

# Into the realm of unknowing: Immersive drawing, imagination and an emerging fictional world

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## Abstract

In 2010 Tim Ingold suggested that the process that gives rise to a form is more important than the form itself. With such a proposition he touched upon the idea that as designers our most significant thinking may occur not in the realisation of forms, but in the ideation and development that underpins their journey towards tangibility. In examining such an idea, this paper uses a case study of the short film *Munted* (2011), to illustrate how processes of thinking in a realm of immersive drawing may lead to very nuanced and highly responsive ways of ideational way-finding.

*Munted* was an unusual film that was developed through a process of indwelling where thinking unfurled through the instability of brushed ink, the absorbance of paper and the quiet scratching of pencils. Set free from the constraints of script writing, the hand and the designer's unknowing joined with and followed the flows and forces of materials in a process that led to very deep and nuanced levels of discovery. Through this process, slowly and lyrically the film's diegesis was drawn into being.

KEYWORDS: diegesis; enstasi; embodied thinking; immersive drawing; lyrical thought; unknowing



Image 1. Still from Munted.<sup>1</sup> This eighteen minute film dramatically unpacks a false accusation of paedophilia and its terrible consequences. Set in 1961 in a remote rural New Zealand community, it tells the story of a ten year old girl (Katrina) and her friendship with a brain damaged artist (Don). In a fusion of drawing and film, it offers a lyrical but brutal account of the cost of rumour and prejudice. Photo/illustration by Welby Ings.<sup>2</sup>

## Prelude

If you listen tonight you can hear the crickets singing; a brittle texture against the fading sky. On the table beside me is a pile of wilting foliage; these are wild plants I have gathered from once tended gardens that have now grown feral with absence and neglect. In the room the light is dim and around the table there are moths, blind in their assault on a kerosene lamp. I can smell the dryness of dirt, and the lightness of the water in the small jar into which I have placed my paintbrush. This is a world of paper and ink, old watercolour tins and imagination ... but most of all it is a dissolving of borders between worlds.

## Introduction

In 1955 A. Irving Hallowell argued that, “any inner-outer dichotomy, with the human skin as boundary, is psychologically irrelevant’ (88). Eight years later, Gregory Bateson developed this idea when he suggested, “the mental world – the mind – the world of information processing – is not limited by the skin” (Bateson, 1973, 429). As an extension of this, Paul Tosey has argued that, “the mind does not reside in the brain” (2006, 2).

When we think about drawing we often frame our discussions around the explicit. Thus, when writers like Taylor (2008) list the purposes of drawing, they present them in terms of what might be seen. But I would argue that there are dimensions of drawing that exist beyond what is made physically manifest.



Image 2. Beyond the physical. Studies like this represent only a surface residue of thinking. Such works are not designed as paintings but operate as thinking spaces. Accordingly, they are not always logical when viewed as 'completed' artefacts. For example, in this work the soil is made up of a congestion of rotted fish all swimming in the same direction. In pondering this idea I was trying to understand the smell and texture of stagnating violence. Although in the final version of the film the rotten fish, billowing clouds and solitary tree were not used, the danger and isolation they suggested eventually surfaced as dominant themes.

## The world behind the physical artefact

The idea that a realm of drawing exists behind a physical artefact was alluded to when John Berger noted, "The drawing of a tree shows not a tree but a tree being looked at" (2005, 71). Within this simple sentence lies a shift in perspective. From the outside we see a tree; something explicit, the residue of a process of thinking and mark making. However, behind this, in forms of drawing I would call immersive, there may lie complex

and nebulous kinds of thinking and flowing that can operate as systems for ideation, discovery and connection. Behind the tree is the genesis of a tree as an idea. In this realm everything exists in potential and flux. The tree is formed by pursuing thought through flows where sound is heard but inaudible, where vision is perceived but not explicit, and where space and time are dissolved in a realm of possibility and productive unknowing (Image 2).

## Context

In conceiving and designing the film *Munted* I used immersive drawing as a hyper-sensitised approach to ideation and diegesis development. In so doing, I pursued a method through which I might transfer something of the intangibility of image-led thought into an image-led story that would deal with characters and their relationships in nuanced and emotionally rich ways.

Immersive drawing is a slow, reflective process that allows a designer to become immersed in the world and potentials of an image. In this approach, thinking becomes dialogic. The designer converses with the drawing and the drawing talks back to him. One thinks in tone and weight, emphasis and potential. Ideas are coloured and lit and their parameters are nuanced. Images operate with a more flexible grammar than words and one is able to connect possibilities in very abstract and intangible ways. This approach to drawing surfaces characters, contexts and narratives. They develop and refine inside an emotionally protected, lyrical world where all things are possible. Here sensitivities one would never risk on the outside are given freedom to expand. Through this one approaches, touches and caresses potential.

