

Dreaming the End of Dreaming

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In dreaming, a focus of the dreamer on her own body, a paradoxical situation, or a special practice, can create an awareness about the dream situation and from this a waking up, or a total change in the dreamworld can occur. The entire situation is radically affected and a degradation of reality to the status of a dream is happening instantaneously. This disintegration of the reality constraints opens the doors to anomalies and impossible behaviors like flying, passing through walls, self-transformations, changes in the environment and the narrative, transformations of the space and time, of the present, future, and even of the past sometimes. Becoming aware that you are dreaming means to become aware of another reality outside of the apparently complete world that you are experiencing in the dream. It means that a second reality in which you are also present, but usually asleep, becomes available to you. If the capacity to participate in two different realities at the same time is a shamanic characteristic,¹ then, when we are lucid in a dream we are shamans for a while because we also maintain the awareness of our bodies in our beds.

Usually we cannot live in two or more realities at the same time, in the best case we have to choose where to be awake. We are awake in one world and asleep in all the others. Unless we can maintain two incompatible perspectives at the same time. For the "new sorcerers" from North America to construct and attentively create coherence in a second reality, the "sorcerers' description of the world", is not only a matter of acceding to a superior hidden reality. The sorcerer-reality, even if it is superior to the "average man reality", is only a habitually enforced description, like every banal reality. An awareness of this fact pushes one behind descriptions in general, a metacognition about the relative arbitrariness and artificiality of realities emerges, dramatically raising the perception of the dreamy nature of any reality in general.² Maintaining two contradictory worlds is a way of knowing that you are always involved in a sort of more or less elaborated dreaming. The dream of becoming aware seems to involve the dreaming of two different dreams at the same time.

In Romanian folklore there are many stories about heroes that for different reasons have to embark on a very difficult and dangerous incursion in the zone of the zmei (some strange evil and terrifying beings, a sort of devils). After unthinkable difficulties, when the "heroes" enter the zone of the "zmei", they slowly fall into a sleepy state against which there is nothing they can do. Exactly at the moment when the zmei are coming, the heroes lose consciousness and the zmei deprive them of the golden apples or some other tremendously important and very difficult to obtain treasure, for which they had just risked their lives.³ These stories follow the perspective of the zmei, of the nightmare zone, in which the heroes lose consciousness and fall asleep. But from a worldly perspective, that of the heroes, we can say that the heroes, lost and terrorized in a nightmare zone, are waking up exactly at the peak of the nightmare, when the zmei are coming. The same situation, of entering the zone of the zmei, can be read as a waking up or falling asleep, depending on what zonal perspective you take. Falling asleep in the nightmare zone is equivalent to waking up in "reality". But, indifferent to these perspectives, the nightmare goes on. The losses during the dream are real, their golden apples are gone.

When the Yanomami shamans from Amazonia enter the Xapiri, the world of spirits from the "time of dream", or rather when the Xapiri starts to haunt them in their dreams, what they experience is pure horror. The world of spirits is so terrifying that for many years, when the spirits want to approach the shamans "to dance with them", they will wake up from horrible nightmares screaming.⁴ The Xapiri, like the zone of the Zmei, are very consistent real worlds, "more real than reality", and like the worst possible nightmares, they do not disappear when you wake up, but often spill out into reality. For the shamans, and through them for all the yanomami, the Xapiri imposes itself powerfully on the waking life. And because we all have a bit of a shaman (the shaman for the Yanomami is not so much something you are, but something that you have, or that rather has you, in different degrees), the nightmares often spill out for the rest of us too. In the so-called "sleep paralysis", which is experienced by 25-30% of people, you wake up paralyzed by fear, and you feel and sometimes see, hear and even smell the presence of a horrible, evil being that gets close to you and eventually presses on your chest, giving you one of the most terrifying possible experiences.⁵ But because such things cannot exist in reality, the rest of us usually consider them just some horrible mind-creations, some dreams – dreams in the weak sense, as less important realities.

