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ACROSS THE AESTHETICS OF DREAMS: FROM AUTO-CREATION TO PROTO-ART

Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between dreams and the realms of aesthetics, creativity and the arts. It examines how the philosophies of dreaming and creativity intertwine, demonstrating how dreams parallel various art forms—from painting and literature to film. Analysing dreams and nightmares as narrative creations of the mind, this study highlights their influence on fantasy and horror genres. A threefold categorization of how artists have historically interpreted and represented dreams is proposed, illustrated through key examples from their oeuvres. These artistic engagements, combined with the aesthetic appreciation of actually experienced auto-creative dreams, significantly advance the philosophical understanding of oneiric experience. Ultimately, this study positions dreams as both a form of proto-art and a root of aesthetic inspiration, introducing «natural surrealism» as a framework to conceptualize their creative nature. This investigation thus offers a comprehensive overview of the aesthetic dimensions of dreams, stressing their potential to enrich creative practices.

Keywords: dreaming, sleep, aesthetics, art, creativity.

Uma viagem pela estética dos sonhos: da autocriação à protoarte

Resumo

Este artigo explora a relação entre os sonhos e os domínios da estética, criatividade

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e artes. Examina como as filosofias do sonho e da criatividade se entrelaçam, demonstrando como os sonhos se equiparam a diversas formas artísticas—da pintura e literatura ao cinema. Ao analisar os sonhos e pesadelos enquanto criações narrativas da mente, este estudo destaca a sua influência nos géneros da fantasia e do horror. Propõe-se uma categorização tripartida de como os artistas têm historicamente interpretado e representado os sonhos, ilustrada através de exemplos-chave das suas obras. Estes engajamentos artísticos, combinados com a apreciação estética de sonhos auto-criativos vivenciados, avançam significativamente o entendimento filosófico da experiência onírica. Por fim, este estudo posiciona os sonhos tanto como uma forma de proto-arte como uma raiz de inspiração estética, introduzindo o «surrealismo natural» como enquadramento para conceptualizar a sua natureza criativa. Esta investigação oferece assim uma visão abrangente das dimensões estéticas dos sonhos, salientando o seu potencial para enriquecer as práticas criativas.

Palavras-chave: sonho, sono, estética, arte, criatividade.

Introduction

For long, dreams have influenced human life and shaped endeavours across various domains of culture and existence. An ostensible aspect of this footprint appears within art and creativity, the primary focus of this article. Both the philosophies of dreaming and creativity exhibit enduring traditions that have persisted since Antiquity, through Modernity, up until the present day. The relationship between dreams and creations of all sorts, most notably in the domain of artistry, underscores the need, and calls for, a strong dialogue between these two philosophical spheres.

Throughout this type of investigation, it becomes evident that an interdisciplinary attitude is necessary. While the methodology adopted is primarily grounded in contemporary philosophy, as well as in the neuroscience and cognitive psychology of sleep and creativity, it does not presuppose any substantial distinction between approaches from «analytical» and «continental» philosophy, nor between the empirical sciences and the humanities. The resources of this proposal are eclectic in nature and therefore require an intersectional position with respect to the debate on the two traditions—or «two cultures», as established by C.P. Snow's famous 1959 lecture. Only then can we do justice to the «inherently interdisciplinary nature of studies of dreams and dreaming throughout history»². Certainly, given that both scientific literature and the humanistic canon are directly involved in our global understanding of dream processes, «an interdisciplinary perspective is called for, as no single discipline alone could succeed in illuminating the multifaceted experience of dreaming»³.

The first section of this article encompasses some key points of both the philosophy of dreaming and the philosophy of creativity, now required to make

² G. Morgese, «A Vast Ocean of Neglected Dream Studies», in G. Morgese, G. P. Lombardo & H. Vande Kemp (eds.), *Histories of Dreams and Dreaming: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham 2019, pp. 1-15, p. 5.

³ M. Schrage-Früh, *Philosophy, Dreaming and the Literary Imagination*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham 2016, p. 9.

a connection by the fact that creativity stands out as a distinctive function of the dream state. The second section explores notable analogies and links between dreams and art, and double-checks the unverifiable hypothesis of dreaming as a source of narrativity or even creativity, considering the parallel evolutionary benefits attributed to both dreaming and fictional imagination. The third section, after proposing a threefold categorization of how artists incorporate dreams into their enterprises, presents examples of dreamlike works by renowned artists of different eras, in order to illustrate how dreaming has historically affected artistic expression. The fourth and last section synthesises these themes into a theory of dreams as a form of proto-art. At this point, I set out to coin a term aimed at the conceptualization of dreams in respect of its connection with artistic creation, namely, «natural surrealism». Finally, the conclusion integrates and summarises the study's findings.

1. Dreaming Creatively

The philosophy of dreaming has a long and fascinating history⁴. It can be traced back to Antiquity, taking, for example, the case of Aristotle's *Parva Naturalia*. Later on, Diogenes Laertius and Sextus Empiricus did not hesitate to invoke the figure of dreams in their embrace of scepticism, and a little later, we find the moral reflections of Saint Augustine in his *Confessions*. Its modern climax is often located in Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Nietzsche later attributed the origin of metaphysical dualism between the earthly and the divine to dreams. Beyond Freudian and Jungian research, common indications of a contemporary approach can be found in the works of Malcolm⁵ and Dennett⁶, who suggest that dreams cannot be proved to be conscious experiences but rather derive their conceptualization from mere *post hoc* waking descriptions. Despite scepticism from these early thinkers, several empirical tests have confirmed dreams as a conscious experience⁷, leading to questions about the ontological and functional status of dreams. Various answers have been proposed, with dreams understood as hallucinations⁸, illusions⁹, imaginations¹⁰, or deliriums¹¹. In turn, Rosen¹² adopts a pluralistic framework by considering the abundant ways dreams are conceptualised, presenting different facets that are not mutually exclusive but rather aspects of a multi-faceted phenomenon. This pluralism also overlaps with

⁴ See J. Windt, «Dreams and Dreaming», in E. N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2021), Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2021.

