The French literary movement known as décadence, an offshoot of symbolism that “blossomed,” so to speak, during the nineteenth-century fin de siècle, shares with the culture of the recent turn of the century a powerful attraction toward artificial realities. This attraction takes center stage in two classic texts of décadence: Baudelaire’s Artificial Paradises, a description of drug experiences, and J.-K. Huysmans’s A Rebours (Against Nature), a one-character novel about an aristocrat, Des Esseintes, who literally attempts to recreate reality through art.

The late-nineteenth-century obsession with the artificial is much more escapist than the present involvement with VR. Nowadays we are drawn to simulacra out of infatuation with the power of our own technologies to produce near-perfect copies of the real. Judging by the importance of nature themes in digital installation art, many artists also seek compensation in computer simulations for the disappearance of natural environments. We hope to recapture through technology the pristine world that technological culture took away from us.

For symbolist and décadence authors, on the contrary, Nature is the archenemy, and it needs to be corrected by art. Baudelaire regards the artificial not as a copy that should make up for a lost original but as a way to overcome the terrifying chaos of organic life. In his tellingly titled prose poem “Any where out of the world” (English in the French text), he visits in imagination several landscapes in the hope of finding one that will soothe a hypersensitive soul unable to find a home in physical reality. Though none of these potential travel destinations ultimately tempts the soul—they are still too much anchored in this world—it is revealing of Baudelaire’s aesthetic preferences that one of them is Lisbon, a city made of marble and water whose inhabitants, we are told, harbor such a hatred of vegetation that they cut down all the trees. Anguished by any kind of uncontrolled proliferation, Baudelaire’s soul needs the dynamic symmetry, rhythmic movement, rule-governed metamorphosis, and structured multiplicity of art-made realities in which everything is “ordre et beauté, luxe, calme, et volupté” (order and beauty, luxury, calm and voluptuousness).

Yet to reach the worlds where his vision of patterned beauty will be fulfilled, Baudelaire is willing to trust the forces of randomness. These forces will take him on journeys of uncertain destination (anywhere out of the world), to the bottom of the unknown (“au fond de l’inconnu pour trouver du nouveau”), or, in the case of Artificial Paradises, toward the unpredictability of drug-induced hallucinations: “You are now sufficiently bolstered for a long, remarkable voyage. The steam whistle blows, the sails are set, and you, among all the other travelers, are a privileged exception, for you alone are unaware of your destination. You wished it to be so; long live destiny!” (40).

The drug trip unfolds in three stages, but it is the second that truly matters in terms of artistic vision. In the first stage—a warm-up for the second—the drug user rediscovers ordinary reality and ordinary language, the first through an increased acuity of the senses, and the second through the enhancement of the mind’s analogical faculties. In the third stage, the mind is overtaken by a mystical feeling of peace and love. Situated beyond physical reality and beyond sensory perception, this “calm and immobile beatitude,” this “glorious resignation” (57), is a purely spiritual experience that evades poetic language, since the poetic way of expressing the spiritual
is to capture it in a metaphorical body. The truly poetic moment occurs, therefore, in the second stage, when thoughts are invaded by a tumult of images, when analogy let loose ties together perceptions with ideas and perceptions between themselves (the famous synaesthesia), when the abstract becomes concrete and the concrete intelligible, when the mind’s altered state of consciousness reveals the laws that produce the sensible world.

Baudelaire’s description of this second stage anticipates many of the themes of cyberculture. His predilection for images of water and fluidity prefigures Marcos Novak’s vision of cyberspace as “liquid architecture”:

I have before suggested that for those who are artistically inclined, water takes on a disturbing charm when illuminated by hashish. Waterfalls, babbling jets of water, harmonious cascades, and the blue expanses of the sea will sing, flow, and sleep in the innermost depth of your mind. It would be, perhaps, less than wise to permit a man in such condition to linger on the banks of some still pool; like the fisherman in the ballad, he might allow himself to be carried off by the undine. (Artificial Paradises, 23)

Though nothing could be stylistically further removed from Baudelaire’s polished lyrical prose than the oral brainstorming of a child of contemporary pop culture, the theme of fluidity is no less prominent in Lanier’s dreams of a digital paradise than in Baudelaire’s evocation of the chemical version:

