

The Dying Dreamer

looking into Huysmans' Virtual Worlds

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The Dying Dreamer website is a visual presentation of research work in progress. The site features active illustrations that allow for interpretation in a spatial context. These illustrations, in making and as presentation, are analytical collages, some created from a model of the mansion as described in the novel then distorted as the narrative take leaps in space and time.

In 1884, the novel *A Rebours*, translated into English as *Against Nature*, appeared as a complete map of morbid desires, written by Joris-Karl Huysmans at the peak of decadence in literature. Huysmans delivers a study of a monstrous psyche in a dandy outfit – the depraved Baron Des Esseintes. The novel is a parallel description of the isolated mansion and the deteriorating mind of the hyperaesthetic protagonist. Neurotically represented in detail, we are invited to experience the architectural creation of a man whose inquisitive senses

and restless imagination has led him to taste every forbidden fruit and whose wealth and health are slowly consumed by experimental spatial excesses on the verge of sensory overload.

Nature, according to Des Esseintes, is overrated as “there is not a single one of her inventions, deemed so subtle and sublime, that human ingenuity cannot manufacture”¹. The Baron, a character essentially modeled after Huysmans himself, develops an advanced taste for artificiality, since his “overfatigued senses”² are ill-fitted for reality. When he cannot find the like of his aesthetic ideas in the world, he sets off to artificially manufacture it. Nature proves to be surprisingly supple in the hand of this architectural alchemist.

By fully embracing the powers of artifice, Huysmans created essentially the most hardcore decadent novel ever written. Huysmans credo is that imagination is the key to evolution of man. He puts imagination into practice through manipulation of perception itself. Throughout the novel, Huysmans spares no effort to advocate the idea of augmented sensory input. The author presents numerous mindbending artefacts



and, through the descriptions of Des Esseintes' interaction with these, provides a manual for living in hyper-aesthetic space.

It was a novel without a plot, and with only one character, being, indeed, simply a psychological study of a certain young Parisian, who spent his life trying to realise in the nineteenth century all the passions and modes of thought that belonged to every century except his own...³

It may well have been without a plot, but not without indications of a new kind of existence: the integration of the body in an immersive virtuality, a dreamer-friendly interface packed with soft- and hardware to relieve everyday spleen in any century. We enjoy today the affordable tools, buzzing on every office desk, soon humming in every pocket, to become Des Esseintes' disciples and join him in the refuge of alternative reality.

Against Nature provides an inventory of various aspects of virtuality. The research presented in this article and on the Dying Dreamer website aims at analysing the coherence between Huysmans' description of the Baron's mansion and the general conditions of virtual space. In the narrative space of the novel *Against Nature* as well as in digital space, we are located in a user-oriented egocentric universe, where artificiality offers superior pleasure to nature, but to the expenditure of the human body and life as we physically know it. This project is exploring the idea that Huysmans is in fact creating a virtual world, a hyperspatial sanctuary. In a way, he describes the ultimate immersive computer game and its addicted player: The Dying Dreamer.

In the quest of total immersion in alternative reality, Des Esseintes needs to modify his senses by customising his environment and exclude all social interaction. In order to escape the world that he perceives as fatally



boring, he needs icons to click himself away. The mansion is for that purpose filled with carefully selected art and literature, mechanical installations and architectural innovations. These modifications are in many aspects similar to the practise of interface design and aligns with contemporary theories of virtual reality. The idea of travelling in inertia, numerous examples of sensory augmenting installations, the oppression of physical needs are all features that are generally assigned to virtuality. There is also the recognition of the "limitations of the tool" as in a digital process. The Baron eventually suffers a disastrous "crash", just like any rugged PC user does sooner or later.

