the Age of Modernism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), and Kristin Mahoney, *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>11</sup> Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism*, pp. 175–76.

<sup>12</sup> Weir, *Decadent Culture in the United States* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), p. 193.

<sup>13</sup> Gore Vidal, *Myra Breckinridge & Myron* (London: Abacus, 1993), p. 34. Further references are cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>14</sup> Rachilde, *Monsieur Vénus*, trans. by Melanie Hawthorne (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2004), p. 208.

<sup>15</sup> See Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (London: Virago, 1992), pp. 127–43.

<sup>16</sup> Rachilde, *Monsieur Vénus*, p. 210.

<sup>17</sup> Melanie Hawthorne, *Rachilde and French Women’s Authorship: From Decadence to Modernism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), p. 187.

<sup>18</sup> Maxime Foerster, ‘A New Catalogue of Perversions: Sexology and Decadence’, in *States of Decadence: On the Aesthetics of Beauty, Decline and Transgression across Time and Space*, ed. by Guri Barstad and Karen P. Knutsen, 2 vols (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2006), I.

<sup>19</sup> Rachilde, *Monsieur Vénus*, p. 81. Original emphasis.

<sup>20</sup> Hawthorne, *Rachilde and French Women’s Authorship*, p. 56.

<sup>21</sup> Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature [À rebours]*, trans. by Brendan King (Sawtry, Cambs.: Dedalus, 2008).

<sup>22</sup> Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, trans. by F. J. Rebman (New York: Rebman Company, 1922), p. 418.

<sup>23</sup> Heaney draws attention to this tradition. For the coinage of homosexuality, see Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* (San Francisco: Seal, 2009), p. 37.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Frederick S. Roden, ‘Medieval religion, Victorian homosexualities’, *Prose Studies*, 23 (2000), 115–30 (p. 117).

<sup>25</sup> Petra Dierkes-Thrun, ‘Decadent Sensuality in Rachilde and Wilde’, in *Decadence and the Senses*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and Alice Condé (Cambridge: Legenda, 2017), pp. 51–65 (p. 55).

<sup>26</sup> Heaney also examines Roland Barthes’ genital-focused analysis of this novella, *S/Z* (1970), but does not include the nineteenth-century novella in her broader argument about modernism. For the Mendès allusion, see Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Knopf, 1987), p. 282.

<sup>27</sup> It is mentioned in Vidal on p. 31, and there are quotes and echoes of Tyler’s language throughout.

<sup>28</sup> Parker Tyler, *Magic and Myth of the Movies*, British edn (London: Secker & Warburg, 1971), p. 13. Italics in original.

<sup>29</sup> Hext and Murray, *Decadence in the Age of Modernism*, p. 18.

- <sup>30</sup> Tyler, *Magic and Myth of the Movies*, p. 77.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 79, 77.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.
- <sup>33</sup> Sally Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p. 109.
- <sup>34</sup> Tyler, *Magic and Myth of the Movies*, pp. 225, 226.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.
- <sup>36</sup> *The Dybbuk* (1937) and *Turnabout* (1940).
- <sup>37</sup> Tyler, *Magic and Myth of the Movies*, p. 227.
- <sup>38</sup> Myron sees the extension of Myra as an allegory into a more explicitly postmodern sci-fi involving body swapping and jumping inside TV screens.
- <sup>39</sup> Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 142.
- <sup>40</sup> In 1968 when the novel was published, homosexuality was still classified as a pathology by American Psychiatric Association in the Diagnostic and Statistic Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), a fact which was not overturned until the publication of the DSM-II in 1973. The diagnostic categories of Gender Dysphoria and Transvestic Disorder are extant in the current DSM-V. See, for example, Jack Drescher, 'Queer diagnoses revisited: The past and future of homosexuality and gender diagnoses in DSM and ICD', *International Review of Psychiatry*, 27 (2015), 386–95.
- <sup>41</sup> Oscar Wilde, *Poems, with the Ballad of Reading Gaol*, ed. by Robert Ross, 12<sup>th</sup> edn (London: Methuen & Co., 1913), p. 276.
- <sup>42</sup> Mahoney discusses Max Beerbohm's decadent 'camp nostalgia [...] under the assault of the ugliness of the present', wartime England in the 1930s and 40s (pp. 26–27).
- <sup>43</sup> Karin Sellberg, 'The subjective cut: sex reassignment surgery in 1960s and 1970s science fiction', *Medical Humanities*, 42 (2016), e20–e25 (p. e23).
- <sup>44</sup> Kate Hext and Alex Murray identify Sontag's *Notes on Camp* (1964) as the first to position Wilde in the evolution from decadence to camp (*Decadence in the Age of Modernism*, pp. 19–20).
- <sup>45</sup> See Diffrient's title.
- <sup>46</sup> Gregory W. Bredbeck, 'Narcissus in the Wilde: Textual cathexis and the historical origins of queer Camp', in *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, ed. by Moe Meyer (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 44–64 (pp. 45, 47).
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.
- <sup>48</sup> Purvis E. Boyette, 'Myra Breckinridge and Imitative Form', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 17 (1971), 229–38 (p. 236).