

# Victorians in the Closet: Oscar Wilde's Monstrous Hollywood Legacy

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IN its first decades, American cinema often viewed the Victorians through a decadent lens. Some of its most compelling Victorians were monstrous and sexually deviant, with illicit, destructive desires bubbling up to the surface. In horror films and what Guy Barefoot calls “gaslight melodramas,” ranging from *Jekyll and Hyde* (1920) to *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) and *The Lodger* (1944), allusions to Oscar Wilde in particular helped define a queer, unspeakable horror for contemporary audiences. These films were haunted by Wilde, who appeared like the return of the repressed through epigrammatic dialogue, camp-ery, and, most notably, filmmakers’ use of the author’s own protocinematic imagination. Why and how the decadent movement—and Wilde in particular—helped shape the presentation of Victorians on-screen has to date been buried along with the history of how Wildean decadence permeated American cinema during the first decades of the new century. Victorian studies research has focused almost exclusively on late twentieth-century adaptations of fin de siècle fiction and biopics of its authors. Scholarship at the interface of literature and early cinema, meanwhile, has tended to focus on experimental cinema and modernism.

Wilde’s omission from critical accounts of the Victorians in Hollywood is unsurprising. Ever since Graham Hough’s *The Last Romantics* (1947), literary history has been more adept at slotting decadence into the end of a tradition, a tendency embedded by the temporal boundaries of university courses and the cultural schism that Wilde’s demise appeared to mark. If this limitation has begun to be addressed in recent years, the twentieth-century developments of decadence have rarely been explored in the interdisciplinary terms of cinema, nor in terms of their broader effects on the screen image of the Victorian period.<sup>1</sup> Aaron Worth and Paul Foster are among the critics who have

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discussed the cinematic sequences in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890, 1891), but when it comes to analysis of Wilde's influence on film, that begins much later, after the Wolfenden Report (1957), and blossoms still later when he came to exemplify neo-Victorian "heritage camp" and the figure of the "gay martyr."<sup>2</sup>

Yet, between the 1910s and 1940s, Wilde was the Victorian with whom Hollywood filmmakers were most acquainted. Journalists, writers, artists, and actors who migrated west in this period infused Hollywood with the aesthetics of Wildean decadence. Magazine and newspaper offices in New York and Chicago—for example, *The Little Review*, *Bruno's Weekly*, *The Smart Set*, the *Chicago Daily News*—were saturated by the literary influences of "belated cosmopolitan decadence."<sup>3</sup> When, in 1921, future screenwriter Ben Hecht fictionalized the office of the *Chicago Daily News* where he worked, he depicted the hard-living telegraph editor at his desk invariably in a "bacchanal of words,"<sup>4</sup> reading Gustave Flaubert, Théophile Gautier, Remy de Gourmont, Joris-Karl Huysmans, Walter Pater, and Arthur Symons while waiting for news stories to break.<sup>5</sup> Decades later, Hecht's dominant memory of the *Daily News* office was of "crack reporters hunched over first editions of Symons and George Moore."<sup>6</sup> His newsroom was indicative of a broader culture in which Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley held a vital fascination for cosmopolitan sophisticates. In March 1919, with considerable misgiving, Richard Le Gallienne even heralded "The Coming Back of Oscar Wilde" in the United States, writing that "it has not been the least of Wilde's misfortunes that he has been posthumously appropriated for their own by an unpleasant rag-tag and bobtail of literary and artistic failures and poseurs, would-be 'decadents and degenerates.'"<sup>7</sup>

These "would-be 'decadents' and degenerates" were not isolated cases but indicative of fervent cultural interest in the decadent movement. In Hollywood, as I will argue, they would capitalize on familiarity with Wilde among sophisticated audiences in order to create a decadent, deviant subtext in mainstream cinema. For, in the 1910s, the movement's past was not over; it was not even past. If the Great War had provided an objective correlative for the world-weary poems of the Tragic Generation of the 1890s,<sup>8</sup> it also showed that the Wildean ethos of sensation for its own sake was still very much in currency. Moreover, its stories and aesthetics could be easily translated to the screen because they were already cinematic and sensational. When David Thompson notes that early Hollywood looked to the past to define the future of the movies, he has in mind the epics of D. W. Griffith and Cecil B. DeMille.<sup>9</sup> Victorian