⁵ N. Malcolm, «Dreaming and Skepticism», *The Philosophical Review*, 65(1) (1956) 14-37.

⁶ D. Dennett, «Are Dreams Experiences?», *The Philosophical Review*, 85(2) (1976) 151-171.

⁷ Windt, «Dreams and Dreaming», art. cit.

⁸ See A. Revonsuo, *Inner Presence: Consciousness as a Biological Phenomenon*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 2006.

⁹ See J. Windt, «The immersive spatiotemporal hallucination model of dreaming», *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 9(2) (2010) 295-316.

¹⁰ See J. Ichikawa, «Dreaming and Imagination», *Mind & Language*, 24(1) (2009) 103-121.

¹¹ See J. A. Hobson, *Dreaming as Delirium: How the Brain Goes Out of Its Mind*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 1999.

¹² M. G. Rosen, *Dream Pluralism: A Philosophy of the Dreaming Mind* [Doctoral dissertation], Macquarie University, Sydney 2013.

the discussion regarding the continuity or discontinuity hypotheses between aspects of wakefulness and dreaming^{13,14}. However, the outlined pluralistic approach is not exempt from questioning: if dreams are as varied as waking mental states, it remains unclear how conceptually distinct the dream state is compared to wakefulness; hence, the continuity-discontinuity debate becomes relevant. On the other hand, the answers to the question of the evolutionary functionality of dreams are also diverse and numerous, although it is true that sometimes dreams are considered as epiphenomena with no adaptive significance, or as spandrels with cultural utility^{15,16}. For instance, Blagrove and Lockheart¹⁷ have distinguished theories of dreaming categorising them as functional or non-functional, and as either eliciting or not eliciting insight.

Regarding the functions attributed to dreams, the relationship between dreams and creativity is notable. It is estimated that 8% of our dreams stimulate creativity¹⁸; to be fair, the math may add up to approximately 100 creative dreams per year (considering that 3 to 5 is the average quantity of dreams per night¹⁹). Dreams in humans are linked to the expression of new relationships between concepts, barely hinted at during wakefulness: thus, an idea may finally emerge into consciousness as a retained dream²⁰. In this sense, following Barrett²¹, dreams are thoughts in a different biochemical state, focused on the same issues that concern us while awake. However, there is an important difference between dreaming and wakefulness: brain areas related to logical and familiar thinking are less active in REM sleep, and precisely this disinhibition is a crucial component of creative thinking, capable of generating inspiration and providing answers to significant matters in the dreamer's life²². The dreaming brain is freed from intentional and directed thinking and therefore optimised for exploring connections and associations that are normally overlooked, making REM sleep a period of unbridled creativity²³. Schredl and Erlacher²⁴, for example, distinguish four categories of relationships between dreaming and wakefulness: dream images used for art, work, or similar areas; dreams that solved a

¹³ See M. G. Rosen, «How bizarre? A pluralist approach to dream content», *Consciousness and Cognition*, 62 (2018) 148-162.

¹⁴ See M. Schredl, «Continuity in studying the continuity hypothesis of dreaming is needed», *International Journal of Dream Research*, 5(1) (2012) 1-8.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁶ See D. Barrett, «An Evolutionary Theory of Dreams and Problem-Solving», in D. Barrett & P. McNamara (Eds.), *The New Science of Dreaming: Vol. 3. Cultural and Theoretical Perspectives*, Praeger Publishers, Westport, CT 2007, pp. 133-153.

¹⁷ M. Blagrove – J. Lockheart, *The Science and Art of Dreaming*, Routledge, London 2023, pp. 138-139.

¹⁸ See M. Schredl – D. Erlacher, «Self-Reported Effects of Dreams on Waking-Life Creativity: An Empirical Study», *The Journal of Psychology*, 141(1) (2007) 35-46.

¹⁹ See J. M. Hereford, «Dreams», in J. M. Hereford (ed.), *Sleep and Rehabilitation*, Routledge, New York 2024, pp. 77-84.

²⁰ See P. Mazzarello, «What dreams may come?», *Nature*, 408 (2000) 523.

²¹ D. Barrett, «Answers in Your Dreams», *Scientific American Mind*, 22(5) (2011) 33-41, p. 34.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 37.

²³ See R. Stickgold, «Creativity of the Dream and Sleep State», in S. Nalbantian & P. M. Matthews (eds.), *Secrets of Creativity*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2019, pp. 124-149.

²⁴ Schredl – Erlacher, «Self-Reported Effects of Dreams...», art. cit., pp. 42-43.

problem; dreams that provided the impulse to do something difficult or challenging; and dreams that contained emotional revelations.

Now, turning to the other aspect of the matter, the study of creativity has a long and rich philosophical history, too—marked by numerous metaphysical dimensions, such as the attribution of divine or supernatural origins to inspiration—yet it often lacks both systematic support and empirical grounding^{25,26}. In fact, the term *creativity* did not appear until the 19th century²⁷. However, in contrast to the curious philosophical indifference of the past, the investigation of creativity is a novel and rapidly growing field in today's philosophy and science. There are exclusively philosophical questions surrounding the concept of creativity, involving both the arts and the sciences²⁸. Depending on the explanatory project, the *explanandum* in a theory of creativity can refer to acts, mental processes, ideas, people, and artefacts²⁹. Artistic creativity could be understood as a spatiotemporal process package culminating in the creation of an artwork³⁰. There has been considerable progress in the scientific understanding of the neural basis underlying (artistic) creativity over the last few decades. Based on neuroaesthetic research conducted by Vartanian³¹, the neural bases of artistic creativity seem to share many similarities with the neural bases of creativity in other domains, and there are both domain-general (e.g., attention, memory) as well as domain-specific (e.g., imagery, motor control) structures that support artistic creativity.

It is worth noting that, in his 1926 *The Art of Thought*, Wallas³² divides the creative process into four stages: preparation, incubation—also called «implicit cognition»³³—illumination, and verification or elaboration; this ideal framework has persisted in creativity theories, although the unconscious nature of creativity as a form of incubated cognition has alarmed naturalists³⁴. In any case, while considering the importance of dream incubation as a creativity enhancer and an aid for problem-solving³⁵, we cannot help but privilege sleep when addressing standard incubation—meaning detachment from a problem—as an inseparable cornerstone of creativity³⁶.