*Munted*'s narrative began from the recollection of a story a friend once told me. On a remote farm, as a little girl, she had grown up with a man who had Down's syndrome. They had become childhood friends. When one night her older brother and his mates, as a drunken prank, terrorised the man then beat him into paralysis, they justified their actions by claiming he had sexually abused her. He hadn't ... and she didn't understand (at the time) why he was suddenly taken away.

In developing the story I initially returned to where this child had grown up and I began to draw. I sketched the brittleness of bracken fern, the corrosion of old tank stands, and the smell of summer mud. I drew the wild plants, tidal landscapes and forgotten gardens

that marked the residues of lives that had unfolded there. Upon returning home each night, I unloaded piles of wilted foliage onto my table and began sketching what I had gathered. In so doing I was not drawing as myself (indeed my painterly style is very different from the works that appear in this film); instead, I was drawing as a fictional character. Through these drawings I was trying to find out about a man who was to become the protagonist of the film.

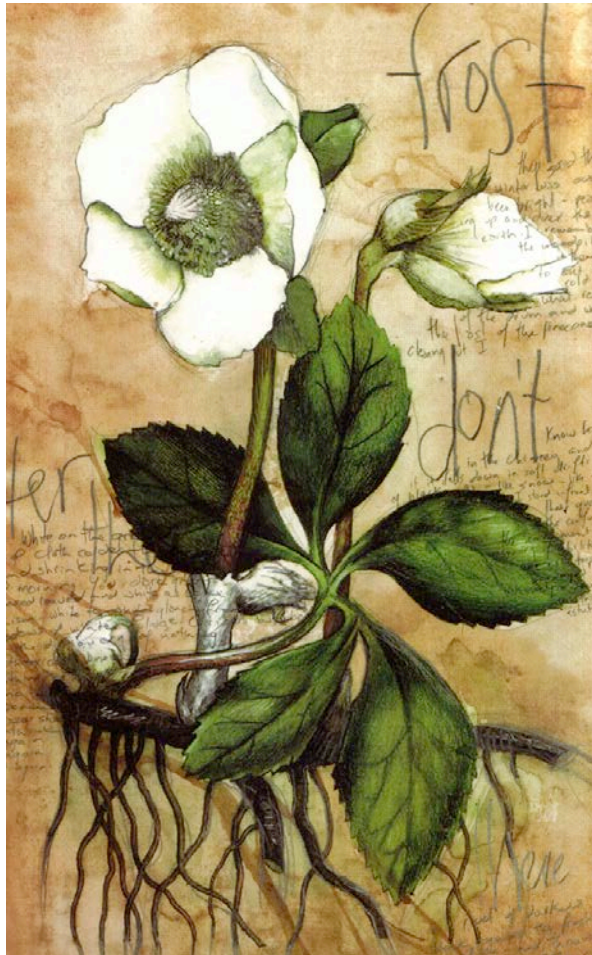


Image 3. Drawing of *Helleborus niger* showing a fusion of Don's (the film's protagonist) botanical training and the fragmented nature of his grief. To explore his character I became him. I drew through him, using only materials available to an isolated man in a remote New Zealand farming district in the early 1960s. Accordingly, the drawings appeared on pieces of scrap paper in Indian ink, graphite, cheap coloured pencils, watercolours, grass stains, coffee washes, and rust.

Using a process of immersion I slowly drew into existence the nature and story of another being. This man was a botanical artist. He was intelligent and had a scientist's preoccupation with detail. However, some years before the film begins he had suffered a

brain injury as the result of a car accident that killed his wife and children. Accordingly, his drawings wrestled with grief over the incident. As I drew literally hundreds of his botanical and landscape sketches in my notebooks (Image 3), I dwelt inside his fictional nature. Eventually I replaced the light bulbs in my studio with a kerosene lamp so he might feel more comfortable with the light, scents and sounds that were in the imaginary world that he occupied. Through this process of immersion his character began to speak. Don was strange company because, unlike other characters I create, he did not speak with words ... (in the film he has largely lost the ability). Instead, somewhere between drawing and the fragmented, scribbled notes of his observations, his story began to surface and connect through a language of nuance and suggestion.

I discovered that he was very vulnerable. He was afraid of conflict because he could not hold ideas together long enough to protect himself. Drawing had become his retreat into a simple but beautiful world that could not hurt him. His friendship with the child (Katrina) was based on this same quest for the safety of innocence.