There were in it metaphors as monstrous as orchids, and as subtle in colour. The life of the senses was described in the terms of mystical philosophy. One hardly knew at times whether one was reading the spiritual ecstasies of some medieval saint or the morbid confessions of a modern sinner. It was a poisonous book.⁴

Aesthetic Alienation

Des Esseintes is born into a family of shadowy and inbred characters, and brought up in Château de Lourps by a mother suffering from various nervous conditions and an estranged father. His lonely and alienated childhood is somewhat relieved when he is sent to the Jesuit school, where the fathers are both impressed by his intelligence and puzzled by his individual persistence, as he refuses to follow the established line of studies and excels only in subjects of his own choice. The restlessness and eccentricity grows with age and when entering adulthood he finds most social activities abominably boring and his contempt for humanity escalates. He indulges in a self-destructive lifestyle of erotic and culinary excesses in Paris but finally, due to ill health, makes the decision to spend what is left of family fortune to buy himself the isolation he is craving for; a secluded mansion in Fontenay-aux-Roses out-

side Paris. This is where the grand projects of domestic adaptations and transformations will take place, interrupted by excursions into memories and associations triggered by Des Esseintes' collections of artwork and artefacts. In response to his childhood deprivation, he recreates his existence in a home perfected in detail and lives as an outcast character.

I tried living in the real world
Instead of a shell
But I was bored before I even began
I was bored before I even began.⁵

The idea of complete immersion is an essential quality that the narrative space in *Against Nature* shares with virtuality. Des Esseintes leaves his residence at Fontenay only in most acute situations and not willingly, even more reluctantly are visitors welcomed to the estate and the domestic people are carefully separated from the Baron's routines and serve him via padded corridors so as not to disturb. The physical isolation is performed with a monasterial discipline that stands in sharp contrast to the Baron's earlier days of carnal pleasures. Des Esseintes social life is strictly restrained to avatars, characters from literature and art, and people recalled from memory of time passed in urban exuberance. This voluntary imprisonment shares the seclusion of virtual reality.

In *Against Nature*, Huysmans positions Des Esseintes at a safe distance from the urban environment which has caused him so much distress. The city, much favoured by the decadents, is in fact even more romanticised in its absence, the distance rendering the temptations of Paris even more vividly. Des Esseintes is off-line in his monasterial existence, isolated from all social interaction. In the first chapter, Huysmans describes the basic setup for the retreat, a kind of manual of the operating system for the Baron's new home. The mansion is the harddrive on which the Baron continuously installs software for his sensory installations as he plots new aesthetic configurations. The rooms are fitted with architectural inventions, for example the ship-cabin that is plugged into the dining room to provide the complete illusion of being on a cross-atlantic journey.

Since moving to Fontenay, Des Esseintes avoids so-

ciety except to get some plug-ins, that is, occasionally turning to civilisation for upgrading his tools. He orders items and has them delivered to his home as he dreams up new installations. The narrative defines the space of the mansion as the user-oriented interface of Des Esseintes. The user himself is the only one who can log in for full access to all the daydream shortcuts that he has created around him. The user's integration with space, the extensions of himself with mechanical devices, the ignorance of bodily functions, all add up to support the idea that Huysmans is introducing a level of virtual life that would only begin to be realised more than a century later. In one aspect only, the novel fails to match our conception of virtual space. The glorified aspects of global communication and extension of social life over the internet is absent in *Against Nature*, since the Baron shows no interest in expanding his social life or take part in any community. The type of virtual space described by Huysmans relates rather to the idea of a cave⁶ or the less refined "goggles and glove" version of virtual navigation, where human-to-human interaction is of less importance than human-to-space interaction (at least in contemporary standards of digital space technology). Des Esseintes' physical and psychological immersion in his home is so complete he can hardly be separated from space itself, and without him, no sensory programs would be accessible.

Je suis l'espace où je suis.⁷
(I am the space where I am.)

