

The Aesthetics of Techno-Decadence

Taste in Avant-garde Gastronomy and Contemporary Arts

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This paper explores the relationships between taste and technology in avant-garde gastronomy and contemporary arts. The case of *Des Esseintes* from Huysmans's *À rebours* will be taken as the literary archetype of contemporary hyper-aestheticization of creative meals. We propose the term *aesthetics of techno-decadence* to define a hallmark of today's food scene: the emotional role of technology as a medium of excess and decline. Rather than celebrating sensationalism, techno-decadence integrates the dark sides of food systems into the hedonistic dimension of sophisticated dining experiences. The glorification of artifice resonates with artistic experimentations designing ultra-tech experiences centred on taste. What emerges is not a triumphant victory over nature but a form of critical hyperbole and sarcastic commentary that recalls the *fin de siècle* of over a century ago. Within this framework, the traditional marginalisation of taste becomes a site of resistance and ecological awareness. | **Keywords:** *Techno-Decadence, Avant-garde Gastronomy, Contemporary Arts, Des Esseintes, Huysmans*

1. Introduction: Taste, Decadence, and Technology

The 19th century, especially in its *fin-de-siècle* phase, witnessed a radical emphasis on taste. The Kantian ideal of taste as a disinterested judgment gave way to a cult of refined, extravagant, and even perverse pleasures. Sadean imagination and libertinism are specimens of a complex constellation that sinks its roots in social, political, artistic, moral, and existential motifs. The sensuous was eroticised, functioning as a political attack and a form of rebellion against middle-class taste and morality. Either a historical-literary phenomenon or, in Nietzschean terms, a metahistorical and collective category, decadence, despite the difficulty in defining it,¹ equated the cultivation of the palate with that of the spirit against the vulgarity of both nature and bourgeois society. Moreover, far from being mere hedonism,

¹ Cf. Gilman (1979), Gluck (2014), Weir and Desmarais (2021b).

decadence anticipated what Lev Manovich and Emanuele Arielli (2024) describe as *artificial aesthetics*, foreshadowing many instances of the technological hyper-aestheticization pervading today's media. As Mary Gluck (2014, p. 353) maintains, decadence is inherently associated with "an unexpectedly wide range of aesthetic [...] innovations, which incorporated the concept of *modernité* but also transcended it." In this sense, the figure of Jean Floressas Des Esseintes, as portrayed by Joris-Karl Huysmans in *À rebours*, can be viewed as the literary archetype of the contemporary appreciator of technologically-mediated arts and, in a broader sense, of the taste underlying creative and modernist cuisine. In this context, the metaphorical meaning of taste includes its literal root and encompasses the fine arts and realm of food (cf. Weir and Desmarais, 2021a).

The glorification of artifice – "the distinguishing characteristic of human genius" (Huysmans, 1998, p. 20) – finds expression in contemporary artistic experimentations designing ultra-tech experiences centred on taste. However, the decadent idea of nature promoted by Des Esseintes does not fully coincide with that advanced in today's gastronomic and artistic practices. Whereas the 19th-century spirit regarded nature as banal and monotonous, something that humans can surpass thanks to technological means,² the contemporary spirit is forced to take into account human responsibility in the depletion of natural resources. From molecular gastronomy to techno-emotional cuisine, and across some contemporary artistic projects, what emerges is not a triumphant victory over nature but a form of critical hyperbole and sarcastic commentary reminiscent of the *fin de siècle* of over a century ago. Like the decadent aesthete, contemporary practitioners construct artificial gustatory worlds, yet their interventions, rather than being motivated by the desire to overcome nature, are often intertwined and prompted by critical and ethical reflections on the current ecological problems. The cases here considered use technological devices to stage encounters with synthetic or radically transformed food. In fabricating taste and smell³ artificially, these examples encapsulate a historical atmosphere dabbled by decline and pessimism that heightens the exposure of the environmental crises and dilemmas in contemporary food systems.

To read *À rebours* today is to be faced with an uncanny mirror of our own condition. Des Esseintes's *artificial paradise* – to use a Baudelairean phrase – foreshadows the aesthetic infrastructures of the 21st century: confined within his home at Fontenay-aux-Roses, lighting, sounds, colours, and works of art are staged to create immersive experiences and designed, controlled situations, where nature is replaced by the mechanical.⁴ Historically, such a process intensified throughout the 20th century, as the aesthetic (and

² In *À rebours*, this is a recurring theme encompassing many dimensions. For instance, Des Esseintes's *artificial flora* is reminiscent of the *futurist flora* (cf. Azari (1924)).

³ We will mainly focus on taste but, in light of the Gibsonian ecological approach to perception that we embrace, we will treat it as a complex perceptual system that, in the act of eating, always involves smell (as well as the other senses).