Our egos are very important to us and we really separate ourselves off from the environment and from the overall flow of life. What’ll happen is that in Virtual Reality we’ll recreate the flow. The flow anywhere is the same flow, so the flow that we create in Virtual Reality will be a new flow but it’s also a part of the same eternal flow and we’ll become all of a sudden . . . [sentence unfinished]. (Zhai, Get Real, 187)

In the liquid architecture of Baudelaire’s artificial paradises, shapes morph into each other as easily as in computer graphics—

Then the hallucinations begin. External things, forms and images, swell to monstrous proportions, revealing themselves in fantastic shapes as yet unimagined. Instantly passing through a variety of transformations, they enter your being, or rather you enter theirs. The most singular ambiguities, the most inexplicable transpositions of ideas take place in your sensations. (Artificial Paradises, 19)

—and the self undergoes alternative experiences of embodiment:

You stare at a tree that harmoniously rocks in the breeze; in a few seconds what would be for a poet a natural comparison becomes a reality for you. You endow the tree with your passions and desires; its capriciously swaying limbs become your own, so that soon you yourself are that tree. Thus, when looking skyward, you behold a bird soaring in the deep azure. At first, the bird seems to represent the immortal yearning to soar above earthly concerns. But you have already become that bird. . . . The idea of evaporation—slow, uninterrupted and obsessive—grips your mind and soon you will apply the idea to your own thoughts, to your own thinking process. Through some odd
misunderstanding, through a type of transposition of intellectual quip, you feel yourself vanishing into thin air. (51)

This passage is worth comparing with Lanier’s statement: “You could become a comet in the sky one moment and then gradually unfold into a spider that’s bigger than the planet that looks down at all your friends from high above” (Zhai, Get Real, 177). Both Lanier and Baudelaire envision their artificial realities as the site of a corporeal participation in a work, or rather in a state of art. In keeping with the idea that VR flows out of the body, Lanier imagines himself becoming a musical instrument and “blowing”—bodying forth—an entire landscape out of this virtual body:

You can have musical instruments that play reality in all kinds of ways aside from making sound in Virtual Reality. That’s another way of describing arbitrary physics. With a saxophone you’ll be able to play cities and dancing lights, and you’ll be able to play the herding of buffalo’s plains made of crystal, and you’ll be able to play your own body and change yourself as you play the saxophone. (ibid.)

Meanwhile, in Baudelaire’s hallucinations, music “enters within you, and you mingle with it” (Artificial Paradises, 64). Paintings take on a life of their own and open their space to the spectator: “You take your place and play your part in the most wretched paintings” (21). The frenetic activity of the drug-stimulated imagination, enhanced by the intensification of sensory perception, writes novels in the mind about a self that Baudelaire conceives, long before postmodernism came up with the notion of the decentered and multiple subject, as living many lives under different avatars: “For the proportions of time and being are thoroughly disrupted by the multiform variety of your feeling and the intensity of your ideas. You could say that many lives are crowded in the compass of one hour. Do you not, then, bear resemblance to a fantastic novel, which will come to life rather than be written?” (52).

Through synaesthetic relations—a phenomenon that inspires many of Baudelaire’s poetic metaphors—the sensations provided by these various art forms blend together into an experience that foreshadows the VR dream of total art. If sounds have colors, colors have smells, smells have taste, and words acquire a body of their own (“words are reborn, clothed of flesh and blood” [63–64]), there are many doorways into this complete experience, but as in Lanier’s imagination, the surest access is by way of music: “At other times, music recites you infinite poems, or places you within frightening or fantastic dramas. Harmony and melody become inextricably linked with the objects around you” (20–21). Total art, for Baudelaire, is not merely the fusion through music of poetry, drama, and visual representation but above all the contemplation of the spiritual essence of things. As a sympathizer with esoteric doctrines—neo-Platonism, cabalism, and Swedenborgian mysticism—Baudelaire conceives this essence as the mathematical laws that govern the spectacle of the physical world. To the hallucinating mind, the language of music is equally adept at creating horizontal correspondences between the senses and at revealing vertical correspondences between numbers and things:

Musical notes become numbers, and if you are gifted with any mathematical aptitude, the melody and the harmony, while retaining their sensuous and voluptuous qualities, are transformed into a vast arithmetical operation: numbers engender numbers, the phases of generation of which you follow with inexplicable facility and an agility equal only to that of their execution. (51)
This view of the world as governed by numbers will be literalized in the sensory displays of VR, since they are generated by binary code. Through the multiple correspondences of musical language, Baudelaire is thus able to enjoy the exuberant show of the artificial world and to access at the same time the underlying program. This vision offers a synthesis of unity and multiplicity, lawfulness and movement, that borrows the dynamic growth and varied spectacle of organic life but protects it from the chaotic proliferation that terrifies the poet’s soul.

Or at least so it does for a while. By the law of probabilities, a trip taken anywhere out of the world can lead to hell as likely as to paradise. The order of the artificial paradises is built on the forces of randomness, and sooner or later this order returns to chaos. Of a fellow drug user Baudelaire writes:

He told me that amid the intermingling of pleasure and delight, that supreme delight in which one feels so full of life and so possessed of genius, he had suddenly encountered an object of terror. The beauty of his sensations, which had at first dazzled him, were quickly displaced by horror. . . . “I was,” he said, “like a frightened horse that flies off into a gallop toward the edge of a precipice, wishing to stop, yet knowing that he cannot. Certainly, that was a terrifying gallop. My thoughts, bound to my circumstances and surroundings, to the accidental and all that the word chance implies, had taken an absolute and purely rhapsodic turn. It’s too late! I continually repeated to myself in despair.” (44)

Baudelaire must have sensed that secondhand narratives of a bad trip weigh little against the temptation constituted by his poetically inspired first-person evocations of the drug experience. To acquit himself of his ethical responsibility toward the reader he dwells forcefully on two additional dangers: hashish drains the will, a faculty indispensable to artistic creation, and it affords no opportunity for growth and transformation, no escape from the monster within, for hashish is nothing more than a magnifying mirror of our inner being; the drug user “is subjugated, but much to his displeasure, only by himself—that is to say, by the part of himself that is already dominant” (39). The instant satisfaction granted by artificial paradises is a prodigal expense of mental energy that ends up in pure waste, because this energy cannot replace itself, as does willpower—a faculty that for Baudelaire actually accrues through use—and because it does not produce anything that can be shared. In the controlling power of the mind, and in the potential communality of the experience, lies the main difference between Baudelaire’s artificial paradises and Lanier’s vision. Explicitly conceived as a remedy for the drug experience, VR “is like having shared hallucinations, except that you can compose them like works of art; you can compose the external world in any way at all as an act of communication” (Zhai, Get Real, 182).

The danger of experimenting with the forces of randomness is not lost on Huysmans’s hero, Des Esseintes, when he embarks on a quest for his own artificial paradise. Whereas Baudelaire chooses to be passively taken toward unknown destinations, Des Esseintes builds his world against nature through an act of pure will, following with steely mental discipline a precise blueprint that leaves nothing to chance and a minimum to improvisation: “The secret is to know how to go about it, to know how to concentrate the mind on one single detail, to know how to dissociate oneself sufficiently to produce the hallucination and thus to substitute the vision of reality for reality itself” (Against Nature, 20).
After a youth spent trying out all worldly pleasures and finding nothing but boredom in this pursuit, Des Esseintes, the last scion of a once illustrious family, decides to withdraw from society and to seclude himself in a world of his own making where he will devote himself entirely to the satisfaction of his elitist tastes. He sells the ancestral chateau and buys a modest house in a lonely suburb of Paris, indifferent to its external appearance, because he intends to banish everything natural from his life, including the light of day. His resentment of nature and his worship of the artificial are even more strident than Baudelaire’s: “Des Esseintes considered, furthermore, that artifice was the distinctive characteristic of human genius. As he was wont to remark, Nature has had her days; she has finally exhausted, through the nauseating uniformity of her landscapes and her skies, the sedulous patience of men of refined taste” (20). Des Esseintes’s life will be spent indoors, in a decor designed to offer aesthetic gratification to all of the senses, especially to the “lower” and most artistically deprived of them: smell, touch, and taste. The book is almost entirely occupied by lengthy discussions of such topics as the furnishing of the house, Des Esseintes’s selection of artworks and color schemes, his experiments with new perfumes, his ruminations on painting, music, and literature, the development, through what we would call today bioengineering, of strange new species of flowers, and erotic fantasies synaesthetically induced by the taste and smell of a purple bonbon.

