

Virtual Reality, Decadence, and the Will to God: A *Rebours* and *Mondo 2000*

But things are going to get weirder before they get better. The Rupture before the Rapture. Social and economic dislocation that will make the Cracked 80's look like summer camp. So, in the words of the immortal Rudy Rucker, "Hang ten on the edge" because the 90's are going to be quite a ride!

--First Editorial of *Mondo 2000*

The replication of reality to ensure its control is behavior as old as Plato's shadows on the wall. Postmodern analysis seems to enjoy this way of looking at the world, in which experience is reduced to a set of signifiers, in which notions of natural "truth" are replaced with understandings of the created "true" ([McCarthy](#), par. 6). Underlying the motion towards better, clearer and more thorough ways of reproducing reality is the desire for total control and domination. In the perfectly replicated world, every parameter is under control, every variable manipulable. Each possible outcome is either precalculated or under the direct influence of the creator. Artistic creation becomes the expression of the desire to be in total control, to replicate reality more thoroughly than the predecessor, to be the God of the created world. J. K. Huysman's *Against Nature* (A *Rebours*) parallels the desires expressed in *Mondo 2000*. Both the drive behind the development of Virtual Reality (and its associated conceptual creations of cyberspace and the cyborg body) and the motivation behind Des Esseintes' disassociation with the mundane carry with them a sense of alienation from the "natural" world and dissatisfaction with its limitations. Whether in the state-of-the-art technology of Virtual Reality (VR) or in the aesthetic sensibilities of Des Esseintes, the desire to replicate and improve upon the inadequacies of "natural" reality takes control over artistic creation and human behavior in ways that might not be immediately evident given the technologically and socially disparate contexts in which they are both located.

The social dropout * is the tired individual, the subject of ennui, of boredom with the commonplace. The social dropout is disparaging of the living and critical of the dead--the intellectual and emotional loner by choice. Des Esseintes, the social dropout, looks for a higher plane, one in which he can hide away from human society, "shutting himself up in some snug retreat" in which "the thunderous din of life's inexorable activity" (24) is silenced. Des Esseintes cannot relate to the human beings around him. He makes his servants invisible to him when at all possible (32). He abandons the social scene after his encounters with mummies in "Pompadour catafalques behind rococo panelling," resolving to never set foot in it again (21). Huysmans' social dropout avoids both the hypocritical and the corrupt in the men of his age; he is full of distaste for "docile, good-looking ninnies, congenital dunces" and debauched "base and facile" gay young men (21). Des Esseintes finds his intellect unmatched, his interests undemonstrated, his sensibilities unstimulated; he bears "no hope of linking up with a mind which, like his own, took pleasure in a life of studious decrepitude; no hope of associating an intelligence as sharp and wayward as his own with that of any author or scholar" (22).

The alienation experienced by Des Esseintes shows up 100 years later, in the pages of *Mondo 2000*, a cult magazine that proposes to explore the options presented by the emergence of a "cyberworld", one in which the interaction between humans and machines is omnipresent, where "mondoids" (its readership) are invited to "cruise the datascape, ride the electronic range, hip hop their laptop, vacation in virtual reality, dine on designer foods, jack in to synchroenergizers and off with smart drugs guaranteed to enhance their brain and sex lives" ([Sobchack](#), 11). Part of *Mondo 2000's* first editorial can be taken as a summary of their vision of their contemporary world:

Our scouts are out there on the frontier sniffing the breeze and guess what? All the old war horses are dead. Eco-fundamentalism is out, conspiracy theory is dÈmodÈ, drugs are obsolete. There's a new whiff of apocalypticism across the land. A general sense that we are living at a very special juncture in the evolution of the species.

