

# Digital Daydreaming as Stillness: a 'disappearance' from the everyday into the art

**Dr Dew Harrison;** School of Art and Design, University of Wolverhampton

**Dr Barbara Rauch;** Chelsea College of Art & Design, University of the Arts London

## Abstract

As researchers and practicing artists we are currently collaborating in an area where our interests merge - the associative thinking apparent within the dreaming and the conscious mind. With Rauch as Ms Dream and Harrison, Ms Real, we have explored a conceptual co-joining into one mindset through a number of projects, including Physical\_Chat 1 and 2, and are currently working on Physical\_Dream, which involves the possibility of 'flocked' thought trails<sup>1</sup> and dreamscapes. We are interested in weaving together the conscious and the subconscious, the rational and the emotional, the awake and the dreaming brain using computer technology in our attempt to compound a creative mind. And wish to present to you our ideas to date.

Contemporary understandings within our separate interests have enabled us to meld these binary mindstates via the interim position of the 'daydream', in which one is neither awake nor asleep. We see daydreaming as the dovetailing of dreams and real-take into an holistic understanding of a compound thought arena. It is a conceptually suspended duration of time, a liminal space at the threshold between consciousness and unconsciousness. A stillness of being, an interruption in our daily life flow of focussed activity, that can be paralleled with Virilio's 'moment of inertia' and state of 'picnolepsia'. We would like to put to you that the daydream is a 'stillness of duration' and argue that it could be a necessary and positive attribute to modern life in our technocratic culture. Specifically for an artist concerned with a viewer's experience of their digital work.

## Keywords

Daydreamscapes, thought-trails, free time, dreaming and emotion.

## Introduction

Within the global village we are nearing a position of continual surveillance. Where can we go to avoid our sense of being watched, escape from the present, have moments of absence in a stillness of time? We can always daydream, but to what extent does technology enable us this state of disappearance? Within our research collaboration we are exploring the extent to which new technologies allow us a space of consciousness where we can meet and engage with our audience in an unthreatening arena of activity, the free-associative liminal state of the techno-daydream. The daydream can be seen as an in-between position where thinking is liberated and allows for free-form connections. The body is awake and active but the mind is open to drifting dream-like thoughts on the threshold of being fully one or the other. Neither dreaming nor awake the 'daydream' is a state of consciousness where the awake and dreaming mind can meet.

---

<sup>1</sup> Basic flocking behaviour usually follows three simple rules: 1. Separation – to avoid crowding neighbours. 2. Alignment – to steer towards average heading of neighbors. 3. Cohesion – to steer towards average position of neighbors. (Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flocking\\_%28behavior%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flocking_%28behavior%29) accessed on July 20<sup>th</sup> 2007)

We intend to 'flock' thought trails according to the semantic relationships between words and the strength of those relationships. This furthers the idea of 'priming'. The brain is primed to recognise related words by activating semantic networks of associated concepts as in direct word pairs such as black and white, or cat and mouse. Another such pair is hand and finger, a less related optional word would be the word handshake. (These ideas are discussed further in Harrison & Rauch 2007, see bibliography.)

Working as Ms Dream and Ms Real, we are two artists collaborating to form a common ground – to unite the left and right sides of the brain, the awake mind of rational thought with the emotive dreamstate of the sleeper. We are currently working in partnership with the Virtual Landscape Theatre at the Macaulay Institute, to create a daydream experience. Individually we continue to follow our own specifics. Barbara researches into the neuroscientific model of the unconscious brain and the non-linearity apparent within dreaming narratives. I remain interested in holding complex inter-connected ideas electronically in line with the human mind, which stores concepts through the semantic association of idea and thought. My preliminary contribution to our daydreamscape will be the production of a moving painting of ‘flocked’ thought trails around a specific subject, offered for contemplation and deep thought with minimal physical action required of the viewer. The first section of this paper, ‘Rational Thinking’, goes some way towards positioning the daydream as a valid space in which such art can happen. The second part, ‘Emotional Thinking’, takes a deeper look at what daydreaming is, a combinatory area of emotional and rational thought.

