Spirits and Other Worlds in Nightmare Imagery

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While we sleep here, we are awake elsewhere, so every man is in fact two men…
Jorge Luis Borges (1940)1

There is at least one part in every dream which is unplumbable, a navel, as it were, linking it with the unknown…
Sigmund Freud (1900)2

My purpose is to give an account of the nightmare as an occult experience: to outline its typical organisation, structure and imagery, and examine how its forms have evolved and adapted to changing historical conditions. Before the modern era, nightmares were envisaged through conservative visual traditions (Milne 2007: 32-7; 120-32; 203-20). These traditions inform images and texts from three twentieth-century groups famous for their bad dreams. Continuities and differences in this material reveal significant shifts between old and modern nightmare forms, related to wider changes in belief-structures, visual culture and social history.3

THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF THE NIGHTMARE

A nightmare can be defined as a “self-shattering” experience: a dream where the dreamer feels under threat of dissolution. At its broadest, the phenomenon encompasses night-terrors and sleep-paralysis, also sexual arousal, delirium, hallucinations and ecstatic or diabolic visions (e.g. Hartmann c. 1984; Domhoff 2003: 9-38, 135-70). Biologically, terror in sleep is “hard-wired,” an inbuilt side-effect of the evolution of consciousness. Psychologically, the nightmare exemplifies a situation wherein ego-consciousness is most clearly revealed as partitioned or fragmentary.4 Culturally, the ego-shattering dream is a psycho-biological event, accompanied by intense emotion, amenable to re-mediation as positive or negative occult experience. We can assume that traditions for conceptualising the emotion-filled

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dream were part of the earliest “cultural packages”, emanating from Paleolithic times. Archaic figurations of the nightmare express the phenomenon as an assault on the self: they configure a seismic mental event as an external attack by an occult agency. This formula is deeply and widely inscribed in dream-culture; flourishing in populations which otherwise lack a supernatural world-view. Atheist moderns continue to view nightmares in terms of external agency, “as something that happens to them, not as something for which they are personally responsible” (Domhoff 2003: 41; Foulkes 1979; Hall and Van de Castle 1966).

The conventions used to represent the nightmare, however, do change historically. By “nightmare”, I mean the nightmare-text: what is actively remembered by the dreamer and so brought into the zone of conscious culture. Like all texts, this is an artefact of representation; borrowing its preferred vocabulary, costumes and scripts from the collective repertoire. Like all dreams, it is a complex figuration of memory. Many different levels – one might say, media – of memory are involved in the construction of even the simplest dream-text. Its primary images are altered and distorted figments of memory. These are assembled on waking into a mosaic, according to visual formulae which are cultural givens (e.g. perspectival space, folk narrative), themselves stored in memory. The result is consolidated further into the world of discourse (= long-term memory) through further retelling/recollection (private or public). Familiar processes of redaction operate at each stage.

THE NATURAL HISTORY OF THE NIGHTMARE

Ancient dreamers could draw on a range of scripts to visualise nightmares – possession, shamanic healing, prophecy – folklore concerning gods, ghosts and spirits, and formal civic religion. Ancient Near Eastern tablets describe the God of Dreams as a “nocturnal demon (preying upon) the traveler… (roaming) the open spaces” (Middle Assyrian fragment DT 46, BM, trans. Oppenheim 1956: 233). A Middle Kingdom scribe, Quenherkhepeshef, had his funeral headrest decorated with figures of hideous hybrids, to repel the nightmare-demons that plagued him in life (1225 BC, see Fig. 1). To keep off bad dreams, put aniseed on the pillow, says Pliny (Natural History, xx, 73), or put a knife under it, as they do in Newfoundland (Hufford 1982).

A “natural history” of the nightmare begins to emerge. This dream-spirit is palpable: it can smell and see and be stabbed. What did it look like? The creature seems to have been visualised originally according to the manner of its attack. Ephialtes (Greek), is one who leaps; incubus (Roman) is one who lies on, or crushes (Roscher 1979: 45-6, 54-5, 73-8). Overall, the dream-spirit is a supernatural predator. Its central body-shape remained fluid: the dreamer can choose from a range of human, animal or hybrid form. A second-century relief (Fig. 2) shows the incubus as a clawed siren, descending on a sleeping labourer. Far more fixed in this template are the creature’s extremities: it has teeth and claws, the points where a carnivore penetrates the body. Homer’s proverbial Gates of Horn and Ivory (Odyssey, 19.560ff) represent a mythic elaboration of this idea (horn = claws/nails, ivory = teeth). Horace has a ghost curse his murderer: Even when I am dead, at night I will meet you as a fury / my ghost will tear your faces with crooked claws… seated on your troubled breast / I will chase off sleep with terror (Epode 5, 91-6).

By early Christian times, Isidore of Seville (c. 560-636) lumped together fauns (Panitae, Pilosi) and incubus as types of malevolent spirits, given to having sex with animals, but who also “live in women and carry out their sexual union” (Etymologies VIII. 11.103). By the thirteenth century, the demonologist, Caesarius of Heisterbach (c. 1220-35), was attributing a hollow half-form to the incubus. He implied that the creature only solidifies as it approaches the dreamer:

Demons, as I have understood from another vision, have no hinder parts… [when] a woman asked a demon why he always walked backwards when he went away, [he] replied: “We are allowed to take the human form, but nevertheless we have no backs”(1929: ch. VI, 132).