⁴ Although the aesthetic significance of the mechanical exceeds the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that it oscillates between the uncanny and the comic, as Bergson (2014) has famously proposed.

gastronomic) field became increasingly intertwined with technological innovations. The Futurists and Surrealists embraced the machine as their Muse, celebrating speed, energy, and automatism; later, Pop Art revealed to what extent everyday life was saturated by industrial and mass culture imagery. Beneath these avant-gardes runs the same decadent current that animated Huysmans: the fascination with artifice, *the sex appeal of the inorganic* (Perniola, 2004), and the desire to aestheticize them by transforming the mechanical into a source of beauty. In its evolution, technology, far from dispelling decadence, becomes ever more its vessel. Indeed, the 21st century has transformed the decadent ideal fantasy into a ubiquitous reality: our experiences of art and food are more and more filtered through synthetic compounds, prosthetic extensions, and algorithmic systems. Such an aesthetics extends Des Esseintes's dream, while making the repercussions of this model, as prefigured in *À rebours*, pervasive: the extreme mechanisation of the senses produces saturation, anaesthetisation, and an exhaustion of novelty, the supreme value of this paradigm. However, the inauthentic constantly evokes the authentic it displaces. For Huysmans, this relationship favoured artifice, which he nonetheless considered superior to nature; today, it emphasises nature's loss in dystopian and catastrophic scenarios.

Contemporary artistic and aesthetic practices reimagining *taste* and *technology* can be approached as the philosophical terrain of a renewed decadence. Here, artifice functions less as indulgence rather than as a reflexive and ethical mode that exposes both the capacities and limitations of our perception under technological saturation. This paper pinpoints the intersections of art, technology, and taste by exploring avant-garde gastronomy and contemporary arts through the lens of Huysmans's decadence. We propose an *aesthetics of techno-decadence* to interpret today's food scenario and its hallmarks. Rather than merely celebrating sensationalism, a techno-decadent aesthetics integrates the dark sides of food systems into the hedonistic dimension of sophisticated dining experiences. Within this framework, the traditional marginalisation of taste⁵ in the artistic field acquires a paradoxical centrality, emerging as a site of resistance to technological saturation and revealing the aesthetic and ecological challenges of our present.

The article is structured in three parts. The first examines the 19th-century decadent taste, tracing back how the deliberate construction of artificial sensory experiences anticipates the logic of today's gastronomic scenario, from molecular gastronomy to techno-emotional cuisine and immersive dining experiences. In the second section, we explore how some selected contemporary artistic projects actualise an artificial, technologically-mediated aestheticization of taste and smell for the cultivation of perceptual and ecological awareness. The final section will argue that techno-decadent

⁵ We will set aside the longstanding debates over whether taste and smell can be considered legitimately *aesthetic*. The growing interest in taste and food that has been spreading for decades in artistic practices increasingly legitimises a philosophical account for them. After all: *once upon a time there was a minor sense*. See e.g. Curtin and Heldke (1992) and Perullo (2016). Moreover, like many of his decadent contemporaries, Des Esseintes himself believes that every sense, if educated, can experience pleasures "equal to those of hearing and sight" (Huysmans, 1998, p. 92). For the hierarchy of the senses in Western thought, cf. Korsmeyer (1999).

aesthetics is a structural response to a world where the distinction between the organic and the synthetic has ceased. Here, taste constitutes a form of resistance: even when stimulated by the most refined devices, it reveals that the gustatory experience refuses to be fully reduced to a prosthetic artifice.

2. Des Esseintes's Decadent Palate and Avant-garde Gastronomy

Few figures embody the spirit of artifice as completely as Des Esseintes, the solitary hero of Huysmans's *À rebours*, a novel published in 1884 that can be read as a manifesto of decadent aesthetics. Des Esseintes is a wealthy aristocrat who withdraws from Parisian society to a private retreat where he dedicates himself to the cultivation of artificial and exotic experiences. Des Esseintes transforms his own existence into an experiment in refined perception. The house functions as a proto-digital environment and a controlled sensory interface. Each room is turned into a sensory laboratory, from the double dining room, which resembles a "ship's cabin" (Huysmans, 1998, p. 17) inserted into another dining room, constructed as a glass chamber, where an aquarium built into the wall displays artificial marine creatures flashing jewel-like colours, to the "languorous environment" of the bedroom (Huysmans, 1998, p. 10), consisting in a kind of mirror-lined boudoir resulting in an "artificial atmosphere" (*Ibid.*). Des Esseintes is "totally insulated from the sights, sounds, and smells of external reality" and instead "immerses himself entirely in the invention and dissection of the most esoteric sensual fantasies" (Hartnett, 1977, p. 367). Indeed, his self-imposed exile from the world is not an evasion from experience but its intensification, an attempt to orchestrate sensation through artifice, to elevate taste far from society's vulgarity. Des Esseintes engages in lengthy descriptions of rare odours, sounds, and tastes. Narratively, this is reflected in the prose of the novel; Paul Valéry characterised Huysmans's style as "always striving after the unexpected and the extreme, overloaded with adjectives perverted from their usual meaning" (Hartnett, 1977, p. 367), a *modus operandi* that applies equally to Des Esseintes's approach to sensory stimuli. Indeed, he decomposes perception into discrete variables – light, colour, texture, smell – and recombines them into aesthetic responses. His glorification of artificial and immersive experience establishes Des Esseintes as an early prototype of technological mediation and synthetic cuisine.

