

Lucid dreaming and the Surreal: Accessing the unconscious through conscious methods to produce creative visual outcomes

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‘Surrealism is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of dreams, in the disinterested play of thought.’ *André Breton, Manifesto of Surrealism 1924* [Matheson, 2006]

Introduction

This paper considers how it is possible to explore the realm of the unconscious through induced ‘guided’ or lucid dreaming. This has been done over a period of several years with undergraduate students from design and the visual arts as a means of engendering creative thinking. Both the process and the outcomes resonate with the Surrealist project that drew on the unconscious and dreams for inspiration. One means of doing this is described in detail. The method used is surprisingly simple and yet can be surprisingly effective.

Lucid Dreaming and Surrealism

Lucid dreaming is more than simply remembering clearly what we dream — it is when we can control our dreaming. When dreaming, our ability to reflect upon events and to question their credibility is greatly reduced or almost eliminated. Sometimes, however, we retain a degree of critical awareness. This may become sufficiently strong for us to become aware that we are dreaming. When you can tell yourself, ‘this is a dream’, then the dream changes from an ordinary dream into a lucid dream. Lucid dreaming has been described as a hybrid state of consciousness that is different from waking and from REM sleep [Voss *et al*, 2009]. Test subjects have been able to signal they are lucid by making a sequence of voluntary eye movements. The lucid dream experience lasts as long as the dreamer retains an awareness of being in a dream. It is, as Revonsuo observes, ‘like an awakening within a dream’ [2010, 247]. Once the lucid dreamer becomes aware of being in this state s/he may plan actions and carry them through within the dream. This may include interacting with people, anything from conversation to intimate personal relations. They may even recall facts from waking life stored in long-term memory. While most people may recall only isolated incidents of lucid dreaming, it is a skill that can be learned through training [Revonsuo 2010, Voss *et al* 2009]. In considering the creative states of consciousness, Richards refers to the increasing use of guided imagery in health and healing, and how guided imagery and meaning making may be used as ways to fully employ one’s creative mind. She observes that, ‘Dreamwork . . . which can make conscious and transform certain images and beliefs, can be life changing. One can construct narratives and new integrations, find self-defining memories, discover key images and alter them, and even

revision one's life-directing stories.' [Richards 2010, 196]. For some, it has become a business, and you can pay to be taught the technique [Warren 2008].

Hobson details the extent to which dreaming is dependent on memory and how procedural and declarative memory systems interact during dreaming, and the influence of emotions on the outcomes [Hobson 2002]. Procedural, or implicit, memory is about how to do things, such as buttoning up a coat or adding numbers; declarative memory is concerned with specific memories of personal or historical events. The point is, memory is integral to both the conscious and unconscious mind. 'Waking and dreaming are two states of consciousness, with differences that depend on chemistry. [Hobson 2002, 64]. This view has become the new norm in consciousness research [Revonsuo 2010].

Memory, then, is where the stuff of dreams is extracted. In dreams our unconscious exposes itself to us with all the absurdities, fears, desires and inhibitions that often avoid conscious scrutiny. Or maybe, as some research suggests, merely a distorted replay of events that occurred during the day when we were awake [Diekelmann & Born 2010]. Nevertheless, the unconscious has been considered the well-spring of creativity [Dietrich 2004]. Memory is fundamental to intuition, which relies on mixing existing information into new and unexpected combinations to generate entirely unlikely, unforeseen and remarkable outcomes; ' . . . associated combinational creativity during altered states such as dreaming or daydreaming can play a vital role in the creative process for the arts and the sciences.' [Dietrich, 2004, 1018]. Sadly, for those inclined towards a Romantic worldview, intuition — the mysterious mechanism that has been credited with producing instantaneous creative ideas — has been quietly losing its glamour. The consensus amongst many researchers is that the basis of intuition is knowledge. In short, creativity favours the prepared mind [Cropley & Cropley 2009, Gabora 2010, Jackson & Sinclair 2006, Weisberg, 1986, 1993].

