

## Workshop 4

### The Anthropology of Decadence and the Abject

Convenor:

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It is striking that the fantas(ma)tic and real voyage into the realm of decadence and darkness, the underworld or hell, which for ages has played such an important role in (Western) literature and popular culture, became a source of inspiration as well as a field of investigation for anthropologists only in recent years. One wonders why they forgot for such a long time Frazer's observation with regard to 'the permanent existence of...a solid layer of savagery beneath the surface of society' and our moving 'on a thin crust which may at any moment be rent by subterranean forces slumbering below.' It is time for a change if we want to gain a deeper insight in, on the one hand, the contemporary quest for the sublime (in the sense of 'delightful horror' as it crops up, for instance, in the consumption of neo-mythological movies replete with sex and violence and in the popularity of extreme forms of recreation) and, on the other, in more concrete manifestations of the decadent and the abject in a plethora of contexts such as (civil) wars. This workshop will focus on the occurrence and meaning of different forms of real and imagined decadence and darkness, especially in the allegedly civilised Western world.

#### **'Arc de Triomphe': ein Mann spritzt in seinen Mund (ab). On Savage Sculpture – or the Savagery of Censorship**

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The opening of the Salzburg Summer Festival 2003 was overshadowed by yet another "art scandal", echoed loudly by the Austrian and German press. Agnes Husslein, the head of the Rupertinum, the Salzburg Museum of Modern Art, invited the group "Gelatin", four Austrian artists, to create a work for public space. The result was a sculpture of a nude man with an erect penis made out of scrap and plasticin. He bows backwards and thereby forms an arc under which people can pass by. Liquid gushes from his genitals straight into his mouth. The piece was placed at the Max-Reinhardt-square close to the Grosses Festspielhaus (Grand Festival Hall), where all major opera performances of the festival are staged. Although the head of the museum kept demanding freedom for the arts, the local politicians had the "obscene object" first hidden behind wooden walls and finally removed. The city mayor of Salzburg argued that it certainly is not Agnes Husslein's duty as a curator to exhibit her

personal fantasies. I shall discuss why local politicians thought they were acting in correspondence to the public opinion when they declared Gelatin's work as abject. Further I shall ponder the question if it is not to be considered more barbaric to destroy and remove an allegedly artistic creation than to exhibit a pissing or ejaculating figure.

### **Murmur beneath the Surface: The Noise of Art**

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What is abject or decadent in music? Trying to answer this question one risks getting into some rather strange paradoxes. Music in "itself" has throughout western culture often been interpreted as being an irrational endeavour; the "other" of reason. However, there has still been some kind of theory about the "good" music, the music that could still in a sense "serve" reason and/or rationality. But some music is more dangerous than others. And here the notion of decadence comes in as well. Decadent music seems to be the music not being in accordance with some kind of rules. However, this decadent or, perhaps, abject music thus might move into two different extremes: either toward noise (often with less clear-cut definitions of what "noise" signifies) or towards too much beauty (a kind of sleazy music, where the "sweetness" or beautification of this music tends towards the abject). Thus, some kind of paradox: too "ugly" music noise; and too "beautiful" music, both ends up as being decadent and abject. This "music", it seems, is either too hard or too soft on the ears: either too painful or too much beauty. Discussing such a notion, the paper will investigate different musical strategies for such "other" music and the different meanings attached to it.

### **Trapdoors of the Fin-de Siècle**

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Some two decades ago, Darnton (1982) strongly emphasised the strategic political importance of information circuits embedded in the popular culture of France's Ancien Régime. Rather than concentrating on the age's great philosophers, this historian asked our attention for the underground culture of hacks, scribblers and politicians. In a recent publication Darnton nuances his position considerably by indicating the manifold interactions between the spheres of elite and popular culture. According to the author, the information circuits emanating from these spheres became increasingly entangled as the 18th century progressed. This paper argues that prominent intellectuals of every age are beholden to the emotional climate of their times. To demonstrate such vulnerability, the paper discusses Proust and Freud as writers who inserted dime novels into the larger structures of their oeuvres. Trapdoors such as these connect the lofty structures

of their great intellectual accomplishments with the collective fantasies of their time.