Yet, his relationship with food is deeply paradoxical. The very excesses that shaped his aesthetic sophistication have also destroyed him. Sometimes even the most frugal meals become problematic for his "over-stimulated or consumptive" constitution (Huysmans, 1998, p. 14), which is paralleled to that of those "weak and nervous people whose sensual appetite demands food enhanced by smoking and pickling" (*Ibid.*). However, although he blames his sensitive stomach for his inability "to take any serious interest in the art of cooking" (Huysmans, 1998, p. 171), his refined taste and expertise in food are apparent. In this respect, the historical context in which the character of Des Esseintes was conceived plays definitely a role. The rise of gastronomic literature in the 19th century, exemplified by Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin's *Physiologie du Goût* (1825), had established "a theory of food-as-art

perfectly suited to decadence” (Colton, 2020, p. 5), with its elegies of sumptuous banquets and catalogues of rare ingredients. An episode that would place him among the ‘gastronomes’ follows the famous scene in which Des Esseintes decorates a living turtle with precious (and mostly artificial) stones so that its shell harmonises with his Oriental rug. Unusually hungry due to the exceptional result, he “dipped his toast – spread with a quite unique butter – in a cup of tea, brewed from a flawless blend of Si-a-Fayoune, Moyoutann, and de Khansky, green teas which had come by very special caravans from China by way of Russia” (Huysmans, 1998, p. 38). The precision of this description – the provenance, the blend, the caravan route – reveals Des Esseintes’s connoisseurship, yet this same expertise becomes a form of compulsion. Pleasure is intellectualised and abstracted, conformed to a collector’s taxonomic knowledge rather than an appreciator’s enjoyment.

Interestingly enough, Des Esseintes inherits the 19th-century gastronomic tradition but places it within a proto-20th-century framework: rather than celebrating abundance, he cultivates restriction; rather than enjoying social dining, he pursues solitary experimentation – traits that would mark the transition to industrial society. From liqueurs to different kinds of food and drink, Des Esseintes’s culinary refinement resurfaces in the few moments when sensory pleasures gratify him. Aesthetic satisfaction temporarily alleviates the nervous disorders from which he suffers; nonetheless, they stem from the very sensory overload he pursues.⁶ Overcome by illness and forced by his doctor to feed himself using a peptone enema, Des Esseintes accepts this form of eating as the culmination of his project of absolute artifice, as evidence of being able to do without real food. Indeed, “to take nourishment in this manner was unquestionably the ultimate deviation from the norm that anyone could realize” (Huysmans, 1998, p. 171). His aesthetic project is therefore inseparable from infirmity, insofar as “sickness is cultivated as an artistic practice by stimulating the senses to the point of overload” (Leggette, 2014, pp. 282–283). Refinement and psychophysiological deterioration coincide: Des Esseintes’s body and mind are the sites where art and pathology converge. He oscillates between the most sublime, even mystical aesthetic experiences and neurotic exhaustion, as though the refinement of taste were also his condemnation. This is what Valentine Colton identifies as the inherent paradox of his decadent gastronomy: Des Esseintes showcases a “dialectic of attraction and disgust toward culinary art,” whereby food becomes “a double-signifier of refinement as well as decline” (Colton, 2020, p. 11).

One of Des Esseintes’s most elaborate gustatory experiments involves what he calls his “mouth organ” (Huysmans, 1998, p. 39), an apparatus for orchestrating spirits as though they were musical instruments. Each liqueur, in his fantasy, corresponds to a sonic timbre; combinations produce chords; sequences compose melodies. Des Esseintes imagines an orchestra in which

⁶ Des Esseintes’s symptoms are comparable to those of hysteria that, from the end of the 19th century, has acquired a new cultural meaning, becoming the typical disease of modern urban life, as it is triggered by immoderate sensory excitement; cf. Gluck (2014, pp. 355–358).

the savouring turns into the performance of interior symphonies, “providing his gullet with sensations analogous to those which music affords the ear” (*Ibid.*). For instance, dry curaçao corresponds to the clarinet, penetrating and velvety; crème de menthe and anisette to the flute, honeyed and pungent, whining and sweet; gin and whisky to cornets and trombones, explosively strident. In this gustatory-musical experience where melodies are played on the tongue, the decadent aesthete becomes a composer of the invisible, transposing sensory domains into one another. Such a synesthetic aestheticism is already, we might say, an analogue technology, transforming perception into a system of coded correspondences. Des Esseintes drinks to construct multisensorial architectures, and in doing so, he anticipates the logic of contemporary aesthetics, where the boundaries between artistic creation, scientific experiment, and technological design blur into one another. This extends to his attitude towards authenticity and adulteration: in a world already corrupted, deliberate artifice becomes for him a form of honesty. Des Esseintes reflects: “Since, the way things are today, nothing remains that is pure and authentic, since the wine we drink and the liberty we proclaim are both adulterated and derisory” (Huysmans, 1998, p. 101). For the decadent, if nature is already compromised, then the artificial is not betrayal but amelioration.⁷

However, the perfection of artifice is inseparable from decay. Des Esseintes’s project is to exclude both nature and society, living in pure solitary artifice at the borders of death, where decay itself has a positive value. This trajectory – “from the dissolution of forms to the dissolution of the self” (Leggette, 2014, p. 284) – reveals the existential stakes of aesthetic overexposure. Des Esseintes’s being, subjected to a self-imposed sensory regime, begins to rebel. His stomach rejects food; his nerves fray; his perceptual apparatus, calibrated to detect the finest variations in sensation, becomes hypersensitive to the point of hallucinatory agony. The novel documents this progressive collapse not as a failure but as the logical apogee of the decadent project. Aestheticizing life completely equals to exhausting it.

