Dreaming Dreaming
(Some notes round-a-bout the short film Traum A Dream)

'I am vacant by the stupification of my tongue', Antonin Artaud (Weaver, 1988)

Dirk de Bryun
Deakin University

These notes explore some of the background, the influences and pre-occupations at play in the construction of my short film Traum A Dream (Australia 6 minutes 2003) that was shown at the 2004 Double Dialogues Conference. This exercise thus places me in that terrain, that double dialogue between theory and practice. As both artist and commentator it also threatens to catch me hovering in that no-man's land between the written word about the art and the artefact itself, judging my own folly.

I wish to present some background information that led to the film's making and make some points about the Experimental Film tradition to which this work belongs. Finally I will outline some of the preoccupations and interests that infiltrated the film as content (or is it structure?). Unfortunately none of these notes are intended to displace the experience of watching the frantic palimpsest of the work itself. Perhaps they can offer one way in and/or out of that flickering dance.

Background-Context

Traum A Dream was completed as a Digital Video but it also exists as part of the Interactive CD-Rom Diary 3.2. This interactive started out as a diary of family life in the late 90s, a family with 3 boys Arie 10, Abe 14, and Kees 18 and partner Alison. It was to be a digital photo album to celebrate the nuclear family. The aim was to explore how the analog practices of family photo albums, kids drawings and so on could work effectively in the digital realm, to develop some sort of layered documentation of mementoes/artefacts of family life.

During its making it became something else. The family disintegrated. Alison and I separated and we all now live separate lives. That project then became more about that loss and my struggle through that mourning. It
became a document of my struggle to reconstitute my life, my self. My arts practice also had to be rebuilt. The analog practice of Experimental film moved from the analog to the digital. The following quote by Kurt Schwitters struck me as appropriate:

‘Everything has broken down and new things had to be made out of the fragments. Collage was like an image of the revolution within me- not as it was, but as it might have been’ (Schwitters in Russell, 1975)

Because of its open-ended nature at some point in the making of an interactive the question arises: How do you finish? How do you move away from something without end, how do you get out of a never ending story and finish with that mourning?

I moved away by going to an earlier linear form, by completing a short digital film to distil something of the process I had been through. Traum A Dream is the last piece added to this CD- ROM. It also exists as a stand-alone piece. It offered a form of closure. I had come back with something from this journey.

**Traditions-Influences**

*Traum A Dream* has been tempered out of a notion that we inhabit a culture that traumatises us, bludgeons and nags corrosively at our bodies. This partly originates out of personal experience. It is also derived from the work of writers and researchers like Judith Herman (1992) and Bessel van der Kolk (1998). The film is part of a search for a language to convey such an abusing engagement through the abstract animation of flicker, abrasive texture, palimpsest, repetition and half words, text and phrases.

It connects to the tradition of Experimental Cinema and Visual Music. It is part of an ongoing project searching for innovative audiovisual technique to articulate personal experience. Small contends in *Direct Theory*_ that Experimental Cinema is a stand-alone genre of filmmaking that bypasses the written and spoken word because such work states its theory directly, often through the materiality of the moving image, in dialogue with its soundtrack (1994, pp. 55-6). Such a reflexive cinema is primed to directly articulate ideas concerning the construction of the self, the body and memory.
French poet and writer Antonin Artaud championed a radical and extreme suspicion of language, proposing a theatre of cruelty in which to articulate an inner world of stops starts, fragments and gaps carried within (1998). This other/anti-self/erasing self resonates with the idea of the panicked or traumatised body explored by Canadian cultural terrorists Arthur and Marilouise Kroker (1998) and Canadian filmmaker Mike Hoolboom in films like *Steps To Harbour* (Canada 17 minutes 1992) and *Panic Bodies* (Canada 70 minutes 1998). Artaud grapples in primal terms with intense sensation and feeling, and argues that thinking must rise directly out of the body. This resonates with Small’s self-reflexive notion about experimental film. The material of film is the flesh. It is its own articulation. There is no hiding the operations conducted on the moving image. It is about the Shklovsky’s ‘baring the device’ (Quoted in Small, 1994, PP. 55-6).

Hoolboom’s *Steps to Harbour* is a short abstracted film. Harsh, bruising and repetitive, a response to the HIV that had invaded his body. Naked mantra as stun gun: to expunge the virus, to punish the body. The state of the artist’s body is transferred onto the film’s surface. The body’s fatigue becomes the burnout of film. Visualization collapses into some trashed tactile realm, a dialectic that continuously re-invents itself. The animation is of a frantic palimpsest, of quick transition rather than movement. Such visual jolts, flashes can leave their afterimage like a hovering bruise.

I am reminded of a friend’s account of her abusive relationship with an ex-partner, where every time she was beaten each strike led to a mental as well as physical numbing. The physical bruise faded slowly, the mental turning off stayed. The jolts remained embedded in her body.

Hoolboom’s feature length *Panic Bodies* suggests a connection to the Krokers’ work (1989). They use Baudrillard’s postmodernist pain as a starting point to comment on the effects of digital information overload on our bodies with such phrases as ‘panic sex’ and ‘electric flesh’ and use of the phrase ‘panic bodies’ to refer to images of cultural burnout. Such images can be extracted from the dysfunctions of overeating, illicit drug use, anorexia, extreme sports, HIV+, paedophilia and the gym culture of over perfected bodies.

**Preoccupations-Annotations**

Issues of panic and stress can connect to preoccupations with lost innocence, abuse, victim mentality, denial and memory loss that have made their way into the film. They are not presented here as a concise argument but as background noise or traces to the film itself which attempts to present directly in some form the experience of a body in trauma, the experience of being overloaded, disassociated. These preoccupations may, at a pinch, be seen as areas of concern that impinge on or trigger such an abused state.