### **Rational thinking**

As an artist and researcher I am aware of how technology is reconfiguring our relationship with the world and our own sense of being and consciousness, our thinking. I prefer to work with collative methods, often collaborating to find an interstice between formal constructed and observed social spaces where unorthodox art can happen to engage with its audience. The daydreamscape could be such a space.

I am currently engaged with ideas of daydreaming with regard to Paul Virilio’s work on inertia and picnolepsy to inform our daydream experience. Initially through physical inactivity and later with repetitive actions. His argument for the acceleration of modern life, the immediacy of information and an understanding of distance as time, led him to the statement “Now everything arrives without any need to depart” – “Polar inertia” (Virilio 2000, 20). Virilio observes that the arrival of dynamic vehicles carrying people or information such as the car, has been replaced by the arrival of multimedia items into static vehicles. Telecommunications have brought in the era of “staying on the spot” or “housebound inertia” (Virilio 2000, 22). This is reflected in car design where speed is a selling point even when over the lawful limit. Within racing car performance the ultimate extreme, according to Virilio (Virilio 2000), is to make the starting and finishing line coincide, and this can be paralleled with the idea of teleportation into the architecture of the intelligent home. It is this understanding of “movement without moving” (Virilio 2000, 25) facilitated by new technologies within our ordinary everyday life, which has informed the making of three digital non-linear films.



free time, and highlights the dilemma within “And yet, in secret as it were, the contraband of modes of behaviour proper to the domain of work, which will not let people out of its power, is being smuggled into the realm of free time.” (Adorno 1991, 164) He focuses on the inanity of leisure activities and in particular the hobby supplied by the leisure industry for profit while keeping people as amateurs. If labour power has become a commodity then the expression hobby amounts to a paradox where “Organized freedom is compulsory.” (Adorno 1991, 165)

We are given time for leisure and relaxation in order to work more effectively afterwards, without distraction or the need to lark about, but we are then provided with activities to prevent total inaction which would lead to boredom and objective desperation. Those activities are never too demanding i.e. Sunday cricket, or they would become work, can be essentially passive i.e. watching T.V., or quasi-active i.e. recent spectator sports which, according to Henri Lefebvre, (Lefebvre 1991) allows the supporter to attend, participate and play sport via an intermediary. Lefebvre sees leisure and work as the interlocked elements of everyday life and insists that we cannot step beyond or escape the everyday in its entirety “the marvellous can only exist in fiction and the illusions people share... And yet we wish to have the illusion of escape as near to hand as possible.” (Lefebvre 1991, 39) However, leaving us on a more optimistic note, Adorno suggests that individuals will continue to resist contrived free time and find ways of approaching freedom proper (Adorno 1991). To some extent more flexible working hours and changing lifestyles are merging work and social time allowing for shorter, more frequent pockets of free time. Computers in the work place allow for gaming and online social interactions under cover of work and although we may feel constantly under surveillance in our Big Brother world, we are aware of deviant ways out. Employing daydreaming as a method of escape from work and contrived organised leisure time offer small episodes of stillness in the chaos of contemporary life.

According to Nicolas Bourriaud “The Aura of contemporary art is a free association” (Bourriaud 2002, 61), he is referring here to Relational Aesthetics and so makes a case for social engagement within an art practice. This free association is a wider contextualisation outside the gallery spaces and into the everyday which can be seen as “Parachuting artists into given situations.” (Doherty 2003), a conditional result of the globalisation of art. This free association can also be taken as an extension of the semantic net-worked artwork continued out into the daily lives of its viewers. New technologies can come into play here and position artists within social niches and specific sites to find new audiences. However, perhaps a reversal of roles is now imminent where our techno-savvy audience will be searching for us, the artists, in unobserved places as a way of participating in Guy Debord’s “free creation of events” (Debord 2002, 244) thus finding actual moments of escape, of disappearance, from within their legitimised free time. We hope to meet them in our constructed daydream space where they can rest, still for a while at their own leisure.

