

# Shryock on Forrest (2020)

Forrest, Jennifer. *Decadent Aesthetics and the Acrobat in Fin-de-Siècle France*. Routledge, 2020, pp. ix + 215, ISBN 978-0-367-35814-3

Readers of late nineteenth-century French literature frequently come across characters from the circus or see the circus used as a setting for a story. Their ubiquity almost makes them invisible. Often merely considered part of a marginal popular genre, they seem to be a stock tool for many artists of the time especially among Decadent writers. Jennifer Forrest's *Decadent Aesthetics and the Acrobat in Fin-de-Siècle France* goes beyond simply treating these reoccurring images as a theme to show that "ambiguities produced by [the acrobats'] performance seeped into the movement's imaginary" (1). This study situates the historical use of circus imagery in the nineteenth century and examines a broad range of literary and artistic production.

Neither French nor English has a word that fully corresponds to the subject of Forrest's work. As she points out in her introduction, it is not the acrobat per se but "acrobatic performance," which allows her to explore a broader yet coherent phenomenon. The performative dimension—both literal and figurative—is spotlighted in the author's use of the French word *funambule*, which literally means a tightrope walker, but over the course of the nineteenth century took on a more expansive meaning that Forrest uses to refer to the "acrobatic clown *and* pantomimist, tightrope walker, trapezist, equestrienne, and more" (2). Forrest builds her theoretical argument on two pillars of the study of circus semiotics: Paul Bouissac and Yoram Carmeli. Rather than relying solely on Decadent literature, her analyses amplify the visual dimension of this theatrical genre by bringing to the fore the interplay between texts and the works of various artists.

The first two chapters fix 1857 as a pivotal moment in the depiction of circus characters with the creation of two works of art that laid the foundation for the Decadent aesthetic: Thomas Couture's *Le Duel après le bal masqué* and Jean-Léon Gérôme's *La Sortie du bal masqué*. The same year, Théodore de Banville published *Odes funambulesques*, which, Forrest argues, was the first work to link the artist and the acrobat. The *funambule* comes to represent the locus of tensions between art and commerce and between the producer and the receiver. Artists and writers engage in a dual play of avowal and derision in order to manipulate cultural codes and produce a sense of "existential ambiguity" (63).

Chapters three and four examine the impact of the performances of the Hanlon-Lees troupe that captivated Paris between 1878 and 79. Forrest links the effect of these performances—especially the double mirror as well as the manipulation of the perception of time and space to aesthetic practices of artists and Decadent writers by showing them at work in pieces by Catulle Mendès, Edmond Goncourt, Huysmans, Rodenbach, and Rachilde among others. These chapters also demonstrate how such practices were represented visually by artists, such as Édouard Manet and Edgar Degas.

The problematic gender of the lady acrobat is explored in the fifth chapter through texts by Jean Lorrain, Gustave Kahn, Édouard Rod, and Jules Laforgue as well as the artistic renderings of Jules Chéret. The literary texts show the destabilizing effects of the view of lady acrobats' bodies

on the male spectator. In addition, Forrest examines how the silence of this body produces uneasiness for some male protagonists. The chapter provides a particularly interesting analysis of Chéret's depictions of weightless lady acrobats seeming to defy gravity and flying through the air.

While most of the earlier chapters provide brief, but solid, studies of works that use circus characters or themes, the last two chapters provide an in-depth focus on two single, and more well-known writers—Jules Laforgue and Octave Mirbeau. In Laforgue's *Pierrot fumiste*, Pierrot is not just the mask or metaphor that allows for verbal acrobatics; he represents an aesthetic practice that creates meaning through the nonsense juxtapositions of voices, tone, and register. The work functions as a manifesto of modern art with its use of *non-sens* to create *sens*. Forrest finds Laforgue's *Moralités légendaires* to be a masterpiece of modern art arguing that the circus performers become a metonymy of the circus ring—a place outside of time and convention in which the spectators are treated to a dizzying display. Normal categories of meaning are upended and produce a space in which antinomies—especially the self and other—are destroyed in order to create anew. In her last chapter, Forrest points out that Mirbeau mostly abandoned the theme of the *funambule* after 1882 but his subsequent writings incorporate “the circus's manipulation of cultural codes and semantic registers” (195). Works such as *Le Jardin des supplices* provide a powerful, deep critique of systems of social and political power. This and later novels questioned literary convention in a manner that opened up aesthetic possibilities in the early twentieth century.

The book closes with a short epilogue. After the decline of the circus at the end of the nineteenth century, aspects of its impact on the arts nevertheless continued through the early twentieth century. Forrest cites a number of examples of the theme of the circus in, for example, Picasso's paintings of acrobats. More pertinent is what she sketches in the works of Jean Cocteau, Ferdinand Léger, and Paul Éluard that break down semantic categories or the distinction between performer and spectator. The epilogue covers thought-provoking connections but should have perhaps either been expanded to appreciate their richness or been eliminated altogether to keep the focus strictly on the late nineteenth century.

The study is directed toward an audience of specialists familiar with the notion of Decadence and some of the lesser-known writers of the time. Although Decadence in late nineteenth-century France is amorphous, it would have been helpful to give some indication of how the author is using the term and any limits that may have influenced the contours of the work or the choice of the corpus. *Decadent Aesthetics* is well written, well argued, and thoroughly researched. Forrest performs an impressive feat in producing one of those exceptional studies that change how we view a cultural phenomenon.