Back in the sixties, Carly Simon's brother wrote a book called *What to do Until the Apocalypse Comes*. It was about going back to the land, growing tubers and soybeans, reading by oil lamps. Finite possibilities and small is beautiful. It was *boring!* (in [Sobchack](#), authors' emphasis)

Mondo 2000 articulates much of the drive and vision behind the "will to virtuality" ([Kroker & Weinstein](#) 4), the focus on technology as a tool to remove one from the "reality of a lonely culture and radical social disconnection from everyday life" (5). Everyday experience is insufficient and unsatisfying. Everyday bodies are "wetware," inferior to solid-state "hardware." The slogan "Reality isn't enough anymore" that pioneers of VR touted ([Sobchack](#)) highlights their dissatisfaction with Nature. Technology offers an escape tunnel from the prison that is the human body--only a tunnel, as the experience must be channeled through the appropriate technological apparatus, but an escape route nonetheless--into a realm where possibilities are endless, where sensory stimulation is taken to new levels, an "electronically constituted reality" where the human sensorium [is plugged] into interactive communion with the computer, so that the user transcends--and, all too often in this context, elides--not only his (or her) being in an imperfect human body, but also the imperfect world that we all "really" create and materially inhabit. ([Sobchack](#)) The transcendence of human barriers that *Mondo 2000* and other spokespersons attribute to VR are similar in intention to Des Esseintes' self-removal from his surrounding social context. Ennui dictates his desire for seclusion and isolation, but his search for exotic aesthetic pleasures is a reaction to the shortcomings of nature, which

has finally and utterly exhausted the patience of sensitive observers by the revolting uniformity of her landscapes and skyscapes. After all, what platitudinous limitations she imposes, like a tradesman specializing in a single line of business; what petty-minded restrictions, like a shopkeeper stocking one article to the exclusion of all others; what a monotonous store of meadows and trees, what a commonplace display of mountains and seas! ([Huysmans](#), 36)

Des Esseintes cannot find satisfaction for his sensibilities within the realm of the natural. His life in seclusion is dictated by the artificial, the duplicated, the virtual. The selection

of colors for his sitting room depends on its tolerance of artificiality (28-31). His sexual relations are underlined with imitation--of an opposite gender, of an illegal affair, of mentor-apprentice intercourse-- and removed from reality (110-117). His mastery of the grammar and control of the syntax of smells in order to thoroughly replicate the fragrances of flowers with alcoholates and essences (119-120) allows him to reproduce the feminine figure "in paint and powder" (124) and create an olfactory jungle, "an unnatural yet charming vegetation... defying climate and season to put forth trees of different smells and flowers of the most divergent colours and fragrances" (125). The orchestral composition can be reproduced with the thorough combination of flavors (58-59). Sea baths become a replicable experience, because "without stirring out of Paris it is possible to obtain the health-giving impression of sea-bathing -- for all that this involves is a visit to the Bain Vigier, an establishment to be seen down on a pontoon moored in the middle of the Seine." (35-36). Here Huysmans goes into a long description of how the emulate the ocean ambience with simple artifice, with ropes brought from the oceanside and bath salts smelling of seaweed. "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" (36). Eventually, his taste for the artificial, the replicated, takes over his life and senses: the replica surpasses the real (208).

In fact, "artifice was considered by Des Esseintes to be the distinctive mark of human genius," says Huysmans (36). To Des Esseintes there is not a single one of nature's inventions that cannot be replicated, not a single "true" thing that cannot be reproduced, even re-produced, by the human hand. Nature's time has come, as "the old crone has by now exhausted the good-humored admiration of all true artists, and the time has surely come for artifice to take her place whenever possible" (37).

Beyond mere replication, Des Esseintes seeks to remove naturality in all aspects of his life. He becomes unable to ingest food orally and eventually resorts to feeding himself through enemas, with which he begins to replicate menus that he would not have been willing to consume if they had been placed in front of him (208-209). When he does decide to travel, he abandons his journey to promptly return to his sitting room, as he realizes that "anyone can go on long voyages of exploration sitting by the fire, helping out his sluggish or refractory mind, if the need arises, by dipping into some book describing travels in distant lands" (35).