This opulent aestheticization already anticipates a broader contemporary trend: Des Esseintes’s dream enters the current public dimension thanks to avant-garde gastronomy. Whereas he transforms the domestic interior into a theatre of artifice, contemporary cuisine expands that stage into the restaurant, both in the dining area and in the kitchen. Although technology, in its various forms, has always been part of culinary practices, here it is turned into a show. Indeed, the adoption of technology as an atmospheric means of enhancing the dining experience goes hand in hand with its use in cooking. Among the forerunners of this type of gastronomy, the Futurists attempted

⁷ This is not without effects on the enogastronomic sphere, as a passage on wine reads: “Thus, nowadays it is widely known that, in restaurants celebrated for the excellence of their cellars, gourmets enjoy drinking fine vintages made out of inferior wines which have been treated by the method of M. Pasteur. Now, whether genuine or fake, these wines have the same aroma, the same colour, the same bouquet, so therefore the enjoyment experienced in tasting these adulterated imitations is absolutely identical with the pleasure one would take in savouring the pure, natural wine which is unobtainable today, even at an astronomical price” (Huysmans, 1998, p. 19).

to create a revolutionary cuisine in step with modernity and technological innovation raging in all fields. This explains their emphasis on the design of true multisensory and thematic performances, originality in food, and the use of a “battery of scientific instruments in the kitchen” (Marinetti, 2014, p. 39). In this vein, albeit in a different historical context, one of the most significant cases of technological implementation in the contemporary culinary panorama is the so-called *molecular gastronomy*,⁸ systematised by French chemist Hervé This⁹ and Hungarian physicist Nicholas Kurti. By studying the scientific processes underlying cooking techniques, molecular gastronomy aims at creating new flavours and innovative textures working on the chemical properties of food through advanced technologies.

Since the 1980s, many chefs have operated within this framework, though not all of them accepted the definition. Ferran Adrià, a renowned Spanish chef who used to run the restaurant elBulli, in Roses (Costa Brava), willingly preferred that of *techno-emotional cuisine* proposed by food writer Pau Arenós. The movement’s tenet, embraced by other famous chefs such as Heston Blumenthal and Andoni Luis Aduriz, and fully actualised in Adrià’s restaurant – a laboratory for cutting-edge and experimental gastronomy for two decades from the 1990s onwards – is the correspondence between knowledge and emotion, technique and technology, imagination and reality (Arenós, 2019). Spherification¹⁰ or the edible foams and bubbles¹¹ are some of the techniques developed by Adrià with the aim of combining technological innovation and the emotional impact of food. In Adrià’s culinary experiments, the eater, like the reader of *À rebours*, is disoriented by the dissolution of categories: solid becomes liquid, savoury becomes sweet, food becomes vapour. Like Des Esseintes orchestrating liqueurs, Adrià plays (with) molecular transformations, treating the kitchen as both a scientific laboratory and an art studio. A similar logic operates in Heston Blumenthal’s multi-sensory creations, where the technological atmosphere intensifies food flavours. His *Sound of the Sea*, a seafood dish served with a shell containing an iPod playing ocean waves, exemplifies what psychologists call *sonic seasoning*: the marine soundscape measurably enhances the taste of the dish. This cuisine conceives the taste of food not only as a sensory phenomenon but also as a cognitive and intellectual experience.

Today, various examples of *techno-emotional dining* echo Des Esseintes’s endeavour of synthetic sensations. Sublimotion, a restaurant in Ibiza run by chef Paco Roncero, proposes a futuristic dining experience where 12 guests sit around a single table and experience a 20-course menu paired with immersive technology, including 360-degree projections, soundscapes, light shows, temperature changes, and augmented reality,

⁸ The original term, coined in 1988, was *molecular and physical gastronomy*. It became popular in its shortened version a few years later.

⁹ Cf. This (1993), his most renowned work.

¹⁰ A complex and innovative technique which resorts to sodium alginate and calcium chloride to create liquid-filled spheres.

¹¹ Another signature cooking method by the Spanish chef, using emulsifiers and stabilisers to create airy textures.

all synchronised with each dish. Here, the technological apparatus threatens to overwhelm the gustatory experience itself, subordinating taste to its own spectacular display. The resulting cuisine, like Huysmans's prose, oscillates between satire and extravagance. The diner coincides with the decadent subject: aware of the artifice, accomplice in it, yet seduced by its precision. Here, taste is inseparable from technology: digital sounds, olfactory compositions, and staging contribute to providing an aesthetic experience. Restaurants of this type are theatres of controlled artifice, actualising Des Esseintes's solitary experiments on a larger scale, and giving concrete form to what he defines as "the indispensable medium for decaying civilizations" (Huysmans, 1998, p. 148): the demand for a language – here, a culinary one – that must constantly renew itself, being fresh, non-conformist, and capable of producing multiple effects of surprise.

