

**IN MY OWN WORLD:  
AN EXPLORATION OF  
DAYDREAMING & IMAGINATIVE  
THOUGHT**

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**THE OXBOW SCHOOL**



This installation is centered around the concept of daydreams and reveries. It aims to give the viewer a dream-like sensation as they interact with the piece. In a society obsessed with productivity in the forms of task completion and efficiency, daydreaming is generally regarded as a useless practice and has become synonymous with inattentiveness and laziness. The concept that I aim to illustrate in this installation is that contrary to popular belief, daydreaming is an entirely healthy practice that gives us a window into the hidden operations and ulterior states of consciousness that we don't have access to while fully engaging in active thought.

It is important to note that these portraits of teenage girls were clearly taken by a teenage girl and are entirely nonsexual in their essence--connoting the phenomena of the "male gaze." The male gaze, a concept delineated by feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey, is the act of depicting women and girls in visual art as sexual objects. The portraits that I have taken capture moments at which the subjects are natural as well as vulnerable and give an insight into a gaze that is unstructured and spontaneous; thereby unencumbered by the contemporary social belief systems that govern the way we think.

All photographs pictured were taken on 35mm color film as I feel that this medium, as opposed to digital, gives a more ethereal quality to photographs. The swing is made from wood, rope, and pillow stuffing. I employ the usage of projections because they give a dreamy, distorted quality to the works. While engaging with the piece, one is simultaneously swinging back and forth and being drawn in by the moving portraits. This is meant to stimulate a daydream-like experience as well as to allow the viewer to float into their subconscious -- a world that is generally unbidden.

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## I. Introduction

I live in a world of daydreams. I often find dull subway rides instantly transformed into exhilarating surf rides on the coast of Australia, a delicious bite of strawberry ice cream while resting on a cloud, a quick trip to ancient Greece. This phenomenon is not singular to my experience, it is theorized that one third to one half of the average individual's time is spent daydreaming.<sup>1</sup> The term "daydreaming" carries with it a myriad of negative connotations and is often viewed as synonymous with inattentiveness and laziness. In a society obsessed with the idea of productivity in the forms of task completion and efficiency, daydreaming is generally regarded as a useless practice. Freud even described daydreaming as "infantile" and as a vehicle of which to avoid the basic responsibilities of life and into fantasies of "wish-fulfillment."<sup>2</sup> Personally, teachers have often labeled me as inattentive, faraway, even distant in my affect. "Zoë seems to be absentminded and even bored by my class," one teacher was bold enough to state on my report card. I'd much rather be labeled as creative and dreamy, (thank you very much!) In reality, with my most disinterested facial expressions come my most vivid thoughts. It is an unhealthy practice to be so absorbed by one's personal thought that one is oblivious or even unconcerned with reality. However, it is a healthy practice to disengage with reality and become utterly consumed by self-reflection and creativity every once in a while in the forms of daydreaming, fantasy, or even seeming cognitive blankness. As delineated by scientists and creative thinkers throughout history, daydreaming is a unique experience that gives us a window into the hidden operations and ulterior states of consciousness that we don't have access to while fully engaging in conscious thought.

## II. What is a Daydream?

When I speak of 'daydreams' I am referring to moments of consciousness in which one is more engaged with one's internal thoughts than with the outside world. Researchers have labeled what I call 'daydreaming' with numerous other names: spontaneous thought or cognition, stimulus independent thought, fantasy, absent-mindedness, zoning out, offline thought, undirected thought, unconscious thought, and mind wandering.<sup>3</sup> Though most modern researchers prefer the term "mind-wandering," my preferred term is 'daydreaming' (as I feel it more accurately illustrates the dreamy, artistic, and imaginative quality of this phenomena).

More specifically, when referring to daydreaming, I am referring to "positive constructive daydreaming." Jerome L. Singer, a critical 1960s psychologist and the originator of this term, defines positive constructive daydreaming as "playful, wishful imagery, and planful, creative thought associated with openness to experience, and reflects curiosity, sensitivity, and exploration of ideas, feelings, and sensations."<sup>4</sup> Additionally, Singer characterizes those who engage in positive constructive daydreaming as "happy daydreamers who enjoy fantasy, vivid

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<sup>1</sup>"Science of Daydreaming." *DUJS Online*, 3 Feb. 2011, [dujs.dartmouth.edu/2011/02/science-of-daydreaming/#.Wtzqe9PwZ-V](http://dujs.dartmouth.edu/2011/02/science-of-daydreaming/#.Wtzqe9PwZ-V).

