

# Dreamlikeness

Stephen Appel

Dreams are performed in 'dimension one', while they are recounted in 'dimension two'. (Ellie Ragland, 2000: 70)

*There was toilet in a run-down house. It was filthy. There were rotting leaves on the floor and the paint was peeling off the walls. It was a toilet, but it was somehow also a pantry or a butcher's fridge. There were pig carcasses hanging from a rail. I think there was a woman in there. She gave me a fright. She had long dark hair and I couldn't see her face. She was wearing a Jewish prayer shawl. But isn't the tallis worn by men? Anyway, I don't know if it was the same woman, but in the little room next door there was a woman also in a white dress. She was on a high shelf. She was standing in a very awkward position, sort of sideways, as if she might fall. I could see her leg through a slit in her dress. Her fingernails were red. Oh yes, there was a jewelry box on the floor.*

What have we here? It is very much like being told a dream. In fact, though, it is a description of a libidinous and forbidding photograph in Julie Firth's *Stain* (2006) corpus. Although it is not her particular purpose to do so, in her evocative series Firth has gone a long way towards solving a curiously persistent problem in art; that of dream depiction.

Reading, watching, or looking at a work of art can be like watching a dream unfold, and yet the problem of actually portraying a dream remains. Painting, film and prose literature have several devices with which to depict dreams: from simple wavy lines or altered typeface to accompaniment by weird music. Or sometimes the problem is side-stepped and an apparently realistic episode ends with the dreamer waking up.

Now and then a more determined effort is made, as in the dream sequence designed by Dali for Hitchcock's film *Spellbound* (1945) which includes memorable surrealistic images - huge floating eyes, twisted landscapes, a faceless man in a tuxedo. The producer, David O. Selznick, cut a scene in which Ingrid Bergman lifts her skirt revealing armies of ants.

The invitation to read David Lynch's film *Mulholland Dr.* (2001) as a dream is made early in the film where a bit-character, Dan, recounts a terrifying dream. Lynch himself gave the movie the tagline, "A love story in the city of dreams". The question of how much of the film is dream and who is the dreamer is not answered. In his novel *Eating Pavlova*, D.M. Thomas segues from one state of consciousness to another in his fictional version of Freud's dying delirium in the house at 20 Maresfield Gardens, Hampstead: "I dream we live in a mare's field. It must relate to my first sight of my mother's genitals - but not the last, for we lived in just one room" (1994: 3).



These are attempts to capture something of the nonsensicality of dreams, their uncanniness and fascination for us. Both puzzlingly illogical and redolent, they make no sense, and yet we have a feeling that these “sweet, dark playthings”, as Anne Sexton calls dreams, have meaning (1999: 97).

*Julie Firth: from the corpus Stain  
Colour transparency image with  
single-channel real projection vid-  
eo, 1200mm x 1200 mm, 2006*

But how to show them? Dreams, as depicted in art, tend to *signify* dreams. They are *like* dreams and we come to recognize them *as* dreams, but they are not *dream-like*. (I purposely exclude poetry here. A single line from *The Man Who Dreamed of Faeryland* by Yeats should be proof enough that poetry is at home with the nonsensical knowledge of dreamlife: “His heart hung all upon a silken dress” (2004: 18)). Attending to a dream in art is too seldom like having a dream.

We must note about the dream a quality of bizarreness which is composed of several elements. Scenes shift abruptly and discontinuously. People change their identity; the furniture of a room is unpredictably altered. Unusual things happen; birds talk, toilets are placed against windows opening into restaurants, sleeping pads are spread on the floor of public corridors, one is dispossessed of one’s bed. And yet *none of this seems remarkable to the dreamer*; he goes from one adventure to the next *quite unconcerned* at the inconsistencies and logical absurdities of what is happening (Nemiah, 1961: 202, emphases added).

