Plans and scattered notions in dream reports, science, and history

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Abstract
Working outwards from one dream report in the *Threshold Worlds* database, this essay examines three aspects of permeability or 'cognitive transit' in dream experience. relating to perspective, planning, and precision. Reports of seeing oneself in the dreamed scene are common, and don't require us to postulate an extra 'self'. A plan formulated in the dream escapes, finding a life of its own. If the reported dream is a 'world simulation', its contents are more scattered than precise, as elucidated in the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs' striking account of dreams. Dreaming is an active, cognitively-permeated experience which must be learned as part of the slow manufacture of the developing mind. This approach promises integration between historical and cognitive scientific frameworks, and the essay concludes with reflections on two-way traffic between dynamic brains and changing cultures.

Keywords: dreaming; dream reports; perspective; Maurice Halbwachs; memory; history of dreams; anachronism; history of science; cognitive gadget

Cognitive transit
The dream report that I submitted to the *Threshold Worlds* survey and databank, in which I am respondent 285, falls neatly enough into three sections or acts. It includes various forms of the 'cognitive transit' that this volume highlights – the permeability of dreams by waking experience, notably including aesthetic and fictional experience. Alongside other dream features such as unfamiliar places and people, surprise and curiosity, and discontinuous transitions, I described names and people from my life and from the novel I'd been reading before falling asleep that night; familiar artifacts repurposed for quirky dream functions; two song titles by the band Shearwater transposed from high rotation on iTunes to become the names of single malt whiskies; and a map depicting three real named distilleries on the island of Islay alongside a fourth that does not exist in our world.

In recording the dream, and perhaps in initially recalling it on waking – who knows, now, years later – I think I was struck and motivated by two further characteristics that piqued my theoretical interests. My longstanding fascination with theories and histories of dreaming has always been intensified by the sense of engagement with the topic I got back from undergraduates and public audiences when trying to evoke

the thrill of wonderful and weird science. In sporadic writings about unresolved issues in dream theory, hugely impressed by the brilliant and rigorous work of the researchers who dedicate their careers to it, I've tried to hook in philosophers and cognitive scientists interested in other questions about memory or experience, to get them as impressed as I am by extraordinary studies like the longitudinal sleep lab examination of children's dreams undertaken by David Foulkes in Laramie, Wyoming, from 1968, in which Foulkes himself woke each child three times a night from either REM or NREM sleep for a total of 2711 awakenings (Foulkes 1968, 1999; Sutton 2009). While monitoring my own dream experience attentively enough, especially in those phases when I was reading and writing on the topic, I was never tempted to keep a sustained dream diary, or to try to control for or cancel out my prejudices or wishes, interests or beliefs. Ideas – both idiosyncratic individual commitments and culturally-embedded norms – certainly influence our thinking *about* dreams and our practices of sharing or analyzing them: presumably they can also shape both our dream reports and the experiences during sleep that those reports try so keenly to latch on to. So I was pleased to find features of this report that tapped into questions that have long puzzled me.

In the third section of the dream report, a muted episode 'in a kind of ferry-docking area or terminal', I wrote that 'I can briefly see myself sitting alone on a bench against the right-hand wall of the space, I'm observing from the end of the room, from the end behind which is the water'. My interest in such external or 'observer' visuospatial perspectives on the self in dreams originally derived from work on memory. Sometimes we see ourselves in a remembered episode, rather than now recalling the event as from our own original first-person or 'field' perspective (Sutton 2010a; McCarroll 2018). As an advocate for such observer perspectives – for their existence, their status as (potentially) genuine memories, and their roles in complex cognitive-affective processes – I worked with my ex-student Melanie Rosen to survey existing databases for a variety of external visuospatial perspectives in dream reports, among a range of possible forms of 'polymorphism of Self' in dreams (Occhionero & Cicogna 2011, p.1009; Rosen & Sutton 2013).

The current example is a mundane case in which the observer perspective emerges 'briefly'. This fits with my answer 'both' to Question 48 in the dream survey, which asks 'Do you tend to dream in first person, or do you see yourself from the outside?'. We know from memory research that many people do not notice or thematize their experience of observer perspectives before being asked, and that as a result such abstract survey questions may under-report them, relative to reports of particular memory experiences. So Richard Walsh's strategy in his essay of delving in to the detailed dream reports themselves to assess against the majority result of 57% who claim to dream mainly in the first person is entirely apt.

