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Films and Dreams

SURPRISINGLY LITTLE has been written about the familiar claim that films resemble dreams. Two excellent recent works on film do treat the topic in some detail; they have convinced me that most comparisons of films and dreams present a beguiling but erroneous view of dreams. These two works, F. E. Sparshott's paper "Vision and Dreams in the Cinema" and George Linden's book *Reflections on the Screen*,[2] center their effort on a description of film. In contrast I shall concentrate more on the problem of characterizing dreams correctly. The persistent tendency to compare films and dreams has usually been undertaken in an attempt to illuminate the nature of film, but if we seek to learn about *x* by comparing it to *y*, a serious interest in the comparison requires that we be clear about *y*. And when *y* is the dream, as elusive and slippery as anything in our experience, we may well need to spend some time with it before being in a position to proceed.

I will begin with a brief comparison of my own of films and dreams, and then turn to Professor Sparshott's and Professor Linden's comparisons.

Films do invite comparison with dreams. In general our dreams simply seem more cinematic than our days. A curious, discontinuous way of unfolding characterizes films and dreams. Dreams are characterized by spatio-temporal discontinuities that are very like cuts in a film. The dream, like the film, freely leaps from one place or situation, or one position in a place or situation, to another.[3]

Buster Keaton makes a comic device of this shared characteristic in his film, *Sherlock, Jr.* Buster plays a movie projectionist who falls asleep on the job, and then dreams the film within the film. In his dream, he leaves the projection booth, walks through the theater and into the film on the screen. Having gotten his character into the film, Keaton the director pauses to play with the characteristic discontinuity that dreams and films share. We see Keaton sitting on a bench in a garden; cut to a street scene, and Keaton tumbles to the ground—the bench apparently having been whisked out from under him by the cut. He finds himself on a rock in the ocean, dives off and lands in a snowbank. The Keaton character makes the discontinuities evident by having the kind of continuity and stability characteristic of beings in the world of waking experience. As an earth-bound mortal in the charmed worlds, equally, of film and dream, he is left to fend for himself when that world makes one of its characteristic leaps. The move in the history of cinema from recording a stage production with an unmoving camera to the use of cutting and changes in camera angles has been described as the move in which films became an art. It is interesting that it can also be described as a move in which films became more like dreams.[4]

This character of discontinuity seems connected with the fact that films and

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dreams are evanescent—they can simply leap into nothingness. To be awakened in mid-dream is not uncommon, and something very like this is always a possibility with film, as occasional mechanical failures or human errors in the projection booth forcefully remind us. Because both films and dreams are discontinuous and evanescent we want to call them kinds of illusion; our feeling that they are kinds of illusion sustains our sense that they are alike. I must add, however, that our sense that they are alike has more than this as its basis; one need only mention the immediacy and vividness shared by films and dreams.

One further point of comparison is that most films and most dreams display dramatic form, that is, in recounting them we tell stories. There is then also continuity. In telling the story we trace the narrative continuity. Now, a narrative of a dream is usually much briefer than a narrative in comparable detail of a film, but notice that even the kinds of stories we tell tend to correspond. Two obvious examples are horror films and suspense films on the one hand, and nightmares and anxiety dreams, on the other. Even the increased portrayal of nudity and sexual detail in contemporary films is remarkable for having brought their story content more in line with that of our dreams.

What more can be said in developing the analogy between films and dreams? In his "Vision and Dreams in the Cinema," in the passage that introduces talk of dreams, Professor Sparshott writes:

> No matter how one moves a photograph around in relation to oneself, it continues to function as a faithful record implying a viewpoint from which it was taken, and in a sense one continues to be "at" this viewpoint no matter what angle one looks at the photo from. Film differs from still photography not only in the sense of vivacity that motion imparts, but also in the great size and contrasting illumination of the screened image in the darkened theatre, which enable it to dominate the visual sense, and in the relatively invariant relationship between screen and spectator. A director determines the audience's spatial relationship to his film. But what he determines remains an imaginary space: we are within the film's space without being part of its world, and observe from a viewpoint at which we are not situated. The alienated space of film is not the only experienced space in which the spectator participates without contact, and which he observes from a vantage point that contrives to be at once definite and equivocal or impossible. The spatiality of dreams is somewhat similar. Or perhaps, since different people seem to have very different dream perceptions, I should only say that my own spatial relationship to my dream worlds is like nothing in waking reality so much as it is like my my relationship with film worlds.[5]

I suspect that this characterization of the dreamer's spatial relation to his dream worlds—the dreamer as a kind of observer who participates without contact—tends to strike most of us as wholly plausible. Yet misleading, I believe; I question our inclination to take up this way of talking about dreams without a second thought. I am also convinced that Professor Sparshott has mischaracterized his spatial relationship to his own dream worlds—for, I will argue, the dreamer's relationship to his dream world is almost never such as to be correctly characterized on the model of the percipient of a visual image like that of a photograph or a film. I rather suspect, and indeed I hope, that this claim sounds simply wild.