²⁵ C. R. Hausman, «Philosophy of Creativity», *Ultimate Reality and Meaning*, 2(2) (1979) 143-162, p. 143.

²⁶ D. Stokes, «A Metaphysics of Creativity», in K. Stock & K. Thomson Jones (eds.), *New Waves in Aesthetics*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2008, pp. 105-124, pp. 105-106.

²⁷ E. S. Paul – D. Stokes «Creativity», in E. N. Zalta & U. Nodelman (eds.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2023), Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2023.

²⁸ See D. Dutton – M. Krausz, *The Concept of Creativity in Science and Art*, Springer, New York 2012.

²⁹ B. Nanay, «An Experiential Account of Creativity», in E. S. Paul & S. B. Kaufman (eds.), *The Philosophy of Creativity: New Essays*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014, pp. 17-35, p. 17.

³⁰ Stokes, «A Metaphysics of Creativity», art. cit., p. 115.

³¹ O. Vartanian, «Neuroscience of artistic creativity», in M. Skov & M. Nadal (eds.), *The Routledge International Handbook of Neuroaesthetics*, Routledge, London 2023, pp. 507-525, p. 518.

³² G. Wallas, *The Art of Thought*, J. Cape, London 1926.

³³ D. Stokes, «The Role of Imagination in Creativity», in E. S. Paul & S. B. Kaufman (eds.), *The Philosophy of Creativity: New Essays*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014, pp. 157-184, p. 168.

³⁴ D. Stokes, «Incubated Cognition and Creativity», *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 14(3) (2007) 83-100, p. 83.

³⁵ See D. Barrett, *The committee of sleep: How artists, scientists, and athletes use dreams for creative problem-solving-- and how you can, too*, Crown Publishers, New York 2001.

³⁶ See S. M. Ritter – A. Dijksterhuis, «Creativity—the unconscious foundations of the incubation period», *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, 8 (2014) 215.

Paradoxically, dream incubation, often devoted to creatively solving problems relevant to the dreamer, does not constitute the relaxing antithesis of the problem in question as intended by standard incubation theories, due to being directed at inducing or invoking such relevant issue. Apparently, the theme of incubation permeates the discussion about creativity; and the pairing between dream incubation and creativity is no exception. The notion of dream incubation has gained particular notoriety from recent research on *targeted dream incubation* conducted at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, using auditory and olfactory methods to awaken creative impulses³⁷. This project, by way of a device called *Dormio*, aims to enhance creative powers during the hypnagogic state (the transitional state between sleep and wakefulness) by reducing inhibitory processes that restrict divergent thinking. In addition to promising results so far, certain anecdotal evidence supports increased creativity levels through dream incubation, as seen in the cases of famous individuals such as Thomas Edison and Salvador Dalí³⁸.

It is understandable why Malcolm rejected the idea of dreaming as a conscious experience, as he argued that dreaming is the opposite of consciousness, instead indicating an absence from the world and a temporary abandonment of life (*a petite mort* in its own right, we might say). If creativity relies on non-conscious processes—and perhaps non-computable ones—, how does dreaming and dream content relate to such mental disposition, and why have they not been more detailedly considered by creativity theories? Creativity in the philosophy of dreams has somewhat been studied, but philosophical studies of creativity rarely mention dreams.

Overall, a plausible claim is that creativity partly relies on sleep, among other states of mental and physical vulnerability, in which consciousness relaxes—or withdraws, or retreats—to the point of generating its own private world. Dreamscapes are the epitome of these made-up scenarios that seem to lay the groundwork for fiction in all its forms. From a straightforward cause-and-effect outlook, (at least at times) dreams cause creativity, that is, creativity becomes an effect of dreaming. But aren't dreams also created? Isn't creativity a cause of dreams as well? Unless, as Allan Hobson suggests, what truly occurs is that they are, in fact, auto-creative... Could it be, then, that dreams and creativity are ultimately one and the same?

2. The Art of Sleep

The analogy between dreams and art is not a surprise: the points of intersection between these extraordinary mental states and the various arts out there are abundant, as evidenced by the 2003 special issue of the niche journal *Dreaming*, titled «Dreaming and the Arts»³⁹; the connections between dreaming, on one hand, and fiction or surrealism, on the other, are in plain sight.

³⁷ See A. H. Haar Horowitz — K. Esfahany — T. V. Gálvez — P. Maes — R. Stickgold, «Targeted dream incubation at sleep onset increases post-sleep creative performance», *Scientific Reports*, 13(1) (2023) 7319.

³⁸ See A. H. Haar Horowitz — T. J. Cunningham — P. Maes — R. Stickgold, «Dormio: A Targeted Dream Incubation Device», *Consciousness and Cognition*, 83 (2020) 102938.

³⁹ See R. A. Russo, «Introduction», *Dreaming*, 13(1) (2003) 1-2.

States⁴⁰, in his analysis of the role dreams and fictions play in forming and maintaining our adaptive systems, treats dreaming as an extension of fiction's preoccupation with our daily concerns. By virtue of sharing structural features with fiction—considered, by the author, a synecdoche for art in general—, dreams become associated with narratives' cognitive capacity to help us enlarge and revise our perceptual and response systems. The creative freedom of mind afforded by the dream state, which allows to expand associational possibilities across sensory limits, perhaps make dreams, even if not unique in their function, at least an extremity in the spectrum of thought. The otherworldly abilities to mix and deform the mind achieves while dreaming seem to account for much of its creative capacity. Thus, dream distortion could be deemed a variety of pretend play capable of widening our associative potential beyond actual needs, therefore training flexibility toward unexpected emergencies.