The role of the travel novel's descriptions of distant lands not only as signifiers of those lands but as replacements for visiting them is brought out in Jay David Bolter's [*Writing Space: The Computer, Hypertext, and the History of Writing*](#):

A book, particularly a novel, is also often thought of as something the mind puts on, fits around itself, and settles into. A library in turn is a building that serves as a large book, through which the reader travels physically and intellectually. If it is so easy to see the book as a world for the mind to explore, then the next, short step is to regard the mind itself as an element in that world of signs. ([Bolter](#), "A new republic")

The representation of books as equipment with which to explore created or replicated worlds falls in line with the idea of VR as an immersive experience. Mondoids enhance their (vicarious) experience through attachments, headgear, sensory pads, electric stimulants and psychedelic drugs much like Des Esseintes uses fragrances, cordials and books. In a VR world the user explores a "cyberspace", a cybernetically replicated experience-scape within which the limitations of action and inaction are presented by the programmer's decisions. The author of the novel becomes the programmer of the virtual space. The reader of the novel becomes the cybernaut. The virtual space, the new creation, becomes one of a set of networked virtual spaces, a new form of "safer" social interaction. Vivian Sobchack describes that form of interaction, the "ambivalent desire to be powerful, heroic, committed" yet safely on the other side of the eremitic cyberspatial interface as an "interactive autism", an "oxymoronic mode of being" in which the focus is on "electronic, quasi-disembodied forms of kinesis ('safe' travel without leaving your desk), interaction ('safe' sociality without having to reveal your identity or 'true name') and eroticism ('safe' sex without risking an exchange of bodily fluids)" ([Sobchack](#)). The rhetoric behind the will to virtuality speaks of "colonizing", of taking control over a new world, of claiming an unconquered frontier ([Fuller and Jenkins](#), [Stone](#)). Allucqu re Rosanne Stone describes that one of the groups in her research on electronic social networks "is already talking about colonizing a social space in which the divide between nature and technology has become thoroughly unrecognizable, while one of the individuals I study is busy trying to sort out how the many people who seem to inhabit the social space of her body are colonizing her" ([Stone](#)). The discourse of virtuality in video games emphasizes conquest and victory over virtual enemies (a conquest in which death only results in reverting to the last saved version); the same discourse in the realm of VR emphasizes control and manipulability. VR opens up "new spaces for exploration, colonization and exploitation, returning to a mythic time when there were worlds without limits and resources beyond imagining" ([Fuller and Jenkins](#) ?).

This rhetoric of conquest and domination of a new virtual world comes up in Des Esseintes' praise of the move to the bar as the setting for socially condoned promiscuity. "...Although the utilitarian tendencies handed down by heredity ... had made the younger generation singularly boorish and also singularly cold and materialistic," says Huysmans, "it had none the less kept ... a little old-fashioned sentimentality, a vague, stale, old-fashioned ideal of love" ([Huysmans](#), 175). The old official brothels did not allow for the masculinized sensation of conquest, of victory, the feeling of victory resulting in being one of those to whom "a girl like that" would agree to "at a price, ... grant a rendezvous"; brothels did not allow their patrons to "feel the honorary distinction, the rare favour" of being the woman's clients (176). The conquest of the inhabitants of the virtual realm emerges; the bar replaces the brothel and discharges its semiotic load, replacing it with an emulation of courtship, an imitation of romantic conquest.

Total sensory stimulation is the goal of the will to virtuality. Des Esseintes and the cybernaut alike seek the exponential multiplication of the sensual experience. Michael Heim, in [The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality](#), compares the quest for the total sensory experience contained in the will to virtuality with Wagner's *Parsifal*. Eventually *Parsifal* ceased to be merely an opera for Wagner--nor did he want it described even as "art" or entertainment. For Wagner it was an immersive experience, one that would transform

ordinary reality into a new reality, a "the total work of art" that would not only engage the viewers but would transport them and change them. "The mythmaker would create a counterreality, one reminiscent of the solemn mass of the Catholic church, which appeals to all the senses with its sights, sounds, touch, drama, even appealing to smell with incense and candles. The audiences at Bayreuth were to become pilgrims on a quest, immersed in an artificial reality" ([Heim](#)).