For Zhuangzi, dreams were very important, at least the one after which he could not find a way to be sure if he was Zhuangzi who had just finished dreaming that he was a butterfly, or a butterfly who had just started dreaming he was Zhuangzi.⁶ But maybe he did not have to choose, maybe both were happening – Zhuangzi dreams the butterfly and the butterfly dreams Zhuangzi. The new sorcerers described by Castaneda perform very elaborate techniques for creating a double who, in a paradoxical way, "is the sorcerer himself developed through his dreaming." By learning to dream the double, "the self arrives at this weird crossroad, and a moment comes when one realizes that it is the double who dreams the self."⁷ The double is the dream of the sorcerer and the sorcerer is the dream of the double. Tulpamancy is a new and rather popular subculture, in which thousands of people through hundreds of hours of precise practices are concerned with the creation of sentient, conscious beings called "tulpas", by "forcing" and "imposing" them in previously constructed parallel worlds called "wonderlands". Usually, at Tulpa's request, a moment comes in which the host and the Tulpa perform a "switching". Tulpa takes possession of the body, becomes embodied, and she is dreaming the former host, who becomes a sort of Tulpa.

On the complicated way to Tulpa-populated wonderlands, the process can flip at any time into a full nightmare in which the tulpamancer can lose herself, or, in the case of a "switching" situation, the tulpa may start to feel the dreaming of the tulpamancer as a nightmare. All this can happen because the tulpas and their worlds are not just simply mind creations, but autonomous beings and realities on their own. This is part of a SOS call of Koomer, a tulpamancer, on his blog: "sometimes it feels like the body doesn't belong to me, like i'm just watching someone else through their own eyes. It's actually really annoying to not feel like yourself because you have no way to ground yourself."⁸ Many times you want to maintain the dream as long as possible, especially the Tulpa dreams, but sometimes you don't know what to do to wake up, and some nightmares can be very difficult to end. Sometimes it is easier to access or even create a reality than to stop it. A world or a reality can appear as closed systems, with no exit, powerful traps that won't let you go.

A threat to one's own life is the source of the majority of nightmares. But paradoxically, to end the nightmare, you often have to end your life, or at least to be close to doing it in the dream. Often a nightmare ends only with the price of an imminent dying, only then do you

wake up scared into "reality", or into another dream. In a mysterious way, the phenomenal self model or, more simply put, the elaborated fiction that is the "I", is central for maintaining the dreaming world around it. It is the dream ingredient that even if it is just a disembodied minimal self, just an abstract point, it seems to be absolutely necessary for the dreaming to happen.⁹ The dream is always somebody's dream, like in Amazonian multinaturalism and perspectivism where the world is always somebody's perspective.¹⁰ The easiest, if not the only way to end these worlds, and probably any type of world, is to end your own life. To vertically navigate between dreamworlds, which are, in this perspective, the only worlds that we know, a dangerously lived life is required, one that is constantly at risk. The terror of taking this path is huge – in some lucid dreams you feel that if you die in the dream you die "in reality" too, you feel that the gesture can have a multi-world effect. And this is perhaps really happening sometimes, but it is impossible to verify.

When the "I" is corrupted or possessed, which is actually always the case to different degrees, to end the "I" is not always an option. Usually, in cases of possession, if there is hope, that is in praying. The novels and movies show us again and again that any other alternative is even difficult to imagine in these situations. If all the "I"-operations are part of the dream, every action to escape it is just an addition to the complexity of the dream situation. The "I" cannot act outside the current dream, or from the outside of the dream. The acceptance of the impossibility to escape the current dream is implicit in praying, that's why a call to the outside is launched. It seems like another pole of influence needs to be created somewhere at the limits of the current world, at the end of it, or even beyond – if not a proper God at least as a sort of attractor. This attractor from outside of the current level of dreaming can allow a vague possibility of an action from beyond of the total behavioral world that is the dream in which the "I" is enveloped at that moment. The hope is that, like in a special form of Tulpamancy, through an act of faith this outside pole can be invested with enough power to pull the "I", or a mutilated form of it, outside of its world. Through a leap of faith to force the "I" to make a leap outside of the loop that constitutes it and its world. This outside is usually spatially represented but could be temporal too. A prayer could be directed toward a future end of the respective dream, to the terminus of all this. By praying to the end, the end could become a future that retroactively acts on the dreaming "I" in the present.

