Goldsmiths, University of London
Department of English and Creative Writing

Decadence and the Fairy Tale

24 March 2023

Richard Hoggart Building, Room 137

Hosted by the *Decadence Research Centre*, the *Centre for Comparative Literature* at Goldsmiths, and the British Association of Decadence Studies

https://bads.gold.ac.uk/decadentfairytale

#TheDecadentFairyTale

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With thanks from the conference organisers, Eleanor Keane and Jane Desmarais, to the Graduate School for contributing funds for this event, Chartwells for catering on the day, our colleagues in the Centre for Comparative Literature for their partnership and support, and to Juliet Snape for the image of the bejewelled toad

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Programme

9.30 Registration

10.00 Keynote

- Alessandro Cabiati (Ca' Foscari University of Venice and Brown University): 'Marvellous Abnormalities: Fairy Tales, Decadence, and Deviance in the Late Nineteenth Century'

11.00 Coffee

11.30 Oscar Wilde, Olive Custance, and Jessie Marion King

- Megan Williams (University of Surrey): '"An artist Slaying his own Soul': Oscar Wilde, Ethel Carnie Holdsworth and l'aube de siècle radical culture'
- Frankie Dytor (University of Cambridge): 'Olive Custance and Fairy Tale Renaissance'
- Michelle Reynolds (University of Exeter): 'Decadent New Women in Jessie Marion King's Illustrated Edition of Oscar Wilde's *A House of Pomegranates*'

1.00 Lunch

2.00 Decadence, the occult, and folklore

- Damian Walsh (UCL): "Many secrets and many answers: the occult rituals of Wilde's fairy tales'
- James Dowthwaite (University of Jena): '"Nous n'avons pu sortir du château enchanté": The Use of the Barbe-bleu Story in Huysmans and Maeterlinck'
- Naomi Fukuzawa (University of Bologna): 'Lafcadio Hearn's *Kwaidan* as Japanese Decadent Folklore'

3.30 Tea

4.00 Walter Pater, Errol Le Cain, and B. Catling

- Lina Vekeman (Ghent University): 'Decadent myths – decadent illustrations: Walter Pater and Errol Le Cain's *Cupid and Psyche*'
- Victor Rees (UCL): 'An Empire of Trees: B. Catling's *The Vorrh* as 21st-century decadent fairy tale'

5.00 Drinks reception

Biographies & Abstracts

KEYNOTE

Marvellous Abnormalities: Fairy Tales, Decadence, and Deviance in the Late Nineteenth Century

How can the fairy tale, a genre that in the cultural imaginary is typically associated with childhood and wonder, and deviance be mentioned in the same context? With its allegorical significations and marvellous features, the fairy tale is generally believed to inherently exclude representations of 'deviant' behaviours such as mental disorders and sexual perversions. But as late nineteenth-century psychiatry identified and classified numerous forms of psychological abnormality, writers of fairy tales readily incorporated and adapted them into their works. As Foucault argued, in nineteenth-century psychiatry the concept of deviance moved from the general categorisation of madness, of insanity as mental derangement of the beginning of the century to covering the wide array of abnormalities, including sexual deviations, identified by fin-de-siècle psychiatrists. Interested in experimenting aesthetically with both the new discoveries of psychiatry and the freedom allowed by the magical world of fairy tales, in the late nineteenth century authors in France and Britain portrayed the mental and nervous pathologies of modernity, and of the modern individual, within the traditional medium of the fairy tale. This paper will discuss the ways in which late nineteenth-century writers subverted both fairy-tale norms and culturally accepted notions of normality by including contemporary diseases and sexual/gender deviations into their fairy tales, either as a testimony of the intrusion of the 'decadent' present into classic fairy-tale stories and tropes or as an attempt to figurately transcend their literal – and medical – meanings and produce new aesthetic significations. These marvellous abnormalities described by such authors as Mary de Morgan, Oscar Wilde, Catulle Mendès, Jules Ricard, and Marcel Schwob reflect contemporary preoccupations, psychological as well as literary, with deviant (and occasionally gender-specific) behaviours which include displays of depression, monomania, anorexia nervosa, neuralgia-neurosis, and masochism.

