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Communicating Dreams

On the struggle for reliable dream reporting and the unreliability of dream-reports

I dreamt such magnificent crap last night
(Amalie)

Looking at the narratives which are studied by psychologists and psycho-analysts, the topic of unreliability seems to be most pertinent and crucial to the analyses of dreams. Even if one takes the sincerity of speakers for granted, the fact that dreams remain obscure to the people trying to report them poses interesting problems; in narratological terms, the difference between the functions of the 'experiencing I' (the dreamer) and the 'narrating I' (the teller) shapes the dream reports which are then studied by psychologists. The ways in which tellers create narrative (dream) worlds are part of the process of understanding and interpreting dreams, and, more often than not, the listener forms an important part of the process. The study of dreams thus offers a fertile field for the exploration of un/reliable narratives.

Dreams are mental activities which are aimed at regression; they serve as a psychophysiological regulative. The subjects of dream reports are hallucinatory events, which occur in a state of mental and physical regression and under the suspension of the orientation functions. Nightly dreaming fulfills regulative functions in the regressive state of sleep. Still there is open discussion on how these regulative functions are to be understood (Mosch 2012; Solms/Turnbull 2002; Wiegand/Spreti/Förstl 2006). The controversial discussion ranges from wish-fulfilling regulative of well-being, across prospective (Revonsuo 2000), problem-solving and exercise functions on up to mental reorganization. These are all more or less plausible assumptions about dreams as a regulation phenomenon (Domhoff 2005). Following Koukkou and Lehmann (1983), dreaming can be conceptualised as a manifestation of mental activities both regressive and targeted at regression. Solms (2000b) provides the neuroscientific basis for the Freudian claim (1900) that this regression-targeted mental activity benefits sleep continuity. According to Freud, the

hallucinatory impressions during sleep are a product of psychodynamic compromise and defence mechanisms. En route to being remembered this product is subject to additional psychodynamically motivated modifications; furthermore, the oral or written representation of a dream is irreducibly interwoven with articulation processes which Freud calls “secondary revision” (1953 [1900]).

As far as the study of unreliable narration is concerned, dream reports are interesting because they can be regarded as a form of biographical self-portrayal. An influential side-effect of *The Interpretation of Dreams* by Freud was the innovation of this kind of self-representation: The dream report is a form of testimony, which mediates between the demands of mental life and those of external reality combining them into a single enigmatic form. In this light, the dream protocol is a form of expressing the notoriously fragmentary and puzzling character of individual existence. The autobiographical self-reassurance manifests itself – and this became central to 20th-century literature, arts and conceptions of identity – as a search in the face of irreducible insecurity. Beginning with the 20th century, the *Here I am and here I avow myself* subtly transforms into the twisted stumbling of Godotesque characters, the “old man's ramblings” of the autobiographical sketches of Gregor von Rezzori. Although this wasn't Freud's explicit intention, *The Interpretation of Dreams* is an exemplary testimony of the “crisis of subjectivity”, present a personal history of mistaking oneself and of punctual self-reassurance. This created a model for 20th-century articulation of subjectivity: The process of autobiographical self-reassurance manifests itself as an act of articulating, determining and searching in the face of the unknown. Let's not forget however: Freud was a physician and a scientist. He didn't take interest in the tragic or comical gesture of self-loss for its own sake. Rather, it presented an opportunity to gain insight into the realm of object relations, dependency and the psychodynamics of the various forms of internalization.

One of the most interesting features of dream reports is their oscillation between distance and appropriation. The dream report as a specific and non-interchangeable form of communication possesses a rhetorical repertoire, which allows for the articulation of the moments of irreducible uncertainty, the fragmentary character and the enigmaticity of its subject. Reporting a dream means using unsaturated speech:

The dream report isn't self-sufficient, rather, it is part of a competitive commenting process. Dream discourse is a dialogical journey from self-alienation to punctual self-appropriation. This oscillation between distance and appropriation, the back and forth between points of reference outside the individual psyche and strategies of mental processing (primary and secondary revision) is central to dream communication.