On a more traditional note, Caesarius stressed the penetrative habits of incubi; they can break bones, as well as raping and inseminating. The country expression, “hag-ridden” preserves this sense of a sexual attack.
Fig. 1. Headrest of Qeniherkhepeshef, carved with protective figure of Bes, 1225 BC, 19th Dynasty, Deir-el-Medina, Egypt; limestone, 18.8x23x9.7 cm. Photo: The Trustees of the British Museum, London (BM EA63783).

Fig. 2. Incubus as Clawed Siren, Roman Imperial period, 2nd c. AD, marble, 40x39 cm. Photo: Museum of Fine Art, Boston 2006 (Inv. 56.119).

Fig. 3. William Rimmer, Flight and Pursuit, 1872, oil on canvas, 46.04 x 66.67 cm. Photo: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 2006 (Inv. RES.08.34c).

Fig. 4. Henry Fuseli, The Nightmare, 1781, oil on canvas, 101.6 x 126.7 cm. Photo: Detroit Institute of Arts, 2004.
Long after cultural responsibility for the description of demons had moved into the realm of film and television, this constellation of teeth, claws and monster remains central to nightmare representation. Dream-texts posted on the internet demonstrate the currency of these motifs:

I looked through the snowstorm and saw these red eyes. There were many of them and they were getting closer. I started to run away and saw that they were in front of me. They were wolves but [they] did not look like were-wolves from the movies. These looked like sleek and strong dogs standing on their hind legs. They ran at me with knives and swords. One pulled out a bow and arrow and launched it at me. The arrow hit me in the leg and I fell to the snow. They were standing all around me and saw that I could not move. They bent over and began to feast on me…

(www.geocities.com/Hotsprings/1077/dmonster.html, posted October 2000)

There are cases where the teeth and claws are cast in modern imagery:

My mother and sister had to go to the dentist… a girlfriend and I drove with them [and said] we would meet them later at a bar. It was daylight but suddenly it was night once more. And we were sitting in this bar, where there were only low-life types, like drug-addicts. And one of them came to threaten me with a needle, as if he were going to shoot me up. [And] another one comes and starts to choke me… (Female, 22, Switzerland, 1992)

This dreamer “experienced intensive fears when threatened by the addict and during the choking” (Strauch and Meier 1996: 91). Here is a case where the structure is identical, but the ego-projection is reversed:

a winter night, just after sunset. The street lamps bathed the scene in an orange light… a thick, pea-soup, London-type fog descended. Unable to see at all, people froze in place [and] called to each other trying to get their bearings. Among them, I heard some friends. I called out to them, “If you follow my voice, you can get home”

“Okay,” they responded
And then, just as [my] friends were approaching, I began to change into a hideous monster. I could feel my fangs and claws growing, and was sure my eyes were turning red. I felt demonic, and knew that as soon as my friends found me, I would kill them. I have dreamt of turning into a monster or demon many times (Christine, North Carolina, posted 5/27/2000, www.nightmareproject.com)

If we take all these accounts in sequence, they demonstrate how the semiotics of the nightmare-demon can be arranged and rearranged.

THE MODERN NIGHTMARE

Permutations in the basic constellation of motifs depend not simply on changing material culture (dentists and syringes instead of claws and teeth), but on changing habits of conceptualisation, such as perspectival space and narrative convention. The modern tendency is to pattern the key elements of the nightmare as a scenario, a kind of one-act play. We say, I dreamt I was in such-and-such a place, and a monster attacked me. This presupposes there is a dream-situation separable from the dream-encounter, a frame surrounding the dreamer and attacker. However, this perspectival theatre is itself part of the dream-text. It is a spatio-temporal convention which had become mandatory in mainstream fantasy by Victorian times – for instance in William Rimmer’s Flight and Pursuit (1872, Fig. 3) – and continues to underwrite contemporary dream representation. The ancients positioned ego, monster and dream differently; they would say rather: I had an encounter with the monster who causes dreams.

Is it the encounter with a nightmare-entity, or is it the “content” of such a dream, which constitutes the nightmare-text? Henri Fuseli’s iconic painting, The Nightmare (c. 1781, Fig. 4; Powell 1973: 46-52), straddles the divide between archaic and modern visualisations. Fuseli depicts a nightmare-demon, with another occult figure from dream-folklore (the “night-mare” coming in through the window), together with a beautiful woman dreamer, seen from the outside. All are framed inside a perspectival box. His solution points forward to the dominant paradigm of the industrial era, in which the dream
became a private drama, wherein nightmare-demon and dreamer were construed as characters in a *mise-en-scène*; and, at the same time, serious intellectual attention focussed on what caused nightmares, now secularised and understood as psychological.

By 1900, bad dreams were a subject of scientific study, a domain of psychiatry. A century later, the main attention given to nightmares comes from clinical psychology. Each shift moved the subject further into the realm of the material. According to Hartmann (1981a, 1981b, c. 1984), for instance, the people most likely to have terrifying dreams are “thin-skinned’ individuals, with over-vivid imaginations, schizoid tendencies or histories of trauma. Medical researchers speak of “degrees of predisposition to nightmare,” in terms of the sufferer’s relatively thick or thin “cognitive boundaries.” They rarely describe actual dream-imagery. On the other hand, their findings confirm the prevalence of the archaic nightmare elements:

On the Rorschach inkblot test, frequent nightmare subjects scored significantly higher on the “boundary deficit” scale than did ordinary dreamers and vivid (non-nightmare) dreamers. That is, they perceived more merging and penetration, amorphousness, and loss of shape, without seeing protective features such as armour or clothing (Bearden 1994: 142-3).