Inescapably, questions arise of self-awareness, of being—that is, of being *conscious*. Perhaps the most compelling neurological research has to be that conducted into consciousness and unconsciousness. For an organism with consciousness, consciousness is life. Such research then is trying to explain being alive. The ineluctable conclusion being drawn is that a separation of body and mind is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain. Hobson has no doubt that, 'consciousness in dreaming, as in waking, is a brain function.' [Hobson 2002, 50]. At the same time, he recognizes that many people do not wish to consider mental activity as another form of physical activity, since this is antithetical to many cultural and private belief systems. Along with this new and clearer understanding of consciousness, the psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung is now placed in a bygone era that has been described as the 'Dark Ages' of the science of consciousness and sleep [Revonsuo 2010]. The human psyche, however, remains irrational as well as rational. Subjectively, our unconscious really is another world, a personal parallel universe that we all carry with us as an intrinsic part of our psyche. The value of many

of the insights provided by psychoanalysis need not be dismissed because we are unraveling the basis of consciousness. Subjectivity lies still in the world of myth and fantasy, and surrealism was intensely subjective. Freud's writings on dreams were translated into French in the 1930s and these provided a new impetus for the Surrealists [Mundy 2001]. Recording and unraveling the meaning of dreams and portraying this through enigmatic and disquieting imagery became the mark of surrealism:

'Dream is, of course, commonly considered as the peak of the unconscious mind's experience, and a resource for the conscious analysis of that experience. The opening up of the field of possibilities was never more exciting to the [surrealists] than in dream phenomena, whether interpreted collectively or singly.' [Caws 2004, 21].

An Altered State Of Consciousness

The dreaming of the Surrealists may now be engaged with consciously, through guided or lucid dreaming. The experience would qualify for being termed 'an altered state of consciousness' [ASC] according to Revonsuo [2010]. While this may suggest the experience is a form of hypnosis the subject does not engage in any form of physical activity and suggestions made by the dream guide do not become a reality for the dreamer, who is aware s/he is dreaming. Also, the dreamer remembers the whole episode afterwards without distortion or omission. Perhaps the closest way of describing the sensation is to consider it a combination of hypnagogic and hypnopompic states. Hypnagogia means 'leading to sleep' and refers to the short period of time between wakefulness and sleep that may produce hallucinations, as may also occur when the sleeper is just beginning to wake and experiences hypnopompic ['leading out of sleep'] hallucinations [Revonsuo 2010].

The unconscious can be fickle in terms of outcomes. The process may lead to bizarre and memorable results while at other times this technique produces no meaningful outcomes. The mood of those taking part, that is, the combination of physical and emotional state, has a powerful influence on the success of this activity. Also, personality is important and the difference between success and failure often lies in those participants who empathise with one another and those that do not. The immediate environment also has a major influence on the success of the process, most especially with guided or lucid dreaming.

Delving into the unconscious may have unexpected, scary and even dire consequences. This is one reason I do not introduce the classes to these techniques until we have all been working closely together for most of two months and everyone feels fairly comfortable in the presence of everyone else. Some weeks prior to exploring the unconscious they will all have undertaken a three-hour improv session, which is very effective in developing group cohesion and in gaining acceptance of others. Thus, by the time we consider the unconscious we are doing so with

enquiring minds in a trusting and supportive group environment. I should emphasise that I never demand students attempt anything they do not wish to do. There is no coercion and the wishes of anyone not to take part are respected.

The impetus to explore the unconscious through dreams came from Keith Johnstone, who describes how he used 'guided dreams' as a form of narrative. Another method is what Johnstone termed 'Automatic Reading', and this too, has proved to be effective at accessing the unconscious] [Johnstone 1992]. Based on his work, the *Lucid Dream* and *My Book* are two techniques I have used with students. While these have the potential to be unsettling or even disturbing, in my experience most students are intrigued and curious to find out how these methods may be used.

The Guided, or Lucid, Dream

Having explained to the class what is about to happen, I personally demonstrate how it works, using a willing accomplice, and then encourage everyone to give it a go with a friend or colleague. This technique is one that the teacher has to work on and put in some practice for it to work successfully and, naturally, one becomes more proficient although success can never be guaranteed. The guided or lucid dream requires a room that has curtains or blinds so the level of light may be adjusted to semi-darkness. This activity requires two people who, for the duration of the process, are prepared to place their trust in each other: The Dreamweaver and the Dreamer. The Dreamweaver, initiates and 'directs' the dream, while the other person, the Dreamer, allows her/himself to become absorbed in the dreamscape, but not in a passive manner. The Dreamweaver explains that the Dreamer must keep her/his eyes closed while responding verbally to the questions put by the Dreamweaver. This procedure relies entirely upon two-way communication to be effective.

