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THE ARCHITECTURE OF PARALLEL REALITIES

Joris-Karl Huysmans published the novel A Rebours (Against Nature) in 1884, at a stylistic turning point between naturalism and mysticism in his writing career.[1] This interlude work comprises, in an unsurpassed way, the essence of decadence and symbolist aesthetism. Against Nature has provided my work with a scope of ideas and examples of social and sensory conditions, artificial creations, hyperaesthetic configurations and synesthetic instruments, all aimed at supporting the inner world of imagination of the main character of the novel, Baron Des Esseintes. Physical space and architecture in Huysmans' text are means to augment and redirect perception. The narrative space and time shift between three main narrative modus, identified as present space (the actual physical location of the body in the mansion), revived space (spaces restored from memory), and evoked space (spaces conjured up from stimuli, as art or smells, a dream state of mind). The Baron is striving for an alternative spatial reality, or more precisely, a concentrated essence of certain qualities of space that enables him to escape from the world. The home and its collections are parts of the aesthetic machinery whose purpose is to trigger Des Esseintes' imagination and project him into parallel realities.

The Palace of Art

The novel is a parallel description of the isolated mansion and hyperaesthetic mind of the depraved Baron who is in voluntary exile from the excesses of urban and social life. His new existence is stripped from everything except pleasures dictated by artificiality. Des Esseintes believes that the imperfection of nature may be compensated by excessive artificiality, in fact, the only raison-d'être of nature is to be improved upon by art. Huysmans creates a new kind of Palace of Art, where the interior space is entirely created for escape into imagination by the aid of artificial and mechanical arrangements that stimulate each of the senses to produce a new world from within.

> The Soul revels in the artificiality of her realm
> and also in its dissociation from the outer world…[2]

The seductive powers of the artificial appealed to the

symbolists and the decadents in accordance with aestheticism and the l'art pour l'art ideal. This division of disciplines into singular entities guaranteed a free space, at least a potential space for art to develop its forms, unaffected by formal demands and morals. The above quote from Tennyson's poem the Palace of Art illustrates the idea of an Ivory Tower, a desire for artistic freedom that puts imagination in a space of mythical seclusion, separated from nature and the ideals impo-

sed on her. The idea of the artificial proposed to the artist or poet an untouched and limitless, yet isolated space, with no dictated rules of moral or beauty. Des Esseintes has withdrawn from the corrupted nature, in a final attempt to create a complete and autonomous world:

> Once he had cut himself off from contemporary life, he had resolved to allow nothing to enter his hermitage which might breed repugnance or regret…[3]

The complete isolation is necessary in order to keep his retreat free from the codes of society that have already infiltrated nature. Central to the symbolist movement and mood was the aversion to the self-satisfied materialism of the time. Inside the realm of imagination, dreams, irrationality and the unconscious rule.

The Dying Dreamer

The first part of this project, the Dying Dreamer, consists of an analysis of Huysmans' novel Against Nature as a premature description of the conditions and possibilities of digital virtual space, as we are able to describe and create it in our time.[4] The novel constitutes in this part a case study of representational methods: not only the plot but also the narrative space and time-structure lend themselves to various digital metaphors. Part of the theoretical framework is the terminology shared by digital virtual space and the narrative virtual space of the decadents. One of the main issues is the conditions for virtual architecture and its implications in spatial design by digital tools, traced through the perceptual experience of space that emerged from late 19th century ideology, exemplified by the terminology of artificiality, synesthesia and other perceptual phenomena, socio-cultural structures and technological advancement. The Dying Dreamer website, as a complement to the text, includes a sequence of pages: one for each chapter, where interactive illustrations guide the visitor through the spaces of the novel.[5]

Interfaces of the Chimaera

The concept of the artificial has been further investigated in the essay Interfaces of the Chimaera – Artificial Creation in Huysmans' Against Nature. The Chimaera, an incredulous figure: part lion, goat and serpent, is in this text employed as a metaphor for the multifaceted, mythical and hybrid existence of the Baron and the various architectural interfaces of the novel, but also as the adaptive metaphor that turns up in Huysmans' text and in Paul Ricoeur's investigations into the world of fiction. Ricoeur's hermeneutical methods are helpful to this project for the positioning of the different contexts of the study and the role of the reader in relation to the world of the text.[6] Huysmans provides the

artificial creations in Against Nature that serve as the constitutional parts that make up the interface of the mansion These artefacts are discussed along with the theory of Herbert A. Simon, author of the Sciences of the Artificial.[7] According to Simon, the artificial is the interface between an inner and outer environment governed by their respective aims, but also the interface between man and nature. Where there is an artefact, there is a user. Inner and outer environment are united in the interface. The interface between inner and outer environment is a sliding door between aim and action. In this text, I try to bring together the imagination of Huysmans, the scientific logic of Simon and the hermeneutic models of Ricoeur into a Chimaera-like triple combination. There is an interesting likeness of terms between Ricoeur's and Simon's theories. Both disciplines depend on general concepts of hierarchy, memory, expectation and imitation. Most importantly, both Ricoeur and Simon deal with the "internal configuration of a work" related to the "external refiguration of a life", to use Ricoeur's words. Simon's descriptions of the artificial are discussed together with scenes from Against Nature in order to cross-fertilize the terminology and ideas in both texts. The mansion is a paradoxical space where artificial loops are introduced on various levels. Among the immersive spaces, whose purpose is to augment illusory perception and aesthetic stimulation, is the dining room designed as a ship's cabin and the study, aesthetically and functionally adapted for nocturnal living. Instruments such as the mouth-organ are used in combination with sensory-inducing works of literature and art. The Baron ventures into creation of cyborgs by carefully structuring an interface to eliminate the presence of his servants and have them to robotically carry out their duties. The padded corridors constructed for that service will be analysed in a separate essay along with other examples of muffled and muted spaces, the history of the padded cell is a perceptual horror story.