Extensive text analytical, clinical and process-oriented documentation on dream data was made possible by the cooperation with Horst Kächele and Erhard Mergenthaler of the University of Ulm, which now provides voluminous multimethodological and interdisciplinary research on a prominent psychoanalytic case consisting of more than 500 sessions well documented in both writing and audio recording and supplemented by a comprehensive dream database, which allowed for the systematic investigation of the dream manuscripts (Kächele/Albani/Buchheim et al. 2006; Thomä/Kächele 2006; Mathys 2007; 2008).

What occurs during a dream is experienced as real by the dreamer but when later recounted this sense of reality is discarded as an illusion. The occurrences in the dream become peculiar, because they cannot be understood, classified or categorized – for now – and become worthy of attention because their enigmatic character arouses interest (Boothe 2008). How persons report their dreams demonstrates how they understand the phenomenon of the dream and how they conceive the dream event; *it also influences the kind of narratives they create*:

- *Claim of privacy*: In reporting a dream the person makes clear that the dream is a private experience, that it represents an event from a person's *mental life*, and not an experience that could be intersubjectively shared.
- *Privacy in a passive-receptive mode*: In reporting a dream speakers make clear that they are recipients, not stage directors of this emerging event.
- *Passive-receptive mode and naive ignorance*: In reporting a dream speakers make clear that this concerns events that, for now, defy understanding and categorization. The dreamer imparts this innocently enough, from the distance of being amazed; an important distinction from reports of psychotic experiences.

- *Privacy and shortcomings of remembering:* In reporting a dream the person makes clear that the event in the dream emanates from inner life, is past tense, and can only be retrospectively grasped and only with limited certainty.
- *Claim of privacy due to reporting difficulties:* In reporting a dream speakers make clear that these are events from their mental life that are difficult to report (Gülich 2005). Reporting is difficult because (a) one articulates experiences that are not intersubjectively shared, for which there is a common basis for understanding (privacy problem); (b) because it evaporates quickly from memory (elusiveness); (c) because remembering cannot be validated (validation problem); and (d) because the event itself is enigmatic, i. e. Is not immediately grasped and categorized in its relevance and meaning (need for interpretation). Psychotic experiences are known to not be articulated in the mode of reporting difficulties but in an assured state of delusion.
- *Invitation for interpretation:* In reporting a dream the person emphasizes the non-transparent, puzzling nature of the experience and indicates that the message of the dream is not, in and of itself, sufficient but requires supplementing. This involves an invitation for interpretation that motivates and contextualizes the dream occurrences making them beneficial for everyday life practice.

Especially the first three aspects highlight the sincerity as well as passivity of the experiencing I. In addition, the intention of the narrator in truthfully telling his experiences, and understanding the dream through the creation of their narratives becomes visible. A special challenge, however, results from the limited ability of the narrator. In the reflective distance of a protocol, dream reports articulate hallucinated impressions, which don't bear any meaning outside the privacy of the dreamer's mind, which, at the same time, are perceived by the dreamer as in need of interpretation.

The subject of the dream report is elusive, fragile, enigmatic, and inaccessible by others, it is only developed into a narrative world, following a narrative logic, during the process of telling what one has vividly experienced while sleeping. Dream reporters may say: "I had such a bizarre dream" or "that was a frightening dream" or

– as Amalie once announced: “I dreamt such magnificent crap last night” (Boothe 2006; Mathys 2006). They emphasize note-worthiness of the dream and – from an observing reflective distance – report hallucinated impressions. Dream and dream commentary have a complementary relationship (Boothe 2000). The dream teller retrospectively remodels the collection of pieces; dreamer and commentator (this can be one and the same person in two different roles) can explore the report in the narrative perspective of expectation and fulfilment (Kilroe 2000; Knudson/Adame/Finocan 2006). The development of narrative episodes is geared, both in literature and in everyday life, towards a happy end or catastrophe, to a good or bad ending. This means it is geared towards a wish-guided development of events, which is in line with the personal, self-centred concerns (Boothe 2004). It has to be emphasized: the narrative presentation of events transforms a person’s world: the world becomes the world-for-me. The narrative cosmos organizes itself according to a dynamic that steers between fulfilment and disaster.

