

Regarding affects and imagery in dreams

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Summary. Focusing on the affects experienced in 118 dreams, the author puts forward a general principle of oneiric replay of secondary feelings that are real and barely mentalized. This could be a feeling of anxiety experienced in a dream when the “real” anxiousness it replays, that was provoked by a primary psychological “event”, resides in the background. An example of this is the barely anxious feeling that may surface when one is on the way to being devastated by a tormenting memory. The highly mentalized cognitive-affective stimulus (the tormenting memory) is symbolized by the oneiric image (such as a vicious dog). This exploratory study corroborates the theory put forward by Hartmann (2001) in which the image of a dream seems to picture the emotion of the dreamer.

Keywords: Dream, imagery, affect, physical sensation, tsunami in dream, animal dreams

1. Introduction

Modern scientific advances have allowed us to study dreams from the perspective of physiological and biological transformations. This has led to, among other things, a re-evaluation of the place of emotion in dreams.

Building on the idea of dreams as oneiric stories, Hartmann (2010) considers such emotions as being contextualized by the “Central Image of the dream”. According to Hartmann, the central powerful image of the dream seems to picture the emotion of the dreamer. However, the emotions felt in dreams have, until now, enjoyed little interest.

Here, we study our own dreams from the perspective of the affects experienced in those dreams and we present a summary of our observations.

Of course, we are aware that the study of dreams through the subjective analysis of affects poses, from the outset, a methodological problem, which beckons the question, “do we have the right to proceed in this manner with our study?”. Admittedly, an explanation based on introspection and the subjective examination of one’s affects poses serious questions regarding its limits, and so, for the moment, caution needs to be exercised. Therefore, in this paper we avoid inductive explanations and, thus, remain at the level of the descriptive sciences. It should also be borne in mind that this study is exploratory in nature and remains to be validated. After a brief description of our first study, a study which leads us to idea of dreams as a replay of psychological experiences of the day preceding the dream, we present our observations of the links between the affects experienced in a dream and secondary affects. We conclude by presenting a number of observations related to the question of imagery in dreams.

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2. Dreams and the Replay of Real Psychological Experiences

So, we undertook an exploratory study of our own dreams from the point of view of reoccurrence of feelings (Sellonge, 2012).

In line with this, the following statement is considered incomplete:

“I am by the sea; I am being warned of the imminent arrival of a tsunami.”

It lacks information regarding the affects experienced in the dream, in this case, “tranquility”, then “surprise” followed by “anxiety”.

The approach taken here consists in considering the extent to which such a series of affects could have been experienced in reality shortly before the dream (typically, the day before). Of course, the example that we use here is simplified. In reality, dreams give rise to a much richer web of affects, which make it possible to assign, with greater certitude, given series of real affects to given series of oneiric affects and, more precisely, to be sure of the uniqueness of this assignment.

Our first series of observations (1997-2002) suggested a general principle of the oneiric rerun of real, lived feelings from the day preceding the dream.

Out of 43 dreams studied during this first series of observations:

- 15 presented resonances that were so convincing that the correspondence between the dreams and experiences from the preceding day was beyond question. These were dreams in which the affects were so intense or original that the experience of these affects during the preceding day left little doubt as to correspondence between the dream and the real, lived experiences identified.
- 15 were consistent with the afore-mentioned principle. These typically comprised dreams in which the series of affects corresponded with a series of so banal real affects that it was not possible to say, with certainty, if the real series was actually that which was replayed by the dream.

- 13 presented resonances that were debatable, due only, however, to a certain vagueness and to gaps in the memories.

3. Dreams and the Replay of barely mentalized “secondary” affects

In 2012 we began a second series of explorations in which we focussed on the question of the construction of images. Now, having made the connection between 118 different dreams and lived experiences from the day previous to these dreams, we feel in a position to present the hypothesis that the affects experienced in a dream constitute barely mentalized secondary affects of real life. We will use the example of the tsunami dream to illustrate this idea.

A tsunami is coming (anxiety).

That example is a “pedagogical” dream. It is inspired by a real, personal dream (January 2015), which we related to the lived experiences of the previous day based on the similarity between the affects experienced but which we have simplified for “illustrative” purposes.

In this case, the day before the dream, after having discussed, with a quidam, some of his personal difficulties, I found myself in a state of intense anxiety: I feared having badly expressed myself, to the extent of fearing that what I had said might bring my interlocutor to do something unfortunate and finding myself faced both with the devastating idea of my own culpability for a potential misfortune and with being judged a such.

An initial reaction may be to associate the sense of “being responsible for an unfortunate event” to the tidal wave and the anxiety experienced in the dream to the sense of anxiety described above.

