

Flying in Nightmares - A Neglected Phenomenon

Rainer Schönhammer

School of Art and Design, Halle, Germany

Paper presented at the 17th Annual International Conference of the Association for the Studies of Dreams, July 4-8, 2000, Washington, D.C.

ABSTRACT

It is widely supposed in the scientific and popular literature on dreams that flying in dreams is of mostly delightful character. Domhoff (1996) recently emphasised the highly positive feelings experienced in flying dreams although he mentions a turn to apprehension later in the dream ("crashing", "coming down"). In my research (an interview-sample of flying dreams) I met flying experiences in contexts of nightmares which are seldom mentioned and never thoroughly discussed in interdisciplinary dream research. Flying can be a means of escape when being chased. In such cases anxiety can melt into the joy of flying and even cover it. Not seldom the act of flying is accompanied by strong sensations of effort in these cases. On the other hand there are cases where the uncanny feeling of haunting presence arises during flying and floating without preceding chase.

Even if seldom mentioned and rarely discussed these findings parallel with reports scattered in the literature on dreams. As for the "escape" pattern, e. g., Mallon (1987) found that in women escape is a common trigger for flying in dreams; Arnold-Forster (1921) reports that her 'career' as a lifelong dream flyer started with escape; Hubbard (1971) reports several cases of recurring dreams of that kind (cf. also Schmëing, 1938).

As for the "haunting presence" pattern Ellis (1910) quotes a case where levitation is accompanied by an "agonizing fear of evil presence" and simply states: "This seems to be an abnormal type of the dream of flight". On the other hand uncanny feelings of presence are, according to Hunt (1989), a common feature of flying dreams and altered states of consciousness.

How to make sense about the interwoven patterns of flying dream and nightmare? - To nightmares can be attributed experientially a heightened feeling of "reality," i.e. an intensified awareness, and physiologically a kind of "hyperarousal" (cf. Bearden, 1994). The same seems to be the case in flying dreams (cf. Barret, 1991). Beyond this rather abstract parallel the following speculations, inspired by Barret (1991), Hunt (1989) and Kuiken (1995), could be a step to a better understanding of the mentioned patterns. Perhaps the escape-pattern makes sense as a further intensification of awareness/arousal causing at the same time vestibular stimulation and heightened attention for the physiological state of the body; the sense of effort could be interpreted as the intention to maintain this shift in dream-consciousness (of the body). The evil-presence-pattern could be understood as an auto-symbol of emerging wake consciousness haunting the sleeping mind; this shadow-consciousness (sometimes appearing as double) can be interpreted as a complementary phenomenon to OBEs (a pre-lucid split in dream single-mindedness looked at from the inside perspective). In both patterns, thus, dreammetaphors seem to be related to a specific state of dