

The Decadence of Mimetic Science: Against Nature 2.0

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Abstract. This Science Fiction Prototype re-imagines the technologies of augmentation which seek to create a space “overlaid” onto our own with a ‘mixed’ reality. It is proposed that this can be seen as an attempt to build an unseen zone that is reminiscent of the aether worlds of the 19th and early 20th Century. Taking an aesthetic developed by the decadent author JK Huysmans to create a neo-decadent prototype braided with Huysman’s own work this prototype initiates a discussion on the design of future sensuous sound objects as components of a hyperphysical interface to an artificial mind and its material and virtual counterparts.

Keywords. Neo-decadence, mimetic science, sound objects, simulacra, science fiction prototypes.

Introduction

This science fiction prototype takes the scientific ideas of consciousness uploading [1] and discusses these by creating fictional relations between the following areas: the brain in a vat; the history of mimetic science; scientific simulation and experiment [2] and bioart [3]. I avoid the major philosophical debates and problems of the brain in a vat [4] but it is worth articulating briefly what these are by way of context:

- A brain is removed from the body and suspended in a vat of life-sustaining fluid.
- It is connected to a supercomputer that holds a simulation of the world.
- The brain is wired via its neurons to send and receive electrical impulses to and from the simulation.
- These create sensations identical to those the brain normally receives from the world.

Can the brain tell the difference between the simulation and the real, does the brain/mind know it is in a jar?

To complicate matters further we might ask if the brain in a jar is itself a simulation – a mind uploaded in some transhumanist or strong AI. These issues are questions I would like the workshop to consider in a closer reading of the *vignette* I provide below. The fiction develops from my previous research through one further adjustment to the

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above contextual setting: If the brain-in-a-vat/uploaded brain in a liquid computer (so it has a materiality almost indistinguishable between these two variants) sits in a space which is real but is augmented through technological virtuality – a mixed reality, can it distinguish between this external real and its own double?

The following theory-fiction takes a neo-decadent science fiction and updates the characters and context of the novel *Against Nature* by Huysmans [5] it takes the stereotypical neo-victorian or ‘steampunk’ context of advancing technology gathered around steam power found for example in Sterling and Gibson’s *The Difference Engine* [6] to the advances in technology beginning with computing in our timeline accelerating to present day standards including advanced bioart [3].

The scientific context for the paper, without wishing to ignore the significant steps in movement toward an uploaded consciousness or the simulation of the real and life in general, suggests that working with a counterfactual history of the science of the aether might perhaps be productive. The prototype developed here values the Aether as an hypothesis of a science, discredited by Michelson and Morley, as an invention: as both a fiction and as a one-time science which might be re-imagined and put to work in thinking about mixed reality technology.

This short vignette takes the form of a flash fiction (it is very short), I intercut this with extracts from Huysmans novel. The story postulates that the experiments initiated by Huysmans central character the aesthete Des Esseintes are prototypes of a mixed reality. In the novel Des Esseintes lives an increasingly simulated and isolated life - where sensations are artificially produced; food is reduced to its essential nutrients; he engages in experiments creating perfume and artificial plants; travels without leaving home: simply thinking about somewhere being sufficient and offering more pleasure than actually being there. The story concludes with an afterword – a long concluding extract from chapter eight of Huysmans novel. This is provided so that the reader might both better read my simulation of the original and see the original itself as a prototyping of biotechnological and simulacral interfaces.

Stylistically, I am not a match for Huysmans. However, I attempt here to mimic his style, which tends to the exuberant, excessive and overly descriptive. Huysmans provides levels of detail rather than a plot or story. I do this through reminiscence, recalling and braiding in descriptive passages from Huysmans novel, using the device of memory and Des Esseintes’ memories, of pre brain-in-a-jar experiences, or simulated counterparts of memories. I write these, together with my own observations on machines, in terms of an attention to the detail of their materiality (particularly in relation to sound) and an aesthetic of steam and clouds much in the manner Huysmans might and following his use of, for example, descriptive passages on colour. I reference, fictionalising Peter Gallison’s [7], history of mimetic science through a re-telling of the cloud-chamber and the airpump as the birth of simulation meeting developments in artificial tissue engineering and as the structure and support for a disembodied mind.

1. Science Fiction Prototyping and Mixed Reality

In the context of Huysmans writing the technologies of mixed reality that seek to create a space “overlaid” onto our own and associated work in pervasive and locative media, might have been seen as an attempt to build an unseen realm in similar ways to the aetheric planes of the 18th and 19th centuries.

Prior research on these alternate worlds argued that the new realms of mixed realities share various themes with these previous unseen realms in that they: promise instantaneous communication across invisible boundaries; extend our senses and enhance our power to act both locally and at a distance; can act as cultural memory and contain traces of its visitors (alive or dead); are oracular, mysterious, uncanny, and deeply sensual. Here I suggest that this sensuality would have been particularly pleasurable to the Baron des Esseintes.

This workshop presentation will be based on work commissioned and supported by the Digital Research Unit [3] under the direction of the author and a series of workshops developed for exploring the design of mixed reality speculatively through notions of science fiction props, weird objects and strange realms and zones. It also draws on collaborative research undertaken by the author as part of the *Emergent Objects* research group under the AHRC and EPSRC joint programme *Designing for the 21st Century* [8]. The Emergent Objects project *Hoverflies* – was an investigation into hyper-physical interfaces and hybrid spatial situations here the disembodied mind – whether the brain in a vat or the container containing an uploaded transhumanist Mind or strong AI, here this is considered as a hyperphysical interface to a decadent mixed reality in a re-imagined culture of the fin-de-siecle.

Research methods employed in my previous work include devising processes from theatre and performance and speculative vignettes to describe an imagined wireless space of invisible forces, E-M frequencies and noise, as a kind of *aether*. This provided a context for the design of technological and playful objects. I hope to develop that context through discussion and participation in the Science Fiction Prototyping workshop.

2. Against Nature 2.0

Des Esseintes was reminiscing once again, it seemed to be all he was capable of these days –indeed he had made a habit of such things for most of his life he thought...

Dreaming of a black dinner [Extract]

“In the days when he had deemed it necessary to affect singularity, Des Esseintes had designed marvelously strange furnishings, dividing his salon into a series of alcoves hung with varied tapestries to relate by a subtle analogy, by a vague harmony of joyous or sombre, delicate or barbaric colors to the character of the Latin or French books he loved. And he would seclude himself in turn in the particular recess whose _decor_ seemed best to correspond with the very essence of the work his caprice of the moment induced him to read. He had constructed, too, a lofty high room intended for the reception of his tradesmen. Here they were ushered in and seated alongside each other in church pews, while from a pulpit he preached to them a sermon on dandyism, adjuring his bootmakers and tailors implicitly to obey his briefs in the matter of style, threatening them with pecuniary excommunication if they failed to follow to the letter the instructions contained in his monitories and bulls. He acquired the reputation of an eccentric, which he enhanced by wearing costumes of white velvet, and goldembroidered waistcoats, by inserting, in place of a cravat, a Parma bouquet in the opening of his shirt, by giving famous dinners to men of letters, one of which, a revival

of the eighteenth century, celebrating the most futile of his misadventures, was a funeral repast. In the dining room, hung in black and opening on the transformed garden with its ash-powdered walks, its little pool now bordered with basalt and filled with ink, its clumps of cypresses and pines, the dinner had been served on a table draped in black, adorned with baskets of violets and scabiouses, lit by candelabra from which green flames blazed, and by chandeliers from which wax tapers flared. To the sound of funeral marches played by a concealed orchestra, nude negresses, wearing slippers and stockings of silver cloth with patterns of tears, served the guests. Out of black-edged plates they had drunk turtle soup and eaten Russian rye bread, ripe Turkish olives, caviar, smoked Frankfort black pudding, game with sauces that were the color of licorice and blacking, truffle gravy, chocolate cream, puddings, nectarines, grape preserves, mulberries and black-heart cherries; they had sipped, out of dark glasses, wines from Limagne, Roussillon, Tenedos, Val de Penas and Porto, and after the coffee and walnut brandy had partaken of kvas and porter and stout. The farewell dinner to a temporarily dead virility—this was what he had written on invitation cards designed like bereavement notices.”

His paintings were still there of course and he could imagine occupying some of the strange and even terrifying spaces of Gustave Moreau just thinking about being there, or those of Odilon Redon, could almost give him the chills – and all without the discomfort of actually travelling...

Recalling exotic expeditions [Extract]

“They enclosed inconceivable apparitions in their rough, gold-striped pear-tree wood. A head of a Merovingian style, resting against a bowl, a bearded man, at once resembling a Buddhist priest and an orator at a public reunion, touching the ball of a gigantic cannon with his fingers; a frightful spider revealing a human face in its body. The charcoal drawings went even farther into dream terrors. Here, an enormous die in which a sad eye winked; there, dry and arid landscapes, dusty plains, shifting ground, volcanic upheavals catching rebellious clouds, stagnant and livid skies. Sometimes the subjects even seemed to have borrowed from the cacodemons of science, reverting to prehistoric times. A monstrous plant on the rocks, queer blocks everywhere, glacial mud, figures whose simian shapes, heavy jaws, beetling eyebrows, retreating foreheads and flat skulls, recalled the ancestral heads of the first quaternary periods, when inarticulate man still devoured fruits and seeds, and was still contemporaneous with the mammoth, the rhinoceros and the big bear. These designs were beyond anything imaginable; they leaped, for the most part, beyond the limits of painting and introduced a fantasy that was unique, the fantasy of a diseased and delirious mind. And, indeed, certain of these faces, with their monstrous, insane eyes, certain of these swollen, deformed bodies resembling carafes, induced in Des Esseintes recollections of typhoid, memories of feverish nights and of the shocking visions of his infancy which persisted and would not be suppressed.”

The sounds of the air pump breathed in and out and he could sense the squeaking as the faux-leather airbag tightened and relaxed its musculature – he was pleased they'd made such a good job of it for him, it was so, so satisfying, soothing, to imagine its fleshy texture. He thought about the outside, as if one could in fact even be thought these days. The apartment was laid out exactly as it had always been – he was surprised to

have lasted so long – the miracles of modern science, first the turn of one century and almost without noticing the turning of another.

It had all started of course with Babbage – the analytical engine had been invented just in time and now its wonders cast an aetheric plane, luminiferous and soniferous, over the whole world, or at least that was how it seemed to Des Esseintes from his particular and peculiar vantage point: it was as if the past had been etched into a series of really thin plates and that Des Esseintes could see and hear through them all – restack them in any order, over and over. The new novelties of narrative possibility tickled Des Esseintes, tickled him and tinged him a pinkish-orange. After that, well, everything had changed. You might even say it had slowly metamorphosed, as the analytical mill had revealed the whole world to be nothing but process: the all, the everything, revealed to be a kind of manipulable field of mind-aether-matter. Des Esseintes found it increasingly difficult to separate thinking from being. The experiments had continued of course, they became, in fact, quite the rage! All the dandy's wanted a simulated jewelled tortoise to flaneur about town with now.

The synthetics and simulations – all that wonderful mimetic science, how far they had taken it and how easily it had become an audio-visual artform to end all others. At first it hadn't been like that and then, as the real collapsed into the background, they started to need a mimetic medicine of sorts. Simulations as art-therapy, acoustic simulations as psychopharmaceuticals of the mind: living simulations becoming a kind of medical substitute for real interaction with life. Now, philosophers claimed, the whole world was a simulacra: how wonderful Des Esseintes thought to himself, to think what he had started! How the cloud-chamber had proved the purposeless pleasures of pure experiment! You just never knew what you would find Des Esseintes reflected, talking to himself again. The first iteration was all but useless really, he supposed, but in a strange way he couldn't quite understand, Des Esseintes kept waking from a dream in which he was dependent in some vital way he couldn't explain, on that ordinary air-pump. After this as Galison had shown, how close these things really were – images and science: this pleased Des Esseintes and he flushed again and the air filled with clouds of microsound in steam-hisses, brass-scratches and glass-glitches as the analytical engine did its soniferous mixological work again.

The second in the family of cloud chambers was, in its own way he supposed, quite startling in what it revealed but the latest cloud-chamber's well, those really were clouds, these really were reverberant chambers! The echoes you could hear in them! Condensate really did form in them and the glories, Oh! the glory of the rainbows and brocken spectre's! the glorious halo's! All we need thought Des Esseintes is a miniature mountain range and it would be sublime, well he corrected himself, better than sublime really, better than being there actually, no travel, no fuss! In thinking this, and how he'd started a trend back then in the fin-de siecle, he blushed a little, the temperature rose and he flushed a little, as the airbag stretched and flexed and sphincters opened and closed and the pulsing and fluttering steam-organs whirred into life once more. The satisfying clicking and hissing of the analytic engine, its sounds refined through careful acoustic simulations to synthesise the beating sound of humming-bird hearts flying through a sibilant hiss of background fog, were positively music to Des Esseintes: the whole abstract sonic ensemble, the maintaining of acoustics, temperature and nutrients just so, was like a parallel biology, a botany of sorts, just as Des Esseintes had tended his plants, the tender ministrations his machines offered, in the coupling of biological and analytic engines, seemed to him to make for completion not extension in prosthesis.

He thought, thinking about it now, how the air-bag must look very similar in texture to some of his more fleshy plant experiments with living yet artificial tissue. With this Des Esseintes drifted into his steamier memories with a deep yet soft sigh.

3. Summary

Rethinking science fiction as a neo-decadent dreamer might present some new challenges for thinking of the value of science fiction prototyping. This short fiction might be taken as an alternative past – one in which Babbage's analytic engine was in operation at the turn of the century and in which rapid industrial and informational development has given rise to the technological breakthrough depicted. Another way of imagining the kind of milieu in which Des Esseintes' updated upload story might be viewed is in a near future where a neo-victorian concern with heaviness of materiality overcomes the increasing dematerialisation of objects in a new found concern of interaction design with tactility, physicality and mass. Of the two this would be the preferred interpretation where the prototypical concern of the narrative is in the problem of prototyping mixed realities involving quasi-living materials.

Some concluding remarks on another aspect of this problematic will perhaps help a more general conclusion on this Science Fiction Prototype: This is the problem of the sounds of the future (or of the sounds of the past carried through the soniferous aether perhaps) and how a science fiction might prototype these qualities through 'writing' sound. Such sounds provide a central theme in the Science Fiction Prototype depicted here in the workings of the Des Esseintes' artefact. How do these sound effects work?

Science Fiction provides a means of prototyping the sounds of the future and a way of investigating sounds yet to be heard through descriptive and metaphoric imagery. This 'writing on sound', where a fiction might be described as being haunted by the sounds of the future is suggested as a way of thinking about the sound of science and the sounds of technology. The central challenges of designing future sound objects, it is proposed here, are in the relations between a sound, its temporal and tactile qualities and the ability to express these through reverberant acoustic interactions with an environment and in the actions depicted in the story. Writers of such science fiction prototypes need to develop new ways of hearing and listening. Such listening will involve the study of sound effects, soundscapes and other areas of film sound design, before they can be fully prototyped. One further avenue for future research on Science Fiction prototyping of sound objects might be through writing fictions for radio and audiobooks and further research on writing sonic science fictions is proposed.

It is further suggested that the field of sound effects design for science fiction film and relations between props and sounds might be productive for writers of future sound prototypes. Science Fictions prototype sounds – not as the sound devices or musical devices of literature – not for what the sound means – but for how it works: there is a necessary shift from interpretation to performativity in writing sound. Science Fiction Prototypes can help designers of mixed realities arrive at developed sound objects that are responsive to hyperphysical interactions and can be matched in descriptions of physical or hybrid physical/digital artifice. Sound objects and sonic events described through science fiction prototypes can specify performance of physical descriptions and actions, the dynamics of manipulation and interaction and the specific sonic intention of future mixed reality interfaces.