<sup>2</sup> Lehrer, Jonah. "The Virtues of Daydreaming." *The New Yorker*, The New Yorker, 19 June 2017, [www.newyorker.com/tech/frontal-cortex/the-virtues-of-daydreaming](http://www.newyorker.com/tech/frontal-cortex/the-virtues-of-daydreaming).

<sup>3</sup>McMillan, Rebecca L., et al. *Frontiers in Psychology*, Frontiers Media S.A., 2013, [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3779797/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3779797/).

<sup>4</sup>Ibid

imagery, the use of daydreaming for future planning, and possess abundant interpersonal curiosity.”<sup>5</sup>

Additionally, daydreams should not be confused with *visualization*, a subset of daydreaming which involves a cognitive rehearsal in which one visualizes and plays out all of the actions involved in a particular action. For example, surgeons are often encouraged and even trained to engage in visualization before engaging in procedures.<sup>6</sup> Before writing this paper, I found that I synonymized *visualization* and *daydreaming*, often engaging in the process when immersing myself in thoughts surrounding what I will do when returning to my sending school, and how I will present myself at my summer internship and more. However, when one engages in daydreaming, one is transported to a world of imagination, not one of practical thought or concrete problem solving.

### III. The Science Behind Daydreaming

While daydreaming is looked upon by many as a negative practice that does not hold any real value, experts now conclude that daydreaming is a normal and even cognitively beneficial part of life. As Marcus Raichle, a neurologist at Washington University states, “when you don’t use a muscle, that muscle really isn’t doing much of anything.... But when your brain is supposedly doing nothing and daydreaming, it’s really doing a tremendous amount. We call it ‘resting state,’ but the brain isn’t resting at all.”<sup>7</sup> As daydreaming is a seemingly unproductive experience, researchers often pose the question: why does the mind daydream at all? As put forth by researcher M.F. Mason in *Science* magazine, there are three widely agreed upon probabilities as to why this phenomena occurs in the first place. The first suggests that daydreaming allows individuals to maintain steady performance and engagement on mundane or fundamentally uninteresting tasks. Second, the researcher suggests that daydreaming “lends a sense of coherence to one’s past, present, and future experiences.”<sup>8</sup> The third reasoning is that there is no underlying meaning for daydreaming, the mind simply daydreams because it can.<sup>9</sup>

There is much support in the scientific community for the hypothesis that as an individual’s external stimulus decreases, a section of the brain known as the “default network” becomes more active and is responsible for daydreams. This network includes the medial prefrontal cortex, the posterior cingulate cortex/precuneus region, and the temporoparietal junction.<sup>10</sup> A neuroimaging study by Christoff et al. put forth significant evidence to support this hypothesis. By using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), he found that both the individual’s “default network” and executive systems of the brain are active during daydreaming. In other words, one’s mind is just as active, if not more active, while daydreaming than while

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Surgeons Study Benefits of Visualizing Procedures.” *The Globe and Mail*, 25 Mar. 2017, [www.theglobeandmail.com/life/health-and-fitness/health/surgeons-study-benefits-of-visualizing-procedures/article22681531/](http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/health-and-fitness/health/surgeons-study-benefits-of-visualizing-procedures/article22681531/).

<sup>7</sup> J. Lehrer, *Daydream achiever* (2008). Available at [http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2008/08/31/daydream\\_achiever](http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2008/08/31/daydream_achiever) (22 May 2010).

<sup>8</sup> M. F. Mason *et al.* Wandering minds: the default network and stimulus-independent thought. *Science*. **315**, 393-395 (2007).

<sup>9</sup> M. F. Mason *et al.* Wandering minds: the default network and stimulus-independent thought. *Science*. **315**, 393-395 (2007).

<sup>10</sup> K. Christoff, A. M. Gordon, J. Smallwood, R. Smith, J. W. Schooler, Experience sampling during fMRI reveals default network and executive system contributions to mind wandering. *PNAS*. **106**, 8719-8724 (2009).

engaged in active thought. Additionally, this research gives us an insight into the very nature of daydreaming, that because the brain is using both the default network and the executive systems of the brain, it is clear why it is nearly impossible to remain on task while engaging in daydreaming -- much brain power is needed.