Walsh, however, understands these visuospatial perspectives in dreams differently. When respondents write of experiencing their dream selves in the third person or as from the outside – what would standardly be called 'observer perspectives' on the dreamed self – Walsh thinks that in such cases 'their dream perspective is, or becomes, dissociated from embodied representation; that is, the selfhood implied by their embodied perceptual perspective itself becomes the object of a reflexive level of attention, generating a detached subject position of its own, a dreaming self distinct from the dream self' (this volume, p.152). The experiential phenomena in play here are many, and the issues complex, but this is not quite right. Typical observer perspectives do not involve this kind of explicit reflection or inference. It's not like seeing a photo of a bunch of people and asking myself if that one is me or not: self-identification is just as immediate, just as non-inferential, as in field or first-person perspective experiences. As Chris McCarroll argues in detail for the case of memory (2018, ch.4), what we are calling an observer 'perspective' need not be – and in most of these cases is not – the specific, occupied external location that Walsh describes, for this transient observer experience in the visuospatial modality need not be – and in most of these cases is not – also a detachment from the embodied, kinesthetic, or emotional dream self. On Walsh's view,

ordinary observer perspectives would be full-scale out-of-body experiences or OBEs: but this is not the case, either phenomenologically or mechanistically. Even as my visual perspective briefly shifts to observing myself on that bench, my represented self in the dream is still unthinkingly there on that bench, knowing full well that my friends 'have just popped away to get something and will be back soon'. The survey data offers rich material for further analysis and enquiry into dream perspectives.

The second specific feature of this dream report that warranted further consideration, both personal and theoretical, is a case of real-world planning that seems to have been operating within the dream. Having examined the maps of the Islay distilleries closely, I thought (in the dream) that it was strange that (in real life) we hadn't visited them on our last extended visit to Scotland; and, as I wrote, 'I think that next time we can, we will go there, and that we should visit Lagavulin first, then Ardbeg, then Lagavulin', notably not including the fourth mythical distillery 'Solder' located on the dream maps. If this is a case of trans-world communication, it is one that operates in both directions, reality permeating fantasy and vice versa as thoroughly as in Alasdair Gray's *1982, Janine*, if much more prosaically. My real memories are animating my cognitive and emotional responses to the dream experience; and then the very firm and specific intention generated within the dream – entirely without awareness that I was dreaming – does not just survive waking, but has sufficient motivational power first to keep the dream alive and transformed into this more or less coherent small story format, and then over time perhaps even to play some active part in causing my real-life trip to the Islay distilleries (finally, years later, albeit in different context and as a different 'we'). I am not a person to cultivate dream-generated input on life decisions, but having been grasped, in a sense, by this instruction, I granted it a life of its own among multiple whirling fragments of wish and hope and imagined places-I-want-to-visit; and in due course I thought and talked of this little dream report sequence when actually walking from Ardbeg to Lagavulin on that later rare and precious – indeed dreamy – sunny island morning, and I picked this dream narrative to share in the Threshold Worlds survey, and here it is again now cropping up in this essay, infiltrating this book and our shared discourse, and your attention briefly too now, and on it goes.

Maurice Halbwachs and scattered world-simulations

This rare close-to-home case of real-world planning in the dream seems to fit with and exemplify in straightforward ways the broad consensus on dreaming as a 'world-simulation' described in Revonsuo and Tuominen's essay in this volume. Each of the dream's three phrases or acts at least on first consideration seems to be generated, presumably by my brain, as a multimodal world analog, a virtual reality simulated along with an immersive sense of presence, to use some of the language of that essay.

This is challenging for me because I'm attracted to and have recently defended what seems to be a quite different account of dream experience as fragmentary and unmoored, 'reduced and narrowed' compared to waking experience, as articulated in a century-old book by the French sociologist – or, as I suggest – sociological psychologist – Maurice Halbwachs (1994, 39).

In the early chapters of *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (*The Social Frameworks of Memory*), chapters not included in Lewis Coser's partial English edition of 1992, Halbwachs (1925/ 1994) developed a sustained comparison between remembering and dreaming. While editing the forthcoming first full English translation of this material, by Charles Wolfe, Barnaby Hutchins, and Cat Moir, I have sought to revivify Halbwachs' argument that dreaming is a natural experiment that tests the cognitive powers of the isolated brain, and that its fragmentary nature confirms that social frameworks are necessary for rich memory experience (Sutton 2024). Since Halbwachs is widely known as 'the founding father of collective memory' (Olick et al 2011, 5), it is striking to find that – far from ignoring individual psychology – in fact he offered an

intriguing account of dreams and a social ontology of remembering that can contribute afresh now to contemporary integrative approaches to dreaming and memory across the social and cognitive sciences.

