GRACE SPARAPANI –

Only in Dreams

Over COVID's most intense months, I started dreaming of recurring architectures. Confined more or less to my home—attending online classes and working remotely, meeting with my "pod" of a few friends only rarely—my unconscious, hungry for the stimulation of the outside, began exploring the external world oneirically. When I was sixteen, a camp counselor had told me that you needed to orgasm at least once a week, and if you didn't, you would orgasm in your dreams instead. I liken this architectural exploration to the same mechanism.

In one of my dreams, I wander through a massive school with several levels. Some of the floors are accessible via elevator; some are not. There are multiple libraries-cum-bookstores, a large foyer where people gather, hidden classrooms, and beautiful courtyards. But the most prominent features are the bathrooms and locker rooms. They are always convoluted—I can never find a stall with a locking door to relieve myself. Even when I find the hidden bathrooms, the ones off the beaten path, I find that all the doors are broken, or curiously do not meet the wall of the stall. Unsurprisingly, the dream interpretation site *dreammoods.com* says this means I am having frustrations about privacy. I do not know how this can be the case, when I am almost always alone in my waking hours.

In another recurring dream, I am in a shopping mall that turns into an airport that turns into a theme park-cum-game show. In the mall, I always try to shoplift. In the airport, I am always running late. In the game show, I always miss a special shortcut that will allow me to take the lead. I think I can surmise, even without consulting dream dictionaries, that this architecture speaks to a certain anxiety I have about following rules; it makes sense that it would appear during the pandemic, when I am resigned to a litany of restrictions.

Dream architecture does not have to follow standard architectural rules. Engineers don't have to check the constructions for viability; doors don't have to open; stairways don't need to remain static in one place; walls don't even have to meet the floor. This is simultaneously frustrating and freeing, like being trapped in an Escher woodcut. I've heard you should check clocks, light switches, and phones to test if you're dreaming, so that you may—if you're able—launch into a lucid dream and live out your wildest fantasies. I will posit here that checking architecture also helps—though, I have to admit, like the clock-switch-phone trick, it never works for me. Unable to control my sleeping mind, I'm fated to dream worlds of melting phones upon which I cannot type and

Citation: Grace Sparapani, "Only in Dreams," in the *Avery Review* 63 (August 2023), https://averyreview.com/issues/63/only-in-dreams#fn:2.

stairways I cannot climb that would lead me nowhere anyway.

Rêves à Deux

I later discovered that my dream architectures echoed others—in particular, a number of old films that tried to represent the unreal, oneiric built environment and help glimpse its elusive and shifting structures.

Still from *Meshes of the Afternoon*, directed by Maya Deren and Alexandr Hackenschmied [1943]. Courtesy of Flicker Alley.

In Maya Deren's 1943 experimental film *Meshes of the Afternoon*, architecture serves as the scaffolding for a dreamworld of shadows and mirrored surfaces. In one series of shots, a flight of stairs seems to be almost never-ending. In another, Deren falls backward out of a window, previously overlooking the path outside, into a stairwell, as she struggles to reorient herself vertically. Pressed against the ceiling, she then watches from above as her body slumbers below, doubled. In a later scene she observes again, now from a window, as a series of Deren doppelgängers chase a shrouded figure. It is unclear if it is really a series of Derens we—and she—see, or if it is just one Deren, continuously thwarted in her pursuit by an architecture that loops around on itself. The film reproduces the familiar dream feeling of running in place, of moving forward only to find that one is still in the same spot, as if one were in a virtual reality game and more ground keeps spawning between oneself and one's destination, endlessly extending the distance.

In another shot, Deren throws herself against the walls of the stairwell, the camera's motion matching her movements, creating the illusion that the architecture has gone topsy-turvy. She wakes, only to find that it is a false awakening, a false start—a moment later, keys turn into knives and mirrors become faces. In my own dreams, I've had many false starts like this, often plagued by sleep paralysis. I wake up in my room, where the architecture is familiar enough to believe I am ready to start my day, only to find corners melting and phone keys that don't work. I can be plagued by up to ten of these false starts, stuck in a continuous loop of realizing I am dreaming only to realize, yet again, that I am dreaming.