This, however, from our point of view, would be a mistake. In line with the hypotheses put forward by Hartmann (2001), the highly mentalized anxiety presented above, an anxiety that we will describe as “primary”, can be considered as being integral to the image. The tidal wave corresponds to the anxious rumination, that is to say, to a cognitive-affective unit.

In real life, this anxious reflection triggered a response. I fought against this primary threat: I was trying to convince myself that my interlocutor had understood me correctly, that he would make the right choice, that he was responsible for his own acts...However, hand in hand with this attempt to rid myself of the anxiety was the sense that it could fail. And, fearing that I would not be able to curb this spiraling primary anxiousness, I dreaded the possibility of being engulfed by the chaos of a destructive anxiety in which case the body would have been caught up in a tidal wave. (It appears that, in general, a primary psychological stimulus, anxiousness in the present example, can “reach new heights” to such an extent that it can take over one’s mind and spirit. This change of state, in response to the failure of the defensive process in our example, corresponds, in the dream, to a physical sensation). The primary psychological threat (the increasing anxiety) had, therefore, triggered a secondary anxiety; the pessimistic presentiment of being completely engulfed by the primary anxiety. Thus, from our point of view, the tidal wave symbolizes the anxious rumination and the secondary anxiety is reproduced by the anxiety experienced in the dream.

We reinforce our argument by adding that this pattern appeared in two other dreams involving surging waves. These

2 dreams brought to light very clearly an anxiety issue and the anxiety involved in its control.

4. Imagery

This schema of highly mentalized cognitive-affective units transformed into oneiric images and of the oneiric replay of barely mentalized secondary affects has also proved applicable to dreams involving animals.

Based on a sample of 19 dreams involving animals, we deduced that an animal symbolizes a representation carrying an affect, embodying to an autobiographical peripeteia, be it real or imagined. This could, for example, be a memory that either torments or delights (the memory may be real or imagined; a “false” memory that we believe absolutely to be true has the same effect as a “true” memory); a past event that befell us or one that was imagined that discourages or consumes us, a planned project accompanied by a sense of anxiety or enthusiasm (we can be captivated by the representation of a future action to such an extent that it seems to us that everything is happening just as if the story were in process of unfolding), an exhilarating or shocking peripeteia recounted by somebody else but which, instantaneously, was taken on board thanks to a phenomenon of identification.

But, how can we interpret the choice of animal?

Based on our study of animal dreams, it seems that the choice of animal (which typically falls into the category of “biting” as with a vicious dog, “scratching” as with a cat, “stinging” as with a wasp, “charging” like a cow/bull, “caressing” like a gentle little dog, “tarnishing” like a rat, “ennobling” like a lion...) is related to the highly mentalized affect attached to the representation of one’s actions (torment, guilt, vexation, discouragement, euphoria, mediocrity, greatness).

However, it appears that the highly mentalized affect is not the sole determining factor in the construction of the imagery.

We can be lacerated by the swipe of a claw or by a knife. On the basis of 2 dreams of attackers armed with knives, we can hypothesize that, in the first case, the guilt is linked to the vision of an action, while in the second it relates to a line of thought that fills one with a sense of their own guilt. Thus, the construction of the imagery seems to depend on a classification of the various types of stimuli.

In addition, the orientation of the psychological process appears to have an impact on the setting of the dream (and, consequently, the imagery). It is possible to distinguish an oneiric story that unfolds indoors, for example, from one that takes place outside. In the former, the dreamer appears to interact with their own sensibilities, while in the latter, the dreamer focuses on an interaction at the level of primary stimuli.

Thus, it appears that the piecing together of the imagery is a complex process and that there is much interesting work to be carried out on this topic.

5. Conclusion

Our exploratory study of 118 dreams, which focused on the observation of the affects experienced in the dream, suggests that these affects are a faithful reproduction of barely mentalized, secondary affects.

We are aware, of course, that, as this study is based mainly on feeling, we should proceed with caution. That said, this

study can be said to fall within the scientific framework; if we accept that the affects all have a biological and physiological counterpart, it follows that the hypothesis that we propose, which is based on affects alone, can be verified by metrological means.

After having established a link between dreams and real, lived experiences based on the similarities between the affects experienced in the dream and the real-life affects, it was possible to substantiate a thesis established elsewhere and by different means, such as in Hartmann (2001): the oneiric image seems to picture a highly mentalized affect.

If we were daring enough to push our hypothesis further, we could suggest a autonomous, psychological structure that is sensitive to highly mentalized psychological stimuli to the extent that it produces affects (the secondary affects); a structure that produces, almost like a reflex response, either a defensive or self-preserving reaction, depending on the quality of the primary affects. Could we consider this as a structure that contributes to the regulation of one's psyche? If this were the case, if the oneiric process constituted a means of capturing such phenomena, the study of dreams could be said to contribute to a lot more than simply to our knowledge of dreams.

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