Digital decadence

The decadents⁸ could not have entered the cultural scene at any other time. In classicism, the order of the world imposed an aesthetic ideal in the individual, who was no more than a vessel for divine ideals and restrained emotions. Romanticism freed the individual, by describing the human ego as a creative and operative energy, independent from God for better and for worse. The egocentric universe intensified the interest in human sensory experience, perception and psychology, but with the power of the individual came loneliness, the flip side of a godless inner life. In the shift between romanticism and symbolism, the human ego

took a turn from the limitless inner universe to the more complex confluence of mind and space. As Jean Clair puts it:

The Romantics considered the landscape to be a state of mind, a place to stop and rest. The Symbolists, however, reversed this idea: the state of mind actually became the landscape, but it was an empty, deserted, unlimited, boundless world in the middle of nowhere.⁹

The romantics' pitstop for the soul was abandoned for the symbolists' perpetual journey in the wasteland of the mind. Somewhere in between these movements lies decadence, mainly rendered as "word-paintings" of artificiality and aestheticism: the tools with which the individual could create a liveable space, lonely but lovely, poetic though putrid.

More than a tantalising alliteration, digital decadence illustrates the idiosyncrasy of the culture of artifice at the turn of two succeeding centuries. Note the less than coincidental definition of the "in the middle of nowhere" and the endless grid of a computer modeler's worktable: there is nothing until you start messing about with the object creation tools. If the decadents had had access to the computer standards of today, they would rather have used high-end 3D-gamedesign applications than Microsoft Word to describe their visionary worlds. Or they would have been the first community to leave their bodies behind and wallow in infinite luxury as forever-young avatars in a perpetual masquerade in any projected environment of choice.

The notion of parallel realities in *Against Nature* matches the general description of virtual reality as "any of various forms of computer-generated 3D-environments, the more interactive and immersive, the better"¹⁰ and the processes of the making of these environments. It also relates to the basic "everyday" interactions with computerspace via software interface, that is, the graphic appearance of any office package. No matter what level of digital immersion or complexity of programming you choose to compare the space in *Against Nature* with, Huysmans' description of the architecture and artefacts as a navigational interface



is still unsurpassed. With few exceptions, architects engaging in issues of virtual reality are expressing theories side by side with fresh or experienced theoreticians in hard covers, but that is all talk and no moonwalk. It seems the boundless universe of VR could be half-wallpapered already with pages of anthologies on the new era of informative space. The more refreshing to find that a neurotic author more than a century ago envisioned spatial possibilities and sensory-augmenting equipment that would make MIT labs seem like a potter's workshop.

As an effort to stretch language to fit our excitement about sensory augmented space, the entire terminology around information technology and virtual reality is filled with prefixes such as "hyper-", "super-" and "multi-", not to mention "cyber-", forming neologisms that may illustrate the potential of digital tools and electronic communication. The semantic efforts to handle virtual reality seem to draw all energy from the actual assignment of content to the space in question. In an article written in 1901, V.V. Rozanov assigns the prefix "ultra-" to approach the artistic movement:

It is precisely this element of ultra – the result of ultra manifested in life itself, in its mores, ideas, proclivities, and aspirations – that has wormed into literature and remained there ever since, expressing itself, finally, in such a hideous phenomenon as Decadence and Symbolism. The ultra without its referent, exaggeration without the exaggerated object, preciousness of form conjoined with total disappearance of content, and "poetry" devoid of rhyme, meter, and sense – that is what constitutes Decadence.¹¹

The search for definition and lack of content marks the contemporary discussion about Virtual Reality. What are we going to make of this electronic celebration of the ego?

Decay follows subsequently after the maturity of a discipline, driving aesthetics to an extreme point of complexity. Some examples are given by Havelock Ellis, in his introduction to the 1884 original edition of *Against Nature*, where he lists dichotomies in order to illustrate the oppositions of classic and decadent style in different disciplines. Architecture is exempli-

fied by Roman architecture as classic, and Byzantine developments as completely decadent. Architectural decadence is the result of decomposition and corruption of geometrical systems, and may finally be the dissolving of physical boundaries and constructional laws in a process of unlimited hyperaesthetic creation in virtual space.