## Drawing as scriptwriting

It might be argued that this process of immersive drawing is an unusual way of creating a film. Normally such texts are conceived as written scripts that are later translated into images by directors, production designers and actors. However, if film may be understood as ‘talking pictures’, I believe that it might also be conceived and developed inside the domain of images. Immersive drawing as a means of considering and excavating emotional and sensory potential in a film offers very rich potential.<sup>3</sup> By using it, one ‘draws’ a world into being. By forsaking the script (*scriptum*), immersive drawing brings one closer to the Greek concept of *skariphasthai* (to scratch an outline, sketch). This approach allows one to generate and refine thinking inside a space of unknowing where thought is pursued, encountered and gradually drawn into tangibility. Using immersive drawing as an ideational tool, one is able to navigate potentials beyond the limitations of the written word (Image 4). Here one can brush against the nuanced, draw into what withdraws, and retrieve from a protean world, a complex story that thinks ... and speaks in pictures.



Image 4. Rough sketch of a rejected character. Immersive drawings are essentially forays into potential. While dwelling within them I sense my way forward with line, colour and volume. Roughed on to bits of scrap paper, they contain both presence and absence. They provide a kind of *denkraum* that enables me to consider emotional subtleties and tensions in a realm that transcends the limitations of words.

## The realm of unknowing

Immersive drawing is not a new concept. This realm beyond the explicit was referred to when the 16<sup>th</sup> Century Italian painter Titian reportedly touched the surface of his paper in order to investigate an elusive world just beyond his reach. It was also alluded to when Lord Byron, in his letter to Thomas Moore in 1822, wrote, "... like all imaginative men, I, of course, embody myself with the character while I draw it, but not a moment after the pen is lifted off the paper" (Byron 1835, 623).

When we are immersed in a process of drawing we enter realms of unknowing. Here, I suggest we may be operating in what Keats (1958, I: 193) described as "negative capability". This he suggested describes a state "when a man is capable of being in

uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritability reaching after fact or reason.”

Eisold (2000), in his essay *The Rediscovery of the Unknown*, suggests that it is the ability to tolerate anxiety and fear in this state, and to function in uncertainty and unknowing that allows the emergence and flow of new thoughts or perceptions.



Image 5. Immersive drawing of mudflats. At the point in the film's development when this sketch was drawn I spent a lot of time visiting potential locations. The story was still in its gestation phase but I knew that Katrina lived near water and her story would unfold at the end of a long summer. Because such drawings can afford up to two hours of contemplation on a site, I become very sensitive to what I see, hear, and imagine. When I can't capture an idea with the flick of a pencil or a splash of paint, I hastily write down what I think I have encountered. These scribbles are often very lyrical because in the state of immersion I am experiencing heightened levels of sensitivity that could not function in a normal world.

Drawing as a process of immersion aligns somewhat with Polyani's concept of "indwelling" (1967, 17). In this state the thinker dwells inside an environment of the self where meanings and connections might surface. Douglass and Moustakas (1985, 47) suggest that this process is marked by "vague and formless wanderings" but eventually there develops "a growing sense of direction and meaning emerge[s] as the perceptions and understandings of the researcher grow and the parameters of the problem are recognised" (ibid.). In this space, Rosenberg (2008, 109) suggests one thinks as "a process and always in process". The process of drawing is simultaneously mental and physical. It is both thinking and thought. Here, Rosenberg says, "we are drawn into



making drawing and the drawing draws us into further thinking” (ibid. 110). In this process, what is known and what is unknown are drawn to and through each other. Thus, when we draw as an immersive process we might be reminded of Heidegger’s assertion that what is thought provoking has not yet been thought, and thought turns away from us, and calls us through the draft of its withdrawal (Heidegger 1968, 3-18).

In this uncertain state one receives and reflects on thoughts rather than actively pursuing them. Thought is cumulative. The dimensions of characters, worlds and their collective stories gather like tentative fragments drawn to a magnetic field. These fragments are brought to the fore through flows of drawing. Where a character murmurs words in this realm, I record the fragments I ‘hear’ (Image 5). These fragments do not become the dialogues of the film, but act as further insights into consciousness. They are the lyrical thoughts of emerging fictional potentials (both human and contextual).



Image 6. Pencil and wash drawing of the decay of tidal flats. Painted in coffee, ink and muddied water, drawings like this enable me to contemplate the narrative potential of a site. Sketched on location, the scribbled notes record as poetic annotations, sounds, movement, smells and emerging character reflections.

## Drawing as immersion

In drawing one's way through an immersion, one is not seeking to locate describable, narrative episodes. Instead one 'listens' receptively inside the drawing of a world in potential. One stands within the self and dimensions of the self speak in languages that transcend words. Drawing in this realm is not didactic. One is not trying to record thought. Rather drawing is contemplative. Each mark induces another and collectively weight, colour and texture create dimensions of fictional characters, their stories and worlds. The idea of an interior thinking space as a site of genesis may be compared to Eliade's concept of *enstasis*.<sup>4</sup> The term describes a state of standing within. It surfaces from the Indo-Greek roots *en* (into) and *histanai* (to stand), and it may be contrasted with ecstasy or *ec-stasis* (standing outside of).