Not unnaturally, physicians, neurologists (and psychoanalysts) focus on the nightmare as symptomatic of (treatable) conditions within the patient. But this neglects the cultural dimension of bad dreams. Evidence from three twentieth-century groups of nightmare-sufferers shows some of the limitations of considering the phenomenon solely as a medical problem.

**HALLUCINATIONS OF ASYLUM ARTISTS**

In the early twentieth Century, Hans Prinzhorn (1886-1933) collected “outsider” images by asylum-inmates in Greater Germany; artwork by people from the lower classes: clerks, craftsmen, machine-fitters (Prinzhorn 1995; Brand-Claussen 1996; de Zegher 2000; Cardinal et al. 2006). The visual dream-imagery in his collection is a startling barometer of social change. As in the case of the “great confinement” diagnosed by Foucault (1977; 2006) for the eighteenth century, followed by the “birth of the asylum” in the nineteenth, novel symptoms and classifications of mental illness around 1900 were complexly linked to the traumas of industrialisation (cf. Morel and Quétel c.1979; Micale and Lerner 2001; Boydell and Murray 2002).

Religious and megolomaniac delusions feature prominently in the medical records of the Prinzhorn artists. All had suffered psychotic breaks in their relations with reality. When asked to represent their hallucinations visually, many patients reached for shapes from folklore. The labourer Arthur B painted water-nixes (Milne 2006: 75-6); the electrician August Natterer (b. 1868) drew witch-head-landscapes dividing town and country (Fig. 5); the watchmaker Heinrich Hermann Mebes (b. 1842) wove *Märchen* and biblical creatures into clockwork scenarios (Figs 7 and 8).

Prinzhorn and his staff were often at a loss to see how these visual representations related to the patients’ oral testimony about the content of their hallucinations. Though it makes sense now to regard a given image and its “commentary” as elements of the same “text”, the differences between the two are enlightening. For example, Mr H. (Case 355), an alcoholic butler who had spent his life in a university town, attached “explanations” to his pictures. One (Fig. 18) relates to his previous work as a hypnotist:

**Dissertation about Frau Gern. Stand 1886 at bed. Frau Gern on recommendation Dr. U. treats G; give transparent glass; looks at it 1 minute; speaks on command: “I am tired and want to sleep” – “you are tired and want to sleep” – slumbers – “your body circulation healing electromagnetic current”; moment wave hair violet sparks; swell arteries, cheek red – “awake completely healthy to new life” – O. H. General Manager (Prinzhorn 1922: 82)**

The image shows a male hypnotist and recumbent woman (cf. Fuseli, Fig. 4; also Fig. 2). Sparks radiate from her head (green, red and white in the image; violet in the description). This scene is flanked by two further pairs of figures. At bottom right, a man and dog sit together looking out at the viewer. In the back room, another man sits on a sofa, his body covered by an animal on its hind legs. Prinzhorn notes that it is not clear whether “the animal threatens or embraces the man” – an ambivalence of intent visible from the clawed siren through Caesarius to Fuseli – but he is more interested in the fact that
Fig. 5. August Natterer (1868-1933), *Witch’s Head*, pencil, watercolour, pen on varnished card, 25.9 x 34.2 cm. Photo: Prinzhom Collection, Psychiatric Institute of the University of Heidelberg (Inv. 184).

Fig. 6. Miss G (n.d.), *Untitled*, 1897, embroidery thread on linen handkerchief, 37 x 26 cm. Photo: Prinzhom Collection, Psychiatric Institute of the University of Heidelberg (Inv. 6053).

Fig. 7. Heinrich Hermann Mebes (1842- d. Ebserwalde, n.d.), *Who will roll the stone from the entrance of the tomb? (Easter)*, c. 1880-1930, pencil, brush on paper, 10.04 x 12.1 cm;

Fig. 8. Heinrich Hermann Mebes (1842- d. Ebserwalde, n.d.), *The Dark Zeitgeist*, 10.5 x 16.6 cm. Photos: Prinzhom Collection, Psychiatric Institute of the University of Heidelberg (Inv. 403 and 406 recto).
this scene is not alluded to at all in the commentary. He concludes: “Even when a quite specific scene is portrayed, knowledge about details does not prevail; instead they are somehow displaced or replaced by formal components during the process of configuration” (Prinzhorn 1922: 82).

This, we can surmise, indicates how the nightmare constellation can be “re-configured”, by rearranging familiar formal components. An early paper by Freud sheds more light on the role of culture in this process. Writing in 1913, reviewing his own early work on childhood memories, Freud was struck by,

…how great an influence folk fairy-tales have on mental life… In some people a recollection of their favourite fairy-tales takes the place of their own childhood memories: they have made the fairy-tales into screen-memories… (1958: 236–43)

The Prinzhorn images were made by second- and third-generation urban working-class and petit-bourgeoisie. These people were the grand-children of the first immigrants to modernity, and the style of their mental breakdowns mediated the tensions of their hybrid culture. Poorer contemporaries of Freud’s patients, they knew of fairy-tales from childhood, but did not experience them as a traditional occult system, embedded in daily life. Almanacks, atlases, needlework samplers, also figure in their art (e.g. Fig. 9); fixed templates and maps promising or der in a tilting world, drawn from the common visual culture of homes where people read a little. Prinzhorn’s patients were among those caught – “thin-skinned”– in the stresses produced by phantasmogorically-changing environments, and new authoritarian institutions of urban control and by containment.

