# Doors to Inception*

## Abstract

Escalating concerns about AI (artificial intelligence) infiltrating creative processes such as writing and art (see Altraide, 2022; Hearn, 2023) suggest we need to do both differently. Academic writing, in particular, has relied on a recognised style which is often turgid with little linguistic redundancy, and as such, would seem to be vulnerable to text-based AI such as Chat-GPT. Similarly, photorealistic or style-based art, can be replicated by AI such as DALL-EE. My argument is that human creativity cannot be replicated and the way we experience and evaluate it may need to change.

## Personal process - onset

This sits somewhere between the end of one piece of work and the beginning of another, following a becalming that is at first peaceful but soon begins to rumble in waves of undirected energy.

This turbulence is predicated upon the store of experiences I have collected over a lifetime and which encompasses everything I might have read, heard, felt, or seen.

Tim Harford, in his 2022 podcast 'The False Dawn of the Electric Car', spoke of Johnson's (2011) notion of the 'adjacent possible' – developments that appear around the same time and that make other developments more probable. This is like entering a room with an idea for a TV and finding doors leading to cathode ray tubes, electricity, lenses, and cinematography. Clive Sinclair's car failed because there was no adjacent infrastructure to support it.

But arguably, adjacency is not creativity, it simply provides the tools to support an initial idea. In thinking of rooms with doors, my first thought was of the Renaissance,

crammed with doors to more rooms and more ideas. But then I thought of David Lynch (Twin Peaks, 1990) and immediately saw a long, bare room with only two doors, one at each end. Lynch reaches for the distantly related, not the aunts and uncles.

My ideas come from a mental compost bin which, for decades, has absorbed all manner of media and atomised them.

**Initial Phase**

This is prolonged but takes only a few words to describe. Working memory is concrete, literal, and hard to recall after a time. But break it down into unstructured abstractions and ideas and it is the Ribena of organised thought. Although some material may lose specificity and incorporate falsehoods (eg Loftus, 1974, Cowen, 2008), almost everything from everywhere is represented and, given the chance, it will produce the abstractions and oddities I need. Mercifully though, not all at once.

This in itself sparks a chain reaction of creative thinking. Where algorithms look for next-door neighbours, a compost bin fed on everything from dead roses to compressed paper cartons and full of worms, can lob into awareness all manner of unlikely bedfellows.

Finally, the idea still not consciously resolved, there is a sudden calm and the work begins.

**The Graft**

Writers are often characterised as either Plotters or Pantzers and, in describing their different approaches, I think artists may be much the same. Plotters nail down their whole storyline; the characters, their backstories, the cliff-hangers and dénouements of every chapter before they start writing. In the final episode of 'I May Destroy You' (Cole, 2022), the main character, played by Michaela Cole who wrote the series, was shown by her string of post-it notes, to be a plotter. It changed how I understood the story.

Pantzers on the other hand, find their story by following their characters, letting them evolve and 'become' on the page with no preconceived idea of plot or

sometimes even genre. Pantzer means seat-of-the-pants; risky, exciting, and sometimes frustrating; but if that is how your head works, you have to learn to trust it. I know this because I am one.

My inspiration comes from the visual and aural stories collected over decades and stored in that voracious bin where imagery meets simplified cognitive science, as short-term literal memory gradually breaks down and becomes the long-term gist of itself (Squire et al, 2015).

I am an equal opportunity gatherer: music, literature, film, TV, noise, Brighton in 1967, yesterday by the river, three hours waiting in the cold at the wrong tube station, driving home from an undergrad party back in the day when no one bothered how many sheets you were to the wind. All of this sits in a kind of bubbling miasma of unconscious thought somewhere in my head, waiting to be called upon - or possibly a quantum universe if neuroscientists such as de Morais Smith, (2021) are on the right track.

