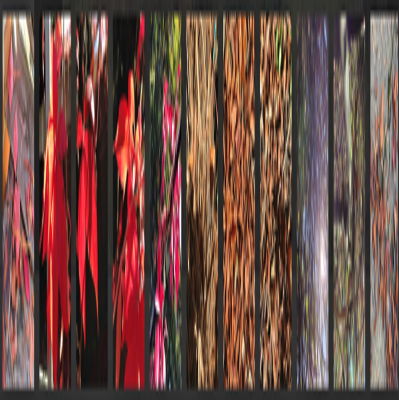
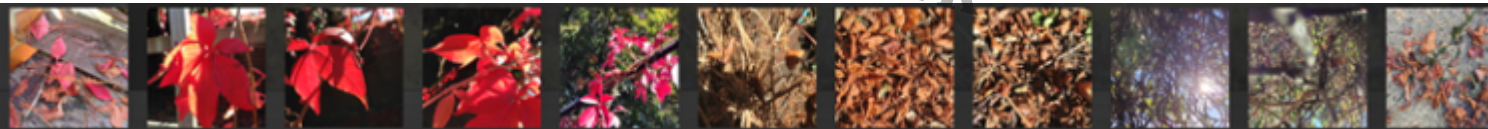




Absence of melancholy

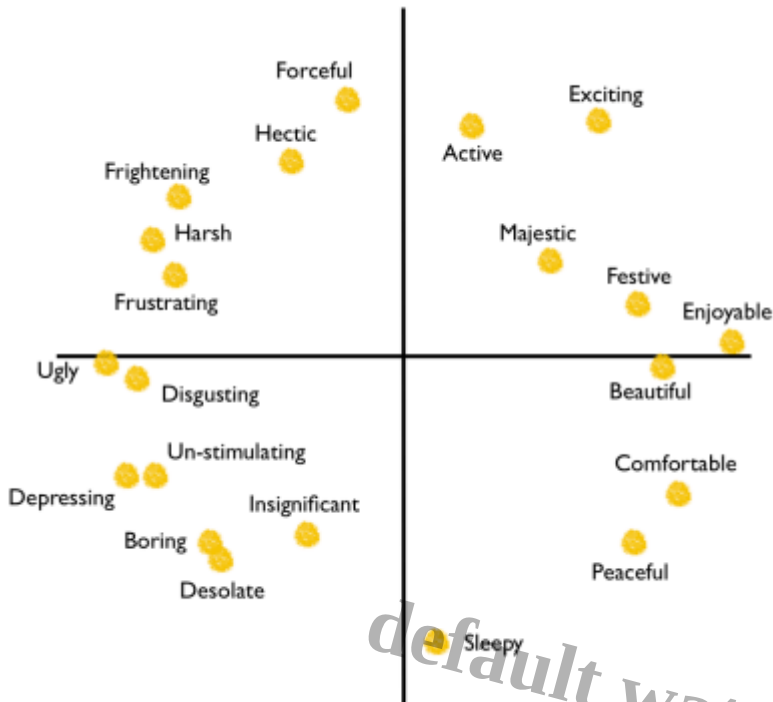
Description

The [muted joy of autumn melancholy](#): who can resist the temptation to be lyrical in such a season? By all accounts melancholy is the feeling you get in the event of loss or absence, as in the passing of summer.



Melancholy is also absent from classifications of mood and emotion as devised by experimental psychologists. For example it doesn't appear on the following diagram devised by James Russell and Geraldine Pratt in a much cited paper of 1980 charting people's emotional responses (the adjectives people use) in relation to a range of physical spaces.

The **horizontal axis** indicates pleasure, with greater pleasure to the right and displeasure to the left. The **vertical axis** indicates intensity, with high intensity at the top. In fact their argument is that emotion or human 'core affect' is (simply) the experience of pleasure and intensity in different degrees.



It's the wealth of human language, culture, narrative, reflection, and the situation of the person with the feeling that positions any particular pleasure-displeasure-intensity (the core affect) as the experience of a particular emotion. Our whole cognitive apparatus kicks in to account for our feelings, and some people for some of the time are better at it than others.

On the one hand the diagram is reductive, in turning the whole complex of human feelings to a couple of linear scales. On the other hand it amplifies the role of culture and society in the way we give labels to emotions, recognise their existence, create our emotional categories, and even *create* feelings.

This diagram also has therapeutic implications. Presumably it's approximate, but it indicates that one emotion could easily be mistaken for another. If the situation you are in makes you feel destitute and insignificant then it could just be a case of mislabelling your current condition. You may just be bored for example: ie experiencing low-intensity displeasure.

On being bored

On the other hand the schema could indicate that boredom is actually a profound and difficult condition, comparable to other more complicated feelings.

The diagram also offers solutions. To get out of the mood you are in crank up the pleasure element, or the intensity, though this can lead to other extremes, not least *fright*, and the means of shifting your feelings along the axes can themselves have long-term negative effects, such as addiction etc.

The diagram leaves out other mood states, such as those proposed in the PANAS (Positive and Negative Affect Schedule) schema: •positive• moods such as being interested, enthusiastic, inspired, excited, strong, proud, alert, determined, and attentive.

On the “negative” PANAS scale are moods such as scared, nervous, upset, distressed, guilty, irritable, hostile, ashamed, jittery, and afraid. The diagram leaves out guilt.

Considering that the diagram is ostensibly about how people feel in spaces, scholars who identify the importance of so-called [non-places](#), might expect to see some prominence given to guilt, or at least Marc Auge’s observation that due to the preponderance of official signage, some places put us in the position of feeling guilty even if we have not transgressed.

Melancholy and movement

These emotional schemas also steer clear of **melancholy**, arguably the preserve of art and culture. Melancholy seems to function as a dynamic emotion: something you dip into and out of. Pilgrims venture into melancholy and emerge renewed, so long as they are able. This is a bit like the pilgrim’s emergence from, or evasion of, the Slough of Despair in John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. It’s also the Psalmist’s walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. Perhaps melancholy is the emotion that also meanders and lingers across Russell and Pratt’s diagram.

It’s not just a raw mood state that provides the melancholic effect, but the excursion into, and return from, such experiences. In any case, the concept of melancholy provides a useful lens through which to view so many cultural forms – including space

Notes

- Wilhelm Wundt introduced the core affect idea in his seminal book of 1897. He had a third dimension that contemporary theorists think of in terms of *attention*. It matters whether you are attending to the feeling or if it’s somehow in the background of our awareness, like a mood.
- I just attended the interesting conference Cinematic Urban Geographies <http://cinematicbattersea.blogspot.co.uk/> at which I received some helpful feedback on the theme of melancholy.
- Melancholy is much more complicated than sadness or depression; it belongs in the cultural sphere; it’s a “meta-mood”; it involves transitions; it involves mobility; in so far as distributed digital media circulate (co-created) films, music, poetry, etc they are complicit in the formation of the mood, ambience, atmosphere of a place; melancholy provides a useful lens for viewing cinema, as well as digital media.
- See other posts: [Melancholy urbanism](#), [The melancholy medium](#), and [As the mood takes you](#).
- See Evolving Thoughts blog on [Are emotion 2D?](#) by John Wilkins.

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1. Culture

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1. emotion
2. melancholy
3. mood
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