The concept of “idea incubation,” first delineated by T.S. Eliot, is a 19th Century theory of consciousness that was very popular throughout the 19th and 20th century. Idea incubation is defined as an operation in which one unconsciously synthesizes ideas and thoughts which emerge at a later point in time as new and fully developed conscious thoughts and ideas.<sup>11</sup> The experience of having a problem, letting it sit in one's mind for a certain period of time, and then, out-of-the-blue, arriving at a solution is widespread. Additionally, T.S. Eliot made the connection between health and creativity, explaining that “some forms of ill-health, debility or anemia, may produce an efflux of poetry in a way approaching the condition of automatic writing.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, when one is ill and must lie in bed inactive, one produces more creative thoughts and ideas--there is more space for incubation. There have been many studies to prove this centuries old idea. In 1993, Harvard psychologist Deirdre Barrett told a group of college groups to “incubate” the answers to homework problems and questions of which he posed to them. After one week of “incubation,” Barrett found that half of the students had dreamed about the answers to their problems and a quarter of the students had found answers in their dreams.<sup>13</sup>

#### IV. Daydreaming and Creativity

As exemplified by the Dada and Surrealist movements, the notion that daydreaming or subconscious thought facilitates daydreaming is not new. Because creative ideas are often viewed as having been conjured up out of the subconscious, creative individuals are often described as “dreamy” and “imaginative.” Creativity is not a unitary concept -- when referring to the term “creativity,” there are numerous processes of which it suggests. The first process is *analytic creative insight*, which refers to the process in which one restructures, combines, or understands a certain idea in a different way. Steve Jobs, former CEO of Apple, Inc., stated, “creativity is just connecting things. When you ask creative people how they did something, they feel a little guilty because they didn’t really do it; they just saw something and it seemed obvious to them after a while. That’s because they were able to connect experiences they’ve had and synthesize new things.”<sup>14</sup> The second is when one actually experiences a creative insight--usually characterized by the sudden appearance of an idea, image, or solution to a problem. Creative insights are usually the result of unconscious associative processing.<sup>15</sup> Though it is certainly possible to come up with creative ideas while engaging in task focused thought, researchers have drawn many links between imagination and daydreaming. Researcher R.N. Shepherd asserted that the act of daydreaming aids creativity as it gives way to the reconnection

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<sup>11</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Incubation\\_\(psychology\)#cite\\_note-2](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Incubation_(psychology)#cite_note-2)

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.brainpickings.org/2012/11/01/john-keats-on-negative-capability/>

<sup>13</sup> Barrett, Deirdre. The 'Committee of Sleep': A Study of Dream Incubation for Problem Solving. *Dreaming: Journal of the Association for the Study of Dreams*, 1993, 3, pp. 115-123.

<sup>14</sup> <http://blog.spencerhall.com/blog/where-does-creativity-come-from>

<sup>15</sup> Schooler J. W., Melcher J. (1995). “The ineffability of insight,” in *The Creative Cognition Approach* eds Smith S. M., Ward T. B., Finke R. A., editors. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press; ) 97–133.

of mental images and novel associations.<sup>16</sup> In 2009, researchers Sio and Ormerod found that taking breaks from active thought and work and engaging in daydreaming increased creativity, an idea labeled incubation.<sup>17</sup> Incubation is associated with individuals who engage in daydreaming often while engaging in undemanding tasks, which subsequently increases creativity.

Since it has been proven by numerous scientists that while engaging in some styles of daydreaming the mind is more creative, the question that naturally emerges is this: is it possible to engage in volitional daydreaming in order to stimulate and evoke creativity? In 1985, researchers Long and Hiebert explored this very question. The researchers developed visualization exercises for a control group of students in which the students imagined experiences and let images trigger other images, thoughts, and ideas. After three weeks, the researchers found that the creative writing of the control group had improved significantly.<sup>18</sup> Another study by researcher A.L. Jampole in 1991 used two control groups, one of which engaged in visualization and daydreaming practices mentally manipulating images and travelling to different locations and the other engaged in reading and writing exercises. Jampole found that the students who engaged in the mental imagination techniques wrote more original and creative stories at the end of the study.<sup>19</sup> Though daydreaming is associated with underperformance when one is performing tasks,<sup>20</sup> it is clear that the value and outcome of daydreaming when both stimulating and evoking creative thought can be far greater.

## V. Surrealism -- Daydreaming as a Vehicle for Social Commentary

The relationship between creativity and daydreaming has been both scientifically proven and employed in the surrealist movement as a technique of which to fight against oppression and nationalism. The surrealist movement was a wave of art and literature in the 1920s and 30s centered around the creative capacity of the unconscious mind - a concept which has many links to the act of daydreaming. The term “automatism” is used to describe any actions or thoughts that are not actively controlled by the conscious mind, dreaming, daydreaming, and breathing for example.<sup>21</sup> All surrealist work aimed to employ automatism from their instinctive and extemporaneous writing techniques to their free association in painting and writing. André Breton, the leader of the movement, defined surrealism as “psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express - verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner - the actual functioning of thought.”<sup>22</sup> In other words, Breton suggests that artists and

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<sup>16</sup> Shepard R. N. (1978). The mental image. *Am. Psychol.* 33 125–137.