Darken the room; tell everyone else present to keep silent. Clear a space on the floor. Turn a chair on its back so that the backrest provides a headrest . Lay a sheet or two of newsprint in front of the improvised 'headrest' for the Dreamer to lie on without getting her/his clothes grubby. Use cardboard if the floor is hard or cold. The Dreamweaver asks the Dreamer to lie in a completely relaxed manner. This is best done lying flat on their back with arms resting on the floor along the sides of the body and legs not crossed. The Dreamweaver asks the Dreamer to close her/his eyes and leads the Dreamer through six to eight deep inhalations and deep exhalations, counting something like 4 seconds for inhaling and maybe 3 or 4 for exhaling. The Dreamweaver should watch the Dreamer to ensure no discomfort is apparent. The Dreamweaver should close her/his eyes at this point to enter the dream. The Dreamweaver describes a scene with the Dreamer in it. [I will describe this as though you, the reader, are the Dreamweaver]: E.g. 'You are lying on a beach, it is warm and you are really relaxed.' [Take this slowly, let the scene unfold and become fixed in your, and the Dreamer's, mind]. 'It's warm and so pleasant,

you can hear the sound of the surf in the distance. Then, you hear someone walking up to you and they stop next to you, and you look up to see a woman/man [*you decide which*] holding something in their hands. She is smiling down at you but something is moving in her cupped hands — it's a bird and it's fluttering in her hands. Can you make out what sort of bird it is?' [At this point you are beginning the dialogue between you and the Dreamer and you encourage the Dreamer to respond. S/he may say something like, 'Yes, it's white, it's a cockatoo', which then gives you the opportunity to take this a step further] 'Yes, it is white and look, is it holding something in its claws? . . . ' And so, with prompts you get the dreamer to describe something more, and you latch on to their description and expand on it: The bird is holding a key. What sort of key is it? ['It's a big old rusty key'] Ah yes, it is a rusty old-fashioned sort of key. Suddenly the bird flies off into the trees along the shoreline, so you get up and run after it. ['The sand feels really warm between your toes, but as you move beneath the trees the ground changes — how does it feel? ['It's crunchy with dead leaves'] It's quite shady under the trees, and is it a bit cooler? ['Yes, and I can smell the scent of leaves'] There's the bird just ahead, by that great big rock, and it's dropped the key. You kneel down and pick it up . . . ']. And so it goes, and there may be a locked door or, well, who knows? That's now up to you and the dreamer. Those involved may agree beforehand on the initial scenario or it can just unfold. Don't rush things and allow a bit a time between statements and responses for the dreamer to provide her/his descriptions. As the Dreamweaver, it is worth thinking ahead just that tiny amount to provide an option in case the narrative falters. Remember, this is not your dream, so allow the dreamer to develop the narrative in a way that reflects the direction s/her is following. It really is important to have the story unfold with the collusion of the Dreamer. And so it continues, still with eyes closed, through dialogue between the Dreamweaver and Dreamer, until it feels like a good point to end.

The Dreamweaver must decide when to terminate the dream. Try to create some sort of 'conclusion' [not always easy to do]. Say, "Now take a few deep breaths and open you eyes", and allow the Dreamer some moments to quietly collect her/his thoughts. The experience can be quite compelling and it may take a minute for the Dreamer to 'return' to the real world. Occasionally, the dreamer appears to have entered the hypnagogic state that precedes sleep without actually falling asleep. It is immediately apparent when this has been a successful dream because the experience is so real for the dreamer that s/he remains mentally still in the dream for a short period of time after 'waking'. The feeling is similar to going to the cinema in the afternoon and, at the end of the film, stepping out into daylight that seems suddenly very bright and loud and a bit unreal because your mind is still in the world created by the movie you have just finished watching. The guided dream can create a surprisingly strong memory of something that never physically happened but was experienced nonetheless. Finally, talk over the experience. Open the discussion and invite the rest of the class to give their impressions of the sequence.

Conclusion

By eluding conscious controls this technique of guided or lucid dreaming allows elements of the unconscious to infiltrate the conscious mind, giving rise to unlikely and unexpected combinations of narrative and image. The narrative has to be recorded on a voice recorder or by notes made immediately after the session. While some students have used this technique to explore and develop their creative ideas, others have used it as an end in itself to provide the basis for slideshows or video tapes based on dream imagery. Such creative output has resulted in truly dreamlike sequences. Appreciating the powerful influence music and other sounds has on how viewers respond to imagery, students have generally been careful in their selection of the accompanying soundtrack, sometimes creating their own. For those who really wish to access the unconscious in relative safety this technique offers a powerful means of exploring the inner self— A surreal experience, one might say.

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