This compendium of decadent refinements anticipates many of the cultural topoi of the most recent fin de siècle. Foremost among them is Des Esseintes’s Baudrillardian preference for copies over originals. His fishtank contains only mechanical fish (virtual pets), the color schemes in his house are designed to be seen in artificial light only, and he feeds himself with pills that simulate the taste of haute cuisine. But a perfect copy of nature is still too natural for Des Esseintes; the ultimate triumph of art is to denaturize nature itself: “After having artificial flowers that imitated real ones, he now wanted real flowers that mimicked artificial ones” (73). From a philosophical point of view, this pursuit of the artificial is much more sophisticated than the purely consumerist obsession of Baudrillard’s subject with the hyper-real; or at least so it appears to the hermit, who justifies his hedonistic project as a spiritual quest:

Thus, were not his propensities towards artifice, his need for eccentricity, the result, in short, of the specious subjects he had studied, of otherworldly subtle distinctions, of quasi-theological speculations? They were, essentially, outbursts of feeling, impulses towards an ideal, towards an unknown universe, towards a far-off blessedness as desirable as that which we are promised by the Holy Scripture. (66)

This reminds us of Baudelaire’s pursuit of the Ideal in “Any where out of the world”—a poem prominently displayed in a reliquary on the mantelpiece of Des Esseintes’s fireplace—and of the mystical overtones so often found in cybercultural discourse.

When he furnishes his home—expression of his inner self—Des Esseintes approaches the task with the same maniac attention to detail that today’s hackers bring to the design of their Web pages, or Second Life players to the construction of a house that truly reflects the personality of their on-line character:

And then during a period when Des Esseintes had felt the need to draw attention to himself, he had devised sumptuous, peculiar schemes of decoration, dividing his salon into a series of variously carpeted alcoves, which could be related by subtle analogies, by indeterminate correlations of tone, either cheerful or gloomy, delicate or flamboyant,
Like windowed computer displays (concept proposed by Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*), Des Esseintes’s living space is structured as a series of subspaces with different themes and functions, between which he divides his days according to a rigid hourly schedule.

Also very contemporary is Des Esseintes’s fascination with forms of sexuality that pass as unnatural because they challenge the traditional binarism of gender categories. One of the erotic fantasies induced by the above-mentioned bonbon is an encounter with Miss Urania, an American woman and circus acrobat who gradually turns into a man. Des Esseintes takes particular delight in imagining the figure of the Roman high priest Elagabalus, spending his time “surrounded by his eunuchs, at woman’s work, giving himself the title of Empress, and every night bedding a different Emperor” (28). Anticipating the fixation of the steam punk movement of science fiction on steam engines, Des Esseintes voices his lust for a sexual coupling of man and machine in a rapturous celebration of the erotic appeal of the locomotive: “Does there, in this world, exist a being conceived in the joys of fornication and born of the birth pangs of a womb, of which the model and the type is more dazzling or more splendid than those two locomotives [the Crampton and the Engerth] now in service on the railroads of Northern France?” (20). For Des Esseintes, the machine is to man’s artificial recreation of the world what woman is to God’s natural work: its supreme achievement.

In the literary domain, Des Esseintes’s taste elaborates on Baudelaire’s conception of poetry as the “mathematically exact” art of choosing the right word, and of expanding its meaning through the “evocative witchcraft” (*sorcellerie évocatoire*) of a network of correspondences:

The words chosen would then be so inevitable that they would render all other words superfluous; the adjective, positioned in so ingenious and so definitive a manner that it could not legitimately be displaced, would open such vistas that for days on end the reader would ponder over its meaning, at once precise and manifold, would know the present, reconstruct the past, and make conjectures about the souls of the characters, as these were revealed by the light of a single epithet. (162)

This description suggests the twentieth-century aesthetics of the open work (*Eco, The Open Work*), but it differs from the postmodern ideal of the self-renewing “work in movement” in that infinite signification is generated not through a physical permutation of textual elements, as will happen in hypertext and other literary combinatory games, but by assigning the right place to every word in a frozen structure that reflects, on the whole, the static architecture of Des Esseintes’s artificial reality.