On the other hand, Bulkeley⁴¹, in his examination of David Lynch's oneiric film narratives, makes a case for the unconventional types of narrations that are comparable to dreams. Rather than a failed attempt to convey a clear sense of place, or a tendency to mock viewers by the lack thereof, Lynch's films work like Hindu myths, where the confusion about the state of consciousness spectators find themselves in becomes the norm, due to deliberate devices put forward by the narrative in question. That is to say, when dreams and dreams within dreams proliferate, we, being the audience, *should* get confused. I think that in this sense we can approach a viable route to conceive the inherent story-like structure of dreams, as reported by Cipolli and Poli's experiments⁴².

Well, speaking of stories, dreams exceed the physical and logical laws the way fantasy does, so much that the products of filmmaking have been regarded as a first-rate analogy for dreaming. Federico Fellini himself once said, in an interview for *Rolling Stone*: «Talking about dreams is like talking about movies, since the cinema uses the language of dreams; years can pass in a second and you can hop from one place to another»⁴³. What strikes us first when analysing this matter is cinema's technical capabilities, so sophisticated and proper as regards bringing dreamscapes into audiovisual fulfilment. Burkhead's *Dreams in American Television Narratives: From Dallas to Buffy*, before sinking into television art and its inherently extensive narrative finesse, stresses film's groundbreaking suitability for crafting dreamlike optics⁴⁴. In truth, its unique technological privilege when it comes to surreal creation renders the seventh art a very special place amid the analogies between dreams and art. In point of fact, imitating subjective fantasy such as dreams is the main purpose behind Georges Méliès' pioneer developments in stop-motion, fades, superimposition, dissolves and fast motion: via special effects he was trying

⁴⁰ B. O. States, «Dreams, Art and Virtual Worldmaking», *Dreaming*, 13(1) (2003) 3-12.

⁴¹ K. Bulkeley, «Dreaming and the cinema of David Lynch», *Dreaming*, 13(1) (2003) 49-60, p. 52.

⁴² C. Cipolli – D. Poli, «Story Structure in Verbal Reports of Mental Sleep Experience After Awakening in REM Sleep», *Sleep*, 15(2) (1992) 133-142.

⁴³ J. Cott, «Fellini's Language of Dreams», *Rolling Stone*, (421) (1984).

⁴⁴ C. Burkhead, *Dreams in American television narratives: From Dallas to Buffy*, Bloomsbury, London 2014, p. 5.

to emulate some sort of mental magic⁴⁵. As Burkhead⁴⁶ recounts, the dreamlike experience lived by the spectator in real time during the length of a movie has been a debating affair at least since René Clair's 1926 *Reflections on Cinema*. The movie theatre's illusive atmosphere looks intrinsically fabricated to induce a fairly ethereal mental and sensorial state: the lowering of the lights into utter darkness around the screen and the viewer's nearly fetal sitting position are key points of this resemblance. She then evokes psychoanalyst Bertram Lewin's expansion of this analogy: the dream is viewed by the dreamer on a white dream screen. Semiotician Christian Metz thwarts this pervasive enthusiasm around the dream-film analogy by stating the main difference between oneiric and filmic experiences: while we dream (non-lucidly) we are unaware of the fact that we are dreaming, whereas film spectators are aware of themselves being at the movies. Ironically, what the dreamer and the spectator have in common is precisely what strengthens their dissimilarities. In concrete, there is a gap in both experiences, and these two gaps are opposites, exactly what the remainder minus the gap is in the other case. According to this view: for the dreamer, the gap is lucid dreaming, that is, gaining a formerly absent awareness; for the spectator, the gap is losing awareness of the film-viewing ritual in and of itself, thus momentarily forgetting being in front of a screen. Of course, Burkhead remarks an important distinction concerning cinema versus theatre and television: on one hand, theatre's more artificial production, where shifts between scenes entail an interval, and, on the other hand, television's livingroom-based bright setting and recurrent commercial breaks, do break the dream illusion.

It is true that another potent case among the dream-art analogies is literature, as proclaimed in Schrage-Früh's *Philosophy, Dreaming and the Literary Imagination*. The commonplace ideas of Hollywood as a dream factory and the sum of nocturnal dreams as a dream theatre, or Samuel Taylor Coleridge's view of poetry as a rationalised dream and Jean Paul's notion of dreaming as involuntary poetry, as well as Jorge Luis Borge's opinion that dreams might be the most ancient aesthetic expression, are a few among many references Schrage-Früh⁴⁷ consults when attesting the exceptional place literature occupies in the philosophical discussion about dreams and the arts. By reviewing how dreams can be a good metaphor for fiction, partly following Keith Oatley's *Such Stuff as Dreams: The Psychology of Fiction*, in which both Shakespearean and Bardonian concepts of a modelled world are pivotal, Schrage-Früh reminds us of the outlandish occurrences we take for granted as real without blinking when asleep⁴⁸. The accordance between dreaming and waking imagination becomes relevant as she examines the seemingly parallel evolutionary functions of dreams and fiction, modestly summarised as rehearsing and enhancing scenarios via safe mental simulations, with various adaptive benefits shared across both ends of the

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 7.

⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 7-10.

⁴⁷ Schrage-Früh, *Philosophy, Dreaming and the Literary Imagination*, op. cit., pp. 1-2.

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 3-4.

spectrum^{49,50}. Following Cosmides and Tooby⁵¹, from an evolutionary standpoint, aesthetically driven behaviour—though seemingly non-utilitarian—may serve to enact adaptive changes in the subtle world of the mind and brain. Aesthetically driven behaviour such as dreaming⁵². In this respect, as per Mavromatis⁵³, dream activities during wakefulness—daydreaming, engaging in art or science, or being creative in general, and letting go without falling asleep (e.g., hypnagogizing)—may explain why humans sleep less than any other mammal; he claims that the evolutionary functions of dreaming are analogous to those of the creative activities of wakefulness.

Undeniably, dreams involve the generation and the contemplation of our own private fictions, and that is the main rationale underpinning Schrage-Früh's book: that we both create and consume dreams in unison, like readers spontaneously writing what they are at the same time reading. Authorship and audience coincide during a dream: they are identical, one and the same. That dreams can be simultaneously created and experienced, or, put in different words, that the dreamer can be regarded as simultaneous writer and reader of his or her dream, ultimately makes this thinker gravitate towards a literary approach rather than a filmic stance when it comes to the links between dreams and art, due to the evidence supporting the view of dreaming as an associational composition more accurately comparable to that of the fictional writer⁵⁴, free from those calculated externalities the percepts of cinema embrace. Borrowing terminology from Oatley⁵⁵, this philosophical path culminates in her view of dreams as a form of «writingandreading»⁵⁶, a neologism aimed at capturing a comprehensive sense of what creative writing means.

