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Lucid Dreams, Perfect Nightmares: Consciousness, Capitalism and Our Sleeping Selves

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Lund, Sweden, Sept 21, 2016.

Dear reader,

This is the published version of a review article which discusses three books on sleep and dreaming: Evan Thompson's *Waking, Dream, Being*; Andreas Mavromatis' *Hypnagogia*, and Jonathan Crary's *24/7*. Topics include lucid dreaming, what happens when we die, and what to do about global capitalism. The day will soon come, I suggest, when multinational corporations can buy advertising space in our dreams.

I became interested in sleep mainly since I'm not getting enough of it, and writing this essay has kept me up every night for the past week.

The article will appear in *Distinktion*, a social theory journal edited by the eminent Christian Borch in Copenhagen.

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happy autumn, happy dreams,

Erik

REVIEW ARTICLE

Lucid dreams, perfect nightmares: consciousness, capitalism and our sleeping selves

Waking, dreaming, being: self and consciousness in neuroscience, meditation, and philosophy, by Thompson, Evan, New York: Columbia University Press, 2014, 496 p., € 19,46 (hardcover), ISBN 978-0231137096

Hypnagogia: the unique state of consciousness between wakefulness and sleep, by Mavromatis, Andreas, London: Thyrsos Press, 2010 384 p., € 32,68 (hardcover), ISBN 978-0955305214

24/7: late capitalism and the ends of sleep, by Crary, Jonathan, London: Verso, 2014 133 p., € 30.74 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1781683101

Sleep is a social state.¹ When you are asleep you may be oblivious to the world but you are also perfectly vulnerable and thereby at the mercy of others. Sleeping you are dependent on the sturdiness of the locks on your door, on the force of the law and the goodwill of your fellow man. Dreams are social too. What you make of them when you wake up depends on the nature of the society in which you live. In a religious society, dreams are messages from the gods, they are omens and signs, but in an individualistic society such as ours, they are instead far more likely to be interpreted as messages from each individual's subconscious. And yet, despite their social nature, sleep and dreams are quite alien to our fully woken, rational, selves. At night we do not work, we do not consume, and we cannot control who we are and what we do. In our dreams, the craziest things may happen. As the books by Thompson, Mavromatis, and Crary make clear, however, this may now be about to change. Today our dreams are slowly being captured by our conscious selves and the night is invaded by the forces of global capitalism.

Waking, dreaming, being

Evan Thompson is a philosopher with an interest in the nature of consciousness but he is also a student of Buddhism, and in *Waking, Dreaming, Being*, he writes about both (Thompson 2010, 2014b; cf. Varela, Thompson, and Rosch 1991). In the Buddhist tradition, reflections on god have largely been replaced by reflections on the self. Studying the self turns out to be a lot easier than studying god since the self at least seems to exist, although, clearly, it is quite unclear exactly how and why. Meditation, as Thompson explains, is a way of investigating such

matters. In meditation you watch yourself, watch what your consciousness is up to, and while this is a subjective rather than an objective investigation, there is no objective way of investigating what necessarily must be subjective experiences. Ideally, a study of consciousness should be pursued as a neurophenomenology, as a neuroscience which respects our phenomenological awareness (Thompson 2014b, xviii–xix).

This is how Thompson became interested in dreams. Dreams are after all the most obvious example of an alteration in our state of consciousness. We all go from being an awake self to a being a dreaming self on a daily, or rather on a nightly, basis. By studying this transformation, and by studying what dreams are and who we are in our dreams, we can hope to learn more about our consciousness and ourselves. Indeed, there is a long Buddhist tradition which studies these topics. By means of dream yoga it is possible to investigate consciousness as it moves between its various states and across the gap which separates the awareness of each succeeding moment in time (Thompson 2014b, 57–65). A practitioner of dream yoga would never privilege the awake over the dreaming self. After all, what we call reality is it too a dream, and our dreams are stacked inside each other like lives in an endless series of incarnations. By means of dream yoga we can investigate the gap that exists between our present life and the next, and as such it becomes a manual in the art of dying. Thompson's book has a chapter devoted to this art (cf. 2014a). Dying does not seem to be too bad in the end:

Imagine a red drop ascending from the base of the spine toward the heart. As it ascends, desire transforms into profound bliss. ... A deep, black sky, free of stars or moon, appears. Out of this nothingness, luminescence arises. ... This is your ultimate great perfection. This is the actual moment of death.²

To be free of this series of dreams is to finally wake up – 'Buddha' after all means 'the awakened one.'