Attacking the 'surprising' tendency of 'psychological treatises that deal with memory' to treat each of us as 'an isolated being' (1994, vi), Halbwachs starts by contrasting the richly situated spatial, social, and temporal frameworks that we rely on in remembering with what passes through the mind 'when freed from the limitations of waking life'. In dreams, he argues (1994, 39),

> images are nothing more than raw materials, able to enter into all kinds of combinations, only combined by chance …: a succession of images in a dream differs from a series of memories as much as a pile of rough-hewn materials – whose overlapping parts slide over one another, or remain in equilibrium only by accident – differs from the walls of a building supported by a whole infrastructure, and, moreover, shored up or reinforced by those of the neighbouring buildings. This is because the dream rests on itself alone, whereas our memories rely on those of everyone else, and on the great frameworks of the memory of society.

Rejecting claims by Bergson, Freud, and even his mentor Durkheim that remembered scenes often appear complete and fully-formed in dreams, Halbwachs sees dream life as like the mental life of very young children, unsupported by the norms and 'reference points' that we slowly pick up through enculturation into the diverse social frameworks of waking life (1994, 9). In contrast, ordinary adult remembering is a learned activity that continues to require cognitive work as we assemble coherent sequences with and through our images of past events, as part of the slow manufacture of the self (Sutton 2024). Where we are immersed in dream experience as if present now, remembering is something we do while maintaining a dual temporality, aware even of vividly recalled events as *past* events (1994, 15).

If this deflationary or 'decidedly negative' view of dreaming (1994, 3), developed in the first chapter of his book, was Halbwachs' final word on the subject, then he would have a tough job making sense of standard enough dream reports like mine above. While it includes no singular or unitary waking episode, each of its constituent sub-narratives deploys concepts or background notions of significant spatial, social, psychological, and temporal complexity.

But at the opening of chapter 2, Halbwachs acknowledges that it was 'an overstatement' to claim that 'when we dream, we cease to be in contact with the society of our fellows' (1994, 40). Without reneging on his case against individualism, or accepting any inbuilt capacity of the isolated brain to reproduce fully-realized episodes from waking life on its own, Halbwachs now notes that even dream experience involves 'general notions' which 'have permeated the isolated consciousness of the dreamer, and can only come from the social environment of waking life' (1994, 42). Though 'the logical, temporal, spatial frameworks in which the visions of sleep take place are highly unstable' (1994, 30), these 'notions of waking life, as they penetrate our sleeping consciousness, must retract themselves, scatter, and leave behind part of their form or content, like geometrical figures traced on a surface on which the chalk slips, thereby losing some of their contours, a side, an angle, etc' (1994, 50).

This striking image, I submit, effectively catches the ways that real-world elements and incidents turn up in dreams like the one of mine with which we started. We can talk in terms of virtual or simulated worlds if we like, but this is in no way a 'remarkably faithful replica' or 'realistic facsimile' of our waking experience of external reality, as per the phrases from Snyder quoted by Revonsuo and Tuominen (this volume, p.99). They are, rather, variably but highly mediated, transformed or reverberating as they 'scatter' through and across the unstable dream worlds which they are creating on the fly, rather than inhabiting or populating. We can consider Halbwachs' remarks on bodily, spatial, and temporal frameworks in dreams in turn.

With the dreaming mind needing to work with whatever reference points it's got, dream experience may still – Halbwachs speculates – be residually open to certain bodily sensations or feelings, with some 'cross-permeation' between the dream content and the dreamer's actual 'physical unease or discomfort' (1994, 45). Jennifer Windt has revivified earlier ideas about somatic sources of dreams to suggest that the brain may not be quite as sealed off from residual bodily stimulation and motor output as we have tended to think (Windt 2015, chapters 7-8). Though Revonsuo and Tuominen cite Windt as supporting their strong picture of dreaming as a simulated world, her considered view is more nuanced: 'dreams are weakly phenomenally-functionally embodied states: phenomenologically they neither replicate the richness of waking bodily self-experience nor do they lack bodily experience entirely' (Windt 2018, 20).

