Lucid Sleeping

A meditation on nightmares, bubbles and incantation

TED HIEBERT

In the preface to his 1830 book *The Philosophy of Sleep*, Robert Macnish claims that on the subject of sleep 'there is scarcely a single fact on which any two authors agree … the medical writers are, in every respect, as much divided in their views as the metaphysicians, and the most contradictory statements meet us at almost every step' (2009: vii). Nearly 200 years later, not that much has changed – sleep researchers, neuropsychologists, lucid dreamers and psychoanalysts still have their own ideas about what sleep means. Yet we all sleep, even if we do it each on our own, some nights better than others, with differing degrees of immersion and depth. In a sense, even if sleep seems at first to be a purely private phenomenon, one might also argue that it is exactly the opposite – shared in form if not always in content and as such an exemplary performative platform if we can only learn how to put sleep in conversation with waking, thoughtful, experience. However, to do so involves meditating on this paradox, attempting to articulate some of the ways in which sleep can be made accessible as a shared contextual arena for speculation and performative engagement.

There is a concept from the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk that can help access some of this nuance – the notion of 'critical proximity' in which criticality is not a detached and objective function but fully immersed in that which it studies to the point that activity itself becomes lucid (1987: xxxiii). More recently, Sloterdijk has spoken about structures like this as a form of poetic possession, articulating the idea of subjectivity as an 'inhabited interior' in the context of his theory of 'bubbles' as a metaphysical form (2011: 90). To extrapolate from Sloterdijk to the concept of sleep is to think about a form of 'lucid sleeping' that understands nighttime reverie for its extraordinary creative potential and for its incommensurably shared structural form – both a biological condition of human existence and a deeply eccentric and personal platform for imaginative performance.

This essay examines the concept of sleep through a doubled lens – through the critical writings of Macnish, Sloterdijk and others, as well as by examining a recent performance project I have been involved with called *Nightmare Inductions*, an artwork whereby audience members are invited to fall asleep and be guided through a visualization of nightmares: imagining the experience of having their teeth fall out, of forgetting something important or of falling from somewhere high in the air.[1] The point of the project is to call attention to the performative power of the unconscious mind, attempting to put sleep and dreams into conversation with creative practice, capitalizing on Ernest Hartmann's argument that 'the nightmare is the most useful dream' and one that can catalyze real conversations about the powerful possibilities of sleep and the imagination (1999: 199). To make sleeping lucid is then to attempt to find ways to make these complex aspects of the imaginary more communal, more relational and more *performative*.

NIGHTMARE INDUCTIONS

Last night I dreamt my teeth fell out. While it was happening it did not feel like I was asleep – in fact I felt lucidly aware of my surroundings,

[1] This essay grows, in part, from my involvement with the *Nightmare Inductions* project, an installation produced in collaboration with Jackson 2bears and Doug Jarvis. For full details on the project see Noxious Sector Arts Collective (2013–15).

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attentive to the minute and excruciating movements of my jaw, horrified as tooth after tooth crumbled within my mouth. It started simply with a single loose tooth, loose in that way that seduces the tongue, like a piece of popcorn stuck in the gums or a dinner mint rolling around in the hollow of the mouth. Except that the more I played with it, the looser it became, and the looser it became the more enraptured I grew with the sensation of the tooth getting looser and looser. It felt nice, like that feeling one gets after flossing a little bit too aggressively, a tickling that hurts a little bit, but is somehow almost refreshing at the same time. It didn't take long though until the tooth came fully loose, accompanied by a slightly salty taste in my mouth, and once more my tongue gravitated to the spot with a will of its own. As it did, the same itching began to spread, to the teeth and gums on each side of the hole in my mouth. At first it seemed like a game – but then the game didn't stop. Imagine swiping one's tongue across the front of one's teeth and having all of them just fall out. All of them. And then the bottom ones too. But it didn't stop there. The teeth just kept falling out – even though they were all already gone. More and more teeth, piling up in my mouth and spilling onto the bed beside me. When I woke up, it was with a jolt, soaked in sweat – the wet pillow against my cheek blurring my ability to tell the difference between where I had just been and where I found myself now. Heart still racing, palms still sweaty, mind on overdrive – as if, in some way, the dream had followed me back into the waking world – literally becoming real – even if only for a moment.