This intimate interaction between dreaming and the long-lasting activity of telling and contemplating stories is reinforced when we notice that the earliest documents of handwritten tales record and interpret the dreams of their authors⁵⁷. For example, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, a Sumerian text dating back approximately 4000 years. The hypothesis about dreaming as the origin of all human creativity is difficult to prove, but there is evidence that dreams inspire creation^{58,59}. On a similar note, the distinction between appearance and reality may have been made possible thanks to lucid dreams⁶⁰. Moreover, dreams have been thought of as a source

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 46.

⁵⁰ See K. Oatley, *Such Stuff as Dreams: The Psychology of Fiction*, Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford 2011, p. 162.

⁵¹ J. Tooby — L. Cosmides, «Does Beauty Build Adapted Minds? Toward an Evolutionary Theory of Aesthetics, Fiction, and the Arts», *SubStance*, 30 (1/2), 2001, pp. 6-27.

⁵² Schrage-Früh, *Philosophy, Dreaming and the Literary Imagination*, op. cit., pp. 54-55.

⁵³ A. Mavromatis, *Hypnagogia: The Unique State of Consciousness Between Wakefulness and Sleep*, Routledge, London 1991, pp. 276-277.

⁵⁴ Schrage-Früh, *Philosophy, Dreaming and the Literary Imagination*, op. cit., pp. 262-263.

⁵⁵ See K. Oatley, «Writingandreading: The Future of Cognitive Poetics», in G. J. Steen & J. Gavins (eds.), *Cognitive Poetics in Practice*, Routledge, London 2003, pp. 161-173.

⁵⁶ Schrage-Früh, *Philosophy, Dreaming and the Literary Imagination*, op. cit., p. 263.

⁵⁷ Ibid., pp. 55-56.

⁵⁸ See C. S. Rupprecht, «Dreaming, Language, Literature», in D. Barrett & P. McNamara (eds.), *The New Science of Dreaming: Vol. 3. Cultural and Theoretical Perspectives*, Praeger Perspectives, Westport 2007, pp. 133-153.

⁵⁹ See K. Bulkeley, «Dreaming as Inspiration: Evidence from Religion, Philosophy, Literature, and Film», in *International Review of Neurobiology*, 92 (2010) 31-46.

⁶⁰ J. M. Windt – T. Metzinger, «The Philosophy of Dreaming and Self-Consciousness: What Happens to the

of supernatural agent concepts⁶¹, which altogether makes a strong case for dream-fantasy relationalities. Similarly, Nietzsche⁶² sounded convincing when he described dreams as the origin of all metaphysics, meaning they are responsible for the partition of reality into two different realms, the material and the immaterial; his argument relies on the apparitions of otherworldly beings, spirits, gods, and the deceased, that are so frequent in dreams. For Twitchell⁶³, it is also possible that the horror genre may have been inspired by nightmares and night terrors; monsters do tend to arise not from the real world but from the realm of dreams. Thus, distortions of dreaming or hallucinations generated by sleep paralysis are the ones to blame; both monsters and nightmares resist categorization, and the monster in horror fiction is the uncanny epitome of otherness, the enemy within us in the form of something altern⁶⁴.

More recently, Koncz⁶⁵, in an article for the *International Journal of Dream Research*, tells us how she curated an exhibition about the interplay between art and dreams, presumably two sides of the same coin stemming from a shared origin: making art as a conscious creative process and dreaming as an unconscious action of creation. Yet her preference for the psychoanalytic interpretation of dreams, regardless of Freud's undeniable relevance in the advancement of dream studies, collides with more neuroscientifically informed findings. Granted, following Grosse⁶⁶ in Hahn's *The Art of Dreams*, Freud did complement the formal analysis of dreams as bodily acts with a content-based breakdown of dreams within a mental and emotional network, while aligning with neuroscience's removal of religious undertones from dream research. But by seizing the linguistic, he also, in Foucaultian terms, reduced everything, including image, into language, precisely contrary to phenomenology's mute rendering of the imagistic⁶⁷.

Besides, it was Freud who inspired perhaps the most recognizable art movement specialised in dreams: surrealism. A manifest landmark of the *avant-garde*, this school of thought, around one hundred years ago, sought to harness the political power of the dream world as a strategy to challenge the rational hegemony of bourgeois, capitalist lifestyles. Surrealists' unorthodox incorporation of psychoanalysis contributed to their search for social and psychic liberation by way of welcoming the revelatory ubiquity of desire they found in the dream state, an awe-inspiring, peculiar state not only helpful for artistic inspiration, but also necessary as an emancipatory tool for the transformation of human experience⁶⁸. According to this group of artists,

Experiential Subject During the Dream State?», in D. Barrett & P. McNamara (eds.), *The New Science of Dreaming: Vol. 3. Cultural and Theoretical Perspectives*, Praeger Perspectives, Westport 2007, pp. 193-248, p. 216.

⁶¹ See P. McNamara – K. Bulkeley, «Dreams as a Source of Supernatural Agent Concepts», *Frontiers in Psychology*, 6 (2015) 1-8.

⁶² F. Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996, p. 14.

⁶³ See J. B. Twitchell, *Dreadful Pleasures: An Anatomy of Modern Horror*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1985.

⁶⁴ See Schrage-Früh, *Philosophy, Dreaming and the Literary Imagination*, op. cit., p. 192.

⁶⁵ L. Koncz, «Exhibition of Dreams», *International Journal of Dream Research*, 15(2) (2022) 271-278.

⁶⁶ P. Grosse, «Sensible Dreams: Irrationality and the Philosophy of the Mind in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries», in B. Hahn & M. Werner (eds.), *The Art of Dreams*, De Gruyter, Berlin/Boston 2016, pp. 25-44, pp. 26-27.