Hyperaesthetics and Synesthesia

The physical space that the Baron possesses is programmed for escape into an inward reality. Des Esseintes lives in a custom-made interface where any object acts like a phicon¹² that, when interacted with, propels him into other dimensions. The hyperaesthetic quality of objects suggests that the idea of the thing is more desirable than the thing itself: the Baron does not decorate or collect to impress others, only to project himself into his dreams. Huysmans takes this idea further by assigning navigational functions to smell and taste and also renders objects with proprioceptive, tactile and haptic qualities beside the ordinary visual and auditive icons of computer space. A rare condition that corresponds to this multisensory interface is synesthesia¹³, a perceptual phenomenon of sensory fusion that was central to the symbolists in art and literature around the turn of the last century and had a great influence on Huysmans.

The neurological condition of synesthesia has had a great influence on Huysmans. It may be described as one of the most extreme manifestations of the mind, where two or more senses simultaneously engage in the experience of another sense. Between 1860 and 1930, there was a peak of interest for this rare condition. Synesthesia attracted serious attention in art, music, literature, linguistics, natural philosophy, and theosophy. Most accounts emphasised coloured hearing, the most common form of synesthesia. The symbolist movement launched the idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerke*, engaging the audience in multi-modal concerts of music and light, sometimes even odour. Special synesthetic instruments were invented, for example the *clavecin oculaire*, an instrument that played sound and light simultaneously. Other polysensory artworks have their place in history, such as the *odorama*, *smellavision*, *son-et-lumiere* and *theremins*. After decades



of scientific neglect, a revival of inquiry is under way. The synesthetic corruption of the senses is an important issue in digital media, especially in the computer game industry and in interface development where cognitive engagement is commercially viable. Our minds will be stimulated and simulated to experience sensory effects beyond the normal.

Art is more sensitive than anything else to the future; it discloses more clearly than anything else the innermost workings of our soul.¹⁴

Huysmans assigns the condition of synesthesia to Des Esseintes who even builds his own synesthetic hardware: the mouth-organ. This apparel is in fact a drink bar organised as a musical instrument where the Baron creates liquid symphonies and potable tunes by

pulling levers and pressing stops. He restores the grammar of perfumery, creating semantic spaces and entire landscapes, classical gardens as well as industrial areas by mixing scents in his olfactory bar. There are numerous examples of multi-modal experience and descriptions of synesthetic qualities of certain works of literature and art in the novel.

The interaction with artefacts in his collections – books, perfumes, drinks, artwork, textures, bonbons, plants – sets the Baron's mind in motion and he enters the parallel reality of a dream or a memory. This structure enables Des Esseintes to travel without leaving the comforts of his home. Travelling is, surprisingly enough, a favoured pass-time for Des Esseintes. He does not need to move any further than to the dining-



room for example. Here he performs virtual tourism, studying timetables of steamers, tampering with compasses and instruments for navigation, and breathing in fake odours of salt seas. He is inside a “room inside the room”: a ship’s cabin, complete with arched beams and tarred wainscoting. Through a porthole placed in front of the real window with a fishtank placed between the two windows, he contemplates on the “marine life”, mechanical fish and artificial seaweed, the remains of daylight filtering through the water. No need to change rooms even, when an illustrated book and a glass of irish whisky brings grassy plains into the library. The Baron has perfected the skills of travelling in inertia¹⁵, an undisputable aspect of virtual space.

The main thing is to know how to set about it, to be able

to concentrate your attention on a single detail, to forget yourself sufficiently to bring about the desired hallucination and so substitute the vision of a reality for the reality itself.¹⁶

body <Enter>; bad file format – the Dyspeptic Demiurge

Des Esseintes was fully prepared to enter the virtual world. he had bid his farewell and decided once and for all to live a manipulated life in an environment as artificial as possible. On leaving Paris, he throws a dinner party to bid farewell to the city as well as his virility. The dinner is extravagantly themed in black: black food served by negresses in a black room on black

china. Upon entering the virtual world, no physical potency is needed. He will thrive on memories only and leave the body behind in his dreams. He will encounter old mistresses in the virtual reality of his dreams, some lucid, some nightmarish, where no shortcomings of his manhood have any relevance. Etymologically, the term virtual shares the root of virile, from the latin "vir" for man.¹⁷