This experience was first a dream, but it is also an art project by Noxious Sector Arts Collective, an installation titled Nightmare Inductions in which participants are invited to share the dream of losing their teeth. The project involves a series of camping cots set out in the gallery, trance induction projections and binaural beats designed to help foster a suggestible state of mind, and an induction soundtrack that uses self-hypnosis and visualization techniques to guide participants through the experience. One participates by lying down on a cot, from the perspective of which one sees flickering lights designed to foster a hypnagogic state of mind, bright enough to be seen with eyes closed. At the same time, a series of deep base beats and drones flow through the room, deep sounds that one feels with the body rather than merely with the ears. The participant puts on a headset and a voice begins a guided meditation, using relaxation techniques and self-hypnosis scripting to sustain the nightmare narrative, guiding the listener through a narrative of losing first one tooth, then many more, falling from mouth to floor for the duration of the experience. It is an experience designed for the imagination – an artwork that enters directly into the mind, providing a unique and individual experience while at the same time opening discussion about the status of sleep, dreams and hypnotic induction.

Hypnosis is not the same as visualization and visualization is not the same as dreams (or nightmares). Equally, to speak about dreams is only to partially recognize the mysterious spaces and experiences of sleep. Yet each of these spaces shares a dynamic that makes them equally difficult to speak about – sites of differing cognitive shapes and forms that inevitably separate the experience of sleep from its understanding, such that the pretence is that one understands sleep best from the position of the awake, when there is no real reason why this should be true. Instead one might posit exactly the opposite, that a first-hand proximity to sleep will reveal nuances of the experience that data and analysis may not be able to perceive. That there are challenges to remaining lucid within such proximity is not an argument against understanding the phenomenon in this way; the challenges instead are to make communicable some aspect of the phenomenon. In a project like Nightmare Inductions this challenge might be seen as one of transference – the first steps towards constructing an experiential stage that is both shared and incommensurable.

TEMPORARY METAPHYSICAL DEATH

One of the problems associated with the study of sleep, especially in a performative context, is the fact that we each sleep alone. This results in the perception of sleep as a distinctly individualized experience, incommunicable in many ways and incommensurable in many others. One can share a context, location or memory of a dream, but not sleep itself. Instead, sleep can be both so mysterious and so seductive because it precisely involves an experiential – one might even say performative – intensity. For some, this gives sleep paranormal possibilities (I think of lucid dreaming groups and those dedicated to prophetic dreams or trance voyages). For others, just the opposite is true, and the fact that dreams exist only in our mind is a cause to immediately dismiss them as random cognitive discharges, meaningless to a scientific mind grounded in third party verification.

Early sleep philosopher Robert Macnish, for instance, argues that sleep is 'a temporary metaphysical death' (2009: 2) by which he means that cognitive faculties – especially those attributed to rational thinking – seem suspended while asleep in ways that deride the vitality of life as we know it while awake. Dreams, for Macnish, are a state only of partial (or incomplete) sleep, since elements of the mind remain actively engaged in narratives that can be later remembered. What Macnish calls 'complete sleep' involves a total inactivity of the mind, memory-less and thought-less, sustained by only the minimal autonomic systems of the physiological body such that sleep represents the closest state to death that one might achieve while still alive. From this perspective, dreams represent only an incomplete state of suspension since elements of cognitive engagement remain in play – although with a logic somewhat different from waking states of reasonable thinking (52).

This obviously presents a challenge for any study of sleep premised on anecdotal reports, since the more one remembers the more active and less asleep one has been in the process. The paradox that emerges is that while we all sleep there is no consensus on what sleep means or how it should best be considered. As a phenomenon, sleep can be situated as purely experiential – in the sense that one does not decide for oneself how to sleep but rather enters into this state by necessity and habit – or purely informatics, premised as a scientific study of data generated by sleeping bodies and parsed for technical patterns. However, Macnish's study is useful as a starting point because his analysis relies almost exclusively on comparisons between waking and sleeping states such that sleep is defined inversely (by what it is not) rather than by any proposed function of its own. Indeed, even more contemporary sleep and dream researchers are quick to point out that 'there is absolutely no research proving any particular theory of the functions of dreaming' (Hartmann 1998: 126) by which they mean that most studies of sleep and dreams struggle with the task of identifying and communicating the relationship between sleep and the waking world. Sleep begins as nothingness, and can only be known by identifying how it is not like regular waking activity.

THE MOST USEFUL DREAM

It is for this reason that Ernest Hartmann, one of the leading researchers in the field, proposes that identification of extreme moments during sleep or dreams can be particularly useful. Hartmann argues, for instance, that a study of nightmares can reveal some of the nuances of regular dreaming experience, and he proposes that as a more extreme example of the phenomenon, facets of the dreamtime experience are more obvious and thus more readily observable than under regular sleep conditions. Hartmann (1999: 199) goes as far as to call nightmares 'the most useful dreams' for exactly this reason. Similarly, one might in this context think of dreams as an extreme moment of sleep – certainly not one that sleep is reducible to, but nonetheless one whose study might reveal something more about the larger context

of nighttime experience. As such, it is possible that by looking to dreams one might be able to identify some of the parameters of sleep that distinguish it (experientially) from waking life.