In the context of dream reports, unreliability should be assessed with regard to several criteria. If we apply the concept of the unreliability of reporting to dream protocols, the following picture emerges:

- The points of reference are exclusively private, withdrawn from intersubjective accessibility and difficult to remember. *We are dealing with referential unreliability.*
- Dreams are phenomena which are difficult to recapitulate. Dream-reporters engage in a sequential structure of dream articulation, in which the processuality of formulating, gaps, ruptures and fragmentation at the expense of transparency und conciseness play a central role. *We are dealing with unreliability as precarious to the conciseness of the report.*
- The dream report lacks self-sufficiency: it is akin to question and riddle. Every possible contextualization and narrativization ex post is bound to remain in a state of uncertainty. *We are dealing with unreliability as irreducible tentativeness of interpretation.*
- On the one hand the author of a dream report is unreliable: His articulative and mnemonic capabilities are – according to psychoanalytical doctrine –

inevitably influenced by unconscious wish-defence-dynamics. On the other hand he is reliable: His report has the sole purpose of recounting the remembered impressions of nightly dreaming to the best of his memory and the best of his abilities to communicate with potential listeners. *We are dealing with the reliability of the honest reporter.*

Communicating a personal dream implies dealing with unreliable impressions, which are articulated by a reliable reporter employing unreliable means.

Narratives about dreams demand contextualization; moreover, the addressee assumes an important role, since dreams are often re-created on the basis of dialogical reflection. Recounting dreams is linked to the expectation that a subsequent (inter- or intrapersonal) conversation provides a retrospective contextualization, which allows to establish the relevance of the mental life in dream-state for waking life concerns. Dream reports are directed towards a recipient, who enters the dialogical reflection on the mental processes during dreams. Recounting a dream means to retroactively give a narrative account of one's memory of a hallucinated event, to lexically stage and dialogically communicate the moments of being seized and struck, the bewilderment, loss of control and opacity in the state of dreaming. In contrast to other animals, human beings are capable of (fragmentary) recapitulation of nightly sensory input. Human beings are able to put themselves in relation to these findings through language: The nightly hallucinations form the basis for memory traces, which the dreamer in the awake state documents on by means of everyday language. This document serves as starting point for the analysis of and commenting on a dream.

Communicating a dream is to make a claim for the relevance of a private matter, to represent mental life and impressions, which one has been exposed to, and to mark one's reliance on communicative response. To report one's dream is to give narrative form to the obscure (Boothe 2001: 101-113). The speaker is prone to carry out extensive work when it comes to formulation. His struggle for articulation apostrophizes the challenge to put into words the problems of formulation. Dreams are not the only private sensations though, which pose a considerable articulative challenge, as Gülich and Schöndienst (1999: 187-198) point out in reference to

oral recapitulation of epileptic auras by individuals concerned. In dreams and in certain extraordinary states of mind like epileptic auras the ego is confronted with impressions, which aren't suited for adaption and connection in everyday conversation, which, nevertheless, force the subject to communicate. There is a tension between the desire for response in the face of being seized by peculiar sensations and the possibility of articulating them in a manner suitable for discourse within a cultural space. Dream articulation is inventive and aims at establishing willingness to respond as well as emotional participation by the listener and dialogue partner. This is achieved by the readiness of the recipient to engage in the formulation process, to participate in a common search for possibilities of communication. The listener becomes a companion in travelling through unstable terrain. To encounter a dialogue partner is to put an end to being on one's own when facing the intrusion of the difficult to utter, means to replace an individual struggle for a shared quest for rendering possible and shaping articulation.

A person reporting a dream offers an unreliable collage of recollections

What are the distinctive features of the articulation of dreams? First, it has to be stressed that a person reporting a dream offers an unreliable collage of recollections. In addition, psychoanalytic, depth psychological, daseins-analytical literature as well as data collected by empirical dream research provide a vast array of references (c.f. Strauch/Meier 1996). The following reflections will focus on the dream reports presented by Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). We will be able to observe the linguistic practices, by virtue of which a person marks the fact that he is communicating a dream. We want to retrace, how he linguistically exhibits the unavailability of his personal mental life and we will be granted insight into how he connects his dreams to reality. When talking about dreams we are involved in a joint effort to envision what has been experienced – the dreamer by engaging in mental work aimed at remembering and formulation, the listener by mentally recreating images and scenes under the guidelines of the descriptions uttered by the dream