Des Esseintes' relation to women is complicated if not resentful. Among his favourite female avatars is Salome, as rendered by Gustave Moreau¹⁸ in various motifs. Her glowing flesh animated by gems and her swaying dance is vividly imprinted in Des Esseintes, he is equally attracted and horrified at her physical appearance and her evil aim. Among his former mistresses who return to memory when the Baron eats a purple aphrodisiac bonbon, are Urania, a circus contortionist who initially spellbound him but turned out to be as intellectually boring as she was physically supple, and the Ventriloquist whom the Baron had to cite his favourite poem in a voice displaced in the room during their erotic encounters. In his complex relation to women, Huysmans shares the same view as Baudelaire and Barbey D'Aurevilly: that woman and the Devil are one. If woman is nature, an important motif in symbolist art, and man is artifice, then the satanic woman comprise all demonisation of nature and the uncontrollable. Odilon Redon is one of the artists that adorn Des Esseintes' walls, his images of the hybrid grinning spider with a human face and cactus-head in a pot represent the freaks of Nature that the Baron thrives among. The perversion of nature and the hybrid beings are exemplified in a nightmare induced by the scents of the exotic and carnivorous plants Des Esseintes has filled his vestibule with. A female figure metamorphoses out of a plant, a horrifying vision of flesh in the shape of a plant:

A sudden intuition came to him, and he told himself that this must be the Flower. His reasoning mania persisted even in this nightmare; and as in the daytime, it switched from vegetation to the Virus.¹⁹

Any threat to his virtual retreat is of female nature. The body, as being inseparable from nature, is the only ap-

paratus who fails him in this clockwork dream-studio. Des Esseintes expresses his neurotic anxiety about Virus, the invasive power of organic reproduction that would upset any contemporary computer user or cause fatal catastrophe to a body immersed in computer space, as described in so many tech-fi novels.

As a result of his various acts of perverting of Nature, Des Esseintes finally gets a memento mori: you can turn your back on God but you can't turn your back on your own back. His bodily conditions takes a turn to the worse.

Due to the Baron's dyspepsia, food and drink has to be carefully distributed. Culinary adventures is apparently the only artform that Des Esseintes does not engage in. The oppression of physical needs is one of the most problematic aspects of virtuality. The Baron has directed a structure for the intake of food, that enables him to be served without interacting with the servants who robotically bring the meals according to a clockwork schedule, moving in felt slippers through a padded corridor that separates the kitchen from the dining-room. All precautions are taken not to emit any sounds that may disturb the Baron in his mind journeys. As the symptoms of the Dyspeptic Demurge escalate, the baron orders a patent digester, a "precious instrument" that transforms all food to brown liquid, and when that does not work, the Baron's whole metabolism is reversed in a quite explicit physical way to Des Esseintes' relief and secret amusement:

...congratulating himself on this experience which was, so to speak, the crowning achievement of the life he had planned for himself; his taste for the artificial had now, without even the slightest effort on his part, attained its supreme fulfilment. No one, he thought, would ever go any further; taking nourishment in this way was undoubtedly the ultimate deviation from the norm.²⁰

The original French title, *A Rebours*, is given yet another dimension, directly related to this inverted metabolism, that the English title cannot match. The automatised feeding is a reminder of the defects of the Baron's otherwise nearly perfected virtual life. The body just cannot follow.