Importantly, Hartmann gravitates towards the nightmare particularly because of the emotional intensity that this form of sleep narrative catalyzes. Because nightmares have a lingering impact on the waking world (for instance, when one wakes with sweating palms or a cry caught in one's throat), these dreams seem particularly accessible in ways that more obscure forms of sleep are not. Hartmann argues that this immediacy of the nightmare indicates the possibility of a psychological relevance – one marked not by traditional psychoanalytic principles that require interpretation of symbols, but rather as representative of emotional states as opposed to narrative riddles. For Hartmann, this is the 'adaptive function' of the nightmare – and by extension other forms of sleep as well: an ability to foreground and process a different form of thought, one based on an emotional approach to understanding the world rather than one that is predominantly analytic.

It may seem counter-intuitive to propose that one understands sleep best by examining how one feels about it rather than by examining the details or data with an interpretative lens. This, however, may be the key lesson to be gleaned from Hartmann and others, particularly when seeking a performative understanding of sleep. If the narratives experienced while asleep can be linked to emotional states of mind – and emotions can catalyze such material effects as quickening of breathing and heartbeat – there is at least a sufficient plausibility to Hartmann's suggestion to merit a much more robust series of enquiries, asking what sorts of relationships occur while asleep that are capable of impacting physiological and imaginative performance in these extreme sorts of ways.

A CAPACITY FOR TRANSFERENCE

In the first book of his *Spheres* trilogy – *Bubbles* – Peter Sloterdijk meditates on the idea of breath as an animating force, arguing that the act of breathing carries with it an element of emotional interchange and that 'the limits of my capacity for transference are the limits of my world' (2011: 13). Breathing is not just a relational activity but a metaphysical one – the fact that the air one breathes comes from somewhere else is what guarantees that the body can never (at least while it is breathing) be reduced to a singularity. Instead, for Sloterdijk, where there is breath there is always already a duality. Subjectivity is co-constituted at the most fundamental level as a relationship between the situated body and the air that inflates it – and in inflating it sends it forth into a sustainable relationship to the world. In this sense, a bubble (Sloterdijk's metaphor for subjectivity) is both blown to life and carries within it a breath (or voice) that exists with such proximity to the bubble as to be inseparable from it. It might be understood as a 'consubjective intimacy' that makes clear that subjectification presupposes the penetration, invasion and intrusions involved in participating in a shared social and philosophical space (96). At its core, for Sloterdijk, 'real subjectivity consists of two or more parties' (53).

One might extend Sloterdijk's analogy a step further, from bubbles to subjectivity and then back to the concept of sleep, using his notion of consubjective constitution to put into dialogue the act of sleeping and its affective function. To do so is to insist that sleep is not, as Macnish claimed, an absence of cognitive processes, nor simply, as Hartmann suggests, an autonomic processing of lingering emotion. Instead, the idea of sleep as a consubjective context requires rethinking the transference of affect such as to foreground the dialogic intensity that results from emotional experience. The result is an extension of Sloterdijk's concept of 'critical proximity' (1987: xxxiii) – which he proposed as a phenomenological foil to the detached gaze of cynical reason – to the realm of emotional thinking. If, for Sloterdijk, experiential immersion rather than intellectual distance is the marker of

invested thought, when extrapolated to the realm of emotions one might argue for a form of delirious dreaming proximity, inspired by the emotional transference of material living but sustained in dreams by the narrative imagination. Hartmann's 'affective function', seen as a guarantee of proximate intensity, thus begins to break down identity boundaries, merges bodies and minds together and creates a different form of dreamt subjectivity.

THOUGHT AS INCANTATION

This perspective would take at face value what psychoanalysis tends to treat more symbolically, namely the idea that the narrative focus of dreams is an attempt to cognitively process residual real-world experience – in effect making sleep into a bubble inflated by, yet in some ways autonomous from, the exhalations of material experience. If Hartmann's 'affective function' is the dream guarantee of emotional authenticity, the narratives created by the sleeping mind serve more to sustain affective intensity than to represent specific historical moments from a dreamer's life. Sleep, in this sense, would not be a 'metaphysical death' at all, but a delirious subjectivity in which emotions give life to the narratives of the dream. It might be thought of as akin to what Antonin Artaud calls 'active metaphysics' (1993: 35), which is to say a form of thinking that more closely resembles *incantation* than interpretation. In this case the 'active metaphysics' of sleep would be the lingering memories, partial truths and – especially – emotions from the day brought to a site of proximate intensity in the mind of the dreamer.

