

# DECADENCE

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Postmodern art forms have a habit of using self-reference to hark on the past. This is done to elicit a whole slew of anomalies including but not limited to: contradiction, disjunction, paradox and—the 21st century’s top pick—juxtaposition. The ontological formula of such dualistic playtime is as follows: *this is simultaneously what is and what was*.

This postmodern phenomena is of course a throwback to what Jacques Derrida coined as *différance*; the inadvertent seesawing of form and content which together produce a meaning. *Différance* as an artistic injunction was typified through 20th century modernism by the likes of pre-60s assemblage (Duchamp, Rauschenberg, Tatlin) and Lettrist films (Debord, Isou, Wolman). The aforementioned genealogy is known and internet-verified, but how *différance* transmogrified through the hoops of modernity remains unclear. One possible riposte is by way of *decadence*.

*Decadence* is the postmodern antidote to *différance*, whereby creative production follows a laborious process of mimicking past decades’ memorable output in an effort to resurrect newness. It produces an effect of nostalgic urgency; *this is simultaneously what is and what was*. Some stand by the twenty-year-rule (abstract expressionism -> neoexpressionism, 90s grunge -> 10s neogrunge, 80s hip hop -> 00’s post-trip hop), although others would argue that more recent wistful instances of *decadence* occur in whatever intervals they please (the Beach Boys -> chillwave, 90s emo -> 00s screamo). In any case, let’s unwrap *decadence* and see what’s inside.

First, there is a tag label that reads: *DECADENCE*. Like *différance*, *decadence* entails a linguistic doubling, denoting timely indulgence. To learn what exactly quenches us about this scheduled reminiscence, seasonable resurgence and opportune sentimentality, let’s open the box. The wrapping is haunting; a trowser-like fabric with messily flapped side folds that evokes the bell-bottoms worn by 19th century sailors, 70s hippies and 90s retroists. After throwing the wrapping to the side in haste, the sensible unwrapper detects how remarkably perennial the cardboard box is, as if Warhol himself taped it shut. Then, after tearing off the packing tape and opening the box with indelible anticipation, we see: a USB thumb drive. The storage capacity is unspecified, and the small italicized text on the rugged plastic surface again reads: *DECADENCE*. Upon plugging the drive into a newish computer though, its file contents appear to be corrupted and unviewable.

Unfortunately *decadence* can’t be looked at as a thing. Although it boasts relative singularity, *decadence* would be better understood as an intermittent rematerialization of cultural surplus, similar to the innovative redundancy of capitalism’s productive forces. What makes *decadence* so Byzantine is its infallible ability to project reified newness on all that it resuscitates; not the museum itself but the act of walking from one exhibit to the next in retrospective awe. Beyond the stylistic effects of this pseudo-ephemeral program, *decadence* has the mannerisms of a tyrant. Just as it keeps alive a culture of novice etymologists striving for celebrity in the obscurely familiar, *decadence* holds up political autocracy with evocative sovereignty. Through song, *decadence* depraves the utility of the catchy “hook” in its propensity for maudlin referentialism. Commodity as communion; avant-cool as first philosophy.

Rewind: any good constructivist would tell you that to be a true Soviet you must have the mind of both a Soviet and an anti-Soviet; that this self-aware doubling is nothing less than the hammer of class consciousness swung against free market prissiness. Two things happening at once, a metaphysical insurrection to precipitate into *something else* and move forward. *Decadence* however misinterprets this rule of thumb by advocating for calculated temporal integration so as to create not something else but something *new*, pointing to a priority of distinction; a suboptimal yet utopian position to hold for interdisciplinary artists, indie bands and laypeople alike. After all, *decadence* as a postmodern anti-happening relies very literally on its being after-the-fact. Authenticity is carefully folded into a paper airplane so as to slice through the stale generic air and arrive at a particularly fresh jumble of signifiers. Rodchenko would likely slash hedonism with a sickle if given the chance, if for no other reason than to show that—in agreement with Nietzsche—*decadence* is for narcissist ninnies.

So what? What’s wrong with tossing the bathwater and keeping the baby? Need we throw out all our precious polaroids and mixtape CD-Rs? If postmodernism can stand with relative ease under the umbrella of luxury and excess while the nostalgia pours down with intermittent bursts of thunderous irony and lightning-fast style-scrounging, it might behoove of the artsy masses to reimagine cultural production by running a quick spellcheck on aesthetic concerns. Treat the decade like a bale of hay and sweat blood for the harvest, not the perfectly imperfect straw mound. Do the time warp again, but only if you know the dance.

Even still, *decadence* will catch you in your creative tracks. Revolution? Cool. Subversion? Neat. Full communism? Super. You’ll notice that these savvy modifiers are precisely used to mediate the thing itself—for this is the unfinished project of modernism. Swell. Perhaps a way out of this past tense fixation is to invalidate the decade in *decadence*, to sap it of all its frequency and dissoluteness. Then we’re just left with *ence*; pure action. Notwithstanding modernity, let’s abolish *decadence* through hyperinclusivity and we’ll arrive at a movement not of *decadence* but of *deviance*; posteverything. No remorse necessary; modernity as such hasn’t thrown a brick since 1789, and bloggers can reach deep to bear non-decadecentric opinions without much toil. Let’s get to a situation where the twenty-year-rule breeds praxis from mythology, not Creed from Nirvana. Let’s remake the situation excellent, sans par excellence.