Dr Alessandro Cabiati (he/him) is a Marie Sklodowska-Curie Global Fellow at Ca' Foscari University of Venice and Brown University. His interdisciplinary research project *MadLand – Madness in Fairy Land* explores how in nineteenth-century Britain, France, and the United States medical interpretations of psychological abnormality and deviance influenced fairy-tale imagery, and how in turn fairy-tale representations of monstrosity served as a point of reference for the codification of insanity by early psychiatry. Forthcoming publications include an article on nineteenth-century Bluebeard adaptations and the medical discourse on female deviance as well as a special issue on the horror of fairy tales.

PRESENTATIONS

1) **'"An artist Slaying his own Soul': Oscar Wilde, Ethel Carnie Holdsworth and l'aube de siècle radical culture'**

Set free the fairy sounds and words,
And stand apart from battle-cloud,
The clash of swords, the cannon loud-
Let fighters march in brave array,
I will but sing all night and day.[1]

In 'Two Prayers', published in 1909 in *The Woman Worker*, Ethel Carnie Holdsworth expresses the power of 'fairy sounds and words' to escape banal aspects of class warfare. Yet Carnie's articulation of the Aesthete's priority for creating art takes on a markedly different expression within her fairytales. 'The Blind Prince' is set in a feudal fantasy landscape and, while it is full of beautiful descriptions, Carnie makes explicit that which is often left unsaid in other fairytales: workers are called slaves. The social injustices of past European societies are made explicit as an allegory for present conditions.

The story is clearly indebted to Oscar Wilde, using various symbols that appear in 'The Happy Prince' (blindness; birds), but the working classes play a more active role. In both stories, society is beautiful and yet insufferable, and characters navigate this incongruity by forging emotional bonds. In Wilde's story, a sentient statue gradually destroys his body in order to improve the material conditions of people in his city, working with a feeble swallow. In Carnie's story, a young Prince is born blind and befriends a disabled slave, taking over his labour in order to afford him an evening of rest.

In this paper, I explore how both writers express a desire for radical social relations through the eroticism of queer, disabled and working-class labouring bodies. As a working-class writer, Carnie is attentive to the material impact of working every day – accrued tiredness and illness. In an era of eugenics, the utopian idealisation of healthy bodies (as promoted in William Morris's *News from Nowhere* for example) is undermined in Wilde and Carnie's work.

Megan Williams (she/her) is a TECHNE-funded PhD student at the University of Surrey working in English Literature. My project reads late Victorian and early modernist literature in the context of contemporaneous anarchist thought and praxis, showing that anarchism's widespread influence on the production, circulation, and reception of literature at this time created new socio-aesthetic relationships across class, gender, and national **boundaries**.
Megan Williams (University of Surrey)

2) **'Olive Custance and Fairy Tale Renaissance'**

This paper explores the decadent fairy tale in the life and work of the British poet Olive Custance. Over the past decade, Custance's decadent poetry has seen a critical revival thanks to the work of scholars including Sarah Parker and Patricia Pulham. This paper builds on such work to consider the significance, and reinterpretation, of medieval and renaissance fairy tales in writing by, and writing on, Custance. At the same time as key theorists of the renaissance were noting the 'fairytale' aspect of the renaissance, Custance imagined a fairy tale renaissance through

[1] Ethel Carnie Holdsworth, 'Two Prayers', *The Woman Worker* (May 19, 1909) p. 466, ll.11-20.

her performative and creative practices. Dressing up like a renaissance pageboy or imagining herself as a medieval princess, Custance's mobilisations of the fairy tale sheds light on embodied and imaginative historiographies of the renaissance at the turn of the twentieth century.

Frankie (they/them) has just completed an AHRC-funded PhD in the History of Art department at the University of Cambridge. Frankie's work has appeared in the Journal of Victorian Culture and Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies, with work forthcoming in edited volumes on the poet Charlotte Mew and the art writing of Michael Field.