Folk culture – including tales of dream-spirits – absorbed in infancy, formed “readymade” sets of parts for Prinzhorn’s imagemakers, as they did for Freud’s patients’ dreams, and for contemporary sufferers who post nightmare-texts on the web. But it is not the archaic elements alone which make the Prinzhorn imagery recognisably nightmarish, a century later. It is the ways in which they configure old elements into new visual scripts.

Quite a few inmate-artists had some schooling in commercial art or craft practice, and formally, as has often been noted, their modes of visual construction strikingly parallel the Modernist disintegration of the perspectival mise-en-scène, engineered by the avant-garde around 1900 (see e.g. Foster 2000: 9-22). Elements of self-splitting and claustrophobic, world-filling pattern characterise the Prinzhorn designs, all of which mitigate against spatial and linear narrative conventions. It is this deconstructive emphasis on pattern, regimentation and repetition – extremes of order as well as chaos – which we read as expressing the unique anxieties of the first machine-age: Mebes’s enigmatic contraptions (Figs 7 and 8); Miss G’s chaotic embroidered handkerchief (fl. c. 1897; Fig. 6); the orderly and relentless work of the commercial clerk, Josef Heinrich Grebing (b. 1879; Figs 9 and 12).

NIGHTMARES OF THE THIRD REICH

Many German asylum-artists were executed in the thirties, victims of Nazi eugenics. Their imagery can be compared with the nightmares of Berliners, undergoing psychoanalysis in the early years of Third Reich, as recorded by the analyst Charlotte Beradt (1985). Her patients came from the assimilated Jewish upper middle-classes, they were not severely mentally ill, nor (as yet) incarcerated. Their dreams manifest a similar cultural mix of archaic and paranoid scenarios. Pursuit and boundary penetration often explicitly figure:

as had happened many times before, I had been shot at, martyred and scalped - had run for my life with blood streaming and teeth knocked out, Storm Troopers constantly on my heels (Beradt, 13)

Some dreams evoke ephialtes or incubus, as in this case from 1933. Notice the twists in the ascribed agency of the attack, as in the internet dream where the dreamer herself became the monster:

Am going to bury myself in lead. Tongue already leaden, locked in lead. Fear will go away when I’m all covered with lead… When they come, I’ll say, “The leaden cannot rise up” (Beradt, 10)

Six subjects dreamt that it was forbidden to dream, “but I did anyway” (Beradt, 10).

In 1934, one year into the regime, a doctor slept on his couch and dreamed that:
Fig. 9. Josef Heinrich Grebing (1879-1940), *Untitled (World Map)*, mixed media on paper, 42.6 x 28.7 cm. Photo: Prinzhom Collection, Psychiatric Institute of the University of Heidelberg (Inv. 609).

Fig. 10. Jakob Mohr (1884- last mentioned 1935), *Proofs (‘BeweisJe’) c. 1910*, pencil and pen on office paper, 33 x 21 cm. Photo: Prinzhom Collection, Psychiatric Institute of the University of Heidelberg (Inv. 627/1r).

Fig. 11. Robert Gie (1869- last recorded 1922), *Circulation of effluvium with central machine and metric scale*, 1916, blue pencil on tracing paper, 48 x 69 cm. Photo: Collection de L’Art Brut, Lausanne.

Fig 12. Josef Heinrich Grebing (1879-1940), *Untitled*, pen on paper, 22.1 x 14 cm. Photo: Prinzhom Collection, Psychiatric Institute of the University of Heidelberg (Inv. 624/12).
suddenly the walls of my room and then my apartment disappeared. I looked around and discovered [with] horror that, as far as the eye could see, no apartment had walls anymore. Then I heard a loudspeaker boom, “According to the decree of the 17th of this month on the Abolition of Walls…” (Beradt, 21)

A woman dreamed a machine recorded the fact that she had thought of Hitler when a devil appeared on stage at the Opera. Beradt (26) asked her to describe the machine: “it was electric, a maze of wires.”

The earliest “thought-control” apparatus appears in the hallucinations of an Englishman, James Tilly Matthews, committed to Bedlam in 1796 (Haslam 1988: xxxiii; Porter 1991: 123-5, 144-8, 265-76, 358-9). His “air-loom” was modelled on the weaving factories of the day and powered by Mesmerism; his precociously modern profession as a futures broker (in tea) doubtless shaped this delusion (cf. Milne 2007: 209-23). By World War I, this was an idea whose time had come. Around 1916, the carpenter, Robert Gie (b. 1869; Fig. 9) and the gardener-hawker, Jacob Mohr (b. 1884; Fig. 10) drew the first electrical thought-controlling machines. In 1918, the psychoanalyst Victor Tausk came across the delusion in a patient’s case; he dubbed it the “influencing machine”(1988: 519-56; Weiss 2000: 49). Contemporaries of Dada, of H. G. Wells and Henry Ford, as well as Freud, these patients took elements of the old fear-filled dream – witchcraft, mental attack – and re-metaphorised them for the coming age. The incidence of reports of thought-reading machines, like that of Beradt’s opera-going dreamer, and thought-controlling machines (among paranoid schizophrenics) rises markedly towards mid-century (see e.g. Siegel 1994: 54-88).