In order to support this claim, I would like to turn to a film—Fellini's *8½*—for a reminder of what dreams are like. *8½* can be seen as immediately addressing itself to this issue since in it we plunge directly into a dream, but only learn that it is a dream when the dreamer, Guido, awakes. The film begins with Guido stuck in a fantastic traffic jam. His car begins to fill with fumes. Escaping from his car, he soars into the air. A few shots later, we see in the extreme foreground Guido's leg with a rope around the ankle, and at the other end of the rope a tiny figure in white on the beach far below. That is, we see as if from Guido's own vantage point. Then Guido falls with a cry, and the camera, unmoving, records his fall. There is a cut to an interior (the cry spanning the cut) and this time we see in the extreme foreground Guido's arm clutching at the air. Guido has awakened from an anxiety-fraught dream.

Now, the difference between our relationship as spectators to the space in Guido's dream and Guido's own relationship to it is simply this: we see him fall but Guido falls.

Here Fellini has tapped for his purposes what is almost certainly the most vivid of the familiar ways of awaking in mid-dream, awaking with a start from a dream in which we were falling through space. This common experience presupposes a relation to the space of our dream worlds very different from our relation to film worlds. Of course we are not always agents in our dreams, but we very often are, and as agents move through space—walking, fleeing, climbing—we touch objects and people and are touched by them, we have sensations of pain and pleasure. For example, here are two dreams taken almost at random from a book on dreams by a psychoanalyst:

1. I was playing ball with my father who then turned into a friend of mine. We threw the ball back and forth, harder and harder. Suddenly my friend's face grew red and swollen and he threw the ball at me with lightning speed. It hit me in the face and knocked out three teeth.
2. I came across an enormous pile of gold coins. Endless. I scooped them up feverishly. They seemed to be everywhere.[6]

If Guido's dream had been our dream we would not only have seen and heard, but in all likelihood we would have felt the rope around our ankle and the pull exerted by the figure far below. The space of a film world is made vividly, even authentically present to us—we live in it imaginatively, as we say—but we can *inhabit* our dream worlds. (If one is asked to describe a dream, the first pronoun occurring will almost always be "I." In contrast, we describe films by using "he," "she," "they.") Professor Sparshott notes that we do have a "sense of effort and participation"[7] in our dreams that is lacking in our experience of films. My point is that this sense of effort is tied up with our experience of dreams in which we find ourselves in the midst of a world, often an odd perplexing one, with which we must somehow deal.

Of course we are not always agents within the worlds of our dreams; we can also be a kind of spectator to the dream. Naturally Professor Sparshott's characterization draws its plausibility from dream experiences of this latter kind. But even these cases are not to be seen on the model of a percipient of a film image. Dream worlds are lived worlds, and even when the dreamer is a kind of spectator to his dreams what he sees in a fundamental respect is unlike what he sees as a spectator of a film. In Professor Sparshott's words:

> ... most of the time we are simultaneously aware of a film, as we are of a painting, both as a two-dimensional arrangement on a flat surface and as a three-dimensional scene.[8]

Although this is true of films it is not true of dreams. This two-dimensional aspect is absent in dreams. The space of a dream world is not merely visual space; it can be fallen through—it is a space into which the dreamer can enter as an agent and not just a spectator. This difference makes it so funny and shocking when Keaton appears to walk into the film on the screen—the film which is also his dream.

Returning at a later point to the analogy between films and dreams, Professor Sparshott characterizes dreams with a form of words that seems to be a proper description of films, and not of dreams.

> It has always seemed uncanny to me that although my waking self is quite unable to make a convincing drawing of the simplest shapes, my sleeping mind not only composes continuously and coherently organized visual fields that are completely lifelike, but combines them with appropriate sound to make a fictive world. . . .[9]

A dream world is more than a world of sight and sound. But there is also something correct here. When we reflect on our dreams we must in the end be struck by how mysterious it is that we could be the author of our dreams. When attended to, the dreams of even the prosiest and most mundane of us at times show a vividness, originality, and insightfulness that quite escapes us in our waking lives. If we compare our dreams to the fantasies of waking life, the latter reveal at a glance their stereotyped features and lowly origins in our desires and fears. This fact about our dream life, or dream lives, is another source of our sense that dreams are like films. For just as some films are truly great works of art, at times our dreams speak with the depth and authority of a work of art. Quite often they present us with worlds as distinctive, as

mysteriously coherent, and as unfamiliar to our senses as the world Fellini makes available to our ears and eyes with his film *Satyricon*.

