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Jennifer Forrest, *Decadent Aesthetics and the Acrobat in Fin-de-Siècle France*. New York: Routledge, 2020. 216 pp. Figures, notes, and index. \$160.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780367358143; \$48.95 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9780429341960.

Review by Charles Rearick, University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

Jennifer Forrest takes us back to a time when many of the artistic avant-garde in Paris frequented the circus and saw acrobatic performances. Her argument in this new book is that innovative writers and artists found much more than images and themes in those popular entertainments. They also found inspiration and models for a new aesthetics, which emerged full-blown in works of the fin-de-siècle movement known as Decadent.

First of all, I must say that anyone interested in the subject should not take the title as an accurate guide to this book. The word “acrobat” likely brings to mind a tumbler, tight-rope walker, or trapeze artist, but in Forrest’s account it includes others: the sad clown, the mime, the stock character Pierrot, and the circus bareback rider. The words *saltimbanque* and *funambule* (as defined by the author) would cover more of the cast of performers than “acrobat,” though neither French term is quite right for all of them or best for a book in English.

The author begins with the year 1857 and a wave of notable works featuring clowns and *funambules*—works by Théodore de Banville, Honoré Daumier, Charles Baudelaire, Thomas Couture, and Jean-Léon Gérôme. Two paintings featuring Pierrot serve to contrast a conventional narrative treatment (Gérôme’s) with a novel rendering (Couture’s). (Never mind that the Pierrot in these paintings was neither an acrobat nor a mime, but rather an upper-class Parisian dressed as the *commedia dell’arte* figure for a costume ball, followed by a duel.) Through the rest of the century, the stock figure Pierrot appeared commonly in pantomimes and circus acts. In those works of 1857, Forrest finds antecedents of the fin-de-siècle Decadent aesthetics (chapters one and two). Pathbreaking writers and artists, she argues, liked what they saw in circus performances: acrobats and clowns playing out suspenseful human comedies unbound by social-cultural norms and expectations. Fascinated by acrobatic license, tradition-breaching aesthetes sought to create similar effects in their creations.

The next two chapters put the spotlight on the most influential clown acrobats in fin-de-siècle Paris: the Hanlon-Lees, stars at the Folies-Bergère in the 1878-1879 season. They delighted their audiences with madcap knockabout routines in which they played unpredictable Pierrots, drunks, and antisocial comics. Their mind-bending bit with a mirror became a favorite of Decadent writers, who concocted many a tale around a mirror that showed not just one’s image, but a

double of oneself with an independent reality. Forrest traces the cultural impact of the Hanlon-Lees through a string of works, such as Catulle Mendès's *La Vie et la mort d'un clown*, Edmond de Goncourt's *Les Frères Zemganno*, Rachilde's "L'Araignée de cristal," Huysmans's *Croquis parisiens*, and Degas's painting "Miss Lala au Cirque Fernando," among others.

A chapter on "the lady acrobat" highlights the gender ambiguities of the attractive woman exhibiting unusual strength and daring on a trapeze. Those ambiguities and the woman's silence aroused "existential confusion" (p. 130) in male spectators, the author maintains, citing a few accounts written by men (saying nothing about women's reactions). The best part of this chapter is the explication of Jules Chéret's posters that make vivacious women performers appear to be jumping onto the scene. Forrest traces that distinctive technique to the Decadents' way of depicting protagonists emerging from a void outside the familiar world. Of course, when Chéret used that aesthetic device, he unmoored it from the Decadent sensibility.

The book devotes the most space (chapters six and seven) to a couple of fin-de-siècle writers whom Forrest ranks among the most accomplished practitioners of Decadent aesthetics. The first, Jules Laforgue, identifying with Pierrot and clowns generically, reveled in parodying social and literary traditions. His pantomime *Pierrot Fumiste*, he acknowledged, was so laden with esoteric intertextual allusions that it was "unplayable" (p. 158); it was published only after his death. His *Moralités légendaires*, which Forrest deems the "masterpiece" of Decadent aesthetics (p. 155), spun wild fantasies around well-known characters drawn from history and legend. Hamlet was recast as a Decadent clownish Pierrot, and Salomé as a nonsense-declaming tightrope walker, who falls while tossing John the Baptist's head into the sea.

The last chapter takes us through short stories and novels of Octave Mirbeau, who used Decadent aesthetics to convey his outrage at the hypocrisy and corruption of government, church, and social elites. Mirbeau, the author concludes, "stands out...in his sensitive understanding and manipulation of the poetics of circus performance" (pp. 196-197).

Above all this book succeeds in showing the prominence and importance of clowns and acrobats in French literature and art during the second half of the nineteenth century. Its seven chapters treat dozens of works in different genres—chronicles, pantomimes, short stories, and novels, as well as some posters and paintings. The author as literary critic walks us through one narrative or pantomime after another, explicating the aesthetic methods of Decadent writers. Forrest's analysis is illuminating. Unfortunately, however, after a while the text seems labored and prolix—as she discourses on the featured aesthetics in a daunting number of works.

