

A Private Theatre? Daydreaming as a Cultural Practice

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Why have ethnologists and folklorists shown such little interest in the rich world of daydreaming, Inger Lövkrona (2001: 61) asks in a paper on sexual fantasies. It is a field of research dominated by psychologists, often with a psychoanalytical perspective. How can a cultural analysis be made of what at first glance seems like very private fantasy worlds? What happens if we view these daydreams as cultural products, shaped by the social contexts and historical epochs in which they exist?, Lövkrona tries a contrastive approach and compares the contemporary material with texts on erotic daydreams in traditional peasant folklore.

Setting the stage

In the following we want to use a similar approach of historical contrast to contextualize daydreaming, drawing on an ongoing project about what is happening when you seemingly are “doing nothing” (see Ehn & Löfgren 2007 and 2009). We have been moving around in the history of mindwandering, trying to grasp for example what gender, class and generation does to this mundane and often ignored pastime. We have looked at it as an everyday habit, a kind of mental work. Where, when and how do people daydream?

Daydreaming and imagination – expressed in stories, myths, and songs – have always been part of life in every society. They are universal activities that take up much more of people’s time than they probably are aware of. There are psychologists that argue that more than a quarter of our waken time involves daydreaming (Klinger 1990:6), but still it is an activity that most of us seldom think

about in a conscious way. When some people say that they rarely daydream it has to do with that most fantasies last just a couple of seconds. They are here and gone before we have noticed them, but they still influence our daily lives in many ways, as a force of both memory and desire.

Even if reveries can appear as a solitary and highly personal pastime, it is also a symbolic activity, shaped by given contexts and collective understandings, learnt, shared and communicated in many ways. This makes it a cultural practice, but an elusive one. In our attempts to catch it we found a bricolage approach necessary and we have used very different kinds of materials, from historical records, psychological studies, and mass media to interviews and answers to questionnaires. We have asked people to write down their favorite fantasies or daydreaming settings. Another rich source is the world of fiction, autobiography and diaries. With the help of this material we have discussed the stagecrafts of daydreaming, fetching a metaphor from a recent work on erotic fantasies:

It's a little bit like shooting a movie in your head, and you're the director, you write the script and you're the casting director, and you decide who gets to star in that little movie.

This is Roy, trying to explain to the psychotherapist Brett Kahr (2008:82) how he creates his own fantasies. Kahr's analysis of over twenty thousand persons sexual fantasies uses the metaphor of "staging our own private theater". We have tried to take that metaphor further, looking at the stage design and choreography of daydreaming, as well as the choice of props and co-actors. By using a bricks and mortar perspective on this apparently ephemeral activity, we have explored what kinds of situations seem productive for fantasizing and how they are organized and enhanced by various technologies. Let us give an example from our material.

Two daydreamers

The year is 1914 and the World war has started. Two persons decide to write down their daydreams, but in very different ways. One of them is Julien, a middle-aged Belgian working as an interpreter in the British army on the French front. The other is

an eleven years old girl born in Paris, but who has just emigrated with her mother and brothers from Spain to New York. "Linotte" – little bird – is the self-mocking nickname she has chosen for herself.

During the retreat from Antwerpen in the face of the rapidly advancing German army, Julien has lost the thesis that he had planned to submit to the university, but now he has a great idea. What if he wrote a new one based upon his own daydreams? He is inspired by Sigmund Freud's interpretation of night dreams, but can't help thinking about all those daily reveries that nobody has written about. He starts to make detailed records of his mindwanderings, the streams of thought produced by listening to German mortar fire at night, elaborated fantasies about revenge on a superior officer, images of being severely wounded, longing for home, or reveries of a future with the beautiful Miss X.

Linotte's real name was Anaïs Nin, and she left Barcelona with her mother and brother for the U.S. in 1914. Onboard the ocean liner she begins keeping a diary that many decades later will make her famous. She fantasizes about being an adult, having a wonderful house and a perfect husband, and longs for her father who choosed to stay behind.

Here are two styles of recording daydreams. Julien works hard to write down all kinds of mindwandering, always having paper and pen at hand, but he finds that it is very difficult to keep track of them. He is especially intrigued by the ways in which his streams of consciousness move swiftly in time and space, and often in absurd ways. One second he is riding the tube in London, the next second he is in a car in the French countryside. He fantasizes about what he will do after the war, for example courting Miss X, and the next moment he is trying out clever tactics for securing an academic career in Belgium.