But it is not sufficient to explain the nightmares in Beradt’s group as caused by overly “thin cognitive boundaries” on the part of the dreamers, when they so evidently reflect collective social realities. With hindsight, a Berliner experiencing nightmares under Hitler was more sane than one who was not: the threat really was outside the individual, trying to get in. What counts as “thin-skinned” (prone to shattering dreams) – or avant-garde (capable of contributing an innovative dream-text, taken up by others) – varies as the concrete conditions of culture and history change. As in the images of Gie or Mohr, Beradt’s patients offer new kinds of nightmare-texts. Some merely dress the archaic attack in new clothes. But others project the threatening agency outside the frame – dénouement is postponed, unseen but imminent. Such imagery has a surreal, Kafkaesque aesthetic, which became part of the cultural mainstream after 1945.

**Nightmares of Parkinsonian Sleepers**

The final set of nightmares comes from a group whose members were neither mad nor asleep, in the ordinary senses of these states: the patients treated in the early 1970s by Oliver Sacks (1983). Sacks described people “frozen” for decades in virulent forms of Parkinson’s disease, and their extraordinary “Awakenings” when given the drug L-Dopa. They were long-term survivors of the encephalitis epidemic which killed millions between 1916 and 1927. What had not been known, of course, was how the experience of the illness had appeared from the inside. During remission, some described the intervening states of conscious-ness vividly. Almost all remembered terrible nightmares at the onset of the sickness. Miss R. was a young flapper who spent the next forty-three years in a Parkinsonian trance. In 1926, when she first fell ill, she had a series of dreams with the same structure:

- she was imprisoned in an inaccessible castle, [which] had the form and shape of herself. She dreamed of enchantments, bewitchments… that she had become a living sentient statue of stone … that the world had come to a stop … that she had fallen into a sleep so deep that nothing could wake her … That she died a death which was different from death …
- Her family had difficulty waking her the next morning… [she] turned her eyes to the wardrobe mirror, and there she saw that her dreams had come true… (Sacks 1983: 68)

She recovered partly from this catatonia, feeling an intense, emotionless concentration.

When asked what she was thinking about, the answer was “nothing”:

- “How, exactly, do you think about nothing?”
- “One way is to think the same thing again and again. Like 2=2=2=2=2… Whatever I do or whatever I think leads deeper
and deeper into itself … And then there are maps. I think of a map, then a map of that map, then a map of that map of that map, and each map perfect, though smaller and smaller… Worlds within worlds within worlds. Once I get going I can’t possibly stop. It’s like being caught between mirrors, or echoes… a merry-go-round which won’t come to a stop” (Sacks 1983: 69)

The parallel with Grebing’s numbers series is striking (Fig. 8). In both, the compulsion or threat is embedded in the mise-en-scene rather than in an attacking avatar. In both, the spatial arrangements and imagery evoke the mechanical rhythms of mass-production: spinning, robotic repetition; a hall of mirrors. These visualisations suggest further shifts in the territory of the nightmare, in the direction of distancing and dispersal. The threat takes the form of an entire environment – a spirit-world – where anxiety is prolonged and closure indefinitely postponed. The ego sees itself suspended in pattern, as in the “world-filling” Prinzhorn imagery, or the city without walls; visualisations which exclude the possibility of catharsis or narrative resolution. For Miss R. and the others, the temporal order of the nightmare-scenario was inverted: a terrifying attack was followed by an affect-free state of infinite reflection.

**GELL’S THEORY OF TRAPS**

These shifts in the grammar of the nightmare invite analysis by way of Alfred Gell’s theorisation of the trap (1999: 187-21). The anthropologist-philosopher Gell argued that the artefacts of hunter-gather societies, such as this Central African arrow trap (Fig. 13), operate like an art-work or text. They are representations of human “being-in-the-world”:

Initially, a trap like this communicates a deadly absence – the absence of the [person] who devised and set it, and the absence of the animal who will become the victim. Because of these marked absences, the trap, like all traps, functions as a powerful sign. We read in it the mind of its author and the fate of its victim.

This trap is a model as well as an implement … The arrow-trap is particularly clearly a model of its creator, because it has to substitute for him; [it is] a surrogate hunter … an automaton or robot, whose design epitomises the design of its creator … (Gell, 200)

Each trap is not only a model of its creator, but of its victim. The trap may literally reflect the outward form of the prey (Fig. 14); more subtly, it works as a kind of reverse representation of the prey; it models those aspects of the animal’s behaviour which are used to capture it (cf. Fig. 15):

Traps are lethal parodies of the animal’s *umwelt* [environment, milieu]. Thus the rat that likes to poke around in narrow spaces has just such a cavity prepared for its last fateful foray into the dark… From the form of the trap, the dispositions of its intended victim could be deduced… The trap is therefore both a model of its creator, the hunter, and of its victim, the prey animal.

[Beyond] this, the trap embodies a scenario…the dramatic nexus that binds these two protagonists together... [aligned] in time and space (Gell, 201)

This well describes the operations of the nightmare: an artefact of representation whereby the self preys on itself. What are the mechanisms that spring the trap – that manoeuvre aspects of the self into this “dramatic nexus”?

