

written on top in currants. Which Alice does, of course, leading to this statement at the beginning of the second chapter:

“Curiouser and curiouser!” cried Alice (she was so much surprised, that for the moment she quite forgot how to speak good English); “now I’m opening out like the largest telescope that ever was! Good-bye, feet!” (for when she looked down at her feet they seemed to be almost out of sight, they were getting so far off).

Why is this idea, which is at the heart of both *The Matrix* and *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, so appealing? Why do we take such pleasure in imagining that there’s the world we experience every day and that, just beyond this everyday world (or just beneath it, assuming rabbit holes go down), there’s another world where the laws of the everyday world no longer apply? One explanation for this fantasy’s appeal is that the other extraordinary world is action packed: once the rules that govern the ordinary are suspended, anything can happen—rabbits can talk; bodies can bend out of the way of approaching bullets; a boy with a scar on his forehead can fight off the forces of evil. But this isn’t really an explanation so much as it is a description masquerading as an explanation. Why are we drawn to the extraordinary?

Ellen Dissanayake has spent nearly five decades exploring the allure of the extraordinary. Working in evolutionary aesthetics, a field she helped to invent, Dissanayake has concluded that humans are hardwired to seek out the extraordinary; it is, she says, in our nature to do so. In making her argument, Dissanayake sets out to establish that the desire to “make special” or to “artify” (she uses both terms interchangeably) serves a number of evolutionary purposes central to the survival of the species—the most significant being that acting on this desire provides concrete responses to anxiety and uncertainty. Over time, certain ways of making special become ritualized: the wedding ceremony or the walk across the graduation stage, for example, or the gift of flowers to someone who is sick. What we find appealing about Dissanayake’s thesis is the implication that art is not the set of static images you find on a wall at a museum. Rather, it is a way of doing or making; it’s the practice of making special, which can

manifest at anytime—at the feast for a visiting dignitary or over coffee between friends.

Is there an art to doing research? We think so. Most handbooks will send you out to do your research with a plan, an outline, or a map of some kind. The idea behind all this preplanning is to protect you from getting lost while mucking about in the endless thicket of information that’s out there. That seems sensible if you think of research only as the process of predicting and then confirming results. That is, when this approach to research is followed, it’s no accident that the end results are unsurprising; the whole point of this approach to doing research is that there will be no surprises!

We invite you to envision the research process not as a voyage out onto already mapped territory but as a trip down the rabbit hole. We want you to set for yourself the goal of generating research that is extraordinary—research that proceeds by “making special,” by “artifying.” We want your research to lead you to write something that rewards repeated acts of attention, which, after all, is just another way of defining *extraordinary*.

What does artful, special, or extraordinary research look like? Obviously, there’s no formula. But we’d like to offer an example of what it can look like with an excerpt from an e-mail we received from Chris Osifchin a former student who wrote to us a year after graduating.

I’ve been really getting into Richard Linklater lately, after watching *Dazed and Confused* (my favorite movie of all time) for about the thirtieth time. I watched his movie *Slacker* and also part of *Waking Life*, and what was interesting to me was the portrayal of nothing as everything and how it is displayed in a much more explicit manner than *Dazed*.

I then saw a tweet from an awesome Website, Open Culture, directing Tweeters to the films and works of Susan Sontag. Never heard of her. Isn’t it funny how connections come about? As I read more about her, and more of her pieces, I began to make a connection between Linklater’s work and Sontag. The first piece of Sontag’s work that I read was “Against Interpretation.” I found it fascinating, and also

Richard Linklater
 Dazed and Confused
 Slacker
 Waking Life
 2005

true to a point. The best art does not try to mean anything, it just [lies] there in the glory and awe of its creation. . . .

Next, I read a NYT review of Sontag's first novel, *The Benefactor*, and was struck by how similar it seemed to *Waking Life*. The review even says "Hippolyte also dreams numerous repetitious dreams, ponders them endlessly, and keeps encountering Frau Anders, like a guilty conscience. The intent is to present waking life as if it were a dream. And, to present dreams as concrete as daily living." This is precisely what *Waking Life* is portraying. I think the depiction of dreams as reality and reality as dreams or any combination of those is not "without motive or feeling" as the reviewer says, but rather allows you to view things from a less interpretive point of view, as Sontag might [argue for].

Now, after reading this review, I decided to see if Linklater was influenced by Sontag. I literally searched on Google "Richard Linklater influenced by Susan Sontag." Interestingly enough, and why I decided to send this email to you, Sontag mentions Linklater's *Dazed and Confused* in an article on the Abu Ghraib torture incident, "Regarding the Torture of Others." In it, Sontag mentions the increasing brutality of American culture and the increasing acceptance of violence. Not only did this make me think of [*The Ballad of Abu Ghraib*] and reading it in your class, but it also made me think of a specific moment in *Waking Life* [here he provides the link to the YouTube clip of the moment he references]. "Man wants chaos. In fact, he's gotta have it. Depression, strife, riots murder. All this dread. We're irresistibly drawn to that almost orgiastic state created out of death and destruction. It's in all of us. We revel in it!" It seems to me that this connects very well to Abu Ghraib as a whole, not just the immediate actions of the guards. Sontag's observation that "Secrets of private life that, formerly, you would have given nearly anything to conceal, you now clamor to be invited on a television show to reveal," collides at the intersection of American fantasies played out on TV screens all the time and the real world. It's an

interesting comment on American society as a whole—who would have thought that reality TV would come back to bite America in a war? And with the extension of reality TV that is now, what I can't think to call anything but the "reality Web" (i.e., social media/networks), it is becoming more prevalent than ever. Sontag puts it better than I have—"What is illustrated by these photographs is as much the culture of shamelessness as the reigning admiration for unapologetic brutality."

For our former student, the world of ideas, like the rabbit hole in *Alice in Wonderland*, is endlessly surprising and extraordinary. He begins by writing about rewatching Richard Linklater's movie *Dazed and Confused*, and then before he knows it, he's off on an entirely self-motivated search through film, philosophy, war, and media in search of artists and thinkers who can help him better understand our "culture of shamelessness" and "unapologetic brutality." With genuine curiosity and some practice doing research, you can transform the world of ideas, as Chris did, into an astounding place in which nearly every turn inspires a new connection and thinking itself becomes both art and play.

Practice Session

Researching

Type the words *Ellen Dissanayake* into the Google search engine. Press return.

Everyone who does this at the same time will get the same results. We can call this "ordinary research." If you click on the Wikipedia entry for Dissanayake, you'll find yourself on a page that provides a thumbnail sketch of the author and her work. Again, in gaining this foothold on Dissanayake's work, you'll be doing what any ordinary researcher starting out would do.

It's what you do next that matters. Choose one of Dissanayake's works that you find online and read it.

Your next task is to make your research into this researcher of the extraordinary extraordinary. (We composed that last sentence with *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* in mind.) Set aside at least an hour for exploratory research. Begin by choosing a phrase, a quotation, a reference, or a footnote from the

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