Like another well-known habitual daydreamer, Orhan Pamuk (2006), Anaïs Nin had a rather determined approach to the documentation of her daydreams.

If by romantic they mean someone who dreams, I am a romantic, but I shall keep it a secret and never dream except with my diary. The two of us, all alone, and I will dream peacefully when it is time for dreams. (Nin 1966:185)

Anaïs Nin finds herself daydreaming incessantly. She fantasizes about the good-looking purser on the Atlantic steamer, maybe he could take her back to Spain? There is plenty of teenage dreams about mysterious and fascinating men. In 1916, June 16, when she is thirteen years old, she writes:

So I dream about a tall, strong man with black hair, white teeth, a pale mysterious face, dark melancholy eyes, a dignified walk and a distant smile. Something like the Count of Monte Cristo. Above all, with a soft, clear voice. I would like him to tell me about his life, which will be very sad and full of terrible, frightening adventures. I would like him to be rather proud and haughty, fond of books, and able to write or play some kind of musical instrument. We would spend every evening at home, in front of the fire in winter, in the garden in summer, with a book or a pencil, his hand resting on mine! Isn't that the way husbands are?

She calls this imaginary man "The Shadow". He becomes her imaginary dream partner that she returns to now and then. One night...

with a calm smile, thinking no doubt of all the novels I have read, I took a large armchair and set it very close to my chair, and looking into the eyes of the one that my imagination placed there, I talked with him. (Nin 1966: 129 ff)

The presence of the war is found in the daydreams of both Julien and Linotte. For Julien there are fantasies about being injured or killed. One of them starts while he sits working at his desk and hears a German shell exploding at the other end of the village. As he sees a thick cloud of smoke rise, his mind begins to wander. He imagines the scene of the explosion and visualizes one of his colleagues taking care of two small children who have been wounded, getting blood on his uniform. The next moment he sees himself lying on the cobblestones in front of the butcher's shop with both legs gone above the knee. He asks the butcher for his knife to cut off the last filaments, and in his dream he confidently directs the terrified onlookers how to help him.

After that he is delivered by a field ambulance to the hospital and says gaily to the doctor, "I am saved by my good spirits", but then worries about ending up in a ward with the rank and file, but no, all of a sudden he is safe in a bed among the officers. His brother in law comes to see him at the hospital with a box of five hundred Turkish cigarettes, and Julien says to him in Flemish, "I sacrificed my legs for my country", but decides to talk in French instead so the nurse can hear. He dictates a telegram to his wife and tells her he will soon get a decoration for his bravery.

All of a sudden he is driving around France in a car with his new artificial legs and then he is in the London underground, trying to use his crutches to get into the train. The other passengers look at him with respect. Inside the train he thinks about the many stairs of the school where he will go back to work as a war hero, and sees himself smoking in the classroom, no longer he has to go outside thanks to his new handicap! Maybe he could also get free travel tickets for himself and the family. He then moves on to a popular theme, "what if I die, what will people think of me when I am gone?".

The war is present in very different ways in Linotte's imagination. She is drawn into similar heroic fantasies, but they feed on other kinds of props and raw materials, for example all the patriotic images and stories she encounters. Shouldn't she also be a soldier, saving her beloved France, "if only I could cut my hair and put on a soldier's helmet". In New York it is hard to anchor such fantasies in a local context. The war is far away, but she finds a statue of Joan of Arc that is helpful. Standing before it the statue is coming to life and helping the French to a glorious victory. One night she lies down on her bed and again fantasizes about fighting for France on the battlefield. She finds her father dying and her mother taken prisoner in a landscape with "blood everywhere" and "cottages, houses, castles and monuments, all on fire" (Nin 1966:74 ff). This is war dreamed by a teenage girl.

Julien Varendonck survives the war and finishes what was to become the first analytical work about daydreaming, published in 1921, with a foreword of his inspiration, Sigmund Freud. Anaïs Nin grew up to be an author and a central figure in New York bohemia, but her later diaries have less of the spontaneous and

improvised nature of her youth. Linotte is transformed into a more self-conscious author.