3) 'Decadent New Women in Jessie Marion King's Illustrated Edition of Oscar Wilde's *A House of Pomegranates*'

Oscar Wilde's second collection of fairy tales, *A House of Pomegranates* (1891), continued to explore his aesthetic and socio-political values. Like Wilde, Jessie Marion King (1875-1949) also used the genre of the fairy tale to express her own ideals. As a Glasgow School of Art student and an eminent member of the Glasgow Society of Lady Artists Club, King would have been particularly interested in the opportunities offered by the New Woman. The New Woman was not only an ideology for King but an important icon she would use in her work. As Jude Burkhauser notes, Glaswegian women artists used the New Woman's image to transform 'the prevailing visual iconography [of women] beyond the existing polarities of *femme fatale* or "Pre-Raphaelite virgin"'.[2] This paper will look at King's depiction of female figures in her 1915 illustrated edition of *A House of Pomegranates*. I argue that King infused her own ideals into Wilde's work through her illustrations. Heavily inspired by Aubrey Beardsley and Frances and Margaret Macdonald, King used these decadent influences to create her own image of decadent women that subverted how female figures were traditionally portrayed in children's illustration. King's decadent women are thin and elongated, likely inspired by Beardsley's New Women in *The Yellow Book* (1894-97). The Macdonald sisters, fellow Glasgow School of Art students and another influence of King's, filled their work with spooky female figures that the press deemed as visual representations of the New Woman. Although King's decadent women in *A House of Pomegranates* are not an iconographic representation of the New Woman, her imagery ultimately works to disrupt Victorian notions of womanhood while reflecting the decadent fairy tale's power to challenge the conventional roles of women.

Michelle Reynolds (she/her) is a PhD student in Art History and Visual Culture and English at the University of Exeter. Her thesis is on women illustrators at the British *fin de siècle* and their relationship to the New Woman. More broadly, her research interests include art and literature of the long nineteenth century. She was awarded the 2023 Amy P. Goldman Fellowship in Pre-Raphaelite Studies.

4) "Many secrets and many answers: the occult rituals of Wilde's fairy tales'

'I like to fancy that there may be many meanings in the tale, for in writing it I did not start with an idea and clothe it in form, but began with a form and strove to make it beautiful enough to have many secrets and many answers'. Wilde's remark to an admirer of 'The Nightingale and the Rose' (1888) disavows didacticism in favour of a slipperier and more seductive model for fairy tales: the manifold 'secret'. This paper takes Wilde's suggestion as impetus for examining the 'secret' as an

[2] Jude Burkhauser, "The 'New Woman' in Glasgow," in *Glasgow Girls: Women in Art and Design 1880-1920*, ed. Jude Burkhauser (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1990), 45.

occluded literary form in its own right, submerged within Wilde's fairy tales as an alternative to the neatly extractable 'moral' conventionally associated with the genre. Where Wilde's fascination with the secretive has generally been read solely as a code for queer desire or as a mark of elitism, this paper brings Wilde's fairy tales into dialogue with an underexplored aspect of his biography: his occult interests. Reading Wilde's fairy tales against his engagement with esoteric ritual and secret societies across his career – from Theosophy to chiromancy, Freemasonry and Hermeticism – I suggest that Wilde's fairy tales display a ritual poetics which distorts the fairy tale's traditional function as a site of readerly transformation, pushing this into occult territory. After examining the recurrent secrets of 'The Fisherman and his Soul' (1888), I consider Wilde's *Poems in Prose* (1894) as later extensions of Wilde's aesthetic of secrecy, offering a close reading of 'The House of Judgment' and 'The Teacher of Wisdom'. I close by surveying Wilde's own spiritual reading habits (which blended pious spiritual exercise with subversive bibliomancy) to argue that Wilde's fairy tales experiment with a participatory ritual mode: an 'open' secret and a flexible ritual, in which readers bring to the text their own secrets and receive potentially multiform answers.

Damian Walsh (he/him) is a LAHP-funded PhD candidate in English at University College London. His doctoral thesis, entitled 'Ritual Forms: Wilde, Yeats, Hearn', examines the influence of global spiritual traditions on literary form in the work of Oscar Wilde, W. B. Yeats and Lafcadio Hearn. He is currently preparing to launch *decomposition*, a journal of decadent/ecological poetry and visual art.

5) '"Nous n'avons pu sortir du château enchanté": The Use of the Barbe-bleu Story in Huysmans and Maeterlinck'

Two writers who well symbolise that apparent shift from decadence to symbolism towards the *Fin de siècle* are Joris-Karl Huysmans and Maurice Maeterlinck. This is perhaps evident in the fact that both are central in Arthur Symons's 'The Decadent Movement in Literature' (1893) and in his *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899). There are many ways, however, in which this shift is more apparent than actual. I wish to argue, using the example of a particular fairy tale, that this narrative obscures the aesthetic and emotional continuity in their careers.