Screenwriter and critic Lewis Jacobs had a different take on Deren's

awakening, writing in 1948 that "the story has a double climax, in which it appears that the imagined—the dream—has become the real." [1] In the final shot, Deren is pictured dead, her throat cut by broken glass—or perhaps by the recurring knife, since the glass has broken only in her dreams. It's *Nightmare on Elm Street* rules *avant la lettre*: if you die in a dream, you die in real life. The congruence between death in a dream and death in the outside world reminds me of the story "Father, can't you see I'm burning?", from Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*, in which a boy, recently deceased from a fever, visits his father in a dream to ask, "Father, can't you see I'm burning?" [2] Upon waking, the father finds that his son's body has caught fire in the next room due to an overturned candle. The father's trauma of missing and thus failing to prevent the son's death and the subsequent burning of the body is inextricable from the son's trauma of fever, dying, and burning.

[1] Lewis Jacobs, "Experimental Cinema in America (Part Two: The Postwar Revival)," *Hollywood Quarterly* 3, no. 3 (Spring 1948): 279.

[2] Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. A. A. Brill (New York: Macmillan, 1913), 403–405.

In literary scholar and founder of trauma studies Cathy Caruth's discussion of this case, she implies that the fever-burning-dream relation is a traumatic repetition. "The relation between the burning within and the burning without," she writes, "is thus neither a fiction (as in Freud's interpretation) nor a direct representation, but a *repetition* that reveals, in its temporal contradiction, how the very bond of the father to the child—his responsiveness to the child's words—is linked to the missing of the child's death. To awaken is thus precisely to awaken only to one's repetition of a previous failure to see in time." [3] This interpretation echoes Jacques Lacan, who asked: "Is not the dream essentially, one might say, an act of homage to the missed reality—the reality that can no longer produce itself except by repeating itself endlessly, in some never attained awakening?... Where is the reality in this accident, if not that it repeats something actually more fatal *by means of* reality… ?" [4] While both Caruth and Lacan use their discussions to examine awakening and the real, I'm more interested in the implications their discourse has on *repetition and the real*, the echoing of the burning room between the dream and "real" worlds. While the dream without the corresponding event in the real would be evidence of a purely psychic repetition complex, Caruth and Lacan imply that the entire structure of the story is one of *repetition*: the literal burning of the body repeating the figurative "burning up" of the boy's fever. This is evidence of a repetition compulsion that originates *somewhere other than the mind.* They move into the esoteric, into a notion of traumatic repetition in the real, and into an inseparability between the dream, the awakening, and the real. It is, to repeat, *Nightmare on Elm Street*—if you die in a dream, you die in real life.

[3] Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 100.

[4] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton, 1981), 58.

Like the architecture in dreams, the architecture of dreams—and of the unconscious at large—seems to follow an unruly logic, doubling, turning inward on itself. But this logic begins and ends somewhere other than within. The logic of repetition, as demonstrated by Lacan, starts and finishes in the real: the dream reproduces reality, and reality, in turn, reproduces the dream, a mise en abyme, said to be Satan's favorite trick, that turns *reality* inward on itself. [5] Our unconscious architectures, it seems, are trying to show us something: a literalization of the *unconscious*'s architecture, and its relation, moreover, to reality.

[5] "Let two mirrors reflect each other; then Satan plays his favourite trick and opens here in his way (as his partner does in lovers' gazes) the perspective on infinity." Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 538.

It is worth noting that the dream architecture in *Meshes of the Afternoon* is achieved through movie magic, with both filmic technique and post-filming editing—not CGI, as we have come to expect from more recent

cinema. In analog filmmaking, effects are achieved during filming—through actors' and objects' physical relation to the camera—and, post-filmically—through physical slicing and suturing. The pro-filmic process, a process of indexicality, touches the real—if you die in a film, you die in real life.

Still from *Spellbound*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock [Selznick International Pictures and Vanguard Films, 1945].