reporter. We receive dream reports and we recount dreams by discursively accentuating the fact that we are alluding to an event retrospectively classified as hallucinatory. We articulate a reference. The reference to an event, which, without action on our part and unintentionally, has taken place in our imagination during sleep, an incident beyond the sphere of influence of our self-disposal. A fleeting and enigmatic mental occurrence consigned to the interpretative attentiveness of the other. The reporter of a dream presents himself in a state of *naïve ignorance*. He retells a dream as an event, which has happened both within and to him. To be recapitulated only by one person, i. e. the dreamer himself, the constituent parts of the event are regathered from memory in order to be put into place and strung together by means of linguistic fixation. The reporter establishes a distance of astonishment. This does not suggest however, that he necessarily lacks education or psychological knowledge. Sometimes a person presents a dream and goes on to interpret it himself. In this case he goes back and forth between the position of the naïve reporter and that of the oneirological expert – as it is the case in Freud. Even under this condition, these two points of view, the position of the reporter on the one hand, who articulates his dream in a naïve self-detached manner, the position of the listener on the other, who integrates what has been uttered into a motivated context, remain systematically discernible. Although the reporter can point out connections to the events of the previous day, can suggest links to everyday reality and can subsequently take on the role of the dream expert, he typically abstains from personal statements. Rather, he releases his dream into an open space of questioning in order to “leave commenting to” the listener. Usually listeners take on this task voluntarily. Only in the case of transparent dreams however, commenting on their pictoriality is obvious – and merely at first glance though. In this case the communicative motion of “leaving to” is tantamount to initialising a closing process, which manifests itself as staging of absence of adoption and of naïve disclosure. This gives rise to the characteristic impression that a dreamer unknowingly and in a state of naïve self-detachment presents himself to a person capable of judgement. The listener receives the uncommented rapport and adapts a way of reading the dream, which he either keeps to himself or shares with the dreamer.

What renders the dream rapport into a form of articulation dependent on dialogical supplementation? Is it the complementing commentary recontextualizing and shedding new light on the report? Let's take the first sentence of the following example: "*On account of certain events which had occurred in the city of Rome, it had become necessary to remove the children to safety, and this was done. The scene was then in front of a gateway, double doors in the ancient style ...*" (Freud 1953 [1900]: 441).

Two different dream reports start as follows: "I received a communication from the town council of my birthplace ..." (ibid.: 435) and: "I said to my wife that I had a piece of news for her, something quite special ..." (ibid.: 558).

Prima facie, these examples don't feature what one might think of as distinctive oneiric features. We nevertheless ought to pay attention to how the speaker depicts the situation. It's important to point out the lack of a *motivating framework*.

For clarification, let's consider two further examples:

A hill, on which there was something like an open-air closet: a very long seat with a large hole at the end of it. Its back edge was thickly covered with small heaps of faeces of all sizes and degrees of freshness. There were bushes behind the seat. I micturated on the seat; a long stream of urine washed everything clean; the lumps of faeces came away easily and fell into the opening. It was as though at the end there was still some left. (ibid.: 468-469)

The unquestioned acceptance of an immediately occurring event beyond reason and purpose, beyond a motivating framework, discloses a space of intransparency within the seemingly transparent. The impression of intransparency doesn't arise because of the obscurity of the reported actions, but rather because the event, even if it was inconspicuous und ordinary, remains uncontextualized. Something happens and this is perceived as, in the literal sense of the expression, *note-worthy*, because nobody tells us why it happens. It is 'left to' us, the listeners, how to establish a motivating framework. The use of the rhetorical stratagem of 'leaving to/grant permission to' (epitrope) directly engages us, taking on the role of commenting dialogue partners, in the articulation process. The lack of a motivating framework is closely linked to principle of articulation of *collage-like sequencing*. The speaker combines pieces into pictures; take for example the *open-air closet* (see above). One part joins another. The speaker additively connects elements thus creating the impression of a

montage. Performing this kind of collage-like combination emphasizes the tentativeness of the composition, underlines the fragility of the inner cohesion of the image and its proneness to cease.