Thompson devotes considerable attention to lucid dreams. Lucid dreams, in case you have not had one, are dreams in which you are aware that you are dreaming; dreams in which you are the dreamed but at the same time also the dreamer. Although dreams featuring such doubled-up consciousness have been known to many societies around the world, it is only relatively recently that Europeans and North Americans have discovered them. Sigmund Freud, for one, does not mention them, and the term itself was invented only in 1913 by the Dutch psychologist van Eeden (1913). A curious feature of lucid dreams is that you can direct them. By taking charge of your dreams, you can make anything happen: you can fly, move back, and forth in time, go through walls, talk to the dead, have the most amazing sex, or, if you prefer, watch spiritual insights materialize before you. The lucid dream presents a world in which you are in charge even of the laws of physics. It is like doing drugs, but safe and legal, or like a movie, featuring you as the superhero, coming to a head near you on a nightly basis. 'In your dreams!' Well, yes, exactly.

Lucid dreams are interesting to Thompson since they make it possible to see the dreamed ego from the outside, as it were. In a lucid dream we are able to witness the dream state but without being immersed in the dream the way the dreamed ego is (Thompson 2014b, 143). Above all we can distance ourselves from the 'I-me-mine' structure of the self – the self as subject, as object, and as owner of a certain personality (Thompson 2014b, 123). This 'witnessing awareness,' as Thompson calls it, can occasionally be felt also while awake – in particular while meditating and in other moments of heightened mindfulness. Looking at it this way, there is nothing all that exotic about lucid dreams (Thompson 2014b, 161). It is a state of dissociation, as it were, by which we come to distance ourselves from the ego which we regularly inhabit. In lucid dreams, dissociation happens by itself but it can happen while awake too, and

it happens for a final time as we die (Thompson 2014b, xxxviii). We do not die as a particular person, but as pure consciousness – hence all the luminescence and the bliss.

‘Dissociation’ is a term we are likely to associate with assorted psychopathologies and it may for that reason sound rather unpleasant. But dissociation, Thompson assures us, is a natural process and it happens all the time. It is by constantly dissociating ourselves from ourselves that we are able to deal with the ever-shifting requirements of life. Dissociation assures flexibility and creativity (Thompson 2014b, 162–163). What is strange is not dissociation but rather its opposite: the fact that we are able to think of ourselves as an integrated person which is identical with itself across ever-shifting conscious states. Buddhism, famously, calls the self an illusion, but, says Thompson, this does not mean that we do not exist. Instead we are an illusion in the way a reflection in a mirror is an illusion. That is, the image itself is real enough but the illusion is to think of the mirror image has its own, independent, existence (Thompson 2014b, 365). It is the presence of this illusion that dream yoga teaches us how to recognize. We attain wisdom – we ‘awaken,’ as it were – the day we learn to inhabit the image of the self while remembering that this image is no independent thing. What we wake up to, if we ever do, is thus the same witnessing awareness that characterizes lucid dreaming (Thompson 2014b, 366).

Hypnagogia

Andreas Mavromatis is interested in hypnagogia; that is, in the experiences we go through as we fall asleep.³ Slowly drifting off into sleep, a number of curious phenomena may present themselves: sensations of falling or flying, swelling or shrinking, or perhaps the ideoretinal lights – the illuminated patterns we see when we close our eyes – begin swirling and pulsating or transforming themselves into faces which replace each other in rapid succession. Very often activities that we engaged in during the day will start dancing before our eyes – after a day of blueberry picking, we see blueberries and after a day of Tetris playing, we see falling geometrical shapes. There are phenomena in other sensory modalities too: perhaps we smell something, hear voices or music or have a sensation of being touched, and, very curiously, images may have smells and sounds may have tastes. Right before falling asleep, and for no obvious reason, we may suddenly feel blissfully happy or unexpectedly frightened. Just as in lucid dreams, some hypnagogic phenomena can be consciously controlled, and here too there is a doubling-up of consciousness: we are simultaneously aware of our surroundings – our bed, our room – and of the odd experiences we are going through (Mavromatis 2010, 28).

When first asked about the matter, only a small portion of people acknowledge having had such experiences, but when the sensations are described in more detail, many realize that they have them too. In fact, everyone has hypnagogic experiences of one kind or another. The problem is only that they never last very long. In a matter of a few seconds we fall through the hypnagogic state and enter the world of full-blown dreams, and once we wake up again we are unlikely to remember what happened. But here too there are techniques that can help us. You can try to visualize certain phenomena or hum a certain tune inside your head as you close your eyes, or you can simply make it so difficult to fall sleep that you remain suspended in a hypnagogic state – by keeping your hand raised, for example, or by sitting up.