scholars could add, further, that before epics like *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), Charles Dickens's storytelling techniques were instrumental in Griffith's definition of a new emotional register for cinema, through montage and close-ups,<sup>10</sup> while the Victorians' consolidation of realism was to define the narrative patterns of feature-length movies ever after.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, producers and scenario writers looked to the Victorians for thrilling stories to connect the new multireel feature film with the cinema of sensations provided by the nickelodeons that preceded them. After all, many of the scenario writers of the 1910s and 1920s had come from newsrooms like the ones Hecht described, steeped in decadent literature.<sup>12</sup> Appearing alongside adaptations of Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* (1916, 1925, 1930, 1931) and Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* (1911, 1915, 1934), American period adaptations of Wilde's work—including *A Florentine Tragedy* (1913), *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1915), and *Salome* (1918)—exemplified this preference for the sensational and tantalizing.<sup>13</sup> It is indicative of Wilde's particular popularity that when, in 1919, *Variety* announced that Paramount Pictures was to adapt *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the notice declared that the main box-office draw would be not John Barrymore—then at the peak of his fame and the film's star—but Wilde: "All Paramount will have to do is to bill Oscar Wilde's name in large letters to draw a horde of curiosity seekers in addition to the average picture public."<sup>14</sup>

But how could these audiences be satisfied once inside the movie theaters? Wilde's plots were often saturated in ennui, lacking both kinetic energy and epic scale, and relying on witty language that would not transfer well to the intertitles of silent film. In him, filmmakers saw something quite different: a sexual danger, at once seductive and horrific, that capitalized on the interest of those "curiosity seekers." After the 1910s, Wilde's Hollywood influence would not be defined primarily by adaptations of his plays and stories. Instead, his work was at its most influential when it went undercover as a subversive element in other screenplays, most often adaptations of Victorian works or depictions of the period. Allusions to Wilde are among the few traces of homosexuality in commercial silent film in America. Furthermore, while most suggestions of homosexual desire in the silents are gestures played for comedic effect—cross-dressing, mistaken identities, effeminate men or "sissys"<sup>15</sup>—Wilde is rarely in that category. Hidden in plain sight for audience members in the know, allusions to his works evaded the censorship boards, offering a more serious, sophisticated comment on male-male desire and its danger.

Wilde raises fresh questions, then, about the Victorians' relationship with American filmmaking between its first feature films in the mid-1910s and Hollywood's Golden Age, from 1929 to 1945. As indicated by the examples above, scholarship has tended to present the Victorian influence on cinema as one that operated in line with the aim of movie moguls that cinema become a prestigious, realistic art form. This dominant scholarly perspective, although accurate for the most part, has had the unintended consequence of directing attention away from the seamier side of Victorian influence, in which Wilde was among those who spawned both the tenets that would come to characterize the horror movie genre and the psychodynamics of deviant sexualities that came to dominate the screen more broadly. This aspect of Victorian culture was at least as vivid among Hollywood's journalists-turned-scenario-writers, who were steeped in a culture far more cognizant of Wilde than we have remembered.

In what follows, I focus on Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and the 1920 film adaptation of *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* in order to illustrate an alternative line of influence from the decadents' protocinematic imagination to Hollywood film. Parallel to the work of Garrett Stewart and Timothy Johns on Dickens and early cinema, this essay demonstrates that the transnational influence of Wilde helped form the cinematic imagination in general. Only, the effect would be quite different. In *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film*, Harry M. Benshoff positions Dorian's picture in the novel as the root of cinematic horror in the 1930s because it "contains the quintessential imagery of the monster queer—that of a sexually active and attractive young man who possesses some terrible secret which must perforce be locked away in a hidden closet."<sup>16</sup> Wilde's currency in early horror films, and indeed the organic relation between decadent aesthetics and horror, goes further than Benshoff suggests. As I wish to argue, both Wilde's visual imagination and his persona were harnessed to singular, subversive effect: alluding to things that could not be shown or said in an age of intense film censorship in order to retroactively queer the Victorians on the silver screen.

### 1. VICTORIAN DECADENTS AND THE CINEMATIC IMAGINATION

That decadent literature was already cinematic at the fin de siècle is central to understanding how it was taken up by American filmmakers. Diane Sadoff identifies "the turn-of-the-century break between the industrial

age and the emergence of the ‘graphic age of electronic man’” that produced *Dracula* (1897).<sup>17</sup> Decadent writers were also especially attuned to this shift in modern consciousness, focused as they were on visual art at a time when visual consciousness was altering forever. This new visual consciousness is integral to Symons’s essay “The Decadent Movement in Literature” (1893). In his often-overlooked comments on impressionism in painting and literature, Symons wonders about how the impressionist “would flash upon you in a new, sudden way so exact an image of what you have just seen, just as you have seen it,” and conceives the Goncourt brothers’ literary impressionism as “a desperate endeavour to give sensation, to flash the impression of the moment, to preserve the very heat and motion of life.”<sup>18</sup> The quick succession of flashing images described by Symons is integral to his vision of modernity and to decadence as its embodiment.