<sup>17</sup> Does incubation enhance problem solving? A meta-analytic review. *Sio UN, Ormerod TC Psychol Bull.* 2009 Jan; 135(1):94-120.

<sup>18</sup> Long S., Hiebert E. H. (1985). “Effects of awareness and practice in mental imagery on creative writing of gifted children. Issues in literacy: a research perspective,” in *Proceeding of the Thirty-fourth Yearbook of the National Reading Conference* eds Nules J. A., Lalik R., editors. (Rochester, NY: National Reading Conference; )

<sup>19</sup> Jampole E. S., Konopak B. C., Readance J. E., Moser J. E. (1991). Using mental imagery to enhance gifted elementary students’ creative writing. *Read. Psychol.* 12 183–197.

<sup>20</sup> Zedelius, Claire M., and Jonathan W. Schooler. “The Richness of Inner Experience: Relating Styles of Daydreaming to Creative Processes.” *Frontiers in Psychology*, Frontiers Media S.A., 2015, [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4735674/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4735674/).

<sup>21</sup> “MoMA Learning.” *MoMA | Tapping the Subconscious: Automatism and Dreams*, [www.moma.org/learn/moma\\_learning/themes/surrealism/tapping-the-subconscious-automatism-and-dreams](http://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/themes/surrealism/tapping-the-subconscious-automatism-and-dreams).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*



creative thinkers transcend the boundaries of reason and rationality by way of connection to their unconscious minds, the same mechanisms that are accessed while daydreaming. The movement was deeply rooted in Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic writings which delineate that dreams and the functions of the unconscious mind are of legitimate importance. In his 1899 book, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud explains that the unconscious mind holds keys to human emotion and desires -- a revelation that provided a theoretical framework for the surrealist movement. Through connection to the "superior reality" of the subconscious mind, the surrealists sought to obliterate the rigid and confining rules of society and eradicate what they saw as a centuries old tradition of societal rationalism.<sup>23</sup>

In the early stages of his career, André Breton started the journal, *Littérature*, with fellow writers such as Louis Aragon and Philippe Soupault in which he experimented with this concept of automatism by writing spontaneously sans censorship as well as chronicling his dreams. While the Dada movement had focused on using abstract art and ideas and rejected the norms of



aestheticism in art and writing in order to protest violence, war, and nationalism, Breton found the surrealist methods of channeling the unconscious mind as much more effective and profound. In André Breton's surrealist manifesto, he describes a hypnagogic state in which he pictured "a man cut in two by the window." He states that "upon opening [his] eyes, [he] would get the very strong impression of something 'never seen.'"<sup>24</sup> This vision articulates Breton's understanding of the surrealist movement as what he calls "two distant realities" combined to create a new one -- a daydream of sorts.

Surrealist painters and visual artists were just as focused on the subconscious mind as the writers involved. Artists such as Salvador Dalí, René Magritte, Man Ray, Frida Kahlo, Pablo Picasso and others portrayed dreams and daydreams as integral and enriching expansions of the conscious world. It was the artists' goal to portray this world as a normal and even necessary part of everyday life. These artists looked for environments of which reality and the dream world came together, much like the way daydreaming works: a combination of the active and inactive minds.

Pictured above is Salvador Dalí's 1937 painting titled *Honey is Sweeter Than Blood*. This painting is the first of his works to associate more with surrealist styles and away from those associated with the Dada movement. This painting, as one can clearly see, takes place in the clouds and depicts a headless female torso and plays off of the theme of dreams, fantasies, and subconscious obsessions. Although Dalí did not associate with the surrealist movement at the time, he did state that automatism played a significant role in the creation of this piece.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, Dalí admitted that the theme of the subconscious played a significant role in inspiring his work.<sup>26</sup>