In *Spellbound*, Alfred Hitchcock's 1945 noir thriller, the formula is reversed: when you die in real life, you die (again and again) in someone else's dream. *Spellbound* features one of Hollywood's most famous, and earliest, dream sequences, staged on a set designed by Salvador Dalí. The dream's architecture has no walls, with partitions consisting of hanging curtains featuring large eyes. In the dream, a man with a giant pair of scissors cuts through the curtains—an allusion to Dalí and Luis Buuel's Surrealist short film *Un Chien Andalou* (1929), in which an eyeball is sliced with a razor. A later shot in *Spellbound* reveals more dream architecture: a classic Dalí composition featuring a house with a chimney that morphs into tree roots, all next to a rocky outcropping with a large head-shaped stone emerging from its upper-right corner. A man in skis falls off the roof, which is itself a substitution for the ski slope where John Ballantyne, the dreamer, previously witnessed a man shot and killed.

Ballantyne (living under the pseudonym Anthony Edwardes) tells us about this dream, which is shown flashback-style as he narrates from the analyst's chair—the design of the analyst's office offers yet another piece of dream architecture, as the space that houses the analysis of dreams. For Lacan, the analyst's office is where we meet the *tuché*, or the encounter with the real that cannot be expressed by the conscious mind, lying beyond the fantasy and the symbol. [6] It is where repetition is wrapped up. Lacan writes, "Repetition is something which, of its true nature, *is always veiled in analysis*, because of its identification with the transference in the conceptualization of analysts." [7] Lacan continues to say that the *tuché* is essentially missed, and as such,

> FIRST PRESENTED ITSELF IN THE HISTORY OF PSYCHO-ANALYSIS IN A FORM THAT WAS IN ITSELF ALREADY ENOUGH TO AROUSE OUR ATTENTION, *THAT OF THE TRAUMA.*

[6] Lacan borrows the term "tuché" from Aristotle, who differentiates between "the automaton—and we know, at the present stage of modern mathematics, that it is the network of signifiers—and what he designates as the tuché—which is for us the encounter with the real." Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 52. Aristotle introduces these two concepts in the second book of *Physics*, but, in his case, they have most commonly been translated as "chance" (automaton) and "luck" (tuché). See Daniel Schillinger, "Aristotle's Psychological Approach to the Idea of Luck," *Review of Metaphysics* 73, no. 1 (2019): 31n1.

[7] Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 54. Emphasis added.

> IS IT NOT REMARKABLE THAT, AT THE ORIGIN OF THE ANALYTIC EXPERIENCE, THE REAL SHOULD HAVE PRESENTED ITSELF IN THE FORM OF THAT WHICH IS *UNASSIMILABLE* IN IT—*IN THE FORM OF THE TRAUMA, DETERMINING ALL THAT FOLLOWS, AND IMPOSING ON IT AN APPARENTLY ACCIDENTAL ORIGIN?* [8]

[8] Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 55. Emphasis added.

According to trauma studies scholars such as Caruth, the trauma is that which is missed, which is unassimilable, and thus repeats itself until such a time when, through analysis, it is assimilated into the mind and the body. Such repetition can happen voluntarily, as in the process of eye movement desensitization reprocessing, or EMDR, a therapeutic technique in which the trauma sufferer recounts their traumatic story, while following a series of rapid eye movements led by the analyst. The goal of this technique is to lessen the power of the trauma, integrating it safely into the sufferer's psyche through repeated tellings, while the eye movements assist in processing. [9]

[9] In fact, scientific studies have not been able to tell *exactly why* EMDR is effective, even as they have shown that it is indeed effective. Its mechanisms are simple yet, while there are theories about how EMDR works, ultimately mysterious.

As a patient's eyes therapeutically dart around, however, they see the analyst's office, a fairly standardized space that tends to include a chair/couch opposite another chair, possibly at a desk; some form of art (see the Instagram @therapyofficeart by Hannah La Follette Ryan, the mind behind the immensely popular @subwayhands, for examples); plants; diplomas and credentials; all in a muted color palette. The goal is to have enough to look at—soothing to the eye and mind—without being distracting. An article titled "Healing by Design," published by the American Psychological Association, attests to this standardization, including such directives as "Keep it light," "Use positive distractions," and "Not too fancy, not too shabby." [10]

[10] Tori DeAngelis, "Healing by Design," *Monitor on Psychology* 48, no. 3 (March 2017): 56, link.