Mavromatis sees a close connection between hypnagogic sensations and other processes of the mind which involve the manipulation of images. One example is creativity. There are many stories of how creativity suddenly strikes while a person is trying to fall asleep – the most famous is perhaps Friedrich August Kekulé’s insight that the benzene molecule resembles a snake biting its own tale (Mavromatis 2010, 209–210). Hypnagogia, it seems, is a time when unexpected connections can be drawn between previously unconnected phenomena.

The mind is freed up to deal with things unencumbered by sensory impressions, by rational processes and fixed routines. Some have taken explicit advantage of this fact. Thomas Edison, the story goes, used to take a break from his work by placing himself in his favorite armchair with two metal balls in his hands.⁴ This arrangement made it more difficult for him to fall asleep and he could thereby prolong the hypnagogic state. When he eventually dropped off, the balls would drop too and wake him up. If he wanted to go on imagining, he could start the process again.

Mavromatis finds connections between hypnagogia and a number of related states: meditation, for example, hypnosis, or pathologies such as schizophrenia (2010, 110–130, 219–223, 160–185). He is also fascinated by the paranormal and the occult. What these states have in common is the fact that they involve images and imagining, and they involve our attention. It is more than anything by making images and paying attention to them that our consciousness fills itself with content, and as hypnagogic phenomena illustrate, this is a process which goes on all the time (Mavromatis 2010, 9). Consciousness never rests, even if the images in the daytime tend to be constrained by our surroundings and at night mainly by memories of the past. From this perspective there is little difference between wakefulness and sleep. We realize this once we consider how easy it actually is to dissociate ourselves from ourselves. Our attention is easily absorbed and we constantly lose ourselves, not just in dreams but in thoughts, when reading books or watching movies, or when we fall, head over heels, in love.

But Mavromatis goes further. Indeed he goes too far. Although he at the start of the book presents himself as a sleep researcher with an interest in neuroscience and a commitment to scientific methods – he holds a Ph.D. in psychology from Brunel University after all – he gradually, page by page, transforms himself into a full-blown spiritualist. That hypnagogic phenomena are connected to dreams seems obvious, and that they are related to creativity we can accept; hypnagogic image-making may even be an aspect of schizophrenia. But that they are related to telepathy and out-of-body experiences seems less likely. In hypnagogia, our ego-boundaries do indeed become fuzzy, but this is not to say, with Mavromatis, that we come to share in the experiences of a collective mind (Mavromatis 2006; Thompson 2014b, 203–229). Mavromatis is literally undisciplined. He is a scholar like the scholars at the turn of the twentieth century who wrote about consciousness and the self before the boundary between the scientific and the unscientific had become firmly established and rigorously policed. His writings would fit nicely in the *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* at the time when Henri Bergson was president of the society, and William James, Henry Sidgwick and Arthur Balfour among its leading members (Society for Psychical Research (Great Britain) 1913). Research in this field was more imaginative back then, if less rigorous – perhaps we could say that science itself was more hypnagogic.

Capitalism and the ends of sleep

Jonathan Crary too writes about sleep and dreams, but he is not interested in the nature of consciousness nor in the status of the self. Instead Crary is an art historian and a cultural critic who writes about life in capitalist society, and his latest book, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, is more than anything a wake-up call. A hundred years ago, he tells us, we used to sleep 10 hours a night; a generation ago we slept 8 hours, but now the average American sleeps only 6 and a half hour per night (Crary 2014, 11). Sleep is essential to health and so are dreams, but in the early twenty-first century our circadian rhythms are completely out of whack. Crary blames capitalism, or rather, a combination of globalization and the spread of digital, on-line, technology. Capitalism, after all, remakes everything in its own image. Already in the Middle Ages, moralists complained that users were able to

make money while they slept, and since the end of the eighteenth century many factories have been running on a round-the-clock basis. Today, in the age of globalization and the Internet, we can produce and consume 24/7 regardless of where we are, and this is also increasingly what we do. Our nights are spent in the blue glare of screens which our bodies interpret as daylight. 'The planet becomes reimagined as a non-stop work site,' as Crary puts it, 'or an always open shopping mall of infinite choices, tasks, selections, and digressions' (2014, 17).