Such resting, however, is not mere leisure time, it is also the time for positioning thoughts. When daydreaming the brain does an emotional balancing of diverse thoughts and can form new connections between them which, in accordance with current understandings of daydreaming (Jones 2007), improves thinking. Daydreaming therefore keeps the network of internal and external information handling in tact, and indeed, could be considered as the default setting of the mind where our thoughts can wander and position themselves in the brain’s network.

### **Emotional thinking**

The concepts of daydreaming and emotions are interrelated issues. Margaret Boden (1990) linked the subjects of human motivation, creativity and free association in her book ‘The Creative Mind’. Furthermore, Mueller and Dyer (1985) have pointed out, “emotions trigger daydreams and daydreams modify existing emotions and trigger new emotions, which trigger new daydreams, and

so on.” Daydreaming is an activity where we plan, play through imagined scenarios, replay and reflect memories. I suggest daydreams are the coming together of emotions and rationality. (Different to the dreaming brain when the amygdala is hyperactive and dominant, while the prefrontal cortex does not work to its full capacity, as consequence planning and reflecting suffer during dreaming.)

Daydreaming has been researched relying on retrospective reports and reflective introspection, similar to dream reports this is a backward recall of thoughts, where one verbalises a stream of thought as it occurs. Daniel Dennett does not refer directly to the term daydreaming but he explains how human beings developed a habit of “replaying events in [their] minds’ over and over” (Dennett 2005, 169). He suggests further that this behaviour provides the important source of episodic memory and cannot be considered wasteful or useless at all: we rehearse, repeat, train, to later recall the lesson or episode. This instant replay and reverberating is needed to store episodic events he explains. Furthermore he elaborates, that this explains “infantile amnesia” where the child was too young to use verbal language to replay events. This act of self-conditioning that relies on self-stimulation, is not available in animals. Dennett explains this condition as “echo-capacity”, a situation that facilitates long-term episodic memory. To finalise this thought train: replay and rehearsal mean reflection on several levels, this relates to a methodology explained by Alvensson and Sköldbberg as reflexivity. (Alvensson and Sköldbberg 2000)

While, as explained above, daydreaming offers replay and rehearsal under conscious conditions the dreaming brain has been suggested to be its unconscious counterpart. Antti Revonsuo (2006) elaborates a Threat Simulation theory (TST) for the function of dreaming; a theory that the world-simulation we know as “dreaming” is specialized in the simulation of dangers and threatening events. Revonsuo (2006, 111) presents an understanding of these mental fictive worlds that make us understand the real world, and even assumes that this function might go back to early stages of human development. He also argues that a model representation is needed for matching real and imagined memories and details. He argues that creativity and flexibility are required in the brain to find possible answers to match old ideas with new incoming data/ experience to be able to rebuild the model of the “world-for-me” (Revonsuo’s expression (Revonsuo 2006, 182). Threat simulations in dreams are activated mostly when they are needed, i.e. when something threatening or stressful has been perceived. In these circumstances we construct an artificial situation within which to rehearse for emergencies. This is to practice, in advance, for any potential threats in the real world. Revonsuo claims that the “world-for-me” is primarily a “navigational device in the brain”. With this theory, Revonsuo offers an understanding of “reality as an illusion” made entirely by the brain. The human body is understood as an interface which delivers a model of this “world-for-me”. He further proposed that a personal view of the world exists in the brain as a model where we can rehearse dangerous situations, including obviously also social threats; he points out that we are in the end social animals (Revonsuo 2006, 418/9).