Traumatic repetition, however, can also happen involuntarily. One place where that involuntary repetition often occurs is within dreams, leading to a conflation between the *tuché* and the dream encounter. So, in the retelling of a dream in an analyst's office, which encounter with the *real* is the real encounter with the real? Which architecture—that of the office or that of the dream—is the architecture of the real?

In another 1940s film, *Dead of Night*, an architect named Walter Craig is invited to a countryside cottage by a man named Eliot Foley. Craig meets a group of people at the cottage, immediately recognizing both location and individuals from a recurring dream. One of the guests is a psychiatrist, Dr. van Straaten, who insists on a scientific explanation for Craig's feeling of déjà vu, as well as the fact that he is able to predict future events, which are proven right, based on the dream. In an effort to prove to the doubting doctor that supernatural events can and do exist, each of the other characters in turn discloses a supernatural event from their past, dreamlike in both their content (mystical) and form (imaged as flashback). The result of this is a feeling like that of an analyst's office, as van Straaten offers an explanation for each event, rooted in psychoanalysis.

Still from *Dead of Night*, directed by Alberto Cavalcanti, Charles Crichton, Robert Hamer, and Basil Dearden [Ealing Studios, 1945]. Courtesy of STUDIOCANAL.

Architecture plays a prominent role in several of the stories. In guest Sally O'Hara's tale, she happens upon a ghost by way of discovering a secret room, far removed from the rest of the house. In this room time stands still in the moments before a tragedy occurs: the death of a little boy—the ghost whom Sally meets—at the hands of his older sister. In guest Hugh Grainger's story (which the film writers based on the short story "The Bus-Conductor," by E. F. Benson), Hugh looks out the window of the hospital room in which he is confined to see a hearse driver. The driver's statement, "Just room for one more inside, Sir," tips Hugh off to the fatal bus crash he is able to later avoid when he hears the bus conductor, with the same face as the hearse driver, repeat the same line. In guest Joan Cortland's story, a haunted mirror reveals a room other than the room it really reflects, the room it *used to* reflect, the living quarters of its previous owner, who went mad and murdered his wife. The mirror, through this architectural sleight of hand, takes over the mind of its new owner, Joan's husband, until Joan smashes it to pieces. Each character recounts their supernatural story like patients in the analyst's chair, looking for answers yet refusing them once received.

Upon the telling of this final story, the visiting architect Walter goes mad. He strangles the analyst van Straaten before finding himself in an architectural labyrinth that contains elements from the settings of each story. Stairways open onto other stories; chairs find themselves in other narratives. After Walter himself is strangled, by a ventriloquist dummy, the protagonist/villain of the final story—Dr. van Straaten's story—he wakes up, finding himself at home in bed, only to receive a call from Eliot Foley, inviting him to visit a countryside cottage.

Dream architecture signals to us the untethering of Walter's mind, as well as the unraveling of the setting of his dream. That he kills the analyst, only to be murdered in the same way, is telling—it is a case of p/re-enactment, the correlates set up by scholar Rebecca Schneider, who argues that when a reenactment occurs "*just so*," time is "touched… and time will have recurred."[11] Time folds in on itself. It is also a traumatic repetition, which likewise folds time, flashbacks bringing the past—both temporally and spatially—into the present,

[11] Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (London: Routledge, 2011), 10.

into the analyst's office, into dreams.

I feel—I *hope*—that writing down my dream architectures will get me closer to understanding the architecture of my mind. In my writing them down—and now, reader, in your reading them—they've become true *rêves à deux*, dreams for two, like the father who dreamed of his burning son after he had "burned up" from a fever, only to find him really burning once he woke up. It is repetition in the real. What does it mean that my dreams repeat, that these architectures recur? There is a part of me that feels—perhaps even fears—that, one day, I will find myself in one of these spaces, its meaning suddenly clear to me.

In another recurring dream, I am walking through a vast city, approaching a Walmart that grows slightly bigger with each step. Maybe it's a Walmart, maybe not. I never make it inside—something stops me. In the adjacent strip mall, I spot a vintage store. When I go in, I know where to go for what I am looking for, having visited it so many times before. With each recurrence, my knowledge grows stronger. I am close to assimilating this architecture, to understanding the space completely. What will happen then?