**CATHEXIS: ECSTATIC DREAM, SEXUAL FANTASY AND NIGHTMARE**

Psychoanalytically, the phenomenon of *cathexis* lies at the heart of the nightmare, the ecstatic dream and the sexual fantasy. This becomes clearer if we compare the mechanisms first of inspiration and sexual *jouissance*. Ernst Kris analysed Plato’s description of inspiration in “primitive” (i.e. radically oral) societies, as follows:

[inspired] individuals … communicate with [their] repressed wishes and fantasies [by] special mechanisms [of] projection and introjection. What comes from inside is believed to come from without. The “voice of the unconscious” is externalized and becomes the voice of God, who speaks through the mouth of the chosen … the driving of the unconscious towards
consciousness, the process of becoming conscious, is [itself] attributed to the influence of the Divine. In other words, an alteration of cathexis inside the person, the bursting of the frontiers between the unconscious and the conscious, is experienced as an intrusion from without. (1952: 293-4).

Fig. 13. Arrow trap, Central Africa, drawing by Julian Hodges (2008), after Gell (1999).

An example of this is given in the testimony of the orator, Aelius Aristides (c. 129-179 AD), describing his dream-relationship with the god Asklepios (Oratio XLVIII, 31-35; Misch 1950: v. 2, 498-508). This commenced with treatments for various ills, then moved in a more mystical direction:

[The remedy] was revealed in the clearest possible way… countless… things made the presence of the god manifest. For I seemed almost to touch him and to perceive that he himself was coming, and to be halfway between sleep and waking and to want to get the power of vision and to be anxious lest he depart beforehand, and to have turned my ears to listen, sometimes as in a dream, sometimes as in a waking vision, and my hair was standing on end and tears of joy [came forth], and the weight of knowledge was no burden - what man could even describe these things in words? But if he is one of the initiates, then he knows and understands… (Misch 1950: 210-11)

This is a self-shattering dream, and also an ecstatic vision. The occult “presence” of the god is manifest, but Aristides can only “almost” touch him. The dreamer’s emotional arousal is marked by bodily turmoil (hair rises, tears flow), and he ends by saying that no words (or signs) can convey the central experience. Environment and expectation direct the casting of this as a positive “close encounter,” as opposed to a nightmare.16

Now let us turn to Bersani’s arguments (1981: 145-62) about how representation (fantasy) triggers the “shattering” of ego in sexual arousal:

Desire [is] satisfied as a disruption or destabilization of the self. It [is] not originally an exchange of intensities between individuals, but rather a condition of broken negotiations with the world. [an internal] movement to satisfy a need … becomes a desiring fantasy … [i.e. desire-filled, or affect-laden fantasy – as in the nightmare] in which the psychic apparatus is more or less gravely “shaken” by an exceptional convergence between need and satisfaction… The activity of fantasmatic representation [is therefore] inherently an experience of “psychic pain.” If we understand fantasy here as the imaginary expression of and fulfilment of a desire, then the psychic
disturbance produced by fantasy is an experience of pleasure as
pain (Bersani, 148-9)

Bersani starts by asking how and why sado-masochistic imagery
produces sexual arousal. He concludes that all “fantasmatic”
representation is inherently painful, irrespective of the kinds of
imagery present in the fantasy, because it depends for its creation on a
split in the ego’s self-image: “Perhaps”, he says, “the ‘threshold of
intensity’ of which Freud speaks is passed whenever this kind of
dédoublement takes place.” (Bersani, 149, 157; cf. Freud 1953: 203,
205, 233).

It is this kind of self-shattering dream which would be
predominantly experienced as nightmare in the modern era.
Dédoublement – the splitting of the self – defines a moment when the
self appears to shadow itself – confronting itself with an avatar of
desire, an uncanny double, a projection filled with its own emotion,
yet “known” to be another. For Bersani, some version of this
phenomenon is a necessary prelude to any kind of arousal – sexual,
ecstatic, or terrified – sufficient to shake the ego out of its
“negotiations with the world”. This returns us to the operations of the
nightmare, which – from a psychoanalytic point of view – is indeed a
kind of sado-masochistic fantasy.

Dreams are what Celia Green called “metachoric” experiences,
wherein, “the subject’s field of perception is completely replaced by a
hallucinatory one” (Green and McCreery 1975: 2). Considered in
semiotic terms, when the dream-text is constructed as a memory-text,
what happens? Bear in mind that the dreamer furnishes every element
of the dream, including the mise-en-scène, and any emotional content.
In other words, every entity you see in your dream “is” you. The
identity of the dream-elements is not apparent, because, in the dream-
text, the ego is dismantled: it is simultaneously puppet, puppet-master
and puppet-stage. Recall also that the dream-text coalesces
retroactively, in the form of a “virtual” memory, as the conscious ego
reconstitutes itself (cf. Milne 2004). The dreamer composes this text
not “inside” the sleep-state (when the ego is fully quiescent), but on
the way out of it (when the ego is stirring).

What happens in this reading when cathexis is involved? I suggest
that the dream-text becomes a nightmare when this semi-dismantled
ego-structure, on its way to re-assembly after sleep, experiences split
parts of itself – really assemblages of memory and desire, but
apparently autonomous and objectively other – heading towards it at
breakneck speed. In the traditional nightmare of attack, one or many
alienated avatars of the self close in on the ego, engendering an
escalating sense of threat. This explodes into pure affect as the
models of hunter and prey intersect; the trap springs, the dreamer
wakes.

Whatever the style of nightmare – traditional-personified or
modern-depersonified – the dédoublement experience is pulled
retroactively into a memory-text, wherein one partial pseudo-ego
“remembers” being threatened with imminent dissolution at the hands
of another agency. In the terms of the dream-text, this is rational. The
pseudo-ego perceives itself as an intact and autonomous actor in the
scene: it believes this is its sole identity. It cannot realise that when
the attacker reaches it – at the point of touch – the two will merge, the
difference between the two will vanish, and a third entity, the waking
go-pattern of the dreamer will reassert itself.