In the decadent imagination, moving pictures had long been connected with ephemerality and pleasurable sensation. For Charles Baudelaire, the experience of moving pictures for their own sake became the defining characteristic of the flâneur: as he walks the streets, taking in the ephemeral sights of the city, he becomes “a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness.”<sup>19</sup> As Leo Charney and Vanessa Schwartz note, this visual experience anticipates cinema, showing that “modern attention was vision in motion. Modern forms of experience relied not simply on movement but on the juncture of movement and vision: moving pictures.”<sup>20</sup> Soon after Baudelaire’s visions, we find Pater’s epiphanic moments aspiring constantly to the condition of serial continuity, making him a pivotal thinker in the imaginative evolution that spans from William Wordsworth’s “spots of time” to the stop-motion technique of early cinema technology.<sup>21</sup> When, in “The School of Giorgione” (1877), Pater focuses on “easily movable pictures which serve neither for uses of devotion, nor of allegorical or historical teaching,” he is also anticipating the use of moving pictures for pure entertainment. Liberated from a dogmatic purpose almost by their dynamism, each of Pater’s “movable pictures” is, he writes, “a space of colour.”<sup>22</sup> Like Pater, Symons tacitly links the imperative of art for its own sake with moving pictures. In “At the Alhambra” (1896), his comments on watching ballet anticipate the escapism offered by silent cinema during the Great War and the aftermath of the Wall Street crash of 1929. In contrast with scripted drama, he writes, ballet is “simply a picture in movement”; “one escapes into fairy-land which is permitted by that tyranny of the real which is the worst tyranny of modern life.”<sup>23</sup>

Innocuous though these examples may seem to be, there is a peculiar potential for perversity, degeneracy, and horror in the moving pictures of decadence. Aaron Worth's proposition that there is a "natural affinity" between the horror genre and media technologies is especially true when they intersect in the literatures of the decadent movement.<sup>24</sup> In Symons's "Decadent Movement in Literature," for example, visual impressionism arises out of "a morbid intensity."<sup>25</sup> Horror lurks within the triangulation of intense sensation with moving pictures and modernity. In "The Painter of Modern Life" (1864), Baudelaire's reference to Edgar Allan Poe's "The Man in the Crowd" (1840) is an allusion to the amorality and clandestine thrill-seeking that link his cinematic flâneur with horror.<sup>26</sup> For Baudelaire, the medium of moving pictures dramatizes the collapse of clear distinctions between beauty and horror as it satisfies the scopophilic desire for thrilling sensations. The potential for this horror is fully realized elsewhere. In Auguste Villiers de l'Isle Adam's *L'Ève future* (1886), for instance, the Edison-like protagonist creates an idealized lover to be fetishized as she is brought to life cinematically.<sup>27</sup> "The Inmost Light" (1894), by Arthur Machen, harnesses this scopophilic gaze into a dramatic device that catalyzes its fledgling detective-horror mystery. The Baudelairean flâneur-turned-detective and narrator at its heart is wandering the London streets one night when: "It was as if I had had an electrical current down my spine[.] . . . As I glanced up I had looked straight towards the last house in the row before me, and in an upper window of that house I had seen for a short fraction of a second a face. It was the face of a woman, and yet it was not human."<sup>28</sup> Machen's short story anticipates how moving pictures could crystallize the desire for thrilling sensations, carried on the rapture of suspense and detection. The moving pictures of flânerie are framed in the window and brought to life as if by a modern "electrical current," like the new technologies that projected the moving images of magic lanterns and Praxinoscopes onto screens. They are secretive, shameful, unnatural, but also thrilling.