Perhaps there is a clue here as to why dreams in art are so often not dream-like. Precisely because dreams depicted point to their own nature - this is a dream - they cannot but seem remarkable to the viewer or reader. In order for something to be dream-like, though, it is necessary that the viewer be unconcerned at its inconsistencies and absurdities. I would go further, the viewer needs to be *unaware* of the bizarreness and to take for granted the dream’s crazy premises. (The lucid dream is a dream in bad faith, like a child’s fearful reassurances, “It’s only a movie, it’s only a movie”). This defamiliarised world is somehow familiarised. Sometimes in a dream the dreamer thinks, “That doesn’t make sense”, but if the dreamer is not to wake up, this realistic judgment must remain in the background. To my mind even surrealist paintings are too obviously like dreams. In reality, roses don’t levitate, but Dali’s drawing attention to this fact,



Julie Firth: from the corpus *Stain*  
 Colour transparency image with  
 single-channel real projection video  
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in *The Meditative Rose* (1958), detracts radically from the possibility of viewing such a picture as being like having a dream. However, when a pig's carcass transforms into a woman's lower leg, in Image 1, it does not press to be decoded as a symbol or metaphor. Rather than specifying a meaning, it is more generally suggestive.

But of course, we don't actually *have* dreams, we only *remember* them. When we - our waking, conscious selves - tell a dream to another or to ourselves we are *retelling* it. This is one of the functions of what Freud called *dream-work*: "This function behaves in the manner which the poet maliciously ascribes to philosophers: it fills up the gaps in the dream-structure with shreds and patches" (1900-1901: 490). Waking, we see the dream with the mind's eye, but this is a re-visioning. Like any eye-witness account it is, after all, but an account. Remembering a dream is the first retelling of it, and retelling a dream recasts it.

It might be that this is another reason for the problems artists have had depicting dreams. Too often they have been concerned to demonstrate what lies beneath the dream, to suggest its meaning; but that is to deny the most elementary fact about dreams. If dreams have meaning, that meaning is thoroughly hidden from view and one cannot get its meaning from direct apperception of it. The melting watch in *The Persistence of Memory* (1931) too obviously signifies the non-linearity of time. This outer knowing gets in the way of any inner knowing.

It is well known that, according to Freud, the manifest dream is a transformation, or revision of underlying latent dream-thoughts. Dream-work distorts day-residues and unconscious material to produce the dreamer's dream. Then there is a secondary revision when one wakes, remembers a dream, and tells it to oneself. Unavoidably one attempts to render the dream as a more or less consistent and intelligible scenario. This secondary revision is the attempted removal of the dream's seeming absurdity and incoherence, filling in its gaps, reorganising its elements through selection and addition; in short, "the attempt to make it something like a day-dream" (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1980: 412).

The curious thing about recounting a dream is that while the critical, logical ego is disputatious: "I can't quite remember, it was either a toilet or a butcher shop", one still has access to the mysterious logic of the dream world: "In the dream it was both a toilet and a butcher shop". It is this experiential doubleness that so many depicted dreams miss: the paradox of their believable fabrication, their lying veracity. And it is precisely here that Julie Firth's photographs work so well. Consider Image 2. Treat it as a pictorial composition, as an event in a story, and it might seem faintly ridiculous. Treat it, as I think one must, as a palimpsestic rebus and it pulses.

When it comes to the depiction of dreams, poetry and photography seem better-suited than narrative fiction, painting, and, surprisingly, film. This is a topic for another day, but perhaps a case could be made that the formal qualities of poetry and photography - particularly layering and juxtaposition - cohere with the mechanisms of dream-work - condensation, displacement, and symbolization.

The photographs by Julie Firth are not intended as the artist's dreams and we should not try to interpret them as such. But they do have many of the features of dream enigmata. They are layered and suggestive, without having an explanation. They are over-wrought: beautiful without being pretty; horrific but not horrible; sexual, not crude; intelligent without being clever-clever. And they are dream-like precisely in the sense that, while they don't make sense, they seem to have a deeper affinity. When we look at these photographs, absurd as they are, they work on us and we go along with them. "Whether or not dreams are meaningful, they are good to make meaning with" (Phillips, 2001: 57). Similarly, it seems contrary to the spirit of these images to insist on explanation. It is not just that we cannot determine what they mean; we should not. Far better to allow them to make us daydream.

## References

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Julie Firth's images are originally in colour. A full reading and appreciation of the work would certainly depend on this aspect. Regrettably, we are only able to reproduce them as greyscale