There is not much scope for inventiveness in academic writing although it is still possible to use punctuation to encourage feelings of excitement or slow the reader down, white space for impact, and even shape and layout to reflect the purpose of the piece. King (2012) said that, "*Paragraphs are almost always as important for how they look as for what they say; they are maps of intent.*" Poems are often crafted into shapes, the white space being as important to the vocabulary of the work as the words themselves. [see John Cage's Lecture on Nothing, (1959) via White, (2015)].

The ending of Happy Valley (BBC, 2023), exemplifies for me the use of dramatic white space. Amongst the volumes of praise were dissatisfactions that some storylines had not been tied up to show justice being done. But looking more closely; the main character had passed on key information which would resolve those issues, and this would happen out of her sight and therefore out of ours.

Both writing and making art begin for me with the emergence of a narrative. I learned this many years ago when, faced with a monumental writing task, a wiser and more experienced friend advised me to, 'just tell the story.'

It was not easy; I had never approached academic writing like this and I knew almost nothing about story-telling beyond family anecdotes. But an anecdote is a story, and gradually I learned how to marshal the technique of establishing a narrative first for much of what came later.

Without narrative, there is for me, no purpose to the work; it has to say something and to mean something. Communication is important too because I want as many people as possible to feel they have a chance of forming ideas about what might be going on and not feel negatively mystified by what they see. So, I have to ask myself where the stories come from and how they emerge from behind the curtain of my functional life.

WH Davies put it well when he wrote, in 1911, "*What is this life if, full of care, we have no time to stand and stare?"* because the process of building a narrative is an exercise in noticing; paying attention to the large and the small, holding onto those crystalised thoughts as small fascinations, then laying them out in ways that reflect their unique depth.

Noticing and storing is like adding hops to a brew; it ferments, breaks down the lumpy wholes so they become compressed versions of their original selves. More than the sum of their parts, they are feeders of conscious thought if we know how to let it happen.

There is pragmatism too. King (2012), in another astute observation, characterises writing as, "*just another job like laying pipe or driving long-haul trucks,"* and tells us to turn up rather than wait for inspiration. Here, he is suggesting that writers should have a routine which involves turning up to work at a regular time. Psychologists would call his scenario 'setting conditions (e.g., Aldridge, et al 2014, referring to school students) which are contextual prompts that settle the mind into a particular frame. They help us get into the zone by creating a cognitive landscape within which certain behaviours are more likely and others less so. Sitting in a theatre, for instance, is more likely to favour hushed behaviour than watching a football match from the stands.
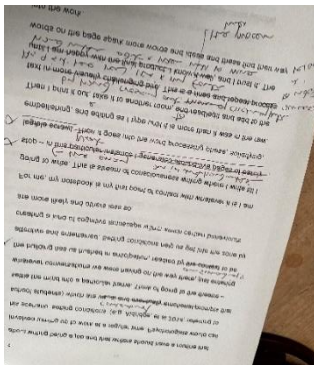
Following the restless phase, my setting conditions are my notebook which puts me in contact with whatever it is I am going to write. This is stream-of-consciousness writing where I write till I stop – for this essay I generated around five handwritten pages before spontaneity gave way to efforts to construct. At this point, it went into the word processing phase; solidifying, embellishing, and editing as I typed until it was more than it had been in the raw. Then I printed it out, took it to another room, and read/edited and added to the text, found better words, addressed punctuation and inserted the hint of new references.

I write for readability and fluency; the editing process a constant battle against superfluous language and its opposite, language so dense it sticks to the eyeballs and clogs the mind. I know this process well, and I trust it. The words on the page spark more words and ideas and these find their way into the work.

The maxim for this is, 'don't get it right, get it written', the message being one of allowing the creative process to do its job without interference from editorial detail. That comes later and is the bulk of the job. As a sophisticated process involving close reading of your own work with the critical eye of an outsider, it immerses me in the feel, the pace, and the tone of what I have written. For an academic piece, evidence is critical and for me, it relies on having absorbed sufficient relevant material to know where to look. The story has sprung out of accumulated and now unconscious evidence, but the sources need to be tracked down. Any assertions for which I am unable to find evidence is deleted and the paragraph reshaped. It helps to have a pomposity filter too. If writing is about anything, it has to be communication and so it must be readable.