4. Afterword: A bio-fiction Prototype (1884)

Such neo-victorian science fictions as the one proposed above thread the present through the past or offer a reimagining of the past defining the present. It is this spirit that this short science fiction prototype on sound in mixed reality was written. The extract below by Huysman's from *Against Nature* is provided as illustrative of Huysman's style and to provide evidence from times past of what might now be viewed as a prototype mixed reality: one that might provide lessons for prototypes of the future.

“He had always been passionately fond of flowers, but during his residence at Jutigny, that love had been lavished upon flowers of all sorts; he had never cultivated distinctions and discriminations in regard to them. Now his taste in this direction had grown refined and selfconscious. For a long time he had scorned the popular plants which grow in flat baskets, in watered pots, under green awnings or under the red parasols of Parisian markets. Simultaneous with the refinement of his literary taste and his preoccupations with art, which permitted him to be content only in the presence of choice creations, distilled by subtly troubled brains, and simultaneous with the weariness he began to feel in the presence of popular ideas, his love for flowers had grown purged of all impurities and lees, and had become clarified. He compared a florist's shop to a microcosm wherein all the categories of society are represented. Here are poor common flowers, the kind found in hovels, which are truly at home only when resting on ledges of garret windows, their roots thrust into milk bottles and old pans, like the gilly-flower for example. And one also finds stupid and pretentious flowers like the rose which belongs in the porcelain flowerpots painted by young girls. Then, there are flowers of noble lineage like the orchid, so delicate and charming, at once cold and palpitating, exotic flowers exiled in the heated glass palaces of Paris, princesses of the vegetable kingdom living in solitude, having absolutely nothing in common with the street plants and other bourgeois flora. He permitted himself to feel a certain interest and pity only for the popular flowers enfeebled by their nearness to the odors of sinks and drains in the poor quarters. In revenge he detested the bouquets harmonizing with the cream and gold rooms of pretentious houses. For the joy of his eyes he reserved those distinguished, rare blooms which had been brought from distant lands and whose lives were sustained by artful devices under artificial equators. But this very choice, this predilection for the conservatory plants had itself changed under the influence of his mode of thought. Formerly, during his Parisian days, his love for artificiality had led him to abandon real flowers and to use in their place replicas faithfully executed by means of the miracles performed with India rubber and wire, calico and taffeta, paper and silk. He was the possessor of a marvelous collection of tropical plants, the result of the labors of skilful artists who knew how to follow nature and recreate her step by step, taking the flower as a bud, leading it to its full development, even imitating its decline, reaching such a point of perfection as to convey every nuance--the most fugitive expressions of the flower when it opens at dawn and closes at evening, observing the appearance of the petals curled by the wind or rumpled by the rain, applying dew drops of gum on its matutinal corollas; shaping it in full bloom, when the branches bend under the burden of their sap, or showing the dried stem and shrivelled cupules, when calyxes are thrown off and leaves fall to the ground.”