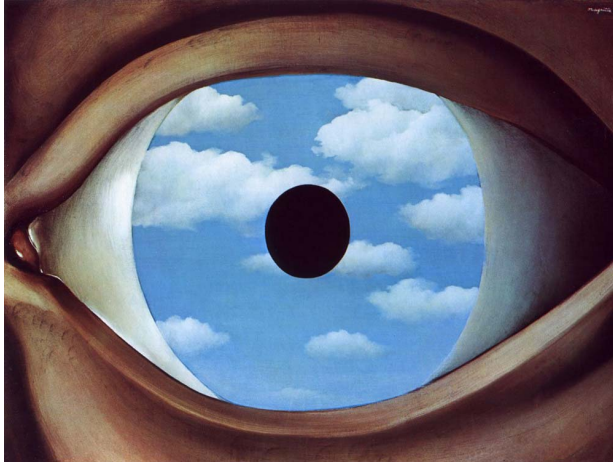
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<sup>23</sup> André Breton, "Radio Interviews with André Parinaud (1913–1952)" in *Conversations: The Autobiography of Surrealism* (Paragon House English, 1993). 63

<sup>24</sup> [http://www.exquisitecorpse.com/assets/manifesto\\_of\\_surrealism.pdf](http://www.exquisitecorpse.com/assets/manifesto_of_surrealism.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.dalipaintings.com/honey-is-sweeter-than-blood.jsp>

<sup>26</sup> Ibid



René Magritte's painting *The False Mirror* is one of the most famous of the surrealist era. This image depicts a symmetrical eye reflecting the image of clouds. There is a visible, dark pupils at the center which suggests that one is looking through the eye and into the human brain. The human brain, thus, depicts the content of the world --a world of subconscious thought, imagination and dreams. While this painting both depicts and evokes imagination and dreaming, it is also a commentary on whether what one sees coincides with what one thinks one knows. Additionally, painters that used unanticipated combinations of imagery like this

were considered to have conjured them up out of their subconscious minds as well as touching the minds of viewers.

## VI. Reverie and Daydreams in Literature

The act of *reverie*, a phenomena widely discussed in literature from Rousseau to T.S. Elliot to Dostoyevsky, is an act much like that of daydreaming. The English term 'reverie' comes from the French word *reverie*, which is defined as both "thoughts in which the imagination lets itself go" and "delirium caused by one illness or another"<sup>27</sup> by the 1762 *Dictionnaire de L'Académie Française*. As made clear by these definitions, the act of daydreaming was looked down upon by French society in the 18th century. The Enlightenment's extreme focus on scientific reason, the scientific process, and the physical world made for a widespread belief that reveries could lead to troublesome outcomes due to the absence of mental restraint involved.<sup>28</sup> Terry Castle, an American scholar at Stanford University, argues that because the existence of ghosts and other ghostly creatures was so staunchly denied by Enlightenment figures, people began to internalize these ideas which gave an autonomy to the human mind that it had never before possessed.<sup>29</sup> In other words,

In 1788, Jean-Jacques Rousseau set out a series of walks throughout Parisien gardens conjuring up reveries regarding philosophy, morality, nature, and, as he simply stated: "let [his] mind wander quite freely and [his] ideas follow their own course unhindered and untroubled."<sup>30</sup> Though Rousseau never meant for his *Reveries* to be read by the public, it is clear that he gave little care to the fact that reverie was generally looked down upon in society. He labeled his resultant reveries as sources of "sufficient, perfect, and full happiness, which leaves in the soul no void needing to be filled."<sup>31</sup> Though Rousseau gave little insights into why the mind engages

<sup>27</sup> "reverie, s.f.". *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, 4th Edition (1762).

<sup>28</sup>

<https://publish.wm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1081&context=honorstheses>

<sup>29</sup> Terry Castle, *The Female Thermometer: Eighteenth Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 7

<sup>30</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, trans. Russel Goulbourne, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 72

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*



in such thought, by simply describing the way in which he engaged in this process we have a vision into his personal subconscious.

In Dostoevsky's 1864 *Notes from the Underground*, he explores a character's newfound ideologies surrounding human nature, philosophy, and society in the forms of reveries as he returns to his home country after years of hard work in Siberia. The character embraces the very ideals that the Surrealists put forth and that Rousseau took hold of in *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*: a rejection of the societal culture of rationalism and a conviction that he has spiritual and irrational needs that cannot be satisfied by the rationalist and materialistic values of the time. The character writes that he will embrace mind wandering, refusing to organize his thoughts in any rational way,<sup>32</sup> and that he identifies as a 'dreamer.'

## VII. Conclusion

Though American society dismisses daydreaming and reverie as unproductive and an indicator of laziness, it is clear that as proven by scientific studies, writers and artists that the practice of daydreaming is a normal, healthy, creativity boosting and arguably necessary part of life.

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<sup>32</sup> <http://publish.wm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1081&context=honorstheses>

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