Everything I have collected and left to disaggregate in my mental bin is waiting for its opportunity to be thrown up into awareness. But there is no chance of anything original appearing if there is a resistant barrier between the bin and my conscious mind, so I have to make that permeable to maximise the chances of receiving something different, relevant and exactly what I need, and the setting for this is mundanity - mindless tasks and routine activities that require no thinking.
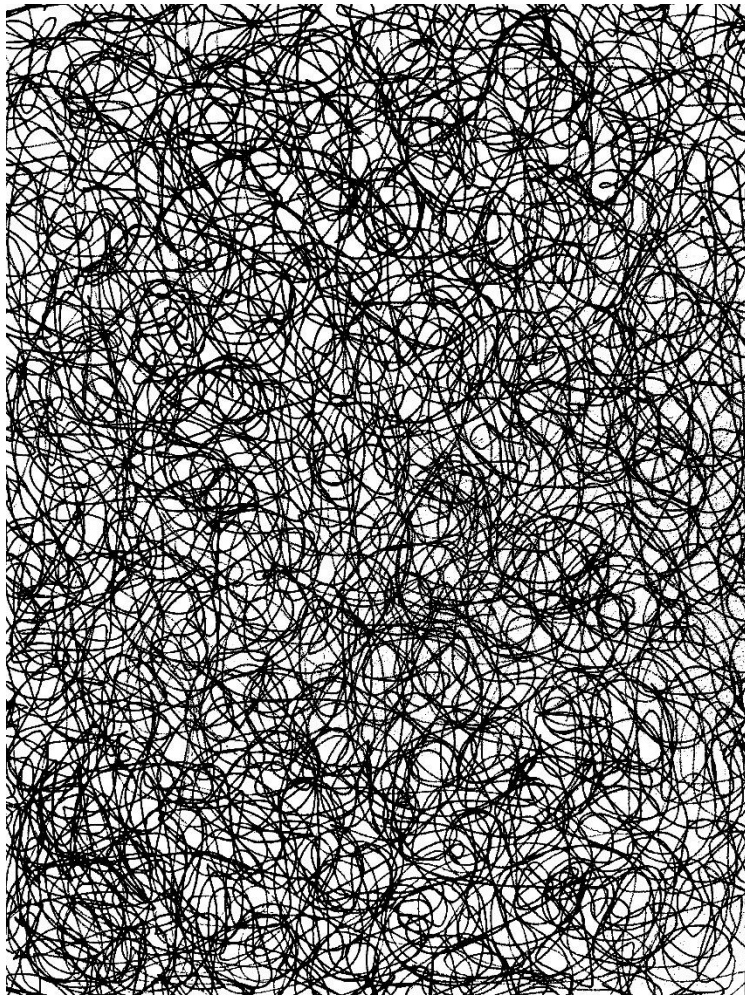
Figure 2 Miasma



Belton, in The Conversation (2018), and referring to boredom, says this:


*"Just pottering, carrying out simple tasks like washing up, deadheading garden flowers or mending, ... can help the mind to disengage from purposeful thought and wander where it will, daydreaming, making new connections, reflecting, problem-solving. Indeed, such free-range is now understood by neuroscientists to be important for healthy brain function."*

While Robertson in 2014, notes that *"[t]he restlessness which comes with [boredom] signifies a search for something – but you don't know what. Time goes slowly and*

*there is something gnawing and edgy about the restlessness that is not too pleasant."*

I can relate to that. And also to this; Dorothy Parker (1893-1967), poet and satirist, observed that "*the cure for boredom is curiosity*" (see Robertson, 2014; Goodreads Dorothy Parker Quotes) which seems to be antithetical but, to me, expresses what she could not have known, i.e. that the mind needs to be in a particular state for curiosity to be freed from troublesome thought.