This static architecture is what will eventually doom the project to failure. Des Esseintes’s “refined Thebaid” ends up as a prison for both mind and body for a very simple reason: there is nothing to do in it. As Doležel has observed (*Heterocosmica*, 48), the novel is entirely devoid of physical action. Whereas the chaos that overtakes Baudelaire’s paradise is allegorized as a powerful animal body galloping out of control, the rigid order that stifles Des Esseintes’s creation works itself into the flesh of the recluse through various maladies. While the body languishes, the mind is overwhelmed by “currents of emotions,” “torrents of anguish,” and “hurricanes of rage” as wild and uncontrollable as the forces of nature that the decadent aesthete sought to expel (53).

At the end of the novel, Des Esseintes abandons his retreat and returns to the world to
rekindle whatever life is left in his exhausted body. As long as he is engaged in the design of his private space he finds respite from his inner demons, but as soon as a project is completed he is overcome by the same boredom that drove him out of the world. Typical of his overall feelings is the state of mind that follows his horticultural experiments: “He felt somewhat weary, and found this atmosphere of hothouse plants suffocatingly oppressive” (Against Nature, 78). For a while Des Esseintes is able to postpone the terminal stage of boredom by throwing himself into new projects or by revisiting his art collections, but he eventually runs out of new senses to explore, and even the art experience loses the self-renewing quality that sustains mental activity. Randomness and the other have been so completely excluded from the design of Des Esseintes’s artificial paradise that once its order is in place it affords no discovery, no potential for growth and metamorphosis, no relief from the mind’s obsessions. It is a totally lifeless environment. Though they take opposite routes, Baudelaire’s and Des Esseintes’s quests for total gratification lead to the same state of morbid self-contemplation.

It was left to an author who later developed a keen appreciation for the literary potential of electronic technology to propose a virtual reality of the mind that sustains life and achieves autonomy by instilling a seed of randomness in an otherwise carefully designed alternative world. In The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., Robert Coover tells the story of a middle-aged, in appearance utterly ordinary, office worker, J. Henry Waugh, who spends all of his free time managing the colorful cast of players of a fantasy baseball league. Let us not be blinded by the apparent triviality of this project: though Coover chooses the humorous approach to reality recreation, there is as much at stake in J. Henry’s humble game as in Baudelaire’s and Des Esseintes’s ambitious artistic and spiritual quests. J. Henry is the inventor of a baseball-simulation system in which every play is determined by a throw of the dice. While he creates the players, specifies their athletic abilities and human personalities, assembles the teams, arranges trades, makes the schedule, selects the daily lineups, plays the games, and keeps the statistics, he lets the outcome of the games be determined by a combination of rules and chance that brings life and suspense to the unfolding of baseball history. Thanks to the randomness of the dice throw, the fantasy league becomes the site of emergent behaviors that bring to its creator both heartbreak (when his favorite player is killed by a pitch) and delight (when the players literally come to life and undo the tragic accident). By permitting events that subject him to this emotional roller coaster, J. Henry Waugh not only works out a compromise between Baudelaire’s terrifying chaos and Des Esseintes’s sterile order, he also gives a human dimension to his fantasy world that makes it livable.

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1 Jaron Lanier is explicit on his contempt of escapism: “People imagine Virtual Reality as being an escapist thing where people will be ever more removed from the real world and ever more insensitive. I think it’s exactly the opposite; it will make us intensely aware of what it is to be human in the physical world, which we take for granted now because we’re so immersed in it” (quoted in Zhai, Get Real, 188).

2 Last line of L’Invitation au voyage.

3 Last line of Le Voyage.

4 I use reveal rather than create in this case because Baudelaire believes in an underlying,
absolutely objective order of things. It is the task of the poet to capture this order through a mathematically exact selection of words.

5 The text describes a few other scary drug experiences.

References