A cultural alchemy

The material from Julien Varendonc and Anaïs Nin is about male and female dreamworlds, but it also shows a contrast between a middle-aged man and a young girl. The war is present in their dreams, but in very different ways. The fantasies about heroic feats unite them but again such daydreams are not only strongly gendered, but also shaped by different positions in the life cycle.

Julien, Linotte and other daydreamers we have read about or talked to illustrate how people shape their personal fantasy worlds with the help of available scenarios they have learned from others. We can see how they combine different raw materials, for example from massmedia and popular culture – as a scene from a film or fragments of a melody (see Klinkmann 2002). Such props may also consist of a box of wooden soldiers, a flowery carpet, a statue in New York, the sound of a passing train, or a favorite view. But the question is, how are they put to work?

Linotte uses the effective daydreaming tool of the window, spending many times looking out at the drab and grey New York backyard, transforming it into a golden adventure land populated by little princes, she rides her bike out to a favourite hill, where she can sit and dream with the help of the landscape and the magic pull of the horizon. Julien's daydreams may be kicked off by looking at a flea crossing the floor or listening to German artillery fire and endless and worried speculations about his future. While Linotte dreams of her mystery man, Julien thinks what would happen if he could start a new life and imagines himself in relations with different women, Miss X, Lady V or the beautiful cousin of his best friend.

These two and other daydreamers demonstrate how the stuff of fantasies may be organized and communicated. Something happens to reveries as they are transplanted into diaries, fiction and autobiographical writing, or used as part of a scientific project. Then they become easier to memorize and retell. The examples show how genres are blurred as well as the vague borders between fiction and non-fiction, but also how personal fantasies become "culturalized" as they are retold into

existing narrative patterns, which opens up a field for genre analysis, as Inger Lövkrona reminds us.

In a study of German high-school students the ethnologist Silke Meyer (2008) noticed that when she interviewed them about their daydreams, they were often using old patterns of folklore, especially when it came to fantasies about heroic deeds, as in the world of sport. The familiar story-line was imported into them from other cultural repertoires, like children's books and fairy tales, newspapers, magazines, and television programmes.

Psychological research on daydreams often focuses on them as narratives. What is the message here, what's behind the story? Psychologists like Christiane Gohl (1991), Eric Klinger (1990), and Jerome Singer (1976) have studied the everyday workings of daydreams, how long they last and what they contain. They are shown to be fanciful and away from here and now. They change when one gets older, and they differ between men and women.

From our point of view there is a kind of cultural alchemy at work here, mixing all kinds of stuff created out of certain raw materials and social contexts. Some fantasies thrive on a lack of inputs, the boredom of "nothing happening", while others prosper on a wealth of sensual stimuli. A well-researched case is the role of computer games, where an imaginary world is offered as a starting point and then developed not only during play, alone or with others, but also in everyday fantasizing. The favorite character you create and develop follows you as a companion (see for example Corneliussen & Rettberg 2008).

Fantasy is thus not only inner, private images, but also a highly sophisticated transformation of reality. Sometimes the borderlines become blurred. One young man told us:

I have always had a fantasy that I'm the only human being in the world. Everything else around me is put up; all people are present just for me. It is not me running my life, but others. Scenes are erected everywhere and they are easy to change. Those people I meet already know everything about me and it's already decided what they are going to say. When I was younger I was absolutely sure that the world was organized in this

way, but when I saw this movie (*The Truman Show*) that was about the same thing, I realized that I wasn't alone in the world.

The micro-politics of daydreaming

As Inger Lövkrona exemplifies in her discussion of female sexual fantasies, there has been a constant debate about daydreaming as good or bad, dangerous or productive, and much of this debate centers around gender. For thinkers from Plato to Freud daydreaming has been seen as a destructive obsession, with attitudes that range from disdain to condemnation. In 1922 the sexologist Havelock Ellis concluded that for women, not only erotic fantasies, but fantasy in general, frequently ceased with marriage. One possible explanation to that may be that at that time admission of daydreaming of any kind was incompatible with the public image of being a respectable married person.

