Fin de siècle

Referring to the end of the 19th century, *Fin de siècle* not only represents a specific historical moment but also a part of the sensibility and of the cultural production of the period. It is particularly challenging to define *fin de siècle* within the artistic world, as it neither corresponds to a movement around a leading figure, nor to an amalgamation of shared and promulgated aesthetic principles (there is no manifesto laying claim to *fin-de-sièclism*...).

The term appears for the first time at the end of the 1880s. In its French form, it has imposed itself ever since on most Western-European languages (e.g. English, German). *Fin de siècle* crystalizes certain anxieties that are typical of this era: the period is characterized by a particular striving for modernity, while at the same time it is also perceived as an end. This explains why the *fin de siècle* mentality has often been closely related to *decadence* (or *decadentism*) to which it is, however, not limited: symbolism, aestheticism or even *art nouveau* all fall within *fin de siècle*.

The *fin de siècle* mind-set is marked by an ensemble of shared features, in particular an ambivalent fear for the end. It often manifests itself in an explicit or implied criticism on the dominance of social, technical and scientific modernity. What is more, this mind-set has an ambiguous relation to certain ideals and themes originating from romanticism. These are either intensified, or they are parodied and ridiculed with an ironic, bitter jubilation.

**\***

**\* \***

Historically, one of the main sources of *fin de siècle* imaginary can be found in the idea of decadence, which takes shape in France toward the end of the Second Empire (1852-1870). France’s 1870 humiliating defeat against Bismarck’s armies is widely perceived as a sign of French society’s decline. This imaginary, developing in all of Europe, counterbalances the then love for technical and scientific advances connected to modernity, as well as the belief in humanity’s constant progress. Paradoxically, both feelings – the love for modern progress on the one hand, social decline on the other – reign at the same time.

1884 is an important year regarding the emergence and identification of this cultural dynamic. The novel *À rebours* by Joris-Karl Huysmans, which soon proves to be a reference work, sees the light, with a title depicting a thwarted relationship with temporality. The narrative’s main character, Des Esseintes, retreats to a villa in a Parisian suburb, isolating himself from the modern world in order to cultivate extremely refined aesthetic delights. Written in a highly sophisticated, in fact mannered language, the novel seems emblematic of decadence and, by extension, of *fin de siècle*.

Yet Huysmans’s novel discloses a great amount of mockery, which also lies at the basis of decadence. Indeed, the word decadence is first presented as an anathema by several critics who, fascinated by manifestations of depravation in this type of productions, aim to expose them. An example is the 1885 publication of Henri Beauclair’s and Gabriel Vicaire’s mystification entitled *Les Déliquescences d’Adoré Floupette, poète décadent*, which is applauded by some people who are unaware of its deceiving intention. Only later on, decadence is taken into account more seriously.

In general, the imaginary of the end, which underpins *fin de siècle* thinking, appears to be a significant form of anxiety closely associated with identity, more specifically sexual identity. Accordingly, the cultural productions of the time are riddled with transvestite figures, homosexuals. Given the fascination for aberrations of all sorts – e.g. crime, mental illness and the like –, it should not come as a surprise that the turn of the century is marked by numerous studies on mental health, ranging from those by Cesare Lombroso, Max Nordeau (*Dégénérescences*, 1896) to Freud’s research.

Humour and irony seem to be striking characteristics of *fin de siècle* sensibility. They come across as the most salient features of an anxiety, taking the shape of the exacerbation of romantic ideals, which is often doubled by parody. The representatives of such a *fin de siècle* sensibility feel that they are born too late into a world that is too old. However, many of them do not turn to romantic desolation. On the contrary, they choose to display a sharp grim, with often a central place for the fantastic. Examples stretch from Villiers de l’Isle-Adam (*L’Ève future*, 1886) to Alphonse Allais (*À se* tordre, 1891) and Oscar Wilde (*Picture of Dorian Gray*, 1891).

The rejection of a disappointing contemporary world is also represented by the development of symbolism, which is as an idealism that the artwork is to incarnate, in its symbols, literary forms (Maeterlinck, Verhaeren) as well as pictorial forms (Gustave Moreau). These art conceptions go hand in hand with sacralisation. As such, they are connected to a growing attraction to the religious domain (the period is characterized by many conversions: Huysmans, Claudel…, as well as by an important esoteric branch (Joséphin Péladan)).

*Fin de siècle* art, on the one hand, and naturalist in addition to mass-consumption oeuvres, on the other, are fundamentally opposed. *Fin de siècle* sensibility is more likely to produce dandy postures. It is characterized by an exploration of the absolute. This pursuit is expressed by an affinity for erudite forms (cf. Walter Pater, Remy de Gourmont), alongside an auto-reflexivity as to be found in Stéphane Mallarmé’s poetry (*Un Coup de dés*…). When Arthur Rimbaud bids adieu to literature, he is considered to be the fulfilment of this search for the absolute, for which silence seems to have been a value *in se*.

**\***

**\* \***

The beginning of the new century appears to make an end to *fin de siècle*. The modern world, previously perceived as menacing, is now the vehicle for all sorts of enthusiasm. A number of important writers in European modernism (Apollinaire, Cendrars, Marinetti…), who, after having published works inspired by *fin de siècle* aestheticism, now bring some fresh air into the literature of the Old Continent. Influenced by the oeuvres of, among others, Walt Whitman, they invite art to come down from its ivory tower, instead to get involved in the modern world with the ambition to capture its particular poetry. This is the beginning of a new era, the *Belle Époque* with all of its splendors, which will soon be interrupted by the canons of the Great War…

**References**

Marshall, Gail (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Fin de Siècle*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007.

McGuinness, Patrick (ed.), *Symbolism, decadence and the fin de siècle: French and European perspectives*, Exeter, [University of Exeter press, 2000](javascript:gotofull('%3cA%20HREF=http://opac.libis.be:80/F/5G7JRP2YR7SDDVY7UM5EPHMK3KMR9N7FVNVK5BJAQIHAMUKNRX-02665?func=full-set-set&set_number=019756&set_entry=000027&format=999%3e27%3c/A%3e')).

Stead, Évanghélia, *La Chair du livre. Matérialité, imaginaire et poétique du livre fin-de-siècle*, Paris, Presses de l’Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2012.

Weir, David, [*Decadence and the Making of Modernism*](http://books.google.com/books?id=WOb26cxGBfMC&pg=PA16), Ahmerst, University of Massachusetts Press, 1995.

David Martens & Aleide Vanmol (KU Leuven)