In designing films like *Munted*, *enstasis* might refer to dwelling within an induced interior state of selfhood where one is immersed in the creative potential of what is not yet formed. This process may involve the deployment of drawing in a reflective process that allows the designer to become an integrated part of the world of the emerging image and story. Rosenberg (2008, 109) refers to this process as a state "where one thinks with, and through drawing to make discoveries, to find new possibilities that give course to ideas and to help fashion their eventual form." Here, he says "the represented object does not function as a sign but rather as a trope; a vector, a directional motion that moves from the singularity of the image to turn the mind out towards something that suggests itself in the hubbub of connections" (*ibid.* 114).

In a state of *enstasy* one is not outside of one's self, drawing to create a picture, but inside one's self, drawing to explore the potentials of thought. Here drawing is a process where one is thinking and recording between the not yet formed and the gradually forming.



Image 7. Visualisation of the fusion between the tangible and imagined world. Here Hallowell's "inner-outer dichotomy" has dissolved. The physical body is no longer a boundary and what exists and what is imagined simultaneously occupy the same space.

## Conclusion

Immersive drawing may be seen as a methodological construct that embraces productive unknowing. It involves a form of imaginative embodiment where drawing is employed as a process for thinking. In this process we have no predetermined roadmap or marked out trajectory. We engage emotion on sometimes very sensitised levels as a means of developing higher degrees of empathetic texture in the designs we create. In an immersive world we question potential and in this process we edge ourselves heuristically forward.

In describing immersive drawing as an approach to creative research I am aware of the problematic nature of the discussion.

First, immersive drawing is not a form of visual communication design. Its purpose is not didactic (diagrams), nor a form of shorthand (sketches). Instead, it is used to *generate* thinking. As such it is a process, not a framework.

Second, immersive drawing is by its nature, nebulous. It validates the sensory and the tacit. It elevates standing *within* the subjective self to draw thought into being. As such its

processes are not stable, predictable or explicit.

Finally, immersive drawing is useful only *in action*. What we read post-process is not thinking but, at best, a disconnected residue of it. Thus the physical drawing as an artefact is *not* what was thought but simply its shell, its surface carcass, the skin of a being that once lived. This makes immersive drawing as a research method problematic in pedagogical systems that seek to evaluate, guide and reward based only on what can be made explicit.

These issues aside, immersive drawing can operate as a very rich, emotionally resonant and sensitised mode of researching into what is unknown. As a form of heuristic inquiry, its emphasis on immersion and reflection was employed in the design of the short film *Munted*<sup>5</sup> because by using it I could pose questions and forge creative connections between ideas that might not normally relate. I could draw myself into and through a realm of potentials.

Thus, the final film was conceived through painting, drawing, touch and sound, in a world beyond words. Through this highly sensitised world the designer sought a fictional man. The drawings illustrating this article are the residue of the process of their connection.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> A trailer for Munted can be viewed at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f8I1k6gwn1w>

<sup>2</sup> All images appearing in this paper are by the author.

<sup>3</sup> Contesting the role of the written screenplay in film development is an increasing phenomenon. Millard in 2010 discussed how, in an era where images and sound play increasingly significant roles, traditional formatting conventions may restrict innovation in screenwriting. Murphy in the same year considered alternative approaches to the screenplay including improvisation, psychodrama and visual storytelling. Their beliefs build on Wells' (2007) argument that the role of film ideation and development needs to be broadened to embrace alternative narrative forms, concepts, images, sounds and music. Wells' ideas have been prefigured by diverse examples of directorial practice. Jean-Luc Godard used images for inspiration and the graphic designer Wong Kar Wai, who in 1995 created *Fallen Angels*, insisted on the role of images, sound, and music in the scripting and production process.

<sup>4</sup> The word enstasis has been used in certain esoteric/philosophical writing (Dooyeweerd 1931; Eliade 1958; Von Baader 1987; & Friesen 2011). However, it has origins that predate this use. Although these writers use enstasis in slightly different ways it may be broadly understood as a state of indwelling, interior consciousness or inner reflection. Eliade (1958, 193) describes it as a state and knowledge where the "consciousness is saturated with a direct and total intuition of being."

<sup>5</sup> Munted premiered in the 2011 Montreal World Film Festival. It went on to official selections in a number of international festivals including the 53<sup>rd</sup> Bilbao International Film Festival, the 29<sup>th</sup> Brussels International Film Festival, the 27<sup>th</sup> Berlin-Interfilm Film Festival, the 18<sup>th</sup> Regensburg Short Film Week, the 2011 Vladivostok International Film Festival, and the 2011 Lucerne International Film Festival. The film won numerous awards including: Best Short Film at the Lucerne International Film Festival, the Jury Award; Special Honour at the 18<sup>th</sup> Regensburg Short Film Week, and the Audience Award at Zubiak Gexto (Spain).