My dream report is typical in including a fair amount of spatial information, in terms of orientations, directions, and spatial relations, but characterized by indeterminacies and gaps. I have a sense of the edges of the curving track we are walking down, and later my brother 'and maybe some other people' appear 'over there behind the entry barriers'. Most notably, the two transitions from one set of locations to another are ones which in the report I noted 'I can't recall', and nothing in the report suggests any integrating or overarching sense of how the places or indeed the scenes relate to each other. As Halbwachs put it, 'in dreams, we lack an overall representation both of space overall (of a city, a country) and of the place we really are in, and the more or less extended whole of which it is a part': we retain only a local grasp of egocentric space, such that 'in a dream, for us not to feel lost, it is enough that we can see ourselves in a "corner of space"' (1994, 50-51). Perhaps some dreamers organize the spatial reference points more in a kind of 'personal geography' (Bernini 2018), but in general, as for very small children, there is no need for the dreamer to conceive of distinct spaces as interconnected.

Likewise, the bulk of the dream report has events following each other, exhibiting succession and duration, without its temporal features forming an internally consistent whole. But it is unusual in that the 'real world planning' episode, in which I note that we haven't (in the past, or, to date) been to Islay, and decide to go there (in the future) does seem to exhibit a less arbitrary or discontinuous temporal framework. This part of the dream experience seems to be occurring in a more genuine present than arises in many dreams, in that it is set against other periods in the asymmetric organization I inhabit in waking life. I don't know what to make of what was for me at least a very rare feature of the dream, and I note that even this episode is in the dream itself cocooned from or marooned in time, disconnected from the events before and after it in the dream. Halbwachs acknowledges the presence in dreams of some elements 'of the frameworks of space and time in which we organize our perceptions and memories in waking life', but in another striking image suggests that they typically appear 'in fragmentary and strangely broken form, like the irregular pieces of the design of a broken piece of porcelain' (1994, 53). This exceptional planning episode is still, I think, compatible with his revised and moderated examination of minds 'temporarily and partly free' of the influence of group notions. For Halbwachs, this second pass at dreams, in which he accepts more cognitive transit, shows us ultimately 'how strong the effect of collective consciousness is, how deep it runs, shaping all of our mental life, since even in the isolation of dreams, we still perceive it – lessened and broken, but still recognizable' (1994, 53).

On the ecumenical pluralism I'm working towards here, we are not rejecting but tempering or refining the 'world-simulation' conception of dreaming. Some dreams and some features of dreams may be more like fully organized, multimodally-experienced worlds, others more fragmentary. Some dream experiences may be more like hallucinatory perceptual experiences, while in others the cognitive or imaginative work involved in constructing the elements may be more pronounced (Sutton 2009; Rosen 2018; Windt 2015, 2018). As Giulia Poerio's paper in this volume convincingly shows, there are many as yet untapped paths for examining the extent and nature of permeability between waking and dreaming mental life.

Plasticity and anachronism in the science and history of dreams

I am not, however, ecumenical on a distinct but related point. I am firmly and wholeheartedly on Halbwachs's side in ascribing whatever richer 'general notions' do crop up in dreams to our social frameworks, neurally and physically mediated as they may be. If we accept, with Revonsuo and Tuominen, that 'there must be a system in the brain that creates world-simulations during both dreaming and wakefulness' (this volume, p.100), I insist on constantly tracing this capacity to enculturation and to sedimented experience in situated social life. Of course there is a rich neurobiological 'starter kit', as Cecilia Heyes (2018) would put it, an on-board endowment that in large part we humans share widely with other animals, likely including the basic neurocognitive mechanisms of simple event simulation. But that bare, skull-bound starter kit on its own gets us no further towards mature human dream activity than it does towards full episodic memory (Mahr et al 2023). Both the forms and the contents of dreams are, as Halbwachs saw, permeated by general notions that derive – often in idiosyncratic ways – from embodied, active experience in the weave of our lives. Like 'mindreading' and imitation, perhaps like language and memory and moral reasoning too, dreaming may, in its recognizable forms in adult mental life, be a cognitive gadget, a distinctively human ability made possible by cultural learning (cf Heyes 2018, 2021). It has to develop, as Foulkes and others have shown; we undergo peculiar training, by which we come to interpret certain experiences during sleep as dreams, accessed retrospectively by way of certain waking memories; and both those processes of enculturation and the kinds of experience they end up giving rise to may vary considerably across changing historical and cultural contexts.