But there is something odd about seeing the visual authenticity of one's dreams as uncanny in the context of one's inability to draw even the simplest shapes. A drawing is a work of the hand, not simply of the mind. A man who has never learned to draw asking, "I dream with such visual authenticity, so why can't I draw even the simplest shapes?" is in some ways like a man who has never learned to write asking, "I can speak eloquently, so why can't I write even the simplest words?" Drawing and writing are like in kind. Although all four—drawing, writing, speaking, and dreaming—are modes of human expression, drawing and writing are specialized skills, addressed to the rarified world of two-dimensional surfaces. Like speaking, the visual elements of dreams belong to a spatial world.

The tendency that inclines us to see dreams on the model of two-dimensional images goes deep in us. It can also underlie a somewhat different way of characterizing dreams. Professor Linden in his book on film begins his discussion of dreams this way:

> Perhaps one of the first things one notices about dreams is their bi-sociative character, which is expressed in the experience of the individual as a sense of bi-presence. One is both in his dream and not in his dream at the same time.... One feels that the dream is in his head but that it also is not in his head.[10]

As we shall see later on, Professor Linden makes it quite clear that in speaking of a dreamer's sense of bi-presence he means that the dreamer has a sense of being in the dream and at the same time being a kind of spectator of the dream. In Professor Linden's work the theme of dreamer-as-spectator gets reintroduced—but in a way not vulnerable to the considerations I have so far presented. These considerations only cut against Professor Sparshott's description of the spatial relationship of a dreamer and his dream. Professor Linden's way of characterizing this sense of bi-presence seems compatible with experiencing the space of a dream as a lived space in which we move as agents.

And, of course, in some dreams we *are* agents within the dream and yet stand somehow outside the dream—when, for example, we think, "Oh, this is only a dream." Also, apparently some people are generally quite conscious that they are dreaming and even consciously direct the course of their dreams. The question then is this: is a sense of bi-presence characteristic of dream experience in general?

This point does not yield to simple examples; we could, I think, dispute it endlessly. Since a sense of bi-presence presumably admits of degrees, an attempt to assess just how it was could easily lead us to wonder about whether we were wholly in the dream or was there perhaps also not some sense of being a spectator.

Fortunately we are not simply stranded at this point. Professor Linden does not abandon us to connect his characterization of dreams with concrete examples of our own. He presents and remarks on two very interesting cases. My interest is in the tension between the cases and his discussion of them. My approach here is admittedly a very indirect one. Since I cannot settle the issue with examples of my own, I will try to show what is wrong with Professor Linden's use of his examples.

Having remarked that we feel that the dream is both in our head and not in our head, he continues:

> As children, we tend to regard not-being-in-one's-head as of more import than the being-in-one's-head. Hence, children and primitives tend to believe that in dreaming they actually go out of themselves to live in a mythic world and return to themselves as they awake.[11]

He then presents the first of his cases, an interview by Piaget.

> A little boy of five years and six months was asked, "Is the dream in your head?" And he answered, "I am in the dream, it is not in my head. When you dream you don't know you are in bed. You know you are walking: you are in the dream. You are in bed, but you don't know you are."[12]

What strikes me about the boy's response is his use of "know." "When you dream ... you know you are walking. You are in bed

but you don't know you are." His use of "know" assigns primacy to his subjective experience—in the dream what he experiences is, say, walking about. But at the same time he has no problem recognizing that he was also in bed asleep. What he is saying is that the dreamer lives and moves in the world of the dream, unknowing that it is a dream, and with no sense that it is his dream.

Note that the boy answers in wholly different terms than those of Professor Linden. Professor Linden's way of putting the options makes the issue look like a kind of objective one: "When I dream do I somehow go out of myself to experience a mythic world, or is it all in my head?" When Piaget asks, "Is the dream in your head?" he asks a question that almost any of us would take as a question inviting an objective answer, that is, as a question about the ontological status of dreams. But the boy simply answers from the perspective of, and in the language of, a subject. This gives his reply its air of a profundity dropped innocently from the lips of a child.