Crary discusses this as an 'attentional economy' (2001). In an attentional economy exchange takes place depending on where and how people direct their attention: what we watch, what we notice, and by implication what we do not watch or notice. Attention is more than anything attracted by spectacles – by public performances of various kinds, by newspaper headlines, and in the twenty-first century more than anything by screens. Today we carry our screens with us everywhere we go and we check them continuously – when waiting for things, like a bus; when in the middle of things, like a conversation; after things, instead of a cigarette after sex. There is always another message to send, a web page to like, a status to be updated and a feed to be fed by. There is nothing off-line which is as entertaining, surprising, titillating, or fun.

The consequences, Crary points out, are far-reaching and deleterious. Since everything constantly is available to us on-line, we lose our sense of history and it becomes difficult to imagine a future which is different from the present. Working life and leisure time blend into each other too, and while we might feel like we never work, the truth is that we never take time off. Since bank accounts and friendships are managed through movements of the same cursors, there is a homogenization of what previously were considered as entirely unrelated experiences. In addition, sensations presented by screens are highly addictive, and when we cannot get our fix right away we quickly get bored. The final results of all this exposure are neurological changes in the plastic matter of our brains. Crary makes a comparison with the sleep deprivation techniques perfected by the US military at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere. To deny someone sleep is to reduce that someone to a state of abject helplessness, and the fact that we are doing it to ourselves on-line makes no difference in this regard (Crary 2014, 7–8). We have already for a long time been policing ourselves on behalf of the capitalist system and on-line technology is only the latest example of such self-administration and self-control.

Crary, needless to say, likes his eight hours. Sleep, he insists, is an affront to the voraciousness of global capitalism. When we are asleep we are on strike, as it were, against the capitalist system. 'Sleep is an irrational and intolerable affirmation that there might be limits to the compatibility of living beings with the allegedly irresistible forces of modernization' (Crary 2014, 13). But dreams also allow us to temporarily let go of our ordinary selves. Dreaming selves have fuzzy ego-boundaries and they move and think according to a logic which is internal to the dream. While dreaming we remember the past, remember what could have been, but we also explore ourselves and elaborate on our relationships to others. Sleep is a protective arrangement, we might say, which prepares us for the coming day. More specifically, sleep protects us from the harsh logic of the capitalist system (cf. Ringmar 2005). Sleep 'leads us elsewhere than to the thing we own or are told we need,' and it requires a periodic disengagement from networks and devices (Crary 2014, 125–126). It is only because we are allowed time away from the market system on a nightly basis that we can cope with it on a daily basis. As such, Crary believes, it is in sleep that the resistance movement will begin. Only a proper night's sleep which allow us to wake up to the injustices of global capitalism. And the revolution, when it comes, will not be uploaded to YouTube.

Crary's book is a bit of a rant, in other words; it is a missive and a manifesto. And to a large extent he is refighting old battles that left-wing radicals like himself lost already back in the

1980s. There is a lot of nostalgia here: for an age before the Internet when there still was time to waste, when people cared for each other and when there was hope for the future. Crary is at odds with the world which on-line capitalism has created; he is proudly and defiantly not keeping up, and given his technophobia it is unlikely that his brain ever will be sufficiently modified to make him fit in. Like other aging radicals before him, he refuses to go gently into that good night. Or rather, the problem is that there no longer are any good nights to go into. He raves at the day *not* darkening. In a 24/7 society, the sun will never set and evening never comes. We have to die awake and fully illuminated.

Perfect nightmares

Bleak as Crary's account undoubtedly is, it may still be too optimistic. Although he acknowledges that sleep is 'porous' and 'suffused with the flow of waking activity,' he still takes it to be a radically different state than wakefulness (Crary 2014, 125). This is why sleep can provide protection and a vision of an alternative to capitalism. 'Sleep,' he insists, 'is the only remaining barrier, the only enduring 'natural condition' that capitalism cannot eliminate' (Crary 2014, 74, 125–126). But if Thompson and Mavromatis are correct, the distinction is not as sharp as all that. In hypnagogia we can follow our consciousness into the dreamworld and in lucid dreams we are just as aware as in our wakeful state. In the daytime we look at screen imagery and at night we look at dream imagery, but there is no fundamental neurophysiological difference between these two forms of attention. Consciousness never rests; there is always connectivity, always coverage. There is no sleep mode, as it were; we are always on.