*This wonderful art had held him entranced for a long while, but now he was dreaming of another experiment. He wished to go one step beyond. Instead of artificial flowers imitating real flowers, natural flowers should mimic the artificial ones. He directed his ideas to this end and had not to seek long or go far, since his house lay in the very heart of a famous horticultural region. He visited the conservatories of the Avenue de Chatillon and of the Aunay valley, and returned exhausted, his purse empty, astonished at the strange forms of vegetation he had seen, thinking of nothing but the species he had acquired and continually haunted by memories of magnificent and fantastic plants. The flowers came several days later. Des Esseintes holding a list in his hands, verified each one of his purchases. The gardeners from their wagons brought a collection of caladiums which sustained enormous heartshaped leaves on turgid hairy stalks; while preserving an air of relationship with its neighbor, no one leaf repeated the same pattern. Others were equally extraordinary. The roses like the *_Virginale_* seemed cut out of varnished cloth or oil-silks; the white ones, like the *_Albano_*, appeared to have been cut out of an ox's transparent pleura, or the diaphanous bladder of a pig. Some, particularly the *_Madame Mame_*, imitated zinc and parodied pieces of stamped metal having a hue of emperor green, stained by drops of oil paint and by spots of white and red lead; others like the *_Bosphorous_*, gave the illusion of a starched calico in crimson and myrtle green; still others, like the *_Aurora Borealis_*, displayed leaves having the color of raw meat, streaked with purple sides, violet fibrils, tumefied leaves from which oozed blue wine and blood. The *_Albano_* and the *_Aurora_* sounded the two extreme notes of temperament, the apoplexy and chlorosis of this plant. The gardeners brought still other varieties which had the appearance of artificial skin ridged with false veins, and most of them looked as though consumed by syphilis and leprosy, for they exhibited livid surfaces of flesh veined with scarlet rash and damasked with eruptions. Some had the deep red hue of scars that have just closed or the dark tint of incipient scabs. Others were marked with matter raised by scaldings. There were forms which exhibited shaggy skins hollowed by ulcers and relieved by cankers. And a few appeared embossed with wounds, covered with black mercurial hog lard, with green unguents of belladonna smeared with grains of dust and the yellow micas of iodoforme. Collected in his home, these flowers seemed to Des Esseintes more monstrous than when he had beheld them, confused with others among the glass rooms of the conservatory. "*_Sapristi!_*" he exclaimed enthusiastically. A new plant, modelled like the Caladiums, the *_Alocasia Metallica_*, excited him even more. It was coated with a layer of bronze green on which glanced silver reflections. It was the masterpiece of artificiality. It could be called a piece of stove pipe, cut by a chimney-maker into the form of a pike head. The men next brought clusters of leaves, lozenge-like in shape and bottle-green in color. In the center rose a rod at whose end a varnished ace of hearts swayed. As though meaning to defy all conceivable forms of plants, a fleshy stalk climbed through the heart of this intense vermilion ace--a stalk that in some specimens was straight, in others showed ringlets like a pig's tail. It was the *_Anthurium_*, an aroid recently imported into France from Columbia; a variety of that family to which also belonged an *_Amorphophallus_*, a Cochin China plant with leaves shaped like fish-knives, with long dark stems seamed with gashes, like lambs flecked with black. Des Esseintes exulted. They brought a new batch of monstrosities from the wagon: *_Echinopses_*, issuing from padded compresses with rose-colored flowers that looked like the pitiful stumps; gaping *_Nidularia_* revealing skinless foundations in steel plates; *_Tillandsia Lindeni_*, the color of wine must, with jagged scrapers; *_Cypripedia_*, with complicated contours, a crazy piece of work seemingly designed by*