Though I did not yet have Heyes' vocabulary, sophisticated framework, and examples through which to develop this line of thought when I was working on dreams in the 2000s, the broadly Vygotskyan picture of the development of autobiographical memory which I had taken up from the psychological studies of Katherine Nelson, Robyn Fivush, Elaine Reese, Qi Wang and others already strongly encouraged me to investigate potential cultural-historical implications. The quixotic task of seeking to synthesize or integrate the history of dreams and the sciences of dreams also fell naturally out of my studies of the early modern history of theories of memory, that ran from the embodied cognitive physiology of fleeting animal spirits, through 'seventeenth-century French connectionism' (Sutton 1998, 1), to eighteenth-century associationism and its vitriolic critics (Sutton 2010b).

As it turned out, some of the frontline dream scientists had got there first. In the neural network fervour of the 1980s, Crick and Mitchison (1983) had argued for a 'reverse learning' theory of the function of dreams, in which a nightly trash disposal or brain-washing process prunes excessively overlapping memories, dealing with the problem of catastrophic interference that arises with superpositional storage, when many memories are retained dispositionally in or across the same sets of neural vehicles. Still animating central neuroscientific accounts of the relations of sleep and memory today, a venerable ancestry was quickly invented for this view by Lavie and Hobson in a surprising attempt to revivify the great but neglected associationist David Hartley. They wrote (1986, 232) that

> Hartley anticipated Crick and Mitchison by suggesting that the function of dreams was to break the course of our associations. In his words, 'the wildness of our dreams seems to be of singular use to us, by interrupting and breaking the course of our associations. For, if we were always awake, some accidental associations would be so much cemented by continuance, as that nothing could afterwards disjoin them; which would be madness'.

Suggesting a systematic replacement of Hartley's archaic Newtonian language of 'vibrations' by contemporary neuroscientific terms, Lavie and Hobson concocted spurious historical respectability for this particularly reductionist modern approach to dreaming.

It is easy enough for historians and philosophers to scoff at what Canguilhem called 'the virus of the precursor' as exemplified in this kind of retrofitting of historical dream theories to fit the latest paper in *Nature*. But I could not relax into such comfy humanistic superiority. I too had deliberately flaunted anachronism in reading Hartley's marvellously rich 1749 book *Observations on Man, his Frame, his Duty, and his Expectations* as offering, in part, a distributed model of memory of intense contemporary interest, a deeply developmental vision of how the natural temper of our nerves is moulded and deformed by the vibrations shimmying down them in the various incidents of life, so that the civilizing process is the training or tidying of our own brains (Sutton 1998, 248-259). When Richard Allen published a highly original work of intellectual history celebrating Hartley's book as a great psychological epic with a mystical finale (Allen 1999), the historian of medicine Roy Porter concluded a positive review with the complaint that the connections Allen makes between Hartley and modern dynamic psychology and physics constituted 'yet another mucking around with Hartley for contemporary purposes' (Porter 2000, 554). I defended Allen's project, lamenting that fear of Whiggish, present-centred history ran so deep among academic historians of science that it had become embarrassing to flirt with truth or extract forgotten theorists from their library-bound historical isolation (Sutton 2002). If we fast-forward again to the present, we might lean on Hasok Chang's encouragement to risk anachronism in being ready to put presentist history in the service of pluralist science, being wary of historiographic purity to the extent even of indulging in 'loser's history', when we 'dig up from the past something good that has become neglected, and bring it to the present' (Chang 2021; on the varieties of anachronism see also Tribble & Sutton 2012).

It is just as easy to find historians and anthropologists scoffing at modern dream neuroscience and its embedding in modern Western institutions and culture, as it is to lament the universalizing impulse of scientists skipping over nuance and specificity in surveying dream theories 'since the dawn of history' (Lavie 1996, 65). Resisting both of these paths through this residual 'two-cultures' landscape, we also cannot simply let each group quietly go its own way. It is because variable cultural and historical assumptions, fashions, norms, and wishes sculpt the practices, narratives, and experiences of our dreaming lives that dream science must work with dream history, and vice versa. This will not be an incorporation or reduction of one side to the other, with scientists using a few spare afternoons decisively to redirect historical discourse, or humanists conclusively revealing the poverty of contemporary cognitive neuroscience. Rather, two-way traffic will bring sophisticated interpretive techniques to content analysis of dream reports, or insight into unique changes in dream culture in particular historical contexts, as when for a short period in the mid-20th century Americans thought they dreamed in black and white (Schwitzgebel 2002). What's required for, and will continue to produce, rich and integrative investigation into dreams, narrative, and liminal cognition, then, is just the kind of comprehensively and insistently interdisciplinary approach to such 'threshold worlds' developed by Ben Alderson-Day, Marco Bernini, and colleagues in this wonderful project and volume.

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