Foreword: Dreams, trauma and awakening

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Our understanding of the relationship between dreams and trauma is, perhaps inevitably, filtered largely through the interpretive framework of psychoanalysis. We know that, in Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920), Freud attributed the repetition compulsion exhibited in dreams by returning shell-shocked soldiers from the First World War to the wartime traumas they had suffered. This was a development of Freud’s earlier work on dreams, dating back to the publication of The Interpretation of Dreams (1899) and before, in which Freud showed how dreams express, in a coded language and through a process of condensation and displacement of content, messages whose interpretation provides a key to the psychic activity of waking life.

Freud’s work on dreams and trauma was quickly exploited by the new art of cinema (which, in its Hollywood incarnation, soon became popularly known as the ‘dream factory’). In Léonce Perret’s Le Mystère des roches de Kador (The Mystery of the Rocks of Kador) (1912), the physician Professor Williams cures the traumatised Suzanne, who is catatonic and has lost her memory, by seating her in front of a screen on which the event that produced her symptoms (the shooting of her lover at the rocks of Kador by her wicked trustee) is acted out before her. Although the traumatic event does not return in the form of a dream, the filmed recreation of the scene creates a similar imaginative and mythical space for the dramatisation of the repressed moment. The classic Surrealist films by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí, Un Chien andalou (An Andalusian Dog) (1929) and L’Age d’Or (The Golden Age) (1930) (and, indeed, Surrealism in general), famously exploited dream imagery as a way of exploring desires and fears repressed in the
unconscious. In Alfred Hitchcock’s *Spellbound* (1945), Dr Brulov cures the ‘imposter’ Anthony Edwards of his traumatic past through analysis of his dream (acted out in the famous Surrealist sequence designed by Dalí).

Since then, the links between dream, trauma and psychoanalysis have become so firmly embedded in modern culture that psychoanalytic tropes are familiar in works that deal with the effects of trauma. If we limit the discussion again just to film, one thinks, for example, of Ari Folman’s animated documentary *Waltz with Bashir* (2008), in which the narrator/director retraces his own participation in the 1982 war between Israel and Lebanon predominantly through a symptomatic reading of his own hallucinations and the dream of his friend and fellow conscript in the Israeli Army, Boaz Rein. In *Shutter Island* (dir. Martin Scorsese, 2010), the suspense is largely driven by psychiatrist John Cawley’s analysis of the behaviour of investigator Teddy Daniels, whose hallucinatory flashbacks to when he was a US soldier during the liberation of Dachau play an important part in the plot. In his autobiographical film *L’Image manquante* (*The Missing Picture*, 2013), Rithy Panh uses a clay figurine of himself on the analyst’s couch as part of his exploration of the traumatic effects of the atrocities committed by Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge in Cambodia (1975–9). In Joshua Oppenheimer’s documentary *The Act of Killing* (2012), about the atrocities in Indonesia in 1965–6, the recurrent nightmares of the mass killer Anwar Congo clearly invite a psychoanalytic reading. And in Michael Haneke’s film *Caché* (2005), Georges’s dreams of blood, axes and sequestration bring back his (and France’s) complicity with the horrific acts of violence of the Algerian War of Independence (1954–62) that he has repressed as a bourgeois adult in Paris.

Psychoanalytic readings of dreams in cultural works are powerful ways to understand our belated response to traumatic moments and events. However, has the interpretive framework of psychoanalysis become so normalised in dream analysis that it is difficult to envisage other ways of approaching the relationship between dreams and atrocity? Are we so used to employing the psychoanalytic vocabulary of ‘repression’, ‘repetition’, ‘screen memory’, ‘condensation and displacement’, ‘acting out’, ‘working through’, ‘melancholia’ and so on, that we are blinded to alternative approaches to the oneiric? Let us remember that the wish
fulfilment that Freud discovered in dreams was only another way of explaining the desires, fears, fantasies, dreams and myths that had been the imaginative bedrock of artistic works since the ancient Greeks (and undoubtedly before). And to what extent are psychoanalytic readings of dreams and trauma universally applicable, given that they may obscure the historical, political and cultural production of neuroses?¹