A further case of hyper-technological dining is The Alchemist, a two-Michelin-starred restaurant in Copenhagen run by chef Rasmus Munk. The restaurant stages what Munk calls 'impressions' rather than dishes: immersive, multi-sensory experiences that combine food with digital projections, installations, and performance to convey ecological and social messages. Particularly, the use of digital projections of underwater ecosystems directly echoes Des Esseintes's dining room: food – at times disturbing due to unusual flavours or repulsive visuals – is accompanied with unsettling videos on climate change that envelop the entire restaurant hall. "Such queasiness is part of the intention of The Alchemist, which offers [...] 'holistic dining'" (Mead, 2024). The sophistication of the dishes and cuisine is accompanied by a carefully designed atmosphere aimed at amplifying the effect of the food and revealing its endangered biospheres. Ecological disasters being spectacularised finds its synaesthetic correspondence in taste. Whereas Des Esseintes constructed his oceanic dining room "at his own pleasure" (Huysmans, 1998, p. 17) – by pouring a few drops of coloured essences into the water to create shades in accordance with the seasons, the sky, and the atmospheres required – The Alchemist deploys aquatic imagery to expose ecological devastation. Des Esseintes's nausea *for* nature's banality becomes nausea *in favour* of nature, as a means for raising awareness of its being destroyed by human impact and pollution. Yet, this project is not without its contradictions. Munk "insists that he has never created anything for mere shock value" (Mead, 2024), and that every creation must bear a social message. But here is the flaw: To what extent does provocation raise awareness without turning into mere spectacle? More fundamentally, on a socio-economic level, as Rebecca Mead observes, "Alchemist, in its reliance on financial inequality to generate its customer base, might even be said to exacerbate it" (*Ibid.*). Fine dining opens up to collective and environmental issues, intertwining critical reflection with gustatory pleasure or discomfort; however, it does so within structures of privilege that reproduce the very inequalities it seeks to criticise. The spectacularisation of the meals is deeply embedded in elitism. Des Esseintes himself "acquired a reputation of eccentricity" by hosting atypical performative dinners for writers and intellectuals (Huysmans, 1998, p. 11). Huysmans describes a meal echoing the aesthetic stance of

The Alchemist, implicitly highlighting the same social implications: a funeral refreshment replicating an 18th-century banquet to celebrate the most insignificant of misfortunes.¹² The black of the decorations, the black of the food and wine served, and the funeral dirges all came together to perform an ironic mourning. Such a misfortune dramatised through a gastronomic experience can be interpreted as a preview of what would become entrenched two centuries later: the hyper-technological death knell for ecosystems glamourised by haute cuisine to entertain wealthy guests.¹³

Both Des Esseintes and contemporary gastronomy attempt to refine experience beyond nature, to aestheticize life through technological mediation, thereby exposing the ambivalence of taste. Actually, Huysmans had already glimpsed the paradox that Walter Benjamin would theorise: the technological reproduction democratises experience, yet it strips away its aura. In this sense, Des Esseintes's experiments anticipate the mass cultural mechanisms that would follow; his solitary decadence foreshadows a digital collective intoxication. However, both Huysmans's decadence and contemporary haute cuisine resist the utopianism often associated with technological innovation: artifice is suffused with melancholy, an acknowledgment that every simulation is also a loss. The perfection of the artificial implies the death of the natural; overstimulation entails sensory exhaustion. Des Esseintes's collapse at the end of the novel reveals the existential cost of aesthetic overproduction. It is no accident that he finally turns to the simplicity and unadulterated purity of bread in Eucharistic terms. This moment of failure, far from negating Huysmans's project, provides it with its philosophical depth: decadence culminates in the moment when it acknowledges that artifice, though inevitable, carries within it the seed of decay. Contemporary techno-decadent aesthetics combines the nostalgic *fin-de-siècle* spirit, born from the awareness of inhabiting a "dull and stupid" period (Huysmans, 1998, p. 147), with a sense of critical responsibility that drives art to respond *against the grain*.

3. Gustatory Experiences in Contemporary Arts

À rebours, emblem of aesthetic withdrawal, is in fact a prophecy of the rhetoric of *immersive experiences*. What Huysmans could only imagine, the 20th and 21st centuries have made true through digital technologies and the developments in chemistry. To trace this continuity is to recognise in Huysmans's artificial fantasy the early technological unconscious of modern aesthetics. Actually, the *fin de siècle* was an age of sensory experimentation: the era of electricity, photography, and early cinema. Each invention reshaped the sensorium, extending perception through mechanical prostheses.

¹² Inspired by Grimod de la Reynière, author of the successful *Almanach des gourmands* (1803–1812) that established him as the first modern gastronomic critic.

¹³ This aestheticization of crisis from a position of privilege recalls an episode where Des Esseintes feels an inexplicable appetite, "a perverted craving" watching a poor child eat a slice of bread and cheese (Huysmans, 1998, p. 137). His decadent fascination with what he perceives as foul is possible only through a kind of social distance that transforms the others' necessity into his own aesthetic experience.

Within this trajectory, artistic experimentation with tastes and food flavours emerged as particularly significant, reaching prominence in the 20th century through movements such as Fluxus, Junk Art, Performance Art, Body and Eat Art. The ephemeral nature of gustatory and olfactory perception aligned with these movements' subversive intentions: tastes, odours, and flavours resist objectification, emphasising transience and idiosyncratic engagement. Together, taste and smell challenge conventional aesthetic categories, transforming art from a static object to a lived, evenemential experience, encouraging the deconstruction of the traditional conception of the work of art. Technology has played a significant role in allowing artists to experiment with new forms of aesthetic practices, from the synthesis of aromas, food flavourings, and artificial ingredients, to the invention of electronic noses and the development of refined diffusers.¹⁴ If it's true that 19th-century decadence "was not a pessimistic critique of the modern world, but rather a complex and ambivalent celebration of its creative possibilities" (Gluck, 2014, p. 350), the current situation seems to heighten such ambiguity. Technology reproduces and manipulates tastes and smells in ways previously impossible. However, taste is fundamentally proximal and limited; in contrast, olfactory stimuli are fleeting, potentially infinite, and spatially transmittable. In a way, the ambiguous and intermediate position of smell becomes a technological and artistic potential. Such asymmetry between the two senses – already proclaimed by Des Esseintes's extreme olfactory fantasies and experiments – opens up a space for art: smell can simulate or suggest the taste of a food that is physically absent.