In the 19th century, according to Juliet Barker (2002:153ff), tales of magic kingdoms or fantastic adventures were invoked by many children, as for example in the fantasy world of the Brontë children, Emily, her brother and sisters. Among the upper classes daydreaming practices can be followed through letters and personal diaries, in an era that celebrated the power of the romantic imagination.

This was not, however, seen as an unproblematic activity. Young women of good standing were not supposed to getting trapped in a fantasy world that was produced by the perilous state of "doing nothing". Idleness and boredom were seen as platforms for unhealthy flights of fantasy. Barred from an active career life, with servants taking over daily household tasks, these young women could escape into mindless and dangerous fantasy worlds, losing contact with real life and real problems (Spacks 1995:164ff).

One of the dangers of daydreaming was their liberating potential, the ways in which they could explore alternative life roads, offering a chance of imagining a different role for women and a different kind of society. Fantasies of romantic love in fact both questioned and undermined the power of both parents and suitors to make decisions about marriage. This could make the reading of novels a dangerous pasttime.

Exploring the genres of mass-produced romantic fantasies for women, Tania Modleski (1982) was one of the pioneers in a reappraisal of these genres that since then have been followed up by many other scholars. Her point is that these fantasies are not as straightforward as they may seem at the first reading; there are more complex processes at work here.

When Nancy Friday (1973) published her surveys of female sexual fantasies it was the suburban housewife that came to symbolize such a life of mindless boredom and frustration. Here was another hotbed that could make their hardworking husbands nervous. Women have often been accused of getting trapped in romantic fantasies, with idle daydreaming declared a non-creative force in their lives. In the Marxist debates of the 1970's daydreaming was usually dismissed as a classic case of "false consciousness", until several feminists, like Frigga Haug (1984), started to think in other directions. In her book *Love, Lust and Adventure* Christane Gohl (1991) has looked at this debate and also made a much more nuanced discussion of the role of daydreaming for girls and women, challenging many of the common stereotypes.

Conclusion

Daydreaming constitutes a significant and creative counterworld to ordinary life. Seemingly "doing nothing", for example while waiting for something or performing daily routines, people have a rich life of fantasies where they are performing a lot of important tasks – not just only creating new kingdoms, sailing to distant continents, or revenging themselves on an evil teacher.

This is, however, an elusive activity, full of paradoxes. It can be an adventure, but also a safe routine. It may be a moment of playfulness or a recurrent theme that haunts you. It brings pleasant as well as frightening images into people's life, and shows them sides of themselves that they may find hard to accept or understand. It works as a creative testing of alternatives, rehearsing the future, and reinterpreting the past. It turns into a prison or a dead end. Above all, daydreaming is an art of turning "doing nothing" into interesting everyday micro-dramas.

Even though fantasies seem to be almost independent of the physical reality and provide strong feelings of freedom from its constraints, you can see the influence of technology and surroundings on their content. As both an ephemeral and a material phenomenon, daydreaming always takes place and claims space. It is culturally created in interaction with concrete conditions and social situations.

You may be mindwandering in almost any situation, without breaking the front of normality, at the same time as it makes the present more fantastic. Now everything is possible and in this fact lies its subversive and emancipatory power. In an everyday life where so much is planned and ruled by routines, the daydream operates as a wild card, slipping into cracks and forgotten corners, disappearing in all directions and then returning to bring the present into new light.

The paradoxical nature of this inconspicuous activity first of all stems from the combination of being intensely personal as well as a markedly social and cultural practice, a shared universe. In this linkage the creative interaction with mass media, popular culture, and other public sources of inspiration is most striking.

But daydreaming is also a skill that is developed differently in various contexts. By focusing on it as a skill we want to emphasize that this is something you develop during the life-course. Such skills include learning to find and use props and settings that are productive for the imagination.

Looking at daydreaming as a cultural practice, as Inger Lövkrona suggested, may thus help us to question the conventional polarities between private and public worlds, play and seriousness, reality and unreality.

Fantasies as a private pastime certainly split individuals from each other into separate realities, but they also unite them in common expressions of hope, longing, or fear. Personal daydreams feed on shared understandings and also become culturally anchored, when they are verbalized, reflected on, and communicated to others. In this sense they work like bridges between private and collective worlds. Most important, however, they offer us a world of alternatives. Without daydreams it would be difficult to see anything but the most obvious.

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