Both Huysmans and Maeterlinck make use of Charles Perrault's 1697 version of the *Barbe-bleu* (*Bluebeard*) fairy tale. In Huysmans's *La-Bas*, his first work after *A Rebours*, *Bluebeard* is central to the story. The protagonist, Durtal, is a historian working on a biography of Gilles de Rais, the 15th century child murderer considered one of the sources for the story. Huysmans's use of the story is historicist and realist, but it leads him towards a vision of spiritual reality and satanic corruption. Symons himself recognised that 'the fantastic unreality, the exquisite artificiality of *A Rebours,* the breviary of the decadence, is the first sign of that possible escape which Huysmans has always foreseen in the direction of art', and it finds its significance in this novel. Maeterlinck, by contrast, threads the story throughout his oeuvre, and his use is more mystical, more symbolic, and vaguer than Huysmans's. The names of Bluebeard's wives echo in his titles and his central characters in *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1893), *Alladine et Palomides* (1894), *La mort de Tintagiles* (1894), *Aglavaine et Sélysette* (1896), and, of course, *Ariane et le Barbe-bleue* (1907). My argument, via Symons, is that Huysmans and Maeterlinck use the fairy tale to demonstrate their vision of the brutal, horrific realities of spiritual existence.

James Dowthwaite (he/him) teaches English literature at the University of Jena, having moved to Germany on completion of his DPhil at Queen's College, Oxford. He is currently working on a second book project on the concept of fate in aesthetic, decadent, and symbolist writing. His first book, *Ezra Pound and 20th Century Theories of Language* was published with Routledge in 2019, and won the Ezra Pound Society Book Award. He has also published on the relation between

modernist poetry and anthropology, the idea of persona, Schopenhauer, and poetry and populism. He is also an associate editor at the *New American Studies Journal: A Forum*

6) 'Lafcadio Hearn's *Kwaidan* as Japanese Decadent Folklore'

The Greco-Irish born writer Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904), initially an established journalist and translator in America, wrote Decadent Gothic Japanist works that can be classified as ghost stories or partly as fairy tales. These were published mostly in *Kwaidan* (1904) and tell about medieval East Asian supernatural beliefs, legends or myths, from different local municipalities in Japan, gathered in the turn-of-the-centuries. Transporting the changes Japan underwent in late nineteenth century, the essayistic writer called Koizumi Yakumo in Japanese collected Japanese tales from different provinces with the help of his wife Setsu Koizumi, to be published first in magazine-series in the U.S.A. Reaching back to the middle ages, *Kwaidan* figures as a collection of Gothic folklore that embodies the new national identity of modernizing Japan. Categorized as decadent and cosmopolitan by Stefano Evangelista (2021/22), Hearn's position echoes the arising Japanese nationalism of his days, up to the Sino-Japanese and the Russo-Japanese Wars. The victories in these wars established Japan as an imperialist modern Asian power of its own, with a rich cultural treasure also on the level of literature and folklore that can be an equal to the West. Hearn has been compared to the fairy tale-authors the Grimm Brothers of Hans Christian Andersen by the literary critic Malcolm Cowley, with the sole difference that he wrote in English about Japan – the linguistic-literary nationalism the Grimm achieved in pre-unified Germany and Andersen in Denmark was, in the case of Meiji Japan (1868-1912) accomplished in the language of the initial colonial threat. This illustrates a split essence to Japanese modernity in the age of Decadence, what might be called another form of hybridity than the one detected by Homi Bhabha for India. This potentially eclectic East Asian hybridity is also reflected in literature. Hearn's tales like 'Hoichi the Earless' (reaching back to the medieval Heike monogatari), 'Rokurokubi' or 'Snow Woman' (analysed as East-Western with French influence) about flying goblins or women who kill men with their icy breath and transform into animals, have been turned into the *Kwaidan*-film by Kobayashi Masaki in 1964. The Orientalist potential in modernizing Japan, also illustrated in Hearn's *Kwaidan*, also brings to light the comparison with Antoine Galland's French-Arabic legends *Thousand and One Night* from the eighteenth-century. This analogy shows the postcolonial potential in the mixture of authored invention and folkloric collector within the comparison of modernist fairy and ghost tales from Japan around 1900. The scary beauty of these legends and myths transport ancient and medieval beliefs in animistic reincarnations among human beings and the faith in the presence of ancestry in forms of Shinto Buddhist ghosts in a unique way that deserves world literary status.