Machen was following a direction set by *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Wilde's novel took the Baudelairean idea that moving pictures were the quintessence of modern sensualism and expanded the uncanny possibilities of this relationship. From the first time Dorian notices that the mouth of his portrait has changed, the autonomously altering picture functions like a Kinetoscope (1891) or private peep show,<sup>29</sup> on which he can watch his pursuit of intense sensations rendered as a horror movie. While critical comment on *Dorian Gray* and cinema has not

been infrequent, it has been fairly brief, and focused on the picture's terrifying alteration, which "records real-world events in real time, preserving them as a succession of snapshots, registered at the precise moment at which they take place."<sup>30</sup> Although, as Linda Nead notes, no one ever sees it move, it is held as if in a freeze-frame each time it is observed, making it the ultimate moving picture.<sup>31</sup> Its alterations, though, are only the novel's most obvious debt to the cinematic imagination. Like Machen, Wilde draws on a number of cinematic technologies and effects current at the time of his writing: mirror images, artificial lighting, and projection are essential to the picture's autonomous movement, as well as that of other horrific moving pictures that appear in the novel.

Mirrors and unnatural lighting were essential to early cinema technology. For example, the Praxinoscope (1877) created the illusion of continuous movement when a strip of drawings was reflected onto mirrors as it revolved. A light fixed above the mirrors improved the effect of movement for the spectator, and, from 1880, bright artificial lighting enabled the projection of the Praxinoscope's moving images onto a screen. Therefore, perhaps when Dorian considers that his picture would be "the most magical of mirrors," the metaphor alludes not only to Narcissus.<sup>32</sup> Coming in the narrative shortly after the picture's first alteration and as Dorian realizes "a real pleasure in watching it" (103), it also alludes to the "magical" mirrors that reflected still pictures in order to create the impression of continuous movement.

However, it is another of cinema's technical innovations that really defines the horror of *Dorian Gray*. Supernatural lighting becomes integral to the horrifying, degenerative alterations of Dorian's picture. Basil's encounter with it on the night of his murder offers one example:

He held the light up again to the canvas, and examined it. The surface seemed quite undisturbed, and as he had left it. It was from within, apparently, that the foulness and horror had come. Through some strange quickening of inner life the leprosy of sin were slowly eating the thing away. The rotting of a corpse in a watery grave was not so fearful.

His hand shook, and the candle fell from its socket on the floor, and lay there spluttering. (153)

The effect of light cast across the canvas and the vibrant image that it reveals in the darkness bear an uncanny resemblance to cinema projection. Such supernatural lighting almost invariably accompanies each appearance of Dorian's picture. Elsewhere in the novel, we see "a cold current of air" cause a sudden flare from the lamp "in a flame of

murky orange,” and, on the morning after the picture’s first change, a flood of dawn light “swe[eps] the fantastic shadows into dusky corners” (151, 88). The chiaroscuro effects that Wilde produces intensify the supernatural horror of the picture. Moreover, the suggestion of cinematic projection—commercially available after 1888 to project moving pictures to an audience—carries the tension between public and private consumption that cuts to the heart of the novel. Dorian’s cinematic spectatorship is clandestine, secretive, charged with fear and desire,<sup>33</sup> certainly, but the threat of exposure is ever present.

Moving images lighted in the darkness, as if projected on a screen, appear later in the novel to emblemize Dorian’s fascination with degeneracy, at once indulged and repulsed. During Dorian’s final coach ride to Bluegate Fields, the narrator describes: “After some time they left the clay road, and rattled again over rough-paven streets. Most of the windows were dark, but now and then fantastic shadows were silhouetted against some lamp-lit blind. He watched them curiously. They moved like monstrous marionettes, and made gestures like live things” (180–81). These images underscore Dorian’s morbid search for new thrills, the coach ride coming as he acknowledges that only “the crude violence of disordered life, the very vileness of thief and outcast” are vivid enough to satisfy his desire for intense sensations (181). If nineteenth-century horror and decadence are twinned by their associations with the unnatural and artificial,<sup>34</sup> then protocinematic technology, defined by these very qualities in the late nineteenth-century imagination, further links them to modernity. Wilde is recycling the image from his poem “The Harlot’s House” (1885) in which “The shadows raced across the blind.”<sup>35</sup> In each case, the projection of shadow-images through a window, against the blind, uses the visual imaginary of silhouette magic lanterns (ca. 1850s). These were created by black outlines painted on glass. The effect in *Dorian Gray*, as in the earlier poem, is to render the figures as a dehumanized spectacle, observed by the protagonist with an uneasy mixture of disgust and desire.