The novelty of this book is that, without abandoning psychoanalytic readings of dreams and atrocity, it sets out to explore other ways too of understanding the relationship. In their introduction, Emily-Rose Baker and Diane Otosaka suggest an approach that reads dreams not only as trauma’s coded language but also as an imaginative escape from and resistance to the oppression and systemic violence of what Hannah Arendt called ‘dark times’. Perhaps it was Walter Benjamin, though, more than Arendt, who removed the dream from the realm of the individual psyche (à la Freud) and placed it firmly in the realm of the collective unconscious (in this sense, Benjamin was more engaged with Jung than Freud).² In so doing, Benjamin politicised and historicised the dream image: instead of ‘Freud’s doctrine of the dream as a phenomenon of nature’, Benjamin posits the ‘dream as historical phenomenon’ (Benjamin, 1999: 908). For Benjamin, the ‘knowledge’ contained in the dream is latent and needs to be actualised. This is an ‘awakening’ through reading the dream image not pathologically but dialectically. So, in the phantasmagoric world of the arcades, Benjamin transforms ‘the enthronement of the commodity’ (Benjamin, 1999: 903) into a materialist reading of the capitalist machine. As he explains it, in the ‘second dialectical stage’, ‘the arcade changes from an unconscious experience to something consciously penetrated [...] All insight to be grasped according to the schema of awakening. And shouldn’t the “not-yet-conscious knowledge” have the structure of dream?’ (Benjamin, 1999: 907). With Benjamin – and his historicisation of Marcel Proust’s involuntary memory – we can begin to explore the reversal of the terms sleep and awakening, as reality is the sleep from which we must awaken in order to encounter history.³

In their film A Perfect Day (2005), the Lebanese directors Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige use the delicate balance between sleep and awakening to dramatise both a symptomatic acting out
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of a traumatic event and the possibility of resistance and change. Malek, whose father was one of the 17,000 or so ‘disappeared’ of the Lebanese civil war fifteen years before (1975–91), has the sleep disorder sleep apnoea, or possibly narcolepsy, which causes him to fall asleep when he is not moving and interrupts his breathing while he is asleep. The strange movements (and lack of movement) of Malek’s body appear, then, to signal the unconscious and symptomatic response to the traumatic loss of the father and the haunting effects of the violence of the war on contemporary Beirut. However, beyond the belated and melancholic return of the absence of the father and the violence of the civil war, the liminal space opened up by the transitions in Malek’s body seems to signal something else too, which goes beyond this psychoanalytic reading. This is a space between ‘reality’ and dream in which the return of the repressed of the civil war intersects with the act (or at least the possibility) of awakening, the psychic state of the individual intersects with the collective unconscious of history, and the haunting nature of the past in the present intersects with the possibility of change and renewal for the future. As Hadjithomas observes (Hurst, 2013: 45), ‘we have to learn how to live in this state of haunting, while also constructing a different present. Our aim in this film is to place absent bodies next to bodies in the present that are about to wake up’.4

In their introduction to this book, Baker and Otosaka exhort us to think of dream as a site of ‘conceptual awakening’ in dark times. In the midst of ecological disaster, the proliferation of war zones and consequent refugee crises, new authoritarian and populist regimes and the evisceration of democratic rights and freedoms, new forms of racial and sexual oppression, and even the confinement of minds and bodies by the latest pandemic, this is a positive message for the future. This book certainly illustrates the emergence of demonic forces in dream; but it also shows how dream can be a powerful imaginative force in the face of those demons.

Notes

1 See, for example, the critique by Frantz Fanon in Peau noire, masques blancs (Black Skin, White Masks, 1952) of what he perceives as the Eurocentric nature of psychoanalytic and psychiatric theory and practice and, hence, their limitations when applied to the colonial context.
2 It seems to be a shared assumption, however, that Benjamin departed from Jung when the mythical aspect of Jung’s ‘archaic image’ underpinning his concept of the collective unconscious – as opposed to the historically materialist conception of Benjamin’s ‘dialectical image’ – was critiqued in the 1930s by Benjamin’s Frankfurt School compatriots, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, for its ‘fascistic implications’ (Wolin, 1995: 70).

3 The new, dialectical method of doing history presents itself as the art of experiencing the present as waking world, a world to which that dream we name the past refers in truth. To pass through and carry out what has been in remembering the dream! – Therefore: remembering and awakening are most intimately related. Awakening is namely the dialectical, Copernican turn of remembrance.

(Benjamin, 1999: 389)

4 For a fuller discussion of this film, see Silverman (2005).

Bibliography


Silverman, Max (2005), ‘Latency in Lebanon, or bringing things (back) to life: A Perfect Day (Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige)’, Memory Studies, published online July 2021, DOI:10.1177/1750698021103333.