Dr Naomi Charlotte Fukuzawa (she/her) works as postdoctoral fellow in nineteenth century modern Japanese literature at the University of Bologna in Italy. She completed her PhD in Comparative literature at UCL University College London in association to Japanese Studies SOAS. She studied at Freie Universität Berlin and briefly at Sciences Po Paris.

7) 'Decadent myths – decadent illustrations: Walter Pater and Errol Le Cain's *Cupid and Psyche*

Errol Le Cain (1941-1989) was a British animator and children's book illustrator who provided numerous illustrations for well-known fairy tales (*Eve*, 1999). Although his work is situated in the 20th century, a clear decadent influence in his artwork is noticeable. This influence is especially present in his illustrations for British author Walter Pater's (1839-1894) *Cupid and Psyche*. Pater was

not a decadent writer *pur sang*, but his work did influence the aesthetic and decadent movement and reflects decadent ideas. Likewise, *Cupid and Psyche* (originally from Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*) is not a prototypical fairy tale, but can be seen as a predecessor to the fairy tale genre. Le Cain's artwork for *Cupid and Psyche* not only takes inspiration from illustrations by Aubrey Beardsley and Harry Clarke, but also exhibits an Indonesian influence of *wayang kulit* (shadow puppetry), offering a broadened interpretation of the decadent style.

The combination of the myth as told by Pater with Le Cain's decadent-like drawings from the 1970's makes for an intriguing case-study surrounding fairy tales and decadent illustrations. My aim is to shed light on how Pater's writing and Le Cain's illustrations reciprocally 'lend each other new forces' (Pater, 1873) by calling upon Pater's concept of *Anders-streben*. *Anders-streben* refers to the possibility of artworks transgressing the boundaries of their own medium into another art form. The role of these decadent-style illustrations in Pater's *Cupid and Psyche* has not yet been investigated. This research will not only illuminate the relation of these decadent illustrations to Pater's text, but will aid us in our interpretation of *Anders-streben*. In addition, a discussion of Pater and Le Cain's *Cupid and Psyche*, will provide insight into how the decadent style can be reinterpreted in 20th century illustrations of a 'fairy tale'.

Lina Vekeman (she/her) obtained master's degrees in Art History and Literature. In 2021 she started her PhD research under the supervision of Prof. Bart Vandenabeele and Prof. Brecht de Groote at the Philosophy Department of Ghent University. Her research focuses on the work of the 19th century British writer Walter Pater in general and his concept of *Anders-streben* in particular.

8) 'An Empire of Trees: B. Catling's *The Vorrh* as 21st-century fairy tale'