the Nature of Artifice

Des Esseintes consistently sings the praise of artificiality as he claims that nature “has had her day” and that “...the time has surely come for artifice to take her place whenever possible.”²¹ The Baron is very creative and proactive in satisfying his desires for artificiality by designing machinery and installations. His feeble apparition and moral weakness is, in a way, balanced by his energy as a craftsman and determination as an artist and inventor. In chapter eight, Des Esseintes enters into close combat with Nature when taking on botanical collection. The exotic plants selected for his hot-house all respond to the aesthetics of artifice: the more unnatural apparition of the organic object, the more reason to bring it in. Huysmans employs metaphors of the human body to describe the Baron’s response to the sensory impressions aroused by the plants. The metaphor is folded twice: first in resembling the colour and texture of the plants with refined manmade materials, then the nightmarish transformation of the same plants into eroticized bodies. Artificiality strikes back, so to say, as the soothing hobby of gardening turn out to be hazardous, evoking the very suppressed cravings the Baron seeks to distract himself from. There are numerous examples of this preference for the manmade, a disposition that is sometimes spiralling into contempt for the natural. His fascination for technical novelty is displayed in a passage where he suggests that even some of his works of latin literature might be

turned out by an ingenious mechanic who takes good care of his machine, keeps its component parts well oiled, and if need be can invent new parts which are both intricate and useless.²²

The Dreamer is thrilled by the idea of himself as a “reading mill”, comparing his mind’s workings to industrial process as he examines his contemporary lay works:

...passing them through the critical apparatus of his mind, just as a metal worker passes strips of metal through a steel drawing machine, from which they emerge thin and light, reduced to almost invisible threads...²³

Huysmans excels in his metaphorical description of the

most beautiful machinery existing: the two modern locomotives of the Northern Railway, described as two women, a stringent metaphor illustrating the charms and seductive powers of these two female creatures of steel and chrome.

The more sensational Des Esseintes’ home becomes, the greater kicks he needs, like a drug addict increasing the dose in order to achieve the same effect. As the artificial becomes domesticised by Des Esseintes, the mansion itself turns into a kind of nature, an alternative nature that is the hybrid of concretisation of dreams and the dreamer himself.

The strive for spatial perfection is a central theme of *Against Nature*. In the first chapter, Des Esseintes is reflecting on the choice of colour for the most important room, his study. He is restricted to ends of the spectra that respond most favourably to artificial light. Des Esseintes rejects all colours except indigo blue and orange, some regretfully as he knows some favourite nuances would be stunning in ordinary candlelight. His life is exclusively nocturnal, wherefor the electric light is a modern convenience he celebrates. Computer-generation of space is always a process of careful selection of textures, colour and lighting in order to achieve, if not pleasing, then at least convincing environments. Des Esseintes do not depend uniquely on mechanical devices to realise his spatial ideas. When contemplating the colours of his carpet, he gets the idea of animating its texture by adding something that moves around on it. He buys a turtle and has its goldglazed shell encrusted with carefully chosen gemstones, and the creature is placed in the room to interact with the colours as intended. After a while, the turtle lies immobile in a corner, poisoned by its artificially augmented beauty.

The aesthetic alienation of Des Esseintes is described by his contempt of the taste of the common man. Anything that the general public gets access to and takes pleasure in, is rejected by the Baron as it has become irreversibly vulgarised. Stylish excellence is forcibly an act of selection. The same skill is applied to efficient retrieval of information. The character most adapted to life in an environment saturated with information is the Selector. The ability to distinguish and



identify useful entities of information is the characteristics of the hyperaesthetic hacker. Des Esseintes shares his aesthetic and selective abilities with experienced 3D-modelers, production designers and special effects artists: he knows where to add and what, he is aware of the effects of lighting and shadows, he kills some darlings and reinvent others, all for the completion of his visions.

For the delectation of his mind and the delight of his eyes, he had decided to seek out evocative works which would transport him to some unfamiliar world, point

the way to new possibilities, and shake up his nervous system by means of erudite fancies, complicated nightmares, suave and sinister visions.²⁴

Virtual Reality could not replace physical space, but may temporarily surround us for some useful purpose or for entertainment, by mediating equipment ranging from a Gameboy via a PC to a fully equipped immersive Cave. Huysmans mediates many useful ideas about navigational functions embedded in objects, but he is also introducing a daring, spatially spastic way of navigating through the narrative space itself.