"Let me out of here!" is the only prayer of the sect from the film "A Visitor at the Museum", and when one of the members was asked "out of where?", the answer was "out of here, in general". Certain artworks, in museums or not, can feel as this minimal and general form of praying, because they try to interrupt everyday realities, and provide some minimal conditions for something else. By not taking reality for granted and artificially manipulating it, the practices of "dreaming" resemble in many ways those of performance. My work Undreaming makes explicit this, overlapping performance and dreaming practices. It explores what it could mean practically to speculatively treat reality as a dream, something that many philosophers, scientists, and mystics endorse. For a performative approach, if life is a dream or not, doesn't really matter, we just can behave like it is.

One of the dreaming techniques, often mentioned in the lucid dreaming guides, is to constantly shift attention around, because an intense concentrated attention can disintegrate the reality, ending the dream. Ending the dream, or "the illusion" as some are calling it, is exactly what is wanted in some meditations when the attention is focused on a single aspect of the world for a long time, as if trying to pierce the fabric of reality, to interrupt the fascination, to "stop the world". Because one of the always present elements of the dream is oneself, to fix the attention on your own hand, or another part of the body, is one of the main techniques for achieving lucidity in dreams. It seems like circulating attention back to oneself amplifies a proprioceptive self-referential attention, a feedback loop is intensified, and the dreaming nature of the environment can become apparent. If a waking up doesn't occur, the world becomes supernatural, the entire dream world can be shaken by all sorts of anomalies. A more radical form of this self-referential paradox is when this circular attention is piercing the "I". Paradoxically, the nearest possibility to reach the outside, to an escape from oneself, is to bend even more inside – to overdream the "I". This would be just an overdoing of what is already the case, because any "I" is already a sort of "strange loop" anyways.¹¹

When this happens, one feels that the self is disappearing. This could be the case in some spiritual or mystical experiences when "the virtuality of the self-model is available on the level of phenomenal representation itself". It feels like the phenomenal self dissipates, and what remains is just a subjective sense of immersion in a void or in a strange brightness.¹² The immersion in a void sounds like death, at least as it is described by people who return from a medically confirmed death. According to some Eastern traditions, like Vedānta, this

is the experience in the sleep without dreams too – consciousness is always present even if in a diffuse and impersonal way.¹³ Clarice Lispector seems to endorse even more this type of perspective: "Sleeping brings us very close to this empty and nevertheless full thought . . . Sleeping is abstracting oneself and scattering into nothingness . . . Then you'll say, 'I dreamed nothing.' Can that be enough? Yes, it can."¹⁴ This is a paradoxical situation because the dreamless sleep becomes dreaming as soon as a minimal consciousness or experience is involved. We can say that this abstract sensation of a void experienced by a diffuse self is the most minimal way of dreaming – the closest you can get to not dreaming is dreaming of nothingness.

We cannot not dream, and at the same time we are not really dreaming, we are rather caught in dreams. Usually dreaming is something that happens to us, not so much something that we perform. According to Windt and Metzinger, we live our lives and the majority of dreams as "naive realists", having the "impression of being in direct contact with external reality" and being unable to recognize "the simulational character of consciousness".¹⁵ The dreaming operations are hidden, we experience just their results. A question for further consideration and experimentation is what happens if dreaming becomes explicit or if the implicit dreaming is speculatively doubled with a consciously performed one? If we reverse engineer some aspects of dreaming, performing them intentionally? If we overdream the world in which we are caught? If we cannot dream less, what if we dream more? What happens if an excess of dreaming is applied to a reality?