The Unattainable Room

There are spaces that grow inwardly, spaces that just take a turn in the physical world and then reenters the mind that created it. An example of this kind of

thought and crafted space is Kurt Schwitters' Merzbau, created in the artist's home, destroyed and reconstructed in various locations over a couple of decades in exile.[8] The dense collections of spaces and artefacts of Sir John Soane, whose domestic museum is one of the most elaborate interiors of the 19th century, display the same kind of will projected onto and into architecture. A more recent project is the german artist Gregor Schneidler whose home in Rheydt since 1985 is slowly folding in on itself under the name Haus Ur.[9] Schneidler claims that "no one can access the final layers, except if the house were destroyed". The initial configuration of walls and rooms has been added to, subtracted from, multiplied with and divided into an artificial structure that consumes subjective time and perception.

Together with Huysmans' description of Des Esseintes' mansion, these projects essentially share the fact that they were or are "unfinished" or "unfinishable" projects, characterised by a creative labour mainly concerned with the interior. The spaces are chinese boxes of material dreams, in reflexive flux with the ideas of their creators. They are investigations of the kind that Bachelard describes as material dreams – a work of imagination that in an architectural or immersive scale teams up with matter, sometimes "against" and sometimes "in" matter.[10] The psychology of these projects is an almost manic architectural activity, in order to explore what material dreams that turn into, and what kind of perception the alternative reality of these spaces require. This kind of architecture depends, just like digitial software for modelling or image manipulation, on the concept of layers. We can borrow (or reclaim) commands from Photoshop, for instance, to describe the process of collapsing and merging layers, hide or make visible, applying filters, invert, fill, extract, select, redo and undo, save and save as. A further study of the unattainable rooms of imagination and the physical efforts and renderings of these can be compared to the processes and tools of digital creation of space.

The Destination of the Metaphor

The journey I am making has a secret destination. I can read some of the names of the stations on my way there, while others are obscured. Some stations in the passing are very busy, urban and modern, nodes of communication with all sorts of transfer possibilities, other stations are derelict and deserted. Of course I think I possess a clear description of the end station, and that I will recognize it when I get there. What I know is that the reading I brought will last the whole journey. I turn the pages and words pass beneath my eyes as a landscape passes outside the window. If you fix your eyes on the ground close to the train you see only speed, coloured lines and textures smeared into a single band of motion. If you look up and beyond the immediate terrain outside the window, the landscape slows down and becomes a view. While looking out, the world of the text resounds in your head, inner and outer environment tumble and wash over each other and clear surfaces to project new thoughts onto, or reveal ideas hidden under travelling dust. The journey metaphor is as worn and torn as a much loved suitcase, but it still serves well: research is moving through a landscape, not always on rail, sometimes hiking across stoney ground, but all romantising aspects aside: it takes you somewhere and you meet people on the way, you acquire a certain heightened perception, experience tiredness and adventure, move with expectation and endurance. Des Esseintes is well travelled in the worlds of imagination, and I will try to keep track of him until he gets lost on a crowded platform. I guess there are places where not even architectural researchers can go unnoticed.

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Notes

1. Joris-Karl Huysmans, Against Nature , London: Penguin Books Ltd 1959 (À Rebours, 1884)
2. Alfred Tennyson, The Palace of Art- A Collection of Poems by Alfred Tennyson, New York: Doubleday 1972, (1833) p. 129
3. Huysmans, p. 63
4. Malin Zimm, The Dying Dreamer – looking into Huysmans' Virtual Worlds, Nordic Journal of Architectural Reserach 3/2001, pp. 41–53
5. http://www.arch.kth.se/~zimm
6. Paul Ricoeur, The Function of Fiction in Shaping Reality (pp. 123–141 Man and World 12/1979), and Life: A Story in Search of a Narrator, (A Ricouer Reader- Reflection and Imagination)
7. Herbert A. Simon, the Sciences of the Artificial, second edition, Cambridge, MA: the MIT Press 1981 (1969)
8. Suggested reading: Elizabeth Burns Gamard, Kurt Schwitter's Merzbau – the Cathedral of Erotic Misery, New York: Princeton Architectural Press 2000
9. www.portikus.de/archiva0081.html
10. Gaston Bachelard, Earth and Reveries of Will (Jorden och Viljans Drömmerier, Lund: Skarabé 1992 (1947)