Revonsuo (2006, 237) insists that this natural virtual reality model is also used to navigate real situations, since we cannot, every time we encounter something in the outside world, reinvent the experience itself. It is easier to build on our existing model as representation of the real. This model, of course, is constantly being updated and I suggest daydreaming plays a part in the process of updating our model of the world. My research into the dreaming brain (Rauch 2005) led me to the issues of emotion. Dreaming is driven by the forebrain system of the brain, and, as Hobson justifies, it is primary emotion that seems to shape the dream plot. The limbic system and, in particular, the amygdala shown in PET-scans are hyperactive, causing emotional direction in dreaming (Hobson 2001, 77). One of the leading figures in emotion research is Antonio Damasio.

Damasio discusses the error of the Cartesian view wherein scientists studied only the body, while matters of the mind were left to religion and philosophy. Only recently have cross-disciplinary approaches emerged in the area of brain/mind study. Damasio's concern about this mutually exclusive dualism, where the brain and mind are seen as separate entities, is of interest for consciousness research. "The organism constituted by the brain-body partnership interacts with the environment as an ensemble, the interaction being of neither the body nor the brain alone." (Damasio 1994, 88). Although consciousness arises within the brain it is still questionable whether this therefore situates the mind in the "physical realm" of the brain (Damasio 1994, 94/95).

Damasio considers the mind not only to be embedded in the brain but in the rest of the body too. He does not only challenge the notion of a separation between brain and mind, and the Western tradition of dividing brain experience from cultural experience, but also the division made between reason and feeling. He investigates issues of decision-making, and states that if there is an impairment of emotions, we would not be able to be rational either. He suggests that a correspondence between emotional feelings and the rational mind is vital. In the words of Damasio "the mind arises from activity in neural circuits" (Damasio 1994, 226). He does not say that the mind is in the body, but "that the body contributes more than life support and modulatory effects to the brain. It contributes a content that is part and parcel of the workings of the normal mind" (Damasio 1994, 226).

According to Damasio, mind is an integrated function of an advanced organism arising through evolutionary selection. The developing brain, when it became complex enough, produced mental responses (i.e. thoughts) that may have contributed to survival. As he states: "the minded brain minded the body" (Damasio 1994, 230). The survival mechanism can be thought of as a greater appreciation of external circumstances, with a "prediction of future consequences by way of imagining scenarios and planning actions" (Damasio 1994, 229).

Damasio concludes that the mind might not be conceivable without a body as "ground reference", one which offers the spatial and temporal framework to an "absolute" reality (Damasio 1994, 235). He further discusses the importance of the "primordial representation of the body proper in action" (Damasio 1994, 235) and the role it plays in consciousness. The interconnectedness of brain and body is stressed and leads to an understanding of the human mind which needs a perspective of the entire organism. If, further, we take on board that rationality and emotion are interlinked, and that there is no split between body and mind, we enter Damasio's hypothesis of the "somatic marker" (Damasio 1994, 173): a dynamic representation of what is happening in the body. The signals given by the body are of emotional value to the person and any future decision-making, even if not consciously acknowledged. "Somatic markers may not be sufficient for normal human decision-making since a subsequent process of reasoning and final selection will still take place in many though not all instances. Somatic markers probably increase the accuracy and efficiency of the decision process. Their absence reduces them." (Damasio 1994, 173)

## **Conclusion**

Our discussion of daydreaming has concerned an outer and inner view of it as a discrete, still place of dynamic thought. We suggest that it exists as a bridge between the rational and the emotional mind, between the awake and the sleeping brain, as a coming together of the conscious and the unconscious thought. Dreaming and daydreaming are regarded as the most creative potential mental states, exactly because the pattern of the activation of specific brain regions allows for unusual combinational creativity. Dreaming and daydreaming can also be regarded as the most extreme forms of spontaneous thinking, they allow for insights that would have been most difficult to reach by conscious logical thinking alone. Our future practical and theoretical research is concerned with

the fusion of stillness and speed in self-organised flocked thought trails, and in so doing, we are considering the digitally constructed 'daydream' as a potential art arena.