NEW AND OLD TRAPS

Many Prinzhorn images depict an alienated, divided body, in
situations of entrapment (Figs 4, 8, 11, 12); or literally dismembered,
as in Goesch’s Horus Dismembered (Fig. 17). Sacks’ patients also
described their symptoms as attacks from within. The language of
trapping – being caught, stuck, split apart – recurs in their accounts.
Miss H., for instance, suffered sudden paroxysms, associated with
anguish and terror, lasting hours, and accompanied by screaming fits:

It was as if something built up and suddenly burst out of me... I
used to feel that it was something apart from me...not
controlled by me, which was doing the screaming. And I
would feel awful afterwards, and hate myself (Sacks 1983:
119)

Doctors use the term, “ego-alien”, to describe this sense of the
profoundly other entity generated in the mind. So Miss H. might well
say, “I had an encounter with the monster who causes dreams”. Some
of her waking delusions manifested as classic nightmare-demon
constellations. During a crisis, while her body parts took on “a life of
their own”: 
[She] would suddenly “remember” that she had been sexually assaulted by a “beast” of an elevator operator in 1952, and that in consequence of this she now had syphilis [and that everyone was talking about this]…when…asked if [this] had actually happened… she replied, “of course not. [It’s] nonsense. But I’m forced to think it when I have one of my crises (Sacks 1983: 126-7)

It seems possible then to regard the original nightmares of the victims as master-metaphors or operating systems – ego-traps of a specialised kind – which came to govern the subsequent existential expression of the disease (Sacks 1996: 212-29). The initial explosion of the virus seems to have permanently fissioned the brain into separate systems, as if one were stuck in a dream. The drug then set up a feedback situation, wherein synapses were temporarily restored, and a “whole” self reappeared; recognisable as such both to the patient and surrounding observers. The therapeutic effects of L-Dopa were unstable, possibly because the neural tissues sustaining the ego-pattern were too profoundly damaged to be overwritten. Some patients could only “manifest the self” in a manic idiom, even initially. What was “feeding back” was the impossible effort of the dissociated parts of the self to come back together.

These manic hallucinatory states partook of both the ecstatic dream and the nightmare. Many patients perceived themselves as rather literally hurled into heaven and then into hell. A marvellous, Lazarus-like coming together, seen from the outside as an awakening into normalcy, appeared from the inside as a rebirth of the spirit. We might say that, as the ego-pattern reasserted itself, the moment of merger/recognition with lost or alienated parts of the self was marked with huge joy, as in the dream of Aristides. Sadly, a backlash of refragmentation inevitably followed, and the drug usually had to be withdrawn. Subsequent doses produced milder lasting alleviation for many, though never again the effect of wholesale miracle. The most unlucky degenerated, split into a terrifying menagerie of warring parts.

All these dreamers – Prinzhorn artists, Berlin analysands, L-Dopa patients, internet posters – represent traps prepared by the self as encounters with occult entities and/or environments. Each composes a dream-text using the perceptual conventions and imagery to hand; hence the strange cocktails of the folkloric-industrial, or the
bureaucratic-satanic. Some old patterns prove infinitely adaptable: the incubus as syphilitic rapist, or needle-bearing junkie. Some are unique to modernity: ray guns, influencing-machines, robotic mass-reproduction. However, Gell’s notion of the trap as simultaneously modelling predator and prey has further implications for the ego-shattering dream.

CONCLUSIONS

Freud wrote, “There is at least one part in every dream which is unplumbable, a navel, as it were, linking it with the unknown” (1978: 186 n. 2). This “dream-navel” is manifest most clearly in the mystery of the shattering dream: a “proto-aesthetic field” where the mind is forced to confront and give shape to its own divisions.

Like nightmares, traps have a “proto-aesthetic” nature. Because of its dense psychological model of hunter/victim, and the double absent presences it so spookily incarnates, Gell argues the trap is more poetic than the chase. The trap is not an artwork, but the concept of the trap is “partially connected” to the way art works. A Guyanese angling trap (Fig. 18) illustrates this transformative power. On its own, it does not look particularly interesting, or appear to have much to say about the human unumwelt. But, once we know that its nickname is the trap which turns fish into fruit, suddenly, one sees … how wildly metaphysical and magical this trap is. One moment the fish is swimming along, belonging (so it thinks) to the animal kingdom, and then, bang, before it knows what has happened, it is a vegetable, dangling from the branches of a tree, to be plucked, like any other fruit, by a passing Indian (Gell, 207)

The “proto-aesthetic” nature of these structures allows us to recognise how changes in overall representational conventions – such as scenario and perspective – can act as mechanisms of innovation, transforming the models of the occult expressed in nightmare imagery by re-arranging their elements.

What holds the parts of the severely-fissioned self together, when they can be held together, is trap-making – techne (= artifice, technique, scenario-making) – at the interface of the private and social self. Successful traps can re-align the parts of the non-unified self. These may be large-scale – religious ceremonial for Aristides – or miniature and mundane. Thus, when Miss H. was afflicted by a new tic, forcing her hand up to her face, twenty times an hour, after three days she invested it with intention as a mannerism. She used it to push back her glasses, which tended to slip down her nose. This interpretation brought immediate relief.18

Fig. 18. Mr H. (n.d.), Frau Gern (c. 1900), watercolour on paper, 33 x 21cm. Photo: Prinzhorn Collection, Psychiatric Institute of the University of Heidelberg (Case 355).