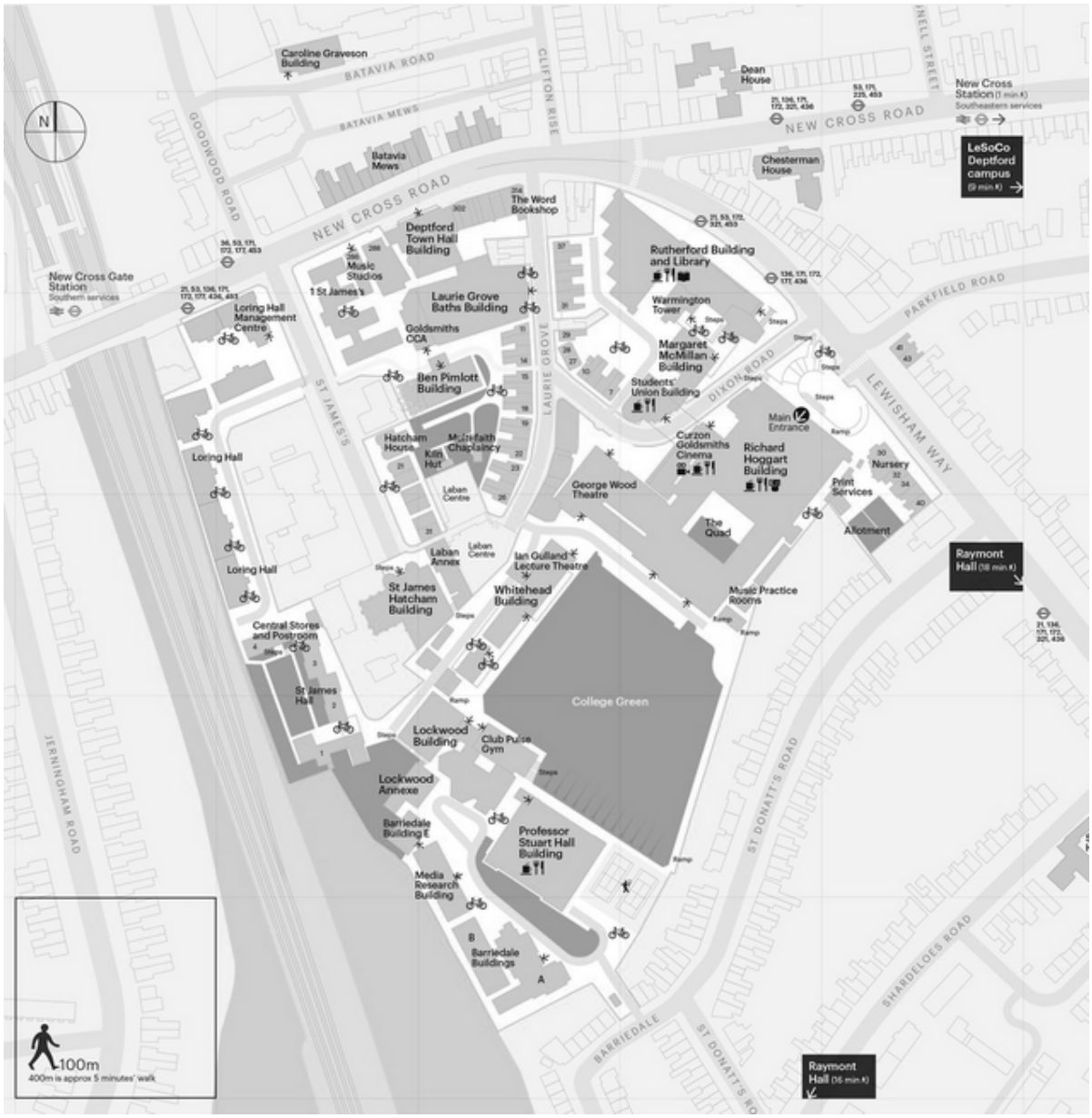
The intention of this paper is to look beyond the critical context which most commonly roots the decadent fairy tale (DFT) to fin de siècle France (Schultz and Seifert, 2016), and to suggest that treating the DFT as an elastic mode which survives into the 21st century might grant us renewed insight into the tensions between two seemingly paradoxical literary forms – namely, the fairy tale and the decadent text.

I will begin by explaining my reasoning for selecting B. Catling's fantasy novel *The Vorrh* (2012) as an example of a recent incarnation of the DFT. I will thereafter use *The Vorrh* as a case study from which to interrogate three of the DFT's key thematic elements:

1) The aestheticization of nature, whereby the natural world emerges as an "exotic" paradise in which the magical/artificial can flourish (Stableford, 1990).
2) The end (and beginning) of empires. Decadent literature's obsession with the fall of Rome goes against the typical fairy tale resolution in which monarchy is upheld through the propagation of royal dynasties. I will question how this relates to the conclusion of Catling's novel, which suggests that humankind's primacy on earth will eventually be replaced by the dominance of trees. The ecological focus of this discussion will lead to my final point:
3) Morality vs amorality. To what extent can we judge the apparent distinction between decadent pessimism and fairy tale wish fulfilment to be relevant or accurate in the 21st century – and might the blurring of these views suggest that Catling's apocalyptic finale presents a form of non-anthropocentric optimism?

Victor Rees (he/him) is a first year PhD student at UCL, researching the novels and performance art of Brian Catling. His other interests include nineteenth and early twentieth century Decadence, fairy art and literature, transdisciplinarity, the process of cinematic adaptation and the treatment of environment on film. Some of his work can be found at victorrees.com

Goldsmiths Campus Map



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