The image of James Vane’s face at the conservatory window further expands the possibilities of cinema-projection imagery in the novel: “When he closed his eyes, he saw again the sailor’s face peering through the mist-stained glass, and horror seemed once more to lay its hand upon his heart[.] . . . And yet if it had been merely an illusion, how terrible it was to think that conscience could raise such fearful phantoms, and give them visible form, and make them move before one!” (194–95). With this, the triangulation of intense sensation, horror, and cinematic



imagery becomes a direct threat to Dorian. James Vane's image, framed by the window, is a frightening spectacle projected over and over again in his mind. Even more so than the silhouettes on the blind, this cinematic appearance represents the specter of bodies moving without souls—"fearful phantoms"—as both a thrilling and terrifying possibility. It is an image that Arthur Symons would return to in *London: A Book of Aspects* (1909), using "the quivering phantoms of a cinematograph" as a metaphor for strangers we pass on the street.<sup>36</sup>

One of the challenges of considering Wilde and cinema is that he plays with the imaginative possibilities of different protocinematic technologies, borrowing aspects from the Praxinoscope, peep-show machines, and magic lanterns. *Dorian Gray* evades any sustained reading in relation to a single machine. Indeed, it seems likely that, in common with Symons and Vernon Lee, Wilde was not interested in cinema per se, only in the way that it might be harnessed as a figure through which to explore the condition of the modern individual. Such evasion is in the end more haunting, like the ghostly presence of modernity, at once indefinable and undeniable.

## 2. MOVING PICTURES, WILDEAN MONSTERS

Silent feature films capitalized on the cinematic horror in Wildean decadence. His triangulation of ephemeral pleasures, moving pictures, and horror was especially pertinent in the 1910s and 1920s, a period defined by new visual effects and the burgeoning industry's self-reflexivity. In the 1915 adaptation of *Dorian Gray*, filmmakers used stop-motion to animate the picture, showing the cinema audience a monstrous change-in-motion. In 1922 prominent art critic S. L. M. Barlow saw the potential for American cinema to develop a cinematic aesthetic akin to that found in such German expressionist films as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) and *The Golem* (1920) by taking inspiration from images by Beardsley, who illustrated Wilde's *Salome* and was often conjoined with Wilde as the two embodiments of 1890s British decadence.<sup>37</sup>

Wilde's cinematic imagination operated most influentially on film not in the adaptations of his works or the avowed screen influences of the decadent movement; in an industry increasingly aware of the importance of maintaining a spotless moral reputation, such adaptations were few. Filmmakers instead conjured up Wilde as a suggestive subtext of cinematic horror. Clara Beranger's 1920 adaptation of *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* is a key example. It took the place of Paramount's proposed picturization of *Dorian Gray* noted above, and it too would star

John Barrymore in the title role(s). Only, this production is not *Jekyll and Hyde* as we know it from Robert Louis Stevenson's novel, or Thomas Russell Sullivan's influential 1887 play, or even the earlier short film adaptations. It is instead filtered through the narrative structure and main concerns of *Dorian Gray*, and draws on its integral relationship between intense sensual desire and moving pictures to create a watershed in American horror film.

Beranger's adaptation of *Jekyll and Hyde* is rooted in a queer sensuality largely borrowed from the novel *Dorian Gray*. A new "Lord Henry" figure, Sir George (Brandon Hurst), replaces Mr. Utterson, to influence Dr. Jekyll into becoming Mr. Hyde. Dominating the film's opening scenes, Sir George acts as a counterpart to Dr. Lanyon, recreating the Basil–Lord Henry dynamic of good and evil influences doing battle for, in this case, Jekyll's soul. This innovation in the scenario is directly linked to Wilde's novel through Sir George's intertitle dialogue. So he incites Jekyll: "The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it," and "With your youth, you should live—as *I have lived!*" (18). Of course, these words are Lord Henry's from the opening scenes of *Dorian Gray*. Their use here, without screen credit to Wilde, rings out in striking contrast with silent adaptations of his own novel and plays, in which the dialogue is conspicuous by its absence, replaced by scene description and new moralizing narration.<sup>38</sup> Wilde's dialogue reaches beyond the scope of the domestic melodrama that *Jekyll and Hyde* might have become in order to draw out the latent homoerotic implications of Stevenson's text. With these lines, the screen scenario repivots itself around seductive male-male influence and hedonism in place of the unraveling mystery of Hyde and his relationship with Dr. Jekyll that is central to the novel.