In the creation of the immersive experience, the artist takes upon the role of the God, the creator and deciding force, the engineer of the virtual world. The artist begets his or her creation and gives it life, an asexual birth--to Donna Haraway, author of [The Cyborg Manifesto](#) it is suggestive of "the triumph of the phallogocentric lust to recreate the world without the intermediary of fleshy women's bodies. It hints at the need of intersubjective sexuality and the reign of masturbatory rationality in its deracinated, permanently pornographic form" (Haraway). The immersive experience of Des Esseintes is devoid of live birth--the pro-choice activist of the 19th century, Huysmans describes the plights of the newborn into a decayed and silly world, trying to see whether or not "if in the name of pity the futile business of procreation was ever to be abolished" as "the time had surely come to do it" (171). Reproduction is unnecessary, as the aesthetic mind can replicate nature with human strength and artistic sensibility.

The stature of God in the created realm is the goal of the aesthete. Des Esseintes looks to create in his new home in the country "a peaceful and unique abode specially designed to meet the needs of the solitary life he intended to lead" (28). Within his own desire to replicate reality (whether he uses the coarse to replicate the fine or the lavish to replicate the austere (75-76)) Des Esseintes creates his own virtual space, the god of his aesthetic realm, where every pleasure is under his control, every creation is his and his alone. He strips himself from the corrupting influence of the natural world. He makes a malleable world where the only rule is his aesthetic pleasure--where a turtle is only a jewel, where a servant is only a tool with which to feel translated to more monastic surroundings (32-33). His world is one in which he can easily "plunge into new and original ecstasies, into paroxysms celestial or accursed, but equally exhausting in the waste of phosphorus they involved" (117). The mental energy invested in the aesthetic creation is his own Godly limitation, but his world remains, surrounding him to nurture him even when consumed with illness. His recovery from dyspepsia is a created artistry, with the culinary art of digestively sound enemas filling his bowels. He seeks to be carried away by his world, "to go along with it and on it, as if supported by a friend or carried by a vehicle, into a sphere where sublimated sensations would arouse within him an unexpected commotion, the causes of which he would strive patiently and even vainly to analyze" (180).

Des Esseintes also sees his created world as the possible outlet for his social frustrations. The social dropout resorts to artifice to create contacts, whether direct or vicarious, and sees in the novel (Bolter's written VR apparatus) the tool to allow an "intellectual communion between a hieratic writer and an ideal reader, a spiritual collaboration between a dozen persons of superior intelligence scattered across the world, an aesthetic treat available to none but the most discerning" (199). It is the virtual community that Stone describes in "Will the Real Body Please Stand Up?", resident in cyberspace, the interactions of which are limited by the engineers of the cyberspace systems; "how these

heterogeneous co-working groups understand cognition, community, and bodies will determine the nature of cognition, community, and bodies in VR" (Stone) Not only does VR offer the possibility for the social dropout to interact, the social dropout can create the rules of interaction. The aesthete of VR is the creator of the social structure, much like Des Esseintes creates an intellectual elite of hyperlinked great minds. The virtual world of Des Esseintes is the "safe" world of the cybernautic eremite: travel without risks, lust without the fits of true passion, social interaction only with imagined beings, dead authors, beatified casuists and distant (but vivid) memories.

The debate underlying the will to virtuality is one that is in the heart of *Against Nature*: is artifice an opposition to nature--are there two categories, one of "natural" experience and one of "created" experience? Stone maintains that dichotomizing "nature" and "technology" results in an unrealistic representation, in which "nature" becomes reified and privileged even though, as François Dagognet sustains, the "natural" state of things ended upon the advent of agriculture. "Not only has the character of nature as yet another coconstruct of culture become more patent," Stone argues, "but it has become nothing more (or less) than an ordering factor--a construct by means of which we attempt to keep technology visible as something separate from our 'natural' selves and our everyday lives" (Stone). Expanding the debate, the idea of artistic creation as an opposition to "nature" becomes a way of de-emphasizing the subordination of the human experience to greater forces (God, Nature, Gaia, fluid state physics); it posits the idea of the human artist as a Creator, a God and Controller of a limitless universe in which the parameters are yet to be established. *Against Nature*, then, becomes the detailed representation of one aesthete's desire to subvert and overcome nature--a similar goal to the monoid ideal, the cybernaut's will to the virtual, limitless experience. Artistic creation is not only a Will to Virtuality: it is a Will to Divinity.

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