Professor Linden follows this passage from Piaget with these words:

> As one grows, however, the dream comes to be interpreted more and more as being a subjective experience and the intensity of possession in the sense of property relation becomes increasingly determined.... Hence, adults are very chary about telling their dreams to one another, as if the dream would somehow reveal too much of them.... Another result of this wary attitude is a sharp intensification of the sense of ownership. Hence one insists that the dream is *my* dream and no one else's.[13]

Clearly the main thrust of these remarks is that one comes to see the dream as one's property. But note that Professor Linden's interest remains in the question of the status of dreams, how we relate ourselves to our dreams when we are awake, and not what our experience of dreams is like. The boy's answer does rather emphatically imply that his experience of dreams is not characterized by a sense of psychic bi-presence, but the fact that adults tend to interpret their dreams as being subjective experiences—read, in one's head—in no way implies that they experience a sense of psychic bi-presence while they dream. Throughout this passage Professor Linden fails to keep the issue in focus. The issue is not whether dreams are subjective experiences, but rather the nature of the dreamer's experience. When we ask, "Is there a sense of bi-presence when we dream?" we are asking about the subjective quality of the experience; we are asking how it is with the dreamer when he dreams. Professor Linden's way of using the term "subjective" makes it simply one of the terms in the in-the-head, not-in-the-head option, but the boy's subjective response is not in those terms at all.

The second case, like the one before it, comes from Piaget. The passage quoted below consists of a child's commentary on a drawing the child has made of his dream and an interpretive comment by Joseph Campbell, all quoted by Professor Linden.

> "I dreamt that the devil wanted to boil me," said the little fellow of seven, explaining a picture that he had drawn.... On the left was the child himself, in bed. "That's me," he said. "It was specially my eyes that stayed there—to see." In the center was the devil. And on the right was the little boy again, standing in his nightshirt in front of the devil who was about to boil him. "I was there twice over," he said in explanation. "When I was in bed I was really there, and then when I was in my dream I was with the devil, and I was really there too."
>
> The reader will not need to be told that we have here a type of logic that is not precisely that of Aristotle, but familiar enough in fairy tale and myth, where the miracle of bi-presence is possible.

Commenting on the boy's words himself, Professor Linden says:

> The whole feel of it is like experiencing a film, for in the experience of film, we are "there twice over" and when we are "with it" we are "really there" and we are "really in the theatre too." And it is 'specially our eyes that stay there—to see.[14]

Professor Linden, then, sees the boy as attempting to communicate by the drawing his experience of a sense of bi-presence in dreaming. But is that the kind of case it is? Campbell, at least, does not mean by "the miracle of bi-presence" a *sense* of bi-presence, as becomes clear when we look at the rest of the Campbell passage, not quoted by Professor Linden.

> [We] have here a type of logic . . . where the miracle of bi-presence is possible and the same person or object can be in two or more places at the same time. Shamans . . . leave their bodies and ride . . . beyond the visible world, to engage in adventures with devils and gods. . . .[15]

The shaman case does seem to be a striking analogue to dreaming in that the body is here yet the experiencing subject is somehow abroad. But the issue of the shaman's subjective sense of being both beyond the visible world and yet somehow a spectator at the same time is simply not raised. It seems we must distinguish between an uncanny or miraculous fact of bi-presence and a subjective sense of bi-presence. Once again Professor Linden overlooks the distinct issue of how it is with the experiencing subject.

But perhaps Campbell is mistaken. Perhaps the drawing is an attempt to express a sense of bi-presence. The boy does say "It was specially with my eyes that I stayed there—to see," and this does suggest that he was a kind of spectator to his dream. That together with the boy's claim that he was really in the dream seems to suggest the kind of relationship Professor Linden is interested in. But note that Professor Linden's account does not imply (nor do I think he would want it to imply) that the spectator aspect of the sense of bi-presence is tied to one experiencing oneself as situated in bed—yet both the drawing and the commentary emphatically characterize the dreamer as in bed. Looked at in this light, the passage suggests that it is the fact and not the sense of bi-presence that the boy tries to express. This case then is at best an uncertain one for the point that Professor Linden wants to make.

If I am right I have not *shown* that a sense of bi-presence does not generally characterize the experience of dreaming, but I hope I have at least raised some doubt. I believe I have found evidence which suggests that both Professor Sparshott and Professor Linden are in the grip of a certain picture of what dreams are like, a picture that guides what they can notice about dreams, and leads them to see the dreamer as a kind of spectator of his dreams.

They are not alone in this. What they have given voice to calls all of us. Hence I have been concerned to go over what they have said about dreams so closely. That such men should get so immediately into such difficulties, and that what they are led to say should have so much in common, makes plausible my position, namely, that at issue here is a picture as widespread as it is difficult for us to come to notice.

