*Adam Alston*

**Staging Decadence: Theatre, Performance, and the Ends of Capitalism.**

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In Adam Alston’s deeply researched book, decadence is framed as the cultivation of bad tastes, which acts as a method for critiquing conservative delimitations of pleasure. Arguing that the political significance of decadence lies in concepts of uselessness, transgression, waste, and outmoded practices and ideas, Alston makes a compelling case for reading decadence in performance as a radically expansive and unwieldy futurity encoded in theatrical materialism. Investigating the political valency of decadence from a theatrical perspective marks an important departure from the concept’s association with the aestheticism of late nineteenth- century literature. The ‘ends’ of capitalism refer to the activities and values of ‘productivism’: the relentless drive for efficiency and innovation and the remote control of labour through the erosion of leisure time engendered by mobile technologies.

Case studies of decadent artworks from the UK, Japan, the Netherlands, Spain, and the USA pivot around this concept of (anti-)productivism. Each of the five chapters returns to the central claim that the refutation of work constituting the optimal means of self-actualization signifies – evoking cul- tural theorist Mark Fisher – ‘the cancellation of a cancelled future’. Alternative futurities of late cap- italism are tempted into being, in the work of both Julia Bardsley and Marcel·lí Antúnez Roca, through the use of bio-techno aesthetics to distort the normative body. Using technology in unpro- ductive ways produces ‘counterpleasures’ to the respectable pleasures that conservatives insist are the only legitimate responses to art. Further, the Afrofuturist and Afropessimist performances of jaamil olawale kosoko and The Uhuruverse stake a claim to new futures for Black people in their positioning of the figure of the sci-fi alien, whose very absence of humanity – which in the colonialist enslaver’s imagination is a synonym for whiteness – may enable resistance to, and escape from, com- modified narratives of progress. The alien breaks the Cartesian binaries of primitivism and modernity that continue to inflect debates about the ‘positives’ of imperialism. As the chapter on the current ‘anti-woke’ right-wing culture war makes plain, the so-called degeneracy of theatre that refuses to affirm neo-colonial, cisheteronormative, and patriarchal western hegemony constitutes a vital reaction against the logocentric bias endemic to political notions of value.

One of the recurrent strategies employed by decadent artists is an excess of energy not directed towards a specific goal. Martin O’Brien, for instance, marries his bodily excreta with dystopian text to evoke an infected landscape of zombies for whom death is behind and inside them, rather than a destination they are moving towards. As some- one with cystic fibrosis who was told he would die before he reached thirty years old, O’Brien theatricalizes his ‘ana-chronistic’ experience of time to produce a new temporality for other bodies to shed the encumbrances of ‘chrononormative’ time. Alston also makes a convincing case for recognizing the liberatory power of surrendering to desires for frivolous uses of time, space, money, and labour in relation to the work of Toshiki Okada and Toco Nikaido, where gestures and objects are used in excess of any proscribed function. Alston’s discomfort with Nikaido’s exploitative working practices with her actors, and the environmental impact of her show *Miss Revolutionary Idol Berserker*, could be developed into a more extensive critical reflection on the contradictions (*à la* Marx) inherent in trans- gressing cultural presuppositions of value whilst working inside institutional frameworks that enable such transgressions to occur.

Alston has written a provocative and critically nuanced book exploring the contours of decadence in theatre and live art. It injects an invigorating rush of hedonism into the occasionally worthy discourse of socially engaged practice.