a crazy inventor. They looked like sabots or like a lady's work-table on which lies a human tongue with taut filaments, such as one sees designed on the illustrated pages of works treating of the diseases of the throat and mouth; two little side-pieces, of a red jujube color, which appeared to have been borrowed from a child's toy mill completed this singular collection of a tongue's underside with the color of slate and wine lees, and of a glossy pocket from whose lining oozed a viscous glue. He could not remove his eyes from this unnatural orchid which had been brought from India. Then the gardeners, impatient at his procrastinations, themselves began to read the labels fastened to the pots they were carrying in. Bewildered, Des Esseintes looked on and listened to the cacophonous sounds of the names: the *Encephalartos horridus*, a gigantic iron rustcolored artichoke, like those put on portals of chateaux to foil wall climbers; the *Cocos Micania*, a sort of notched and slender palm surrounded by tall leaves resembling paddles and oars; the *Zamia Lehmanni*, an immense pineapple, a wondrous Chester leaf, planted in sweet-heather soil, its top bristling with barbed javelins and jagged arrows; the *Cibotium Spectabile*, surpassing the others by the craziness of its structure, hurling a defiance to revery, as it darted, through the palmated foliage, an enormous orang-outang tail, a hairy dark tail whose end was twisted into the shape of a bishop's cross. But he gave little heed, for he was impatiently awaiting the series of plants which most bewitched him, the vegetable ghouls, the carnivorous plants; the *Antilles Fly-Trap*, with its shaggy border, secreting a digestive liquid, armed with crooked prickles coiling around each other, forming a grating about the imprisoned insect; the *Drosera* of the peatbogs, provided with glandular hair; the *Sarracena* and the *Cephalothus*, opening greedy horns capable of digesting and absorbing real meat; lastly, the *Nepenthes*, whose capricious appearance transcends all limits of eccentric forms. He never wearied of turning in his hands the pot in which this floral extravagance stirred. It imitated the gum-tree whose long leaf of dark metallic green it possessed, but it differed in that a green string hung from the end of its leaf, an umbilic cord supporting a greenish urn, streaked with jasper, a sort of German porcelain pipe, a strange bird's nest which tranquilly swung about, revealing an interior covered with hair. "This is really something worth while," Des Esseintes murmured. He was forced to tear himself away, for the gardeners, anxious to leave, were emptying the wagons of their contents and depositing, without any semblance of order, the tuberous *Begonias* and black *Crotons* stained like sheet iron with Saturn red. Then he perceived that one name still remained on his list. It was the *Cattleya* of New Granada. On it was designed a little winged bell of a faded lilac, an almost dead mauve. He approached, placed his nose above the plant and quickly recoiled. It exhaled an odor of toy boxes of painted pine; it recalled the horrors of a New Year's Day. He felt that he would do well to mistrust it and he almost regretted having admitted, among the scentless plants, this orchid which evoked the most disagreeable memories. As soon as he was alone his gaze took in this vegetable tide which foamed in the vestibule. Intermingled with each other, they crossed their swords, their krisses and stanchions, taking on a resemblance to a green pile of arms, above which, like barbaric penons, floated flowers with hard dazzling colors. The air of the room grew rarefied. Then, in the shadowy dimness of a corner, near the floor, a white soft light crept. He approached and perceived that the phenomenon came from the *Rhizomorphes* which threw out these nightlamp gleams while respiring. "These plants are amazing," he reflected. Then he drew back to let his eye encompass the whole collection at a glance. His purpose was achieved. Not one single specimen seemed real; the cloth, paper, porcelain and metal seemed to have

been loaned by man to nature to enable her to create her monstrosities. When unable to imitate man's handiwork, nature had been reduced to copying the inner membranes of animals, to borrowing the vivid tints of their rotting flesh, their magnificent corruptions. "All is syphilis," thought Des Esseintes, his eye riveted upon the horrible streaked stainings of the Caladium plants caressed by a ray of light. And he beheld a sudden vision of humanity consumed through the centuries by the virus of this disease. Since the world's beginnings, every single creature had, from sire to son, transmitted the imperishable heritage, the eternal malady which has ravaged man's ancestors and whose effects are visible even in the bones of old fossils that have been exhumed. The disease had swept on through the centuries gaining momentum. It even raged today, concealed in obscure sufferings, dissimulated under symptoms of headaches and bronchitis, hysterics and gout. It crept to the surface from time to time, preferably attacking the ill-nourished and the poverty stricken, spotting faces with gold pieces, ironically decorating the faces of poor wretches, stamping the mark of money on their skins to aggravate their unhappiness. And here on the colored leaves of the plants it was resurgent in its original splendor. "It is true," pursued Des Esseintes, returning to the course of reasoning he had momentarily abandoned, "it is true that most often nature, left alone, is incapable of begetting such perverse and sickly specimens. She furnishes the original substance, the germ and the earth, the nourishing womb and the elements of the plant which man then sets up, models, paints, and sculpts as he wills. Limited, stubborn and formless though she be, nature has at last been subjected and her master has succeeded in changing, through chemical reaction, the earth's substances, in using combinations which had been long matured, cross-fertilization processes long prepared, in making use of slips and graftings, and man now forces differently colored flowers in the same species, invests new tones for her, modifies to his will the longstanding form of her plants, polishes the rough clods, puts an end to the period of botch work, places his stamp on them, imposes on them the mark of his own unique art." "It cannot be gainsaid," he thought, resuming his reflections, "that man in several years is able to effect a selection which slothful nature can produce only after centuries. Decidedly the horticulturists are the real artists nowadays."

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