I have merely pointed to an issue that invites philosophical investigation. An adequate consideration of our tendency to see the dream as something to which the dreamer is a kind of spectator falls beyond the scope of this paper. However, I would like to remark on some sources of this picture. One source seems peculiar to the enterprise of comparing film and dreams; it has, I think, been at work in the accounts of Professor Sparshott and Professor Linden. Since we find dreams so difficult to talk about, when we compare them to films it is easy for us to change the subject without noticing it, to be talking about films and yet believe that we are talking about dreams. It is also worth noting that there is a time when we might well be said to be both in the dream and not in the dream, or as participating without contact—and that is when we are recounting or remembering a dream. At such times we are distanced from the dream in the requisite way. But this is not the whole story. I have claimed that at issue here is a pervasive tendency, one that we all share. I am referring to a whole cast of thought which characterizes our culture. In the words of Herbert Fingarette:

> All of us in the West are so in bondage to the public, physical orientation that we can only allow ourselves to come to terms with the "inner" world (where it deviates from the physical) by indirection. . . . In those cultures which are not so fascinated by the public, the logical, the physical, it is easier and more common to consider another mode of existence [for example, the dream] as reality.[16]

This fundamental orientation of ours renders us unable to see our experience of dreams for what it is. What I find striking about this passage from Fingarette is the way

it seems to characterize the difference in orientation between Professor Linden and the boy in the first case—on the one hand, a fascination with the public, the physical, the logical, and on the other, an openness to the dramatic, lived reality of dream experience. The boy clearly recognizes that when he dreams he is in bed asleep, but the weight of the fact that his body is in bed and not walking about simply does not press him to conceive of his dream as something to which he is or must be, wholly or in part, a kind of spectator.

I have argued that the spectator model does not do justice to our experience of dreams. Yet I think we should not abandon our sense that the dreamer's relationship to his dream and the film-goer's relationship to a film invite comparison. It seems to me that what does invite comparison here is not that the dreamer is likely to have a sense of psychic bi-presence of the kind a film-goer may have, but rather that a film tends to induce a self-forgetful involvement very like the involvement of a dreamer in his dream—and this despite the fact that a film world is but a two-dimensional world. As Iris Murdoch remarks in a discussion of the novel:

> The reader too must be the creator of the novel.... An excessive detachment or suspicion will fail to create the work at all; an excessive self-forgetfulness will break down its objective contours and blend it with private fantasy and dream. In the latter case novel-reading becomes a drug. (It is characteristic of the art of the cinema to encourage, by its very form, this extreme of self-forgetting).[17]

What is there about film form that encourages this kind of self-forgetful involvement? It is surely the very features of the film image that Professor Sparshott remarks on—its great size, the illusion of movement, the fact that it is itself the principal illumination in a darkened room. These combine to give it an hypnotic quality. Even in the case of a cinematically sophisticated film-goer who remains alert to the director's way of working, this hypnotic quality of the image is the principal source of the vividness and immediacy which is characteristic of our experience of films.

Not only is the spectator model inadequate for our experience of dreams, but it can also be inadequate for our experience of films. The compelling, hypnotic quality of the film image makes for a peculiar intimacy in the relationship between the film-goer and the film. This felt quality of intimacy and immediacy seems especially to invite comparison with the dreamer's relationship to his dream. Here, I feel, we find a feature of film experience which must be given a central role in discussing the relationship of films and dreams.

[1] F. E. Sparshott, "Vision and Dream in the Cinema," *Philosophic Exchange*, Summer 1971 (The Center for Philosophic Exchange, State University of New York, College at Brockport, N.Y., 14420). George W. Linden, *Reflections on the Screen*, (Belmont, Calif.: 1970).

[2] However, there also seems to be a difference here. As Professor Langer notes (*Feeling and Form*, (London; 1953) p. 415), while films can leap forward or backward in time, dreams seem always to move forward in time.

[3] Discontinuities in films and dreams can also take the form of metamorphoses, as, for example, in the film *8½* when Guido dreams that his mother is kissing him, and then that she turns into his wife.

[4] F. E. Sparshott, p. 115.

[5] Leon L. Altman, *The Dream in Psychoanalysis*, (New York: 1969), pp. 23, 24.

[6] F. E. Sparshott, p. 116.

[7] Ibid., p. 115.

[8] Ibid., p. 120.

[9] G. Linden, pp. 171–72.

[10] Ibid., p. 172.

[11] Loc. cit.

[12] Loc. cit.

[13] Ibid., p. 173.

[14] Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology*, (New York: 1959), p. 80.

[15] Fingarette, Herbert, *The Self in Transformation*, (New York: 1965), pp. 226–27.

[16] Iris Murdoch, *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist*, (Yale University Press, 1967), p. 61.

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