⁶⁷ B. Hahn, «The Art of Dreams: An Introduction», in B. Hahn & M. Werner (eds.), *The Art of Dreams*, De Gruyter, Berlin/Boston 2016, pp. 1-4, pp. 2-3.

⁶⁸ N. Lusty – H. Groth, *Dreams and Modernity: A Cultural History*, Routledge, London 2013, pp. 8-9.

surrealism is a word for what defines dreaming: psychic automatism⁶⁹—a position they later intended to enact in the form of automatic writing⁷⁰ (an experimental procedure of trance-like creation with words). It is safe to say that the 20th century was a century of dreams⁷¹.

In any case, following Schrage-Früh⁷², among contemporary researchers specialised in the science of dreams, distancing oneirology from the Freudian model is not rare. According to Bulkeley⁷³, who has studied the multidisciplinary contexture of oneiric inspiration⁷⁴, whereas Freud undervalued the creativity of dreaming, today most dream experts agree that creativity is essential in the dream formation process. Likewise, despite focusing a great deal on the physical origin of dream consciousness and failing at truly contemplating both NREM sleep dreaming and dreamless REM sleep, Hobson, a neurological hardliner, even acknowledges that dreaming is a creative act at heart: over an oneirological view that shrinks creativity into a performance of psychopathological tension, he would rather conceive dreams as prone to create rather than mask meaning, while drawing a parallel between dreams and visual arts such as painting^{75,76}. Said author advocates the auto-creative originality of the dream process⁷⁷. Thanks to our fundamentally artistic brain, «[e]ach of us is a surrealist at night during his or her dreams: each is a Picasso, a Dalí, a Fellini»⁷⁸. As of late, even Fosshage⁷⁹—though rooted in psychoanalytic research—while acknowledging that the meanings of dreams are far from readily apparent, and often elusive due to a variety of contextual factors, criticizes the classical Freudian distinction between manifest and latent content. This researcher sees it as an unnecessary translation of images that increases the analyst's influence when interpreting a patient's dream. Instead, Fosshage favours a phenomenological approach to dream content, which does not rely on defensive or disguising mechanisms, but rather disclose the dreamer's immediate concerns in alternative forms: imagistically (through affects, metaphors, and themes) rather than being linearly attached to words, as occurs in wakefulness. In this sense, dream studies once again appear to be more about what is revealed than what is concealed.

Hence, on the whole, we can claim that dreams are cerebral fantastic creations⁸⁰. Here, auto-creativity refers to the autonomy of the dream process, which results in

⁶⁹ See A. Breton, «Entrée des médiums», in *Littérature*, 2nd series, 6 (1922).

⁷⁰ See A. Breton, *Manifeste du surréalisme*, Éditions du Sagittaire, Paris 1924.

⁷¹ B. Hahn, «“Chaque époque rêve la suivante”: Or: How to Read a “Bilderatlas” of the Twentieth Century?», in B. Hahn & M. Werner (eds.), *The Art of Dreams*, De Gruyter, Berlin/Boston 2016, pp. 85-96, p. 85.

⁷² Schrage-Früh, *Philosophy, Dreaming...*, op. cit., pp. 49-50.

⁷³ K. Bulkeley, «Visions of the Night: Dreams, Religion, and Psychology», SUNY Press, New York 1999, p. 64.

⁷⁴ See Bulkeley, «Dreaming as Inspiration...», art. cit.

⁷⁵ Schrage-Früh, *Philosophy, Dreaming and the Literary Imagination*, op. cit., pp. 33-34.

⁷⁶ J. A. Hobson – H. Wohl, *From Angels to Neurons: Art and the New Science of Dreaming*, Mattioli, Parma 2005, pp. 14-16.

⁷⁷ J. A. Hobson, *The Dream Drugstore: Chemically Altered States of Consciousness*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 2001, p. 9.

⁷⁸ J. A. Hobson, *The Dreaming Brain*, Basic Books, New York 1988, p. 297.

⁷⁹ J. L. Fosshage, «Is Dreaming Thinking? Pivotal Issues in Understanding and Working with Dreams», *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, 44(8) (2024) 816-826, pp. 820-821.

⁸⁰ Hobson, *The Dreaming Brain*, op. cit., p. 296.

automatic creations *of* the dreamer's brain *for* the dreamer's brain—with little to no direct conscious agency from the asleep person behind those dreamy fantasies (except in cases of lucid dreaming, but even in those cases we can still retain the auto-creative aspect of dreaming when we consider the unconstrained creative power of a sort of oneiric crafting that works as if it were something like brainy magic). This approach may certainly imply an alternative way of understanding the aforementioned «writingandreading» philosophy.

It seems that we have gathered considerable theoretical support in our analysis of dreams and art. Each piece of the puzzle we have built up constitutes a distinct angle to address this many-faceted topic. I hope I was able to show that, by all accounts, there are several means to access the aesthetics and artistic creativity of dreaming.

3. Oneiric Oeuvre

Now it is time to display the testament to the close but labyrinthine relationship between dreams and artistic creativity. How do dreams inspire dreamers? How might the act of dreaming be transplanted into a work of art? I have come up with an arguable yet useful way of categorising what an artist can do with dreams in mind. Needless to say, it is worth testing this categorisation with actual art made by real professionals throughout the ages.

Firstly, an artist can just decide to trace the essence of dreams through abstraction, so as to mimic dreaming, without pointing to a specific retained dream. This involves capturing a generalised phenomenological feel of dreams rather than recreating a concrete oneiric event. I refer to *non-dream-originated art that portrays dreams*. We can call this category *non-referential oneiric art*, or rather *undreamt depiction of dreams*.

Secondly, an artist can be motivated to make art thanks to an idea surfaced within a dream or a collection of dreams, without it having to say anything about dreaming itself, that is, even if the final work bears no thematic or stylistic markers of dreaming. I am speaking about *non-dream-themed art based on dreams*. We can name this category *dream-catalysed non-oneiric art*, or rather *undreamy inspiration from dreams*.