My reading of the novel is encoded into three generations of space. Each chapter is, page by page, filtered into any of the three categories revived space, present space and evoked space. Present space is the origin point, the physical space where the Baron is living his life in real-time. Revived space denotes any site revisited in memory, rooms restored to consciousness by the act of remembrance, which in turn is triggered by direct interaction with a physical object, a work of art or a text. Evoked space signifies imaginative places, conjured up from an object or a phenomena, such as a painting or a scent. A rhythmic pattern can be distinguished from the text encoding. The actual present space is statistically dominated by revived and evoked space. Huysmans readily applies a hypertextual structure, merges time and descriptions in non-chronological order, and breaks the axiom of space-time into an elaborate mix of physical chambers, halls of



Bilder och skisser ur forskningsprojektet *The Dying Dreamer* av författaren. Bildmanipulationer gjorda med inslag av konstverk från Moreau, Theotocopuli (El Greco), Wiertz, Millais, samt fotografiskt porträtt av J-K Huysmans.



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memory and gardens of dreams.

Awakening from Virtual Sleep

The user-oriented universe of *Des Esseintes* offers two options. One is the awakening in the world of basic needs ruled by the body. The other is the consequence of the untamed process of synthetic extravagance and sensory alchemy. Huysmans has in his virtual reality caught a virus that is slowly corrupting the files on his harddrive. He must have caught it when he downloaded that elusive dream. The virus was attached to his artificial lifestyle. The dreamer must die.

The senses should be used economically in order to be functional. To excite them gratuitously with sounds, colours and scents, as the Symbolists do, is to invite morbid exhaustion.²⁵

Des Esseintes is forced to leave the mansion at Fontenay and go back to Paris, where he can get medical attention and possibly be restored to a normal social life. The return to the city is thus understood as a remedy to his condition. Urbanity and regular injections of social

contacts will erase all alienated perversion. Or will it?

The dreamer is so intensely connected to the crafted hyperaesthetic environment, where artefacts have become a part of space and where space has become a part of the dream, that, when they pull the plugs to detach Des Esseintes' from these rooms, the dream fades away and all the codes with it.

The destiny of the protagonist of *Against Nature* brings another mythical space and its explorers to mind. In *Stalker*²⁶, a writer and a scientist takes on a perilous journey led by a stalker into a deserted "Zone", supposedly contaminated by mystical powers that governs the time and space of the Zone in a surreal metaphysical choreography. It is said that there is a room inside a derelict building inside the Zone, a room that may fulfil your innermost wish. When the three characters arrive to the room, they start arguing. They realise they cannot enter the room without risking to be proven wrong about what they thought was their innermost wish. When facing the option of stepping across the threshold that separates them from the magic space and lose their dream, or return to civilisation and let life in the real world govern their will and wishes, they chose the latter. The completion of the journey is the return to civilisation. Life is still there when you wake up because it was never gone, even after that journey into mystery, even after virtual life.

...if I were asked to name the chief benefit of the house, I should say: the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace.²⁷