Incantation, for Artaud, is implicit in all thought and required in order for thought to be meaningful as a manifestation of intentionality. Intentional thinking takes seriously the futures it invokes, such as to set in motion their plausible manifestation. One might propose that this way of considering thought is particularly relevant to the study of sleep for its ability to contour the liberties that dream logic is able to take from the material realities that gave it shape. In this context, 'thought as incantation' is exactly not a psychoanalytic deconstruction of dreams for interpretative enlightenment – the process by which dreams ostensibly reveal things about waking life that we did not already know. Instead, this is a process of paying-forward in which waking life conspires to influence the patterns of nighttime activity, treating the realms of sleep and dreams as a stage upon which to project and share performative propositions. Dream researchers call it 'dream incorporation', the ability of a dream to fold into its narrative stimuli that come from elsewhere, sometimes from physical stimuli and other times more psychoanalytically (Nielsen 1993: 99).

The classic dream incorporation example is a method called 'pressure cuff stimulation' in which sleeping subjects have pressure-activated cuffs placed around their arms or legs, which are inflated by researchers when the subjects are in REM stage sleep. Direct correlations emerge between pressure exerted on the body while sleeping and the report of dreams in which pressure is felt at the same location – incorporated into the dream narrative in ways that tend towards minimizing the chances of the subject waking up (Nielsen 1993: 107–8). It's the same phenomenon that is experienced when a firetruck goes past an open window while someone is asleep and dreams somehow massage their narratives to include a siren of whatever sort makes sense to the sleeping mind. What is important is not the form the siren takes in the dream but that the dream narrative is capable of laterally incorporating the stimulus. There is no need for a logical connection, only for an immediacy that sustains the narrative, drawing on lateral ability where needed and trusting the imagination to keep up. In this way the logic of dream incorporation is perhaps even more interesting than the phenomenon: a mode of thought that privileges the ongoing sustaining of the state of sleep, even if at the expense of the integrity of the stimulus. Hence the similarity to incantation and the idea of 'active metaphysics' as a governing principle of dream logic.

LUCID SLEEPING

To contrast Macnish's concept of sleep as a 'temporary metaphysical death' with Artaud's idea of thought-as-incantation as a form of 'active metaphysics' is to identify the twin logics that this essay seeks to balance. The paradox is only an illusion – perspectival ambiguity caused by the contextual placement of the incorporating mind, either in a state of analytic observation or poetic invocation, as the case might be. They are two sides of the same bubble; an inside and an outside perfectly fused but perspectivally autonomous. These two sides can and do coexist, they co-constitute, as Sloterdijk has it, the metaphysical plane of sleep itself.

The self-evident way to summarize this would be to say that because sleep is a space where incorporative logic *does* happen, it is clear also that it is a space where it *can* happen, the difference between the two being one of purposeful engagement rather than strict possibility. To thus understand sleep as governed by a potentially different set of logical functions – emotional rather than intellectual, experiential rather than didactic, persuasive rather than analytic – is to also understand sleep as a site where different rules of logic function.

But rather than simply making an argument, I prefer to end by suggesting an experiment – a performance of sorts in which this essay is not simply an account of phenomenal framing, but itself a performative proposition. For if it is true that there is an element of incantation to dreams then it may also be the case that simply making a suggestion in the context of an article like this is sufficient to catalyze the experience for others. When dealing with the proposition of a co-constituted imagination sometimes even just the suggestion of an experience is enough to begin to catalyze one.

In fact, for some readers of this essay just the reference to the idea of nightmares may be enough to evoke one when you go to sleep tonight. In regard to the dream of lost teeth, it is interesting to note that while many people have this nightmare in common, each individual has a unique version of how the narrative unfolds. Some feel a loose tooth slowly become looser and looser until it begins a chain reaction in which all of their teeth fall to the back of their mouth. For others, the experience is one of their teeth crumbling, slowly at first until their entire set of teeth is reduced to powder. For a reader who has already had this dream, the sensations will likely be familiar. And for others, just the simple act of suggestion may be sufficient for the dream to materialize.

Lucid sleeping is to consider this performative potential of the night, no longer seen simply as a passive place of exhausted daytime function but as a space of incorporative logic and emotional collaboration. Seen in this way, sleep begins an illuminated trajectory as a site for performative intervention and through intervention begins to build a creative nighttime community.

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