Lastly, an artist can engage in creating a work that directly represents one (or a few) of his or her dreams, or even someone else's (as is the case with famous dreams), namely, *a dream* (or *some dreams*), thus simulating dreaming in a way that can be traced back to a real oneiric experience, blending documentation and artistic reinterpretation. I allude to *both dream-originated and dream-themed art*. We can label this category *dream-catalysed or referential oneiric art*, or rather *depiction of dreams inspired by dreams*.

Wes Craven's *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001), Kim Ki-duk's *Dream* (2008), and Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010) are cinematic examples of the first category. Though they thematise the oneiric, there is no direct evidence that they are immediately based on someone's specific dream (however, Craven has admitted to being inspired by news of deadly

nightmares⁸¹ and Nolan has spoken of his own lucid dreams as an inspiration⁸², so these may fall closer to a grey area). In music, Blondie's «Dreaming» (1979) and The Cranberries' «Dreams» (1993) evoke the feeling of dreaming and fantasy through lyrics or soundscapes, without being direct representations of the artists' own dreams. Dreampop (well known to be a subgenre of rock which distinctly encapsulates the oneiric aura) naturally deserves a special mention at this point. Moving to literature, Pedro Calderón de la Barca's *La vida es sueño* (1635) explores the philosophical idea of life as a dream, making it a quintessential example of this category. Jorge Luis Borges' «Las ruinas circulares» (1940), which uses dream logic as a philosophical metaphor to explore creation and reality, and Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman* (1989-2015), a classic of the ninth art, could be considered contemporary cases.

Regarding the second category, Jasper Johns' *Flag* (1954-1955), depicting the American flag, is a visual example⁸³, where a dream catalysed the creative process without dictating the final form. In film, James Cameron's *The Terminator* (1984) was sparked by a fever dream⁸⁴, yet the film itself is a sci-fi action thriller without overt dream content. In music, The Beatles' *Yesterday* (1965) originated from Paul McCartney's dream of the melody⁸⁵ but remains a straightforward ballad. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) also fits here⁸⁶, as it was inspired by a dream but explores gothic themes rather than dreaming itself.

As for the third category, when looking into the history of the third art, one can easily notice an insistence in Jacob's faithful dream (as recounted in Genesis 28:12): Nicolas Dipre's *Le Songe de Jacob* (c. 1500); Ary de Vois' *Jacob's Dream* (c. 1660-1680); Jusepe de Ribera's *El sueño de Jacob* (1639); Raffaello Sanzio's *Il sogno di Giacobbe* (1518). Georges de la Tour's *Le Songe de Saint Joseph* (c. 1640) certainly adds up to this biblical equation. These artworks illustrate a specific dream from the Bible. While explicitly representing a dream scenario derived from a well-known religious narrative, they are grounded in a specific dream origin and thematise its elements. Giuseppe Tartini's *Il trillo del diavolo* (1824) also belongs here; the author had dreamt that the devil taught him a sonata⁸⁷. Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's *Un chien andalou* (1929), Federico Fellini's *8½* (1963) if we consider certain scenes, Akira Kurosawa's *Dreams* (1990), and Richard Linklater's *Waking Life* (2001) all too directly engage with dreamscapes and oneiric logic while being based on identifiable oneiric origins^{88,89}.

All in all, in the first category we have dreaming not as an origin but as a theme; in the second category, we have dreaming only as an origin but not as a theme; in the third one, we have it both ways. In sum, at least one of these two items must

⁸¹ See S. Biodrowski, «Wes Craven on Dreaming Up Nightmares», *Cinefantastique* (2008).

⁸² See R. Hurd, «Inception and Mutual Lucid Dreaming», *Dream Studies Portal* (2010).

⁸³ See D. Barrett, *The committee of sleep...*, op. cit.

⁸⁴ See G. Bass, «The Terminator came to me in a dream: a new interview with James Cameron», *British Film Institute* (2021).

⁸⁵ See D. Barrett, *The committee of sleep...*, op. cit.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ See R. Stone, *The Cinema of Richard Linklater: Walk, Don't Run*, Columbia University Press, New York 2013.

be present, either an oneiric theme or an oneiric origin, and they can be present together. If we neither have dreaming as an origin nor as a theme, then the discussion ends.

4. Natural Surrealism

In summary, Hartmann argues: «If we consider the artist as someone who can see things a bit more broadly or can make connections a bit more easily than most, we can see this as a developed form of an ability we all possess in dreams»⁹⁰. No wonder why Nietzsche also said that during dreams we use up too much of our artistic capacity⁹¹: looked at in this way, dreaming implies an engagement with artistic creativity all along. On top of that, in conformity with Cooke⁹², not only artistic objects have aesthetic value, but also mental objects like fantasies or dreams, which can thus possess narrative and fictional qualities and be experienced aesthetically.

Where does this whole dissertation lead? Building on Hobson's emphasis on the auto-creative aspect of dream experience, Peña Guzmán⁹³ describes dreams as mental works of art that the sleeping mind creates for itself. Following this line of thought, I propose that dreams can be understood as a natural prototype for the development of aesthetic or creative fitness. Even if some individuals do not recall their dreams, dreaming is virtually universal across animal life. From my perspective, art can be regarded as the result of a fundamental need for aesthetic creation—an idea that also sheds light on my discomfort with the art-science dualism (commonly referred to as the debate between the two cultures). Accordingly, art does not need to be ethical to qualify as art (just as politics or philosophy are not required to be ethical to be what they are). To reconcile this naturalistic view of art with the social factors of artistic practices as explored by scholars, I refer to dreams as *proto-art*. It is in this nocturnal intersection of nature and surreality that I find what can be termed *natural surrealism*. Dreams as proto-art is, precisely, what the notion of natural surrealism here seeks to name.