## References

- Harrison, D. and Rauch B. 'A Merging of Mindsets through Collision and Collusion'. In *Technoetic Arts: A Journal of Speculative Research*. Vol 5 No 1. Bristol: Intellect, 2007.
- Virilio, Paul. *Polar Inertia*. London: Sage Publications, 2000.
- Virilio, Paul. *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*. New York: Semiotext(e), 1991.
- Adorno, Theodor W. *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*. London: Routledge, 1991.
- Lefebvre, Henri. *Critique of Everyday Life*. London: Verso, 1991.
- Debord, Guy. Perspectives for Conscious Alterations in Everyday Life. In *The Everyday Life Reader*, edited by Ben Highmore, 237-245. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Bourriaud, Nicolas. *Relational Aesthetics*. Paris: Les presses du reel, 2002.
- Doherty, Claire. "The Wrong Place: Rethinking Context in Contemporary Art." *Situations*. [http://www.situations.org.uk/archive\\_situations20032005\\_conference.htm](http://www.situations.org.uk/archive_situations20032005_conference.htm) (accessed 8<sup>th</sup> May, 2007).
- Jones, Hilary. "Daydreaming improves thinking." <http://www.cosmosmagazine.com/node/980> (accessed 20<sup>th</sup> July, 2007).
- Boden, Margaret. *The Creative Mind: Myths and mechanisms*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1990.
- Mueller, E. T. and Dyer, M. G. 'Towards a Computational Theory of Human Daydreaming' in *Proceedings of the Seventh Annual Conference of the Cognitive Science Society*. pp.120-129. Irvine, CA., 1985.
- Dennett, Daniel C. *Sweet Dreams: Philosophical Obstacles to a Science of Consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005.
- Alvesson, M. and Sköldbberg, K. *Reflexive Methodology: new vistas for qualitative research*. London: Sage Publications, 2000.
- Revonsuo, Antti. *Inner Presence: Consciousness as a Biological Phenomenon*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2006.
- Rauch, Barbara. 'Natural and Digital Virtual Realities – a practice-based exploration of dreaming and online virtual environments' PhD thesis. University of the Arts London, 2005.
- Hobson, Alan J. *The Dream Drugstore: Chemically Altered States of Consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001.
- Damasio, Antonio R. *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain*. London: Papermac, Macmillan General Books, 1994.

## Biographical Notes

Dr Harrison is a practicing artist and academic, currently working as a University Reader in digital media art. Prior to this she has been a researcher and lecturer in interactive art, multimedia and new media theory and was the research fellow on a funded 2yr digital art project. Her current research concerns her own work where she undertakes a critical practice exploring Conceptual Art, non-linear narrativity and multimedia mind-mapping. Outcomes continue to be shown internationally.

Dew has curated a number of international online exhibitions and also works as a co-director of PVA. MediaLab, an artist-led organisation which initiates and supports good practice in new media art, now renowned for its Labculture Ltd., residency programme. Her papers have been published and presented at conferences as diverse as Art History, Gaming, Museology and Consciousness Studies, and she continues to lecture, mentor artists and supervise PhD students in the field of computer-mediated art.

Dr Barbara Rauch is a research fellow in FADE (Fine Art Digital Environment - Surface, Layering, Memory), a joint research project between Camberwell College of Arts and Chelsea College of Art & Design, ICFAR + SCIRIA, University of the Arts London.

Her research focuses on new technologies and how they alter our current understanding of human consciousness. The research provided the basis for her PhD thesis entitled 'Natural and Digital Virtual Realities – a practice-based exploration of dreaming and online virtual environments'. The research work that followed focused on 3D-surface capturing of animated facial expressions in animals and humans, attempting to map virtual emotions (AHRC Grant in the Creative and Performing Arts scheme, January 2007). Currently she is a visiting senior fellow at the McLuhan Program, FIS, University of Toronto.