### **Taking the Great Leap Downwards: Gamblers from Dostoyevsky to Reisz**

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The paper I am proposing will deal with the notion of decadence in Dostoyevsky's novella *The Gambler* as well as in Reisz's 1974 film by the same name. Both present the story of a compulsive gambler on a steady path of self-destruction motivated—as it might once have been surmised—by a 'savage' need to indulge in the decadent expenditure of self. In both narratives, the indulgence of the gambler's need results in abjection through the loss of both economic and agential fortunes. But while Dostoyevsky's and Reisz's gamblers play with the decadent, premodern modality of economic exchange that is gambling, the "thin crust which threatens to be rent by subterranean forces slumbering" just beyond the regulatory force of their super-ego is composed of significantly different strata (Frazer). While in the first case we are dealing with 19th-century casino culture and the spheres of leisure and work that were becoming evermore distinct, in the second case one is dealing with an early postmodern narrative. Given this, I read the filmic version of the story as a particular kind of quest for the sublime and therefore one that hits the viewer with the gut-wrenching, sensuousness of the blockbuster roller-coaster ride so familiar in contemporary culture.

### **Art and Pornography in Taiwan**

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This paper deals with nation building and pornographic iconography in Taiwan. This paper builds off an earlier paper on the Taiwanese artist Chen Dje Ren, an artist who uses computer altered photography to present the historical dilemma of Taiwan as the site of psychological trauma. Engaging a Batailleian aesthetic Chen Dje Ren shocks the viewer with images of Chinese torture, massacre and surrealistic horror. This paper adds the work of Yang Mao Lin and Wong Chi-Feng to further explore Taiwanese artists' response to Taiwan's place in history and on the contemporary world stage. Yang Mao Lin, the oldest of the three artists, presents canvases which parody Taiwan's most immediate cultural influences, the American and the Japanese. Depicting Pikachu dolls, Japanese cartoon superheroes, the American Superman, and airbrushed Japanese schoolgirl porn, Yang Mao Lin seems to gloss over the possibility of an emergent Taiwanese nationalism; Taiwan acting as the melancholy consumer and producer of other's images. The final artist, Wong Chi-Feng, takes the fetishised product of Yang Mao Lin and makes

it abject. A Barbie doll raped and murdered in a doll house, a doll engaged in sexual activities with a Ken doll, a sculpture of an octopus with prosthetic penile tentacles and a human skull for a head, Japanese school girls locked in its embrace, these and other images of pornography, voyeurism and sadism challenge the influence of dominant subcultures in Taiwan, questioning the underlying ideology of imported culture in general. This paper will examine these three artists in an attempt to question Taiwan's vulnerability to foreign subcultures even as it attempts to forge a national culture of its own.

### **Shit in the Arts of the 'Wild West.' Just a Matter of Decadence? Or What Shit Art Might (Also or Really) Mean**

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The representation of urinating and defecating people by artists is a rather old phenomenon, for they pop up in the work of such famous painters and etchers as, for instance, Rembrandt and Hans Baldung Grien. For the twentieth century the same can be observed, however with this remarkable difference with past ages, that the number of artists (playwrights, painters and performance artists to mention only a few) working with shit (as well as with bodily fluids and matter) enormously increased. Especially in the second half of this century it became very popular to use shit in plays, paintings and performances. The Belgian artist Wim Delvoye even built Cloaca, a machine producing shit that is shown now at exhibitions in museums. This paper deals with the question, whether the artworks of so-called shit artists working in the West generally speaking are just a kind of wild manifestations of decadence and the abject, as so many people claim, or that they are meant to bring across a particular message with regard to the society and culture in which they are produced. On the basis of the work of the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk and others the hypothesis will be launched that one cannot understand this remarkable blossoming of shit in the arts without taking into consideration the fact that we are living in an era of neo-capitalism, which implies a horrific transformation of consumption goods bought with the help of money (this eternal companion of shit) into all kinds of waste and ordure.