Nora Gilbert has shown that this kind of allusive approach was necessary during Hollywood's later Production Code Era, with its appointed moral guardians effectively restricting sexual, violent, and blasphemous content. As Gilbert argues, in Hollywood the Production Code resulted not in such content being eliminated but in it being channeled into covert discourses that the reader/viewer then decoded with clandestine pleasure.<sup>39</sup> In fact, codifying queer desire for the big screen began long before the Production Code Era; queer desires were always codified in commercial cinema. For example, in the otherwise straightened-out 1915 adaptation of *Dorian Gray*, an early scene sees Dorian passionately kiss Sybil Vane when she is dressed as Ganymede. The result is to bifurcate the audience into the general picture-goer and the picture-goer who gets (and in many cases gets pleasure from) the reference to hidden male-male desire.

By the same token, sophisticated audiences would have found *Jekyll and Hyde*'s revised narrative of an older man influencing a younger, piqued by Wilde's dialogue, entertaining for its sexual suggestiveness. Contemporary familiarity with Wilde was underpinned by over a dozen revivals of his comedies on the U.S. stage in the late 1910s, alongside the trade-book publisher Boni and Liveright's high-profile edition of *Dorian Gray*,<sup>40</sup> and the salacious interest in his biography since Frank Harris's publication of *Oscar Wilde, His Life and Confessions* (1916). Indeed, the recovery of references to *Dorian Gray* from within *Jekyll and Hyde* can itself be seen as a Wildean endeavor—a reframing of his statement in the preface to *Dorian Gray* that “Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril / Those who read the symbol do so at their peril.” As Wilde well knew, such a perilous dip beneath surface meanings can be both a pleasure and a horror. It is this latter, additional dimension of horror that distinguishes the 1920 *Jekyll and Hyde* from the films on which Gilbert focuses. The element of danger is new and disturbing. The effect is ambivalent: like Wilde's novel, it is both horrific and seductive.

### 3. READY FOR MY CLOSE-UP: MANAGING THE HORROR IN THE GLASS

The production of *Jekyll and Hyde* harnesses Wilde's cinematic imagination in order to endow its narrative of sensual desire and seductive influence with visual horror. Picking up on the brief reference to Jekyll's “own face (now how sadly altered!) in the glass” on the final page of Stevenson's novel,<sup>41</sup> the screen scenario borrows the self-reflexivity of Dorian's picture to dramatize Dr. Jekyll's transformations. In a departure from Stevenson's novel, Jekyll tells his servant, “I want you to have a long mirror placed in my laboratory,” and later the spectacle of Jekyll/Hyde's transformation is conveniently reflected in this mirror, as Dorian's sins are in the painting, or the revolving frames were in the Praxinoscope. As Jekyll looks at his reflection, his disembodied spectatorship and self-recognition make this “most magical of mirrors,” as Wilde writes of the picture (103), into a self-reflexive tool to revivify the integral relationship between moving pictures, sensation, and horror.

Dr. Jekyll's reflection in the mirror is one of the film's many spectral moments, moments that use the “fantastic shadows” of *Dorian Gray* to build on the brief lighting suggestions in Stevenson's novel. We see this in the elongated shadow of a cane knocking on Jekyll's door, in the streetlamps diffused by fog, and in the silhouette of Hyde that

appears on the intertitles. One of the clearest sustained examples of Wilde's influence on the visual effect of this adaptation, though, is a new scene. In it, Jekyll wakes up to imagine a giant spider that appears at the bottom of the room and crawls over his bed before it disappears into the cover as Jekyll transforms spontaneously into Hyde. The scene is drawn from *Dorian Gray*: "There are few of us who have not sometimes wakened before dawn, either after one of those dreamless nights that make us almost enamored of death, or one of those nights of horror and misshapen joy, when through the chambers of the brain sweep phantoms more terrible than reality itself. . . . In black fantastic shapes, dumb shadows crawl into the corners of the room, and crouch there" (127–28). Transferred to the screen as a scene in *Jekyll and Hyde*, this moment realizes the artificial, chiaroscuro lighting design of Wilde's novel. Backlighting through a window casts a wan light over Jekyll's bedchamber, putting the bed and his waking figure into shadow. Next, a double-exposure shot creates a giant translucent spider that crawls out from underneath the bed and, as Jekyll holds up his hand in horror and collapses back onto the pillow, crawls over his body and disappears into him. This imagery tacitly links Jekyll's transgressions to those of Dorian. By borrowing Wilde's image of the "black fantastic shapes" and bringing them to life on-screen, *Jekyll and Hyde* covertly adopts the sexual perversity and drug addiction emblemized by Wilde's imagery. Released at a time when American cinema was trying—at least in some quarters—to liberate itself from Victorian values,<sup>42</sup> scenes like this showed that one Victorian at least could be weaponized in the escape. Wilde's scene wasn't only horrific, with Barrymore in bed at its center, it was raunchy too. Not immoral so much as deliciously naughty.