*Figure 3 Pencil drawing*

It is becoming much the same when I begin to make a piece of art although I am still learning the language of it, the vocabulary and the grammar of the media, the process, and what I personally can do to make it perform to its best. At the beginning of this degree, I made tight little drawings towards a goal of one-draft perfection, not realising this was as alien to my art-making process as it is to writing.

The parallels with writing are easy to draw; just as I no longer fret over words, grammar, or referencing during the stream-of-consciousness phase, I trust that my artwork will, like a feral cat, come to me in its own time if I try not to look at it too hard.

The 'Fishing' piece is illustrative. It began with a series of images by Christy Lee



Rogers who places models underwater, wearing clothing that billows around them [see Extraordinary Portraits series, BBC 2022.] But very quickly I realised that representing a beautiful thing in an image so exquisite was not my style, and so I subverted it.

*Figure 4 Deep sea*

There is no photograph of the preliminary marks; I had moved on before thinking to take one, and so the first here is the sea – deep but with the colours of those first

marks just visible. At around this time, I began listening to a podcast (Monroe, 2022) about a fisheries inspector who went missing at sea. The job seemed indescribably risky, each inspector alone for months with a crew and captain upon whose work they were reporting. What happened to him? What had he seen that the crew thought he should not have?

The painting became a series through capturing its phases which are now displayed in my virtual gallery (Strayfish Gallery at Artsteps). It ends in a piece collaged with extracts from the podcast and shows a creature, which is both fearful and fearsome. Lee Christy's photograph was the initial trigger, then the visual imagery was turned upside down by the linguistic imagery of a podcast.
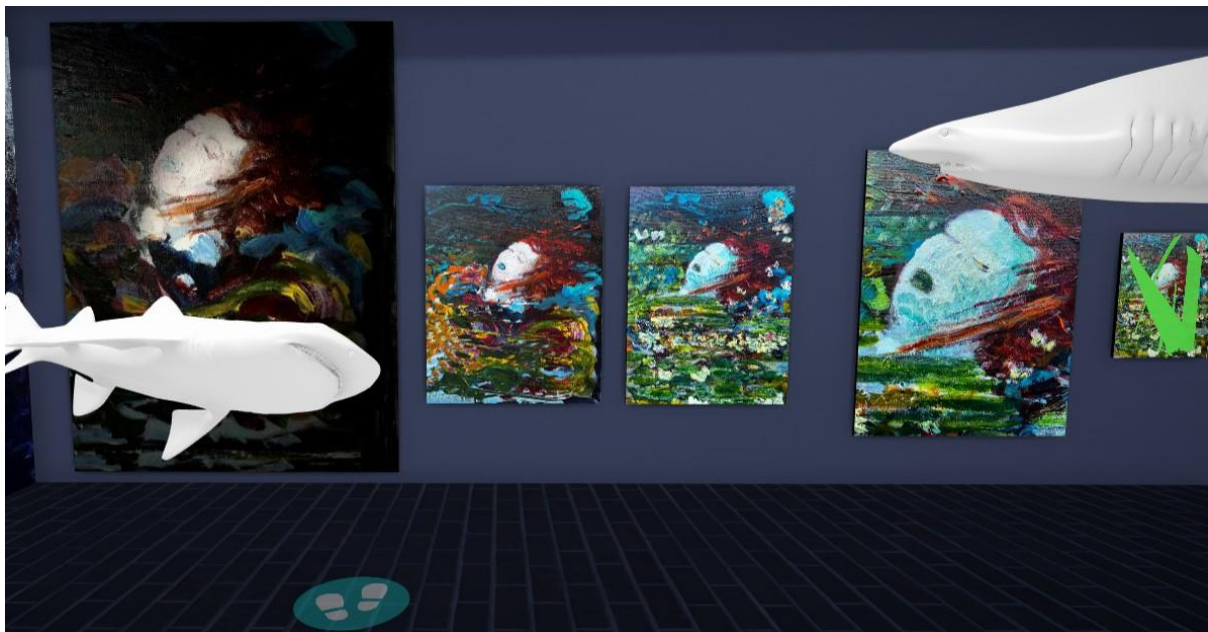