In Forrest's account, the famous Decadent taste for the perverse, malevolent, and artificial are relegated to the background. For her the key elements of Decadent aesthetics are the *funambulesque* leaps out of the familiar world into the realm of the impossible and unnatural. Circus performances revealed a magical alternative to common experience, beliefs, and behaviors. In the carnivalesque space of the ring, clowns playfully called into question the established social-cultural codes, and they modeled derision toward authority. Evoking vertigo and suspense in the face of an abyss, acrobats soared beyond the time-and-space constraints of ordinary life.

Taking cues from those entertainers, writers explored story-telling that defied traditions and readers' expectations. They created fantastic tales with contradictory or doubled characters and clownish attitudes subverting the established order. They produced non-linear narratives

studded with verbal acrobatics, including the free play of incongruities, contradictions, and ambiguity. They went for disorienting effects, even “confusion” (p. 62)—an absence of a clear stable sense of space and time, identity, gender, and meaning. In Forrest’s view, the *funambules* liberated imaginations, and their every breach of tradition was a liberating move toward a remarkable new achievement.

This book, part of a series, Routledge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature, is clearly aimed at literary specialists. It might make historians who read fiction and poetry more conscious of “desemantization” in its various forms, “semantic indeterminateness” (p. 200), and signifiers splitting from their common-law signifieds. The author moves briskly through plot summaries and her literary criticism without commentary on contexts. For a wider readership, an overview of the Decadent movement would have helped. So would an effort to situate the Decadents in the rich cultural history of fin-de-siècle France.[1] That fuller context might even include non-circus spectacles with Decadent-like aesthetics, such as early comic strips, theatrical and music-hall *féeries*, and magic shows like those of Georges Méliès (as well as his early trick-photography movies).

The tight focus on Decadent inventiveness gives the impression that a rock-solid barrier of convention blocked everything new up to the year of the breakthrough, 1857. That emphasis on the “prison house of aesthetic convention” (p. 7) slights the tradition-breaking work of the Romantics above all. Their exploration of dreams, nightmares, and time travel surely bears comparison with the fantasy works of the fin-de-siècle. The Decadents’ relationships to other artistic movements also call for clarification. Realism and naturalism are only mentioned as approaches that the Decadents reacted against. Symbolism is not mentioned.

The more encompassing movement known as modernism would be particularly pertinent for more discussion. In the brief epilogue, only a few lines point to the Decadents’ obvious successor, the Surrealists.[2] Popular-culture successors of the Decadents would include creators of some animated cartoons (think *Tom and Jerry*) and the Marx Brothers in movies such as *Duck Soup* (Forrest’s best example).

For cultural historians, the question of audience reception is of particular interest. This book does offer some good evidence—notably, on the popularity of Pierrot and the Hanlon-Lees. When evidence is scant or absent, the author draws on semiotic theories of the circus to describe spectator responses (more confidently than a historian would). But for the Decadent writings, the question of reception goes largely unanswered. Which works were widely read and which ones reached only a small circle of literati? The popular is simply not the author’s concern. Her criteria are literary ones: avant-garde techniques and forms.

In sum, this erudite study engages with a large corpus of nineteenth-century literature, art history, and twentieth-century semiotics. It is a particularly useful guide to lesser-known fiction and poetry featuring clowns and *funambules*. It convincingly presents new case studies of popular culture as a source for avant-gardes.[3] All in all, the author gives us plenty of reason to appreciate the offbeat creativity of the circus-loving aesthetes. She is so persuasive on that score that readers will probably come away wishing that this study were written in something like the playful, liberated, norm-defying style analyzed at length. Perhaps the conventions of an academic discipline are a form of the aforementioned “prison house”?

## NOTES

[1] To cite only a few of the many pertinent studies: Koenraad Swart, *The Sense of Decadence in Nineteenth-Century France* (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1964); Eugen Weber, *France: Fin de Siècle*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986); Debora L. Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1992); Patricia Tilburg, "The Triumph of the Flesh: Women, Physical Culture, and the Nude in the French Music-Hall, 1904-1914," *Radical History Review*, 98 (2007): 63-80.

[2] For a succinct overview, see Robin Walz, *Modernism* (New York: Routledge, revised ed., 2013).

[3] Again, here is merely a sampling of the many relevant studies published since Roger Shattuck's *Banquet Years* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1958); Jerrold Seigel, *Bohemian Paris: Culture, Politics, and the Boundaries of Bourgeois Life, 1830-1930* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986); Mary Gluck, *Popular Bohemia: Modernism and Urban Culture in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005); Jeffrey Weiss, *The Popular Culture of Modern Art: Picasso, Duchamp, and Avant-Gardism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Nancy L. Perloff, *Art and the Everyday: Popular Entertainment and the Circle of Erik Satie* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Vanessa Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in fin-de-siècle Paris* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1998); Aimée Boutin, *City of Noise: Sound and Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 2015).

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