The film's critical acclaim and success at the box office made *Jekyll and Hyde* definitive for the horror genre in Hollywood, including later adaptations of Stevenson's novel in 1931 and 1941.<sup>43</sup> It put the image of the man with a secret to hide into currency on the American screen and precipitated the wave of movies based on the Victorian trope of the double, which dramatized the "immoral" secrets hidden beneath the surface, following the Motion Picture Production Code (1930).<sup>44</sup> In this way, *Dorian Gray*'s appearance in *Jekyll and Hyde* inaugurates an influence that takes us back to Benshoff's observation: the picture of Dorian in Wilde's novel originates the screen trope of the silver-tongued "monster queer" with a secret. Wilde offered a blueprint for the Victorian monsters of 1930s cinema, one that was especially vivid for cosmopolitan audiences familiar with both his writings and his persona. In *Mad Love*

(1935), Peter Lorre, as Dr. Gogol, reaches toward the woman he has stalked, his hands about to grasp her neck, as he tells her, “Each man kills the thing he loves.”<sup>45</sup> Wilde’s on-screen appearances are rarely so explicit, but many charismatic Hollywood monsters carried with them the suggestion—the threat—of Wildean deviancy. Take, for example, Bela Lugosi’s eponymous *Dracula* (1931), Ernest Thesiger’s Dr. Pretorius in James Whale’s *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), and Claude Rains’s John Jasper in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1935), each of whom brought to the screen an insouciant wit, old-world sophistication, and the suggestion that the Victorian era was a declining civilization marked by twisted moral codes. Only, they also exaggerate these characteristics into camp, and horror that becomes camp cannot be taken seriously. This is also part of Wilde’s legacy. As filmmakers such as Whale well knew, camp offers a means of ironizing, and thus containing, the real horror that lurks beneath beautiful surfaces. The irony falls on both American censorship practices and the Victorian source novels. It is a Wildean rewriting of the morally serious Dickens or Mary Shelley with a nod and a wink to those people who identified with the sexual deviant and knew that the source of horror was in fact the exaggerated construction of a Puritan society and its censorship. The audience for this critique of false essentialist morality was both Wilde’s and that of the filmmakers who followed his vision.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This essay has suggested a different trajectory for the story of the Victorians on-screen: one that begins not with Dickens and realism but instead with the cinematic imagination of decadence and evolves through the depiction of sexual deviance in Hollywood’s horror films. The 1920 adaptation of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* is one example of Wilde’s horrific afterlife, exemplary rather than exceptional. Although the camp horror of Whale receded in the late 1930s, the on-screen association between Wilde, queerness, and horror persisted. We see its material traces in the fact that the large mirror used in the 1920 *Jekyll and Hyde* became central to the design of Fredric March’s Oscar-winning *Jekyll/Hyde* transformation in the 1931 adaptation of Stevenson’s novel. In the gaslight melodramas of the early 1940s, Wilde’s ghost helped define an undercurrent of sexual nonconformity that was more restrained than the camp villains of the late 1930s and, as a result, more menacing. The Los Angeles production of *Oscar Wilde* (1940) by

Leslie and Sewell Stokes made Laird Cregar a star overnight and brought Wilde to sell-out audiences, comprising filmmakers and stars, but afterward Cregar was typecast as a sexually twisted, murderous villain in *I Wake Up Screaming* (1941), *The Lodger* (1944), and *Hangover Square* (1945). Like Roscoe Arbuckle and Charles Laughton before him, his imposing physical presence—noted approvingly by reviewers of *Oscar Wilde* for its similarity to Wilde’s—was figured as a dandified, effeminate, and sinister threat on-screen. Meanwhile, the noir horror film *A Double Life* (1947) signals the duplicity of its central protagonist, Anthony John (Ronald Colman), with a poster for Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). By day, John is a devoted husband and famous actor, but at night he is a violent adulterer, sexual predator, and murderer. His is a double life that subverts the fun of *Earnest* into a sexual criminal fantasy. Twenty-two years after his career-defining role as Lord Darlington in Ernst Lubitsch’s *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, Colman would win the Oscar for best actor for his role in *A Double Life*.