As in all dreams, what Freud called “considerations of representability” govern what can be envisaged and how. In the nightmare-texts we have seen, each figuration of the supernatural encounter turns on the issue of distance. Either there is space between you and the alien other, or there is no space; you can either see it or you are enmeshed in it. We can conclude then, that twentieth-century nightmares evolved in two distinct lineages, in response to successive mass-traumas of industrialisation, war and totalitarianism. In one line of descent, dream-monsters acquired modern costumes and habitats. In the other, the elements of the nightmare constellation were more drastically re-arranged. Under extreme mental pressure, the three groups examined here produced nightmare-texts which collapsed the
illusionist spatial and narrative codes on which the formula of the
dramatic encounter depended. Novel avatars of the nightmare signify
conflicts in the wider body politic as well as the individual; they are a
function of dissidence at this interface.

But notice that this could not have happened without the
incorporation of perspectival space / linear narrative codes into the
dream-text in the first place. When Christine of North Carolina
reflects on her nightmare, she focuses on her transformation into a
monster: the “drama” of the text. However, the winter night, the
street-lights and the fog are equally her avatars – her stage and
scenery are all fragments of herself. Nightmare-texts which represent
the ego as suspended in a mise-en-scène achieve the new convention
by exaggerating this unexamined aspect of the previous Romantic
convention, wherein the pieces of the self were already latently
fragmented, used to form a world, not simply split in dédoublement.

It is clear from all this is that codes and conventions govern
cathexis – the confrontation with the occult self – and that these are
malleable. How the split ego reassembles, and whether it faces union
with its avatars with fear or pleasure is a matter of culture. It takes a
special kind of trap to turn fish into fruit.

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Notes
1 From the story Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius, Borges 2000: 26.
2 Freud 1978: 186 n. 2
3 The present paper is part of a work-in-progress on the history of dreams
and nightmares: Milne 2007 deals with classical and folk dream culture
up to the late Renaissance, and Milne 2006 on the relationship between
dreams and the occult. I am indebted to the International Society for the
Study of Dreams for providing the opportunity to present a first draft of
this essay at their 2006 conference in Bridgewater, MA.
4 In every culture, the human ego disassembles in sleep, cannot recall
infancy, is surprised by memory.
5 For previous psychoanalytic and cultural definitions of nightmares and
hallucinations see, e.g.: Milne 2007 (chs 1 and 2); Jones (to 1930);

Shulman and Strousma 1999; Bulkeley 2001. On medical and clinical
psychological approaches see e.g. Siegel and West 1975, Barrett 1996,
Domhoff 2003, and n. 12 below.
6 According to Freud the “mechanisms” used by the dream-work on
memory include: condensation, displacement, considerations of
representability, and secondary revision (Dicenso 2001: 286–8).
7 The oldest Roman term is inus (Aeneid VI, 775), identified with
Faunus or Pan; cf Roscher 1900, 59f., citing Aristophanes, Artemidorus
et al.; the concept of the succubus is a much later, post-Christian variant.
8 “Two gates for fleeting dreams there are: one of polished horn, and one
of sawn ivory. Issuing by the ivory gate are deceitful dreams but those
that come through solid horn may be borne out, if mortals only know
them.”
9 “Quin, ubi perire iussus expiravero/ nocturnus occurratur Furo/
petamque vultus umbra curvis unguibus/ quae vis deorum est Manium/
et inquietus adsidens praecordiis/ pavore somnos auferam”
10 “Pilosi, qui Graece Panitae, Latine Incubi appellantur, sive Inui ab
inuendo passim cum animalibus. Unde et Incubi dicuntur ab
incumbendo, hoc est stuprando. Saepe enim inprobi existunt ettiam
mulieribus, et earum peragunt concubitionem...” Cf. Roscher 56;
Philostratus, Life of Apollonius of Tyana, 6.27.
Tillhagen 1960; however this research needs to be revisited.
12 “A great body of research suggests that there are a specific cluster of
personality traits correlated with frequent nightmares” (Bearden 1994:
142), citing six main studies between 1972 and 1994, and seventy items
in the medical literature in English. The case for diagnosis of “thin
boundaries” was made in two papers by Hartmann et al. (1981a; 1981b),
and expanded further in Hartmann c.1984; cf. Kryger et al. 2005:
sections 41–47).
13 Works in the collection range from 1880 to 1933, though many lack
exact dates. Those illustrated here appeared in Prinzhorn’s 1922 book;
the exception is Fig. 11 (c.1916), from a different collection.
14 This interpretation follows Foucault’s work (1975; 2006) on the cultural
history of madness and imprisonment; for subsequent literature see e.g.
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15 “Of the c. 360 extant case-files (out of 435)… 55 professional or semi professional artists have been identified: these include craftspersons, architects, art teachers and technical draughtsmen…” (Brand-Claussen 1996: 12, 22 n. 34).

16 Cf. Milne 2004, on emotional responses to UFO encounters: some regarded the event with terror, others with awe.

17 1. Georg Simmel (1997: 212) also speaks of a necessary “threshold of intensity” involving emotions such as love and fear in religious experience.

18 This she described as a “nonsense-movement”: “I feel a tension building up in my hand and after a time it gets too much, and then I have to move it” (sacks 1983:124-5).

References


Karnac.