The dream reporter edits shots into sequences and takes inventory. Another good example is the short dream about friend Otto: *“My friend Otto was looking ill. His face was brown and he had protruding eyes”* (ibid.: 269). What is noteworthy about the recapitulative speech here, is that the speaker sequences shots, which allude to dramaturgy. Take the “coltsfoot” example:

A crowd of people, a meeting of students. – A count (Thun or Taajfe) was speaking. He was challenged to say something about the Germans, and declared with a contemptuous gesture that their favourite flower was colt's foot, and put some sort of dilapidated leaf – or rather the crumpled skeleton of a leaf – into his buttonhole. I fired up – so I fired up, though I was surprised at my taking such an attitude. (Then, less distinctly:) It was as though I was in the Aula; the entrances were cordoned off and we had to escape [...]. (ibid.: 209-210)

The speaker recapitulates *scenic figurations* or, as in the dream about the uncle, mere images or impressions. He is employing exactly the kind of ordinary, unornamented language, which roman rhetorician Quintilian assigns to treating topics of everyday private life (Ueding 1976: 231 ff.). On the other hand, communicating one's dream is neither mundane nor random, but rather – in a naive way – laconic and solemn. Probably because the reporter finds himself being forced to express the visual and linguistic impressions, which he received from mysterious sources, in the mode of *clarification and specifying* employing rhetorical devices such as *accumulatio*, *comparatio*, *climax* and verbose *amplificatio*. Thus, the listener is getting confronted with an articulation process, which puts on display the struggle for the representation of hallucinated images. The closet dream is a graphic effort of accurate reproduction. The long “coltsfoot” dream highlights this struggle at various points:

A count (Thun or Taajfe) was speaking ...; ... (Then, less distinctly:) It was as though I was in the Aula ...; ... (Becoming indistinct again) ... It was as though the second problem was to get out of the town, just as the first one had been to get out of the house I was now sitting in the compartment, which was like a carriage on the Stadtbahn [the suburban railway]; and in my buttonhole I had a peculiar plaited, long-shaped object, and beside it some violet-brown violets made of a stiff material. This greatly struck people. (At this point the scene broke off.) (Freud 1953 [1900]: 209-210)

Additionally, memories can be shaped by *emphasis, insistence and emotional charging*, as in the dream about the uncle:

I. ... My friend R. was my uncle. – I had a great feeling of affection for him. II. I saw before me his face, somewhat changed. It was as though it had been drawn out lengthways. A yellow beard that surrounded it stood out especially clearly. (Freud 1953 [1900]: 137)

The example illustrates the process of remembering from the point of view of a recipient, who remains unable to make sense of the message presented to him. Reassurance by virtue of revisualization is articulated in the following manner: *What happened? Is this what actually happened? What exactly happened?* A moment of intentionality – the emphatically accentuated affectionateness – is *added* to the impression and remains distant and enigmatic for this very reason. The search process is especially noticeable, when dreams are being commented on with regard to their clarity, strangeness or continuity. Grammatical particles like ‘somehow’ are very common. The often used term »suddenly« marks the abruptness of a transition. The comparative ‘as though’ (“*It was as though it had been drawn out lengthways*”; “*as though it had been taken from a herbarium*”) creates the impression of an event being hard to grasp (ibid.: 169). The before mentioned *articulation of the search process* further emphasizes the enigmatic distance. In this case, the speaker comments on the representation of dream events with respect to their level of clarity/opacity, familiarity/strangeness and continuity/discontinuity. Let’s return to Freud’s “coltsfoot” dream:

... (Then, less distinctly:) *It was as though I was in the Aula ...; ... (Becoming indistinct again)*
... [indicating unclarity] *It was as though the second problem was to get out of the town, just as the first one had been to get out of the house ...» «I was now sitting in the compartment, which was like a carriage on the Stadtbahn [the suburban railway]; and in my buttonhole I had a peculiar plaited, long-shaped object [indicating strangeness], and beside it some violet-brown violets made of a stiff material. This greatly struck people. (At this point the scene broke off.) ... [indicating discontinuity] ...*