The first Hollywood filmmakers who took up Wilde’s influence show a notable absence of the cozy nostalgia that would saturate Wilde and adaptations of his works on-screen in his 1990s renaissance. For the generation of writers and audiences who came of age in America’s period of “new decadence,” the Victorians could be seen through the prism of Wildean wit, certainly, but this quality was often overshadowed by the threat to social structures posed by Wilde’s sexual transgressions. The Wilde of the early twentieth century was dangerous, mischievous, and clandestine. Against pressure to make culturally prestigious movies from movie moguls with an eye on distribution and profitability, his persona subverted the moral seriousness of the Victorians, the prestige costume drama, and the Motion Picture Production Code. Oscar Wilde’s afterlife in the movies thus illustrates a different side to the decadent movement, highlighting its transnational, visually innovative, monstrous character. Re-viewing Wilde’s legacy through the eyes of that first generation of filmmakers, the first generation after Wilde’s death, is a timely reminder of how he not only loomed large over the Victorian period but also defined its future.

#### NOTES

1. For examples of recent works on decadence in the first half of the twentieth century, see Sherry, *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence*,

- Mahoney, *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence*, Hext and Murray, *Decadence in the Age of Modernism*.
2. Sadoff, *Victorian Vogue*, 231–36; Waldrep, “The Uses and Misuses of Oscar Wilde,” 52.
  3. Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism*, 189.
  4. Hecht, *Erik Dorn*, 22.
  5. Hecht, *Erik Dorn*, 21.
  6. Hecht, *A Child of the Century*, 237.
  7. Le Gallienne, “The Coming Back of Oscar Wilde,” 262.
  8. Sherry, *Decadence*, 25–27.
  9. Thompson, *The Big Screen*, 20–21.
  10. Johns, “Birth of a Medium,” 77.
  11. Stewart, “Film’s Victorian Retrofit,” 155.
  12. Weir, *Decadence*, 189.
  13. Extracts of Wilde’s *Salome* were frequently adapted for one-reel pictures during “Salomania” in the U.S. around 1908. See Dierkes-Thrun, *Salome’s Modernity*, 93–94.
  14. “Filming the Oscar Wilde Story,” 66.
  15. Russo, *The Celluloid Closet*, 6–17.
  16. Benshoff, *Monsters in the Closet*, 20.
  17. Sadoff, *Victorian Vogue*, 113.
  18. Symons, “The Decadent Movement in Literature,” 859, 860.
  19. See Foster’s discussion in “Kingdom of Shadows,” 32; Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life,” 10.
  20. Charney and Schwartz, “Introduction,” 6.
  21. Williams, “Walter Pater, Film Theorist,” 136–39; Pater, *The Renaissance*, 89–90.
  22. Pater, *The Renaissance*, 89.
  23. Symons, “At the Alhambra,” 97–98.
  24. Worth, “James, Marsh, Wilde,” 362–63.
  25. Symons, “The Decadent Movement in Literature,” 860.
  26. Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life,” 7.
  27. Villiers de l’Isle Adam, *The Future Eve*, 114.
  28. Machen, “The Inmost Light,” 55.
  29. Thomas, “Poison Books and Moving Pictures,” 38–39.
  30. Worth, “James, Marsh, Wilde,” 368.
  31. Nead, *The Haunted Gallery*, 22.
  32. Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 103. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
  33. Thomas, “Poison Books and Moving Pictures,” 38–39.

34. Navarette, *The Shape of Fear*, 39–45.
35. Wilde, “The Harlot’s House,” line 9.
36. Symons, *London*, 29.
37. Barlow, “The Movies,” 40, 41.
38. Such revisions of Wilde’s works in cinema include the American *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1915) and *Salome* (1918) as well as a British adaptation of *Lady Windermere’s Fan* (1916) that was released in the U.S. in 1919.
39. Gilbert, *Better Left Unsaid*, 2–4.
40. “A Word for Profiteers,” 351.
41. Stevenson, *Strange Case*, 70.
42. Barefoot, *Gaslight Melodrama*, 94–95.
43. The movie broke box-office records when it opened at the Rivoli in March 1920: see *Motion Picture News*, 3.
44. For movies making use of the double, see, for example: *Dracula* (1931), *Svengali* (1931; adapted from George Du Maurier’s novel *Trilby* [1894]), *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1931; 1941), *The Island of Lost Souls* (1932; adapted from H. G. Wells’s *The Island of Doctor Moreau* [1894]), *The Invisible Man* (1933), *Frankenstein* (1931), *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1935).
45. Wilde, “The Ballad of Reading Gaol,” 1, lines 37, 53.

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