The only relevant question is what we do with our sleeping selves. The proponents of lucid dreaming know, and the Internet is chockablock with their instructions. There are YouTube clips, web pages, TED talks, pod-casts and chat forums, and off-line there are self-help books, workshops, weekend retreats and a spate of recent movies. Not surprisingly, the gurus of the lucid dreaming movement insist that we take advantage of our potential for round-the-clock mindfulness. As Alan Wallace, a Buddhist scholar, tells Thompson at a lucid dreaming retreat:

When you are awake, it's always better to be mindful than not mindful; when you dream, it's always better to be lucid than non lucid. Not being lucid means being both ignorant – not knowing you're dreaming – and deluded – believing you're awake. When you recognize the dream state in a lucid dream, you replace not knowing with knowing, and delusion with true comprehension. (2014b, 197)

Ignorance, Buddhists have always insisted, brings suffering, and if lucid dreaming can help us avoid suffering it is obviously a good thing. We should not dream our lives away, Andrew Holecek, another lucid dreaming guru, declares. If we sleep a third of our lives, and live to be 90, we have lost 30 good years. If we instead spend that time doing dream yoga, we have added 'a night-shift' to our spiritual practices and 'we can work on our enlightenment 24/7' (Shambhala Mountain Center 2015, sec. 37:07).

Yet, despite all the hype, lucid dreams are actually quite rare and most people are unlikely to have them, at least in their full-blown version. Naturally this only makes those who have them regularly all the more smug: a lucid dream is something you brag about to fellow participants in your yoga class; it is a badge of your spiritual achievement. Lucid dreams, that is, require discipline. If anyone can do it, everyone has to do it; and this is how lucid dreams have become the latest addition to our contemporary technologies of the self. Once we have gained control of our bodies by means of exercise and special diets, and of our minds by means of meditation and various mindful practices, there are only our sleeping selves left to

control. Or perhaps: even if we cannot control anything else in our lives – our working conditions, say, or our relationships – perhaps at least we can control our dreams.

This, lets suggest, is how the attentional economy eventually will come to invade our dreams; this is how we finally will come to administer, control and discipline ourselves on a permanent basis. Thanks to the attention afforded by lucid dreams, we can finally take charge of our subconscious, of our desires and our emotions; control our memories and thereby also ourselves. We never have to let go of ourselves again. Yet this is where Evan Thompson puts his foot down. Ordinary dreams have their own intrinsic value, he insists, and they are not necessarily inferior to lucid dreams. Ordinary dreams occur naturally after all, and for that reason alone we may suspect that they are biologically required. Most obviously they help consolidate our memory, and thereby help us learn and acquire new skills, and lucid dreams may very well interfere with these processes (Thompson 2014b, 198). And even if we accept that mindfulness is better than mindlessness, it does not follow that ordinary dreams are mindless. Regular dreams are rather ‘an expression of a kind of selflessness and a radical acceptance of who we are’ (Thompson 2014b, 199). In regular dreams we are fully present and attention is replaced by immersion. From a Buddhist point of view, however, Thompson’s conclusions sound a lot like heresy. To accept our presence in a dream is surely to accept that there are places we should not go on our spiritual journey and a superior perspective we should not take up. It is to stop half way to enlightenment.

Crary hopes for a similar kind of self-restraint. Eventually, he argues, the day will come when we refuse to go where capitalism leads us; one day we will have had enough and decide to pull the plug on globalization and the whole on-line world. However, we may doubt whether this is likely. What human beings can do, they sooner or later have a tendency to do. If we can take charge of our dreams through lucid dreaming, we probably will, and if we easily can look something up on-line, or download a movie or contact an ex-girlfriend, we will probably do that too. As soon as capitalism has figured out a way to accompany our awareness as we fall asleep, multinational companies will be vying for advertising space in our dreams. Besides, if neuroplasticity means that our physiology really is being altered, resistance will necessarily appear as nothing but an eccentric attempt at sabotage. If everyone else is sleeping, only fools will try to stay awake.

Notes

1. I am grateful to Elisabetta Brighi, Dana Kaplan, Göran Sonesson, Evan Thompson and one anonymous reviewer for comments on a previous version of this review article.
2. Quoting Joan Halifax at a “Being with Dying” workshop. Thompson (2014b, 283).
3. Mavromatis (2010, 49); See also Mavromatis (2006). A long interview with Mavromatis is available at Peake (2013); The term “hypnagogic” was coined by Maury (1865). “Hypnapompic” phenomena are similar experiences associated with the process of waking up.
4. Mavromatis (2010, 186); Salvador Dali used a similar method (Mavromatis 2010, 209–210). Compare the homemade box in which Charles Laughlin slept during his research into states of dream consciousness (Laughlin 2011).

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