The dream report as a specific and non-interchangeable form of communication utilizes a rhetorical repertoire capable of articulating the fragmentary character, the enigmaticity and irreducible uncertainty of its subject. To communicate a dream is to employ a form of unsaturated speech: The dream rapport isn’t self-sufficient, rather, it raises the question of origin and meaning of dream events. Offers to contextualize

dreams range from an array of competing scientific methodologies to various prescientific practices of interpretation and communication. Not only tackling dreams, but also discarding them reaches far back: Their proverbial rejection as null (“dreams are ten a penny”) is far older than its neuroscientific plausibilization (Hobson/McCarley 1977) and can be traced back to ancient literature. We are dealing with both an affinity and aversion to dreams on a historical, cultural and individual level. These attitudes may shift and take turns with regard to their dominance. It is the merit of psychoanalysis to have given a greater scientific importance to attitudes willing to take dreams seriously.

There is a unique relation between the impressive unreliability of dream reports and the privacy of the source of a dream, i. e. the privacy of dream genesis. Starting from the distanced dream rapport professional dream analysis attempts to arrive at individual appropriation. This means:

- attention for the dreamer’s day residues and exploring them together,
- determining the system of relevances and preferences of the reporter,
- establishing a motivational context,
- contextualizing the dream with regard to the dreamer’s situation in life and the therapeutic relationship,
- retroactively integrating the dream report into a coherent dynamic organization.

Dream memories are static or processual and they manifest themselves as individual impressions or whole sequences. After waking up, the remembered impressions are often perceived as findings or fragments of more extensive dreams. As a consequence, the dreamer engages in retroactive sequencing and narrativization. He creates a narrative construction site. He is communicating findings and fragments, which can be combined into bigger compositions by the joint exploration of the dreamer’s situation in life and the expertise of the professional commentator.

How to turn a narrative building site into a narrative structure? On the basis of an *assumption* and with the aid of a *construction*: The *assumption* is that a dream – as a regressive mental phenomenon – creates relief, the *construction* is that the dream dialogue retroactively turns the narrative building site into a fully developed narrative.

The hallucinated dream impressions were experienced as real in the dreamer's sleep. The dream impressions transform reality. The strategy of dream analysis, as suggested in Freud's pioneering discoveries (Freud 1953 [1900]), is based on precisely this tension between world transformation as motivated appropriation and reporting observations and impressions. The material of nightly dreams is comprised of impressions from waking life. These impressions are – if one goes along with the idea that dream work is mental appropriation work – subjected in the dream to the regime of a self-centered wish regulation and made suitable for presenting a wish-fear-defence scenario. The way from a distanced dream rapport to the individual appropriation follows a narrative logic (Boothe 2004), i. e. navigating between expectation and fulfilment within a personal system of preferences. The orientation towards important concerns of the dreamer can then be made useful for the praxis of dream analysis in a therapeutic context.

In conclusion, there are several points to be emphasized. On the one hand, the release of Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1900 initiated psychophysiological dream research; on the other hand, psychoanalysis laid the foundations for a theory of memory work as a set of dramaturgical rules employed by the dreamer to transform everyday life into dream reality under the horizon of wish-oriented mentality. Dreaming puts on display sensations, which present themselves as characters, stage props, sceneries and actions without exhibiting any organising principle. They lie in front of us as objects to be gazed at. They don't reveal their origin and they don't indicate their native environment. Communicating a dream is a search for words in order to grab hold of fleeting images, which, otherwise, would disappear quickly and deny us any chance of further accessing them. The dream narrative is the prototypical form of unreliable communication in everyday life: First of all, its referentiality is unreliable, secondly, the report is rarely transparent and hardly comprehensible, third, the dream articulation isn't self-sufficient, rather, it is a form of unsaturated speech: dream reports demand commenting. Dialogical dream communication enacts an everyday crisis of self-reference: To communicate one's dream is to underline the fact that one is not master in his own house, is to stress one's reliance on the responsive and commenting other when it comes to obtaining

self-knowledge. Reporting a dream is a process of articulation on the unstable terrain of fleeting memory, is to communicate the limits of understanding within the narrative process.

Translated by Philippe Haensler

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