Notes

1. Huysmans, Joris-Karl: *Against Nature*. the Robert Baldick translation (A Reboours, first ed. 1884) Penguin, London 1959 (*Against the Grain* is a variation of English translation of the title) pp. 36–37
2. *ibid*, p. 23
3. Wilde, Oscar: *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. (first ed. 1891) Penguin, London, 1994 (At the end of chapter 10, Mr. Gray is handed a yellow book which will execute a great influence on him. Although never mentioned by name, the book in question is J-K Huysmans' "*Against Nature*".) p 145
4. *ibid*, p.146
5. Morrissey, Patrick: *Shoplifters of the world unite from the LP Louder than Bombs, The Smiths Original Release 1987, Great Britain*
6. cave: a small multimedia- fitted room, often a cube (3 x 3 x 3 m), where all surfaces are projection screens for real-time orientation in virtual space. This immersive technology requires stereoscopic eyeware (HMD – Head mounted displays) for 3D-effect and a CPU-connected sensor gloves as navigation control device and manipulation of virtual objects. Variations of the cubic cave is a quarter or half-sphere where the virtual room is projected. The 3D-illusion is mainly limited by computational power as the 360 degree projection is extremely memory-consuming and the sensory feedback has to be instant for full effect.
7. Arnaud, Noël: *L'état d'ébauche*, Le Messager Boîteaux, Paris 1950
8. decadents: authors of French and English literature of the end of the 19th century: Baudelaire, Verlaine, Wilde, Huysmans, whose main expression is the artificial and the obsessively refined, often obscure and mystical.
9. Clair, Jean: from *Symbolism or the Irredeemable ego*, preface to *Lost Paradise – Symbolist Europe*, *Beaux-Arts magazine* (special issue). Jean Clair was the chief curator of the *Lost Paradise – Symbolist Europe* exhibition in the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1995.
10. Weishar, Peter: *Digital Space – Designing Virtual Environments*, glossary p. 241, McGraw-Hill, New York 1998
11. Rozanov, V.V: *On Symbolists and Decadents*, from *Religiia i kul'tura*, St. Petersburg, 1901. Based on a translation by Joel Stern available on <http://www.oberlin.edu/~tscholl/Rozanov.html>
12. phicon: "physical icon", introduced by interface researchers who experiment on physical objects for computer environment navigation
13. synesthesia: greek, syn – together and aisthesis – perception. Denotes involuntary physical experience in which the stimulation of one sense modality causes an additional perception in a different sense or senses. This

additional perception is regarded by the synesthete as a real and vivid experience, often outside the body, instead of imagined in the minds' eye. It is an immediate kind of experience, not an intellectualised concept pregnant with meaning.

14. Rozanov, V.V.: On Symbolists and Decadents
15. Paul Virilio: "Consigned to inertia, interactive beings transfer their natural capacity of movement and travel into probes, into detectors that inform their users immediately about distant realities, but to the detriment of their own sensory faculties of reality."
16. Huysmans, J-K: Against Nature, p. 36
17. At the time of the publication of the novel, the term "virtual" had been present in scholastic latin since Mediaeval Ages. Derived from prehistoric language, the etymological root of the word is "viros" meaning man. The term was transformed in primitive latin to "vir" (man, hero, husband, warrior), from where the word virilis ("a thing proper of man", virility, magistrate) developed. Saint Augustin, mentioned by Huysmans in the latin writers' Hall of Fame chapter in Against Nature, launches in De Magistro a significance of "virtualis" that approaches the contemporary meaning of the word: "he who has in himself the power to do, to make something". Saint Augustine assigned the meaning "potentiality" and "free will" to the latin virtus, the right use of freedom of choice. In a later work by Saint Augustine, On Faith in Invisible Realities, issues of catholic faith is discussed along the terms given by the title. Thomas ab Aquino simply transformed to "power" – later assimilated by Foucault who related power to information. The translation in our days of virtualis into "absence" and "parallel reality" from the initial meaning "man", is a semantic mutation. The root of "vir" may even seem contradictory in its variations: "virtual" meaning "in effect, though not in fact, almost, nearly", parodically next to "virtuous" for "morally good, blameless" and "virtuality" signifying "essential nature".
- Ethymology from Dimas de Melo Pimenta, Emanuel: Virtual Architecture, Transformers (webmagazine available at: www.asa-art.com)
19. Gustave Moreau (Paris 1826–1898). French painter and teacher, often referred to as one of the first Symbolists; Salome Dancing before Herod (1876; Los Angeles, CA, Armand Hammer Mus.)
20. Huysmans, J-K: Against Nature p. 105
20. ibid, p. 208
21. ibid, p. 37
22. ibid, p. 48
23. ibid, p. 49
24. ibid, p. 63
25. Nordau, Max: Degeneration Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press 1993 (1892)
26. Strugatskij, Boris & Arkadij: screenplay to Stalker (based on the novel Roadside Picnic), filmed by Andrei Tarkovskij, 1979
27. Bachelard, Gaston: The Poetics of Space (first ed. 1958) Beacon Press, Boston 1994, p. 6