This angle implies a distinctive position as far as the ontological debate about the nature of dreams goes. We have briefly seen how many standpoints there are within this discussion. An aesthetic stance based on the auto-creativity of dreams is what is at stake here. In this sense, dreams *are* proto-art. Natural surrealism, in turn, highlights the inherent surreal quality of dreams. While the surrealist movement of the 20th century sought to aesthetically capture the irrational and the dreamlike, naturally, dreams achieve this without effort. They are a real manifestation of the surreal. This natural surrealism is not just a stylistic or philosophical choice, but an intrinsic, defining feature of the dreaming mind. If, following Hobson, the human

⁹⁰ E. Hartmann, *Dreams and Nightmares: The Origin and Meaning of Dreams*, Perseus, Cambridge, MA 1996, p. 164.

⁹¹ Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*..., op. cit., p. 358.

⁹² B. Cooke, «Research Methods and Problems in Aesthetics», in A. C. Ribeiro (ed.), *The Continuum Companion to Aesthetics*, Continuum, London/New York 2012, pp. 14-38, p. 16.

⁹³ D. M. Peña-Guzmán, *When Animals Dream: The Hidden World of Animal Consciousness*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ 2022, p. 191.

brain is inherently artistic, dreams are a bona fide expression of this artistic capacity. The auto-creativity of dreams is what makes them a form of proto-art. They are not just a source of inspiration for art but a primeval form of artefact in themselves. The aesthetic experience of dreams is another key aspect of their proto-artistic nature. Their narrative quality, combined with an organically surreal imagery, creates a powerful aesthetic episode for the dreamer. Dreams can thus be seen as a form of mental proto-artistic experience. In outline, the use of the prefix in *proto-art* precisely indicates the limitations of the dream-art analogy; it is vital to temper such blend due to the obvious differences facing both realities: involuntary (automatic) versus voluntary (intentional) creation. By framing dreams as proto-art, I intend to argue that real art partly builds upon the foundational aesthetic expressions first realized in the biologically grounded—naturally surrealistic—dream experiences, which in turn enable the subsequent cultural and intersubjective dimension characteristic of the artistic universe.

Altogether, dreams qualify as proto-art because the dreaming mind creates autonomously. Proto-art is what natural surrealism, as a biological process, allows to be both auto-created and experienced. The natural surrealistic stance in dream ontology is: dreams are auto-creative works of proto-art. What begins as intimate oneiric fiction becomes its cultural continuation in wakefulness: the shared world of art.

Conclusion

I began working on this theory of dreams as proto-art precisely after a vivid, intense dream about San Carlos de Bariloche, a beautiful town in Argentine Patagonia, where my sister and her family are moving to. The dream consisted of a sequence of pictorial scenes depicting snowy mountains and freezing lakes. Such was the aesthetically pleasing astonishment I was subjected to by my own mind during that night, that I woke up feeling as though I had lived a robust aesthetic experience in its own right. I had done all the work undeliberately, but through and through nonetheless. Somehow it was my creation and I was the sole spectator. That was when I began thinking more carefully of the artistic undertones of dreams. We could even say this paper itself would be included in the third category, *referential oneiric art*.

This investigation gives rise to several philosophical questions. How to define creativity considering sleep? What is the impact of non-conscious implicit processes in this regard? What sets artistic creativity apart from other types of creativity, and is it really more dream-like than its counterparts? And, as such, how does dreaming happen auto-creatively? What is more, can the problem of oneiric creativity contribute to the continuity-discontinuity debate?

If dreaming is a creative act *par excellence*, does this suggest continuity or discontinuity? Continuity in the sense of: creativity as we know it in wakefulness also manifests in dreams. Discontinuity meaning: true creativity, from which all creativity derives, ultimately belongs to dreaming; wakeful creativity is merely an emanation of oneiric creativity. In the end, dreaming is as plural as wakefulness. Is the difference between these two so-called opposite states divergent thinking over

convergent thinking? Does continuity not inherently imply reductionism over the dream state? Or does creativity allow for continuity while also highlighting a critical difference? Moreover, can continuity be thought of in reverse? As a progression to the other end: from dreams to wakefulness. Is dreaming creative in action, while wakefulness is creative in potential? These debates are far from over. I have been merely trying to present an adequate overview of the state-of-the-art of the heated intersection between dream research, aesthetics, and creativity studies, stressing different problems and queries around it.

As we know thus far, there are researchers who highlight the aesthetic nature of dreaming as an auto-creative process carried out by a constitutionally artistic brain; dreaming, in particular, serves as an analogy for various arts such as painting, literature, and cinema, among others. Provided that not only artistic objects possess aesthetic qualities, but mental objects like fantasies or dreams do as well, then dreams can be experienced aesthetically. It can also be said that artists have further developed a skill we all have in dreams. Furthermore, the capacity to tell stories appears partly connected to the need to recount dreams: early written records document and interpret the dreams of their authors. Additionally, the seemingly inherent narrative quality of dreams, the adaptive benefits shared by dreams and fiction, the interconnectivity between dreaming and waking imaginations, and the influence of night terrors and nightmares on the horror genre also invite investigation. If not to explore the unprovable hypothesis of dreams as the origin of all human creativity, then at least to examine why dreams and artistic creation—so often considered analogous processes—have remained symbiotic throughout history.

In conclusion, dreams, capable of being conceptualised as natural surrealism, can arguably be understood as a form of proto-art. They are a raw, unfiltered expression of the mind's creative capacity, unburdened by the logical constraints of wakeful reality or conscious thought. Their auto-creative quality makes them a unique and impressive form of internal proto-artistic expression with undisputable aesthetic undertones. By ontologically addressing dreams in this way, we open up new avenues for exploring the relationship between creativity, aesthetics, and sleep. For example, a possible pathway for future research would be to measure neuroaesthetic differences between dream-inspired and wake-generated artworks through empirical studies.

It becomes clearer and clearer to me that inquiries into the aesthetics of dreaming ought to be complemented with an epistemology of dreaming. Let us continue to honour Breton's insistence on dreams' unexpected tools and answers to the fundamental questions of life. I sometimes fantasize about dreams so radically creative, so innovative and untimely, to the point of being capable of solving all of our major problems down here on Earth. Their existence may depend little on us. They might pop up when least expected—and just as easily be forgotten or misinterpreted. But they can occur again and again, in different minds and forms. Hopefully, some of them will endure, as so many others already have.

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