This finds concrete expression in recent works such as *The Ghost Food Truck*, an artistic project designed by Miriam Simun and Miriam Songster and performed in the U.S. and Moscow between 2013 and 2019, playing on the convergence between taste, smell, food, technology, and the ecological crisis. This performative installation aims at making the impact of climate change tangible and emotional by addressing the repercussions on daily life resulting from the future extinction of various species that are pivotal in some gastronomic cultures (Songster, 2018). It consists of a food truck with a futuristic and minimal design, with waiters wearing uniforms that contribute to suggesting a hi-tech atmosphere. Passers-by can order three familiar options of food from a menu adapted to the country where the performance takes place. The main ingredients are species endangered by environmentally harmful practices. All dishes are actually made of sustainable and climate-resistant foods, while their corresponding but 'absent' ingredients are evoked through artificial flavours emitted by a direct olfactory stimulation device to be worn. Here, through an *olfactory hologram* (Mancioppi, 2023, pp. 157–160), taste and technology operate simultaneously and deceptively to evoke the presence of an absence, creating a cognitive and emotional tension that enhances awareness of biodiversity loss and food future unavailability. The entire performance relies on synthetic flavours in order to recreate ordinary eating habits in an atypical situation, where artificial stimuli are the

¹⁴ For example, *Smeller 2.0* by Wolfgang Georgsdorf; cf. Georgsdorf (2021).

only perceptual link through which the gustatory and affective dimension of food can be reconstructed. The gap between the abstract concept of climate change and the material, affective experiences with food, sometimes disappointing, is essential in order to foster a personal connection to the environmental issue. This example raises broader questions. Suppose that people become accustomed to such eating experiences and to hi-tech flavours: there may be a shift in food preferences and in the very affective and mnemonic dimension of it.¹⁵ The normalisation of synthetic or simulated foods could change culinary practices, dining experiences, collective memories, prioritising either sustainability or artifice as such, distancing us from what is not anthropized. Moreover, this could lead to increasingly individualised and customised eating experiences, deeply redefining how people perceive and interact with food. The underlying question, which intertwines ethics and aesthetics, is therefore: “Where are the limits to what we can learn to enjoy?” (Songster, 2018, p. 52). In a way, what Huysmans imagined as an aesthetic dream – the capacity to invent new sensations independent of nature – has become a scientific pursuit. The contemporary gourmet can savour compounds that have never existed in the natural world. This prospect, simultaneously exhilarating and unsettling, marks the threshold of a postnatural and posthuman aesthetics.

On another note, an interesting artistic case is *mEat me* by Theresa Schubert, who interrogates the boundaries of meat consumption, the human/non-human body, and biotechnology through a radically provocative gesture. Her research project, culminated in a hybrid performance at Galerija Kapelica (Ljubljana) in 2020, ponders over post-humanist tenets by taking them to their most extreme consequences, that is, by exploiting her own body as if it were a farm animal. By growing muscle cells from her blood into edible meat and consuming it, Schubert challenges consumerist hierarchies and ethical assumptions. Pointing to the critical issues of animal abuse, the climate crisis, and the cultured meat industry, *mEat me* sheds light on the “delusion of a victimless post-meat-eating utopia” (Dancewicz-Pawlik, 2025, p. 83). The work provokes reflection on the role of technology in mediating predation, questioning whether human flesh *tastes* more ‘tolerable’ when created through technology, hence avoiding death and diluting the association of our body with mortal (edible) flesh. Here, taste is both literal and conceptual, foregrounding the intersection of technology, embodiment, and ethics, as it points at the cultural taboo of cannibalism. The “misuse of technology invented with the intention to capitalize on it” (Schubert, 2020) translates into a true gastronomic act of techno-decadence, i.e. the consumption of an artificial version of ourselves obtained through biotechnological innovations. Here, like in Huysmans’s novel, abundance and self-destruction are seamlessly intertwined; the act of eating is based on a technological mediation that challenges the boundaries between what is acceptable or not. In this sense, we might speak of *technovore* humans. Technovores end up consuming themselves thanks to technology; techno-decadent aesthetics displays

¹⁵ This has actually been happening for several decades; cf. Hirsch (1992).

precisely the qualities “most feared by critics of decadence: dynamic change; fragmentation; radical subjectivity and creative destruction” (Gluck, 2014, p. 355).