*Traum A Dream* begins with Neil Postman’s voice declaring that there are no longer any secrets from the young. In *The Disappearance of Childhood*...
Postman discusses the emergence of the concept of childhood at the time of the printing press and then shaped by the evolving education system. The intrusion of television into every home introduced children early, too early he argues, to adult concepts and activities and subverts their ability to think abstractly. The very concept of childhood is being destroyed through the access to the secrets, the taboos of adulthood (1994). The Internet with its access to pornography and the documenting of extreme and bizarre behaviours that the Krokers allude to, slips this trend into hyper-drive (1989).

‘The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the state of emergency in which we live is not the exception but the rule’ (Benjamin, 1969, p. 257)

This text appears near the start of the film. The idea of living in a state of emergency, also manufactured by the politics of fear, of negotiating the everyday in a state of heightened awareness seems to suggest this panic state, approaching PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) on a mass scale.

Michael Jackson, pin-up for the Kroker’s collage invocation: ‘Cosmetic body cuts, then, for perfect panic faces’ (Krokers, 1989, p. 187) also makes an entrance in the opening frames with a subversive Baldwinian cosmetic cut to the words of one his songs to now play as: I never knew my body was giving me pain I never never knew. Here is denial and also the idea of the double negative that is incorporated throughout in the wordplay of the film. Deleuze & Guattari, in discussing Kafka, mention the importance of the double negative in talking from a position of disempowerment (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986).

Can we ask: do two negatives make a positive? Two wrongs don’t make a riot. Atwood ties the ideas of Victim and colony together: ‘Let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that Canada, as a whole is a victim, or an oppressed minority or exploited... Let us suppose in short that Canada is a colony. A partial definition of a colony is that it is a place from which a profit is made, but not by the people who live there: the major profit from a colony is made in the centre of the empire. There is also here in such power relationships a sniff of the dynamics of pedophilia where the authoritative adult exploits a profit for him or herself out of the child’ (Attwood, 1972).

The double negative is a way the traumatized victim or the colony, in denial mode, speaks, to try and be positive about itself: Australia is not a bad place to be. And there
is that phrase: 'never never'. Buying on the never never places you on that ambiguous knife-edge of pseudo-ownership hazily visible at some distant future horizon line that ascribes your awareness. We of the never never is the central site of some hardy mythical Aussie persona. Daryl Somers has pointed out that 'if you never never go you'll never never know'.

And so we arrive at the gates of never-never land: a pleasing country existing only in dreams or imagination, a dreamland, an imaginary place, a place for a child to escape to, a safe place. This can also be seen as a disassociated world where a Peter Pan never panics and never lands inside his adult self.

Both Michael Jackson, with his Neverland Ranch, a possible pedophile site, and Stephen Spielberg in the Neverland of his film *Hook* (USA 144 minutes 1991) have cut one ‘never’ out of their dreamland concoctions. *Hook* has been plundered for sound bites that are scattered through *Traum A Dream*: Hook’s snoring, Hook’s statement: make time stand still, still: as chant of the traumatized body, Wendy’s imploring statement: Never-never land makes you forget, never forget, and there are others. In Wendy’s statement the lost never has been restored digitally. It must not be forgotten, whatever the reason for its removal.

Written as if inscribed on the body, on the skin of the film, ‘never say never’ flickers briefly at the film’s mid-point: An ambiguous Aussie DIY affirmation to never give up, to enunciate your powerlessness, to beat the odds. It has not been registered on the film photographically or digitally but like a tattoo, it has been drawn and etched directly and unevenly onto the film’s surface with a fine-tipped pen.

**Multiple Endings**

If trauma is about the breakdown or collapse of story then Experimental non-narrative cinema can provide an appropriate architecture for its expression.

The remembering of an unknown loss in the final spoken text of *Traum: A Dream* is an attempt to reclaim story, regain meaning:

And so he began
Against the double
Double talk talk
Against his will
His will
And so he began
He began
He began to remember
What he didn’t want
What he didn’t want to Remember
What had been taken?
Before
Before he knew
A secret from before
Before he knew
Before he knew himself.


This text was initially facilitated by a now lost pamphlet printed by SECASA (South East Centre Against Sexual Assault) that was found while working as a Social Worker. This pamphlet talked about how traumatised victims of abuse stored the memory of that abuse as fragments cut-up and separated from each other, often continuously replayed, looping parts of that memory. These replays could become disconnected intrusive thoughts. Each replay was as potent as the first. The ‘shock’, in its fragmented state, did not go away, did not dissipate.

This model of trauma is reminiscent of the architecture of interactive media. Random access memory (RAM) in CD-ROMs describes how information is stored randomly and in fragments across the disc and is then reconstituted during the interaction. Navigation through an interactive can be very repetitive and uses circular forms, non-linear structures explored by Experimental film and specifically by British Structuralist Filmmakers in the 60s. It is this emphasis on architecture, on form, rather than content that the digital shares with much of experimental cinema and this relates to the self-reflexive concerns with the medium of expression that Small has pointed out.

At the extreme end of this spectrum, a Formalist Cinema would contend that art has no content and that, in fact, the structure is the content. I think it telling that such a cinema can also be read as content denied. With such a tension we bring the hidden, the underground, the unspeakable into play and we bring into focus those structures, those architectures, those games that hold those denied secrets in our culture, including how we keep in our bodies the traumas of the past.

**REFERENCES**