*Figure 5 Virtual gallery 1*

*Figure 6 Virtual gallery 2*



*Figure 8 Sea creature*



*Figure 7 Sea creature*



*Figure 9 Sea creature*

*Figure 10 Final painting*

Recently, the unconscious has been renamed in a way that removes from it the idea of absence. The Default Mode Network (DMN - see Psychology Today, undated; and Alves et al 2019) sparks up across our whole brain once we stop problem-solving and give it space. This is why tip-of-the-tongue frustrations can be unexpectedly resolved by washing up dishes; and why, for me, some of my best ideas and resolutions of problems come from allowing my DMN freedom of process to drive the beginning of any creative act. The old structures for writing academic material are no longer useful, lacking flexibility and with no room for the spirit of innovation to breathe.

I have begun to think this will become even more important as we consider the role of AI such as ChatGPT (see Ortriz, 2023), and DALL-EE (see Open-ai) which seem more than capable of churning out template essays and photorealistic images by prescription. I think we can differentiate ourselves by incorporating more humanity into the documentation of our work, prioritising serendipity and idiosyncrasy. In short, to be as creative in this as we were in the inception of the work itself. This is what we do best; this is how we invented algorithmic AI in the first place. Our uniqueness lies in those *Eureka* moments, those *Aha*s that hit us like a train full of unicorns at three in the morning, those not-so-adjacent possibilities. The images of doors in this essay appear at points that are idiosyncratically personal to me and my experiences, and not available to an AI search for adjacent material because they are not externally adjacent at all.

Stephen Pinker in 2003, put forward the notion of *mentalese;* the mental language whereby ideas are transferred between minds. AI is algorithmic and adjacent, it has no mind; we are not and we do, which should give us the edge.

**The Conclusion**

This essay began as restlessness associated with the unconscious work of assembling information. It progressed through stream-of-consciousness writing to extract a narrative – the scaffolding of the eventual piece – and then through a rigorous process of detailed editorial scrutiny to maximise consistency and evidential validity. Mentalesed and with counter-positioned imagery, the aim is as much to flex

creative thinking as to summarise a position. AI is capable of writing an essay *about* this, but I doubt it could write *this* essay or *my* dissertation.

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In fulfilment of the written component of Unit 3.1

**2647 words of 2500 +/- 10%**

**Excluding title, author details, and references**

*The title draws on Aldous Huxley's Doors of Perception (1954), an autobiographical account of his psychedelic experiences, and the 2010 film, Inception, which is about 'extractors' who exploit dreams.

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**Figures and illustrations**



Repeated un-numbered illustration. Door (Conboy-Hill, 2023) digital watercolour made in Rebelle 6 using watercolour brushes, pen and ruler tool, and white wash + eraser in three separate layers.

Fig 1. Photograph: typed draft with annotations, double spaced.

Fig 2. Miasma with Artivive app logo indicating embedded AR.

Fig 3. Copied pencil drawing of a cat (drawing exercise) by Suzanne Conboy-Hill (2019) of an image in Aristides' Beginning Drawing Atelier.

Fig 4. First painted surface for the Fishing series. Conboy-Hill (2023).

Fig 5. In-gallery screenshot of part of the fishing series, showing green screen alterations used in the video. The gallery is here https://www.artsteps.com/view/63cc3569c0a4cb48a02c254e

Fig. 6 As above.

Figs 7,8,9. Different stages of the water creature's image, all of which are in the video.

Fig 10. Final painting which obscures the previous images. Artivive logo indicates embedded AR. The standalone video is here https://youtu.be/T4JFHzkviD4