Maybe there is an optimum degree of dreaming for a reality to remain a reality, for a world to be natural. Probably if some limits of dreaming are surpassed, the natural solidity and coherence of the respective reality is shaken. Windt and Metzinger noticed that somehow an ability to exercise supernatural powers is linked with "the availability of the dreamlike nature of one's ongoing state of consciousness on the level of behavior." An intervention at the level of dream creation seems to be a necessary perturbation in the complete coincidence with one's own nature, the step that must be made not to be totally inscribed in nature like an animal. Or from another perspective a way for nature to accelerate itself. At least this seems to be the vision in this Buddhist prayer: "Do not sleep like an animal. Do the practice which mixes sleep and reality."¹⁶

A possible way to follow the prayer is to constantly consider the eventuality of being asleep, dreaming what is happening. The "reality checks" of lucid dreamers can be amplified to a habit of radical doubt – from time to time to doubt that you are awake and that you are perceiving a reality. Or, for those who prefer a more positive approach, an alternative could be the seeding of the impression that your current experience is a dream. One of the consequences of amplifying a dynamic between this kind of doubts and impressions could be the sensation that everything is a dream. This is usually seen as a degradation because dreams are considered weaker forms of reality. But this degradation has its advantages – when the world is a dream, it becomes available to dreaming practices. When the dreaming reality and the waking life coincide, the object of dreaming becomes the "reality". A overdreamed reality, a dreamy hyper – reality can deeply unnaturalize or supernaturalize a world, transforming it into a black hyperbox that spreads everywhere.

One of the consequences of the fact that you are dreaming is that you can wake up. And when you wake up you wake up in a superior reality. A hierarchical relation between realities is created through a retroactive degradation of experience – after you wake up you can acknowledge that your previous experience was "just a dream". A complication of this dynamic is that dream from which you continuously wake up in another dream, till you end up in reality – a reality that could be seen as the most stable available dream at that moment. But nothing guarantees that you will not wake up again, even from the most solid "reality". In one of these types of dreams I was desperate because I didn't know where to come back, I felt that I could choose from more realities and I didn't know where to wake up. I woke up in the wrong places and I was struggling to return, anxious about the idea that maybe there is no way back. It is a strange homelessness to feel that you are everywhere in dreams, nowhere in reality. But an alienation is a necessary consequence of a transversal navigation between realities or worlds. To do jumps, leaps between worlds or at least levels of reality, to accede to radically different complete behavioral spaces, the alienating dreamings and awakenings seem to be necessary.

In another one of my dreams I woke up in the same reality as that of the dream. In a paradoxical way, the awakening, what Wind and Metzinger call the "shift into another global state of reality-modeling", was felt as just a different way of being in the same world. The awakening, instead of being a switch between realities, was just a subtle

change in quality. The minimal aspect of an awakening seems to be a sensation of an increased lucidity more than a switch of realities. For Windt and Metzinger, we are more aware in a lucid dream than in waking life because the system "is able to grasp the simulational character of its overall state". The awareness increases even more in the lucid false awakening "because it combines both concurrent and retrospective insight into the dream state".¹⁷ If we radicalize this perspective, we can say that the maximum awareness is a series of lucid awakenings, a falling from a dream to another dream.

On the other hand, this can only accelerate and make continuous a retro-degradation of existence. For Bergson "a dream is this: I perceive objects and there is nothing there. I see men; I seem to speak to them and I hear what they answer; there is no one there and I have not spoken. It is all as if real things and real persons were there, then on waking all has disappeared, both persons and things. How does this happen?"¹⁸ Retrospectively everything is just a dream, just nothing, it doesn't exist. To fall from a dream to another dream is an endless catastrophe, an infinite falling into a black hole. You kill realities one by one looking for an exit, haunted by a overwhelming feeling that you have to escape, but there is nowhere to go, just a serial exiting, an empty awakening. Seen from the other side, a repeated waking up is a continual falling asleep, because any waking up means a falling asleep somewhere else.

Sometimes a nightmare, a dream of the end, an apocalypse can give a sensation of waking up, in another dream. This is particularly relevant now when many signs indicate that we may be in a process of extinction, when our personal and collective realities are ending. It is important to imaginatively and practically speculate about what happens when the worlds are ending. Maybe, following a Vedānta twist – "the world is included within the state and not in the world the states occur"¹⁹ – to make the serial births and killings of worlds as easy as waking up and falling asleep, a meta-state is needed. A meta-dream in which you constantly wake up only to realize that you are actually in another dream. A meta-dream of endings, of falling from a dream into another dream, dreaming the end of dreaming.

(2015)

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17. Windt and Metzinger, The Philosophy of Dreaming...
18. Henri Bergson, Dreams.
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