Whereas Schubert pushes biotechnology to its ethical limit, the work of Sam Bompas and Harry Parr, who founded the company Bompas & Parr in 2007, brings these explorations into the realm of *mixed reality food and dining*. Through a series of installations and prediction reports, the British duo create experiences in which participants consume physical food while experiencing digitally manipulated or augmented food sensations, demonstrating how technology can mediate multisensory perception. These projects blur the boundary between tangible and simulated gustatory experience, raising questions about the role of digital mediation in shaping both pleasure and expectation. Yet, the same company express ambivalence about this technological trajectory. When asked about the relationship between taste and digitalisation, Pablo Britton, Bompas & Parr’s Senior development chef, replied that, whereas “technotopians present the evolution of technology as inevitable,” he remains “heartened by the stubbornness of the lower senses to be replicated and recreated” (Britton, 2025). This resistance of taste and smell to full technological reproduction – their insistence on material presence, proximity, and embodied engagement – may constitute, as he suggests, a form of symbolic resistance against “the hyper-technologisation of the sensory world” (*Ibid.*). Such tension manifests clearly in their 2020 publication *DIY Decadence*, a book documenting works from 72 collaborators from all over the world. The work shows how the Covid-19 pandemic sparked creativity and experimentation in homes where impromptu feasts with whatever was available acted as imaginative and emotional responses to lockdown challenges. The aim of the project was to encourage people confined to their homes to turn anxiety into ingenuity and to pursue extravagant pleasures in simple occasions by designing bizarre culinary creations and table settings. Such a global situation is reminiscent of Des Esseintes’s aesthetic retreat, though motivated by radically different reasons. From dishes adorned with precious jewels to gargantuan meals with foods that are eccentric in pairing and appearance, *DIY Decadence* “outlines radical strategies for pleasure” in what they hoped would be “a golden era of creativity” (Bompas & Parr and Friends, 2020).

Whether through olfactory holograms of extinct species, consumption of lab-grown human flesh, or mixed reality food, contemporary subjects seek, like Des Esseintes, sensation through technological mediation. This artificial pursuit for gustatory experience, far from contradicting decadence, fulfils its mission. What we call ‘experience’ is increasingly the product of designed environments. The collapse of a strict separation between natural and artificial taste constitutes the decadent achievement of technology: artifice no longer imitates nature but replaces it as the primary site of aesthetic engagement. However, this project stems from the general situation in which humanity finds itself in this critical era. Paradoxically, the *artistic capitalism* (Lipovetsky and Serroy, 2013) even goes so far as to aestheticize the effects of hyper

consumerism constituting its essence. Then, to speak of the mechanisation of the senses is to trace a genealogy that begins with the decadent laboratory and culminates in the digital, molecular, and augmented dining room. Both are architectures of mediation, organised around the fantasy of perfect control over perception. Both reveal the paradox of that fantasy: the more sensation is engineered, the more it risks desensitisation and saturation. The techno-decadent subject, like Des Esseintes, confronts a crisis in perception.¹⁶

The line separating organic and synthetic has dissolved. Huysmans's *À rebours* can be read as a prophetic allegory of the posthuman sensorium: a perceptual field in which biological and technological systems intertwine inseparably. The aestheticization of technology – the transformation of devices, interfaces, and data into sensory experiences – has reconfigured how we perceive, judge, and taste. Contemporary gastronomy operates in the light of what Rosi Braidotti (2013, p. 188) calls the “posthuman nomadic subject,” a self distributed across organic and technological assemblages. In this framework, taste flows across networks of mediation: from the sensory nerves of the diner to the sensors and data systems that record, predict, and reconfigure experience.¹⁷ In this space, taste is a technological process, distributed across machines, networks, and bodies. In light of this, the *technovores* take on further nuances: they correspond to the posthuman gourmets whose pleasure is prosthetically extended, whose tastes are co-produced by machines.¹⁸ In a way, this idea was already present in *À rebours*. Towards the end of the novel, forced by illness to consume only liquid concoctions, Des Esseintes derived from this constraint an aesthetic intuition. By creating new recipes “of inverted epicurism” from oils and food extracts (Huysmans, 1998, p. 171), he reimagined the meal as an opportunity to eliminate “the tediousness that invariably accompanies the necessarily limited choices of dishes,” “the vile sin of gluttony,” and “the tiresome, vulgar chore of eating” (*Ibid.*). The ideal was complete efficiency, something that can also be found in the Futurists’ project: ingesting chemicals that provided all the essential nutrients, stripping food of all social, cultural, sensory, and time-consuming excess. Des Esseintes can be understood as a *proto-technovore*, according to whom eating assumes the function of technological-metabolic performance, yet simultaneously experiencing it as a creative play and *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

Artistic performances, synthetic compounds, augmented dining experiences operate not merely as symptoms of the decadent crisis but as potential interventions, as they function as forms of ‘perceptual persuasion’: by placing

¹⁶ On this, from a broad ecological and relational perspective, see Perullo (2025).

¹⁷ On the cooperation between sensory machines and human senses, including taste, see Salter (2022).

¹⁸ In the realm of foodtech and food digitalisation, numerous techniques and devices aim to expand gustatory limits and simulate taste experiences. Current approaches combine chemical and non-chemical methods in various ways: devices like *Taste the TV* (Miyashita, 2021) use chemical flavouring sprayed onto screens users can lick; cross-sensory devices like the *Sonic Sweetener* manipulate auditory cues to alter flavour perception. Cf.: Apac (2017). In the realm of olfaction, current developments involve the use of AI to source olfactory imagery in digital art collections and archives, as well as to profile and create fantasy flavour formulas that meet consumer tastes to be added to customised foods to maximise sales.

the artificial alongside the absent natural, they aim to reconfigure how we perceive ecological crisis and our responsibility towards it (Koczanowicz, 2025, p. 74). The artifice proves to be a critical tool in the transformation of perception. Therefore, the challenge for contemporary aesthetics is not to escape technological mediation, rather to inhabit it critically. This means reimagining decadence as reflexive practice, as the capacity to dwell artifice while acknowledging that its pursuit is inseparable from melancholy, loss, and decay.

4. Conclusion: Taste as a Site of Resistance in the Age of Techno-Decadence

Far from being merely a stylistic revival of decadent tropes, techno-decadent aesthetics constitutes a structural response to a world where the distinction between the organic and the synthetic has collapsed under the pressure of ecological depletion and digital saturation. Whereas Des Esseintes withdrew from nature for its triteness, we inhabit an artificial infrastructure that conceals the impossibility of returning to it. Under these changed conditions, decadence can no longer be an aim in itself: contemporary artists and chefs adopt a reflexive and critical posture towards it. As seen through the case of techno-emotional cuisine, The Alchemist, the artistic projects *The Ghost Food Truck*, *mEat me*, and the experiments by Bompas & Parr, technology is used to deconstruct the materiality of food, turning it into a hyper-real signifier that evokes the very nature it has displaced. The disgust induced by Munk's disturbing ingredients and visuals, or Schubert's consumption of her own lab-grown cells, is a deliberate aesthetic strategy. It is a form of critical hyperbole that uses the tools of excess to point towards an impending lack. However, a significant difference emerges: whereas much avant-garde cuisine tends to privilege entertainment and experience as finalities in themselves – with any hints of awareness rapidly diluted in spectacular flavours and performances – contemporary art, though equally part of the leisure industry, more firmly bears a function of collective responsibility.

In this techno-decadent scenario, the traditional marginalisation of taste in Western philosophy is precisely what allows it to become a material site of resistance. In an era where visual and auditory fields are increasingly colonised by algorithmic logic and infinite reproducibility, taste demands a physical encounter that resists total digitalisation. As Britton has suggested, the stubbornness of taste not to be fully mediated constitutes an anchor to presence and materiality against the hyper-technologisation adopted by the very avant-garde gastronomic field. This resistance is the core of the techno-decadent paradox: we use the most refined devices to simulate taste, only to find that the experience itself refuses to be reduced to a prosthetic artifice. It is precisely in the gap between this technological conditioning of perception and its critical use that contemporary art positions itself as a laboratory of techno-resistance.

Seen in this broader perspective, both the gastronomic and artistic experiments considered in this paper share with decadence an ambivalent stance towards modernity. On the one hand, they celebrate the power of artifice, the human capacity to engineer new modes of perception. On the other, they expose the depletion of the natural, the impossibility of unmediated experience. It is taste that reveals this crevice, where the dichotomy emerges with full clarity. Undoubtedly, in the digital age, algorithms play an increasingly central role in shaping taste as well. Digital platforms do not simply reflect users' tastes; they produce it, curating experience through predictive models that anticipate and shape desire (Arielli, 2018). Taste increasingly becomes a quantifiable metric, a dataset of optimised preferences.¹⁹ The algorithm functions as a new *Des Esseintes*: a machinic aesthete that refines perception to the point of exhaustion.²⁰ Here, a key risk emerges from the complex interplay between global homogenisation and the desire for unique, customised expressions of taste. Whereas taste remains one of the most subjective experiences, its history has been marked by endless efforts to establish shared standards of objectivity, with consequences for both everyday life and world market economies. This ambiguity helps explain why AI applications and the externalisation of gustatory preferences are more complex to analyse than in other perceptual domains.

Contemporary artists and chefs produce an aesthetic-ethical field that, like Huysmans's fictional world, oscillates between ecstasy and decay, innovation and overload – a decadent dialectic for the current age. As the natural world recedes and the artificial one proliferates, the act of tasting – whether food, art, or digital experience – becomes the stage on which the modern crisis acquires its flavour. For this reason, in this *golden era of creativity* born of anxiety, taste stands not only as an analogue stronghold but also as the very symbol of a renewed decadent movement, rising in response to the algorithmic raging of the digital.

The challenge for future aesthetics lies in the capacity of inhabiting the mediation critically – to acknowledge that every simulated flavour is both a triumph of human genius and a mourning. Huysmans's artificial paradise, for all its morbidity, resisted the vulgarity of his time. Likewise, contemporary techno-aesthetics²¹ can be read as a form of resistance to the powers of technology by turning them to artistic advantage. Techno-decadent gastronomy embodies this performative contradiction, intensifying experience through technology while at the same time exposing the mechanisms – and ecological costs – of that very intensification. Thus, the aesthetics of techno-decadence provides a philosophical framework to inhabit the ecological crisis without falling into either naive techno-optimism or paralysed nostalgia. By aestheticizing the dark sides of our food systems – extinctions, chemical

¹⁹ For a contrasting account of taste as a cultivated aesthetic practice, shaped through experience, attention, and situated engagement, cf. Bertinetto (2025).

²⁰ This process has been described as the rise of the *database aesthetics* (Vesna, 2007), in which experience is organised through combinatory logics.

²¹ On techno-aesthetics, see the works by Pietro Montani, e.g. Montani (2021).

adulterations, and ethical dilemmas of cultured meat – contemporary art and gastronomy transform decline into a tool for awareness. The challenge is no longer whether to embrace technology but how to cultivate, as Des Esseintes attempted, a taste refined enough to perceive both the beauty of artifice and the melancholy of what it replaces. Techno-decadent aesthetics operates precisely in this interstice: acknowledging that artifice, though inevitable, carries within it the seeds of decay and awareness, of loss and critical consciousness.

Maddalena Borsato is the author of sections 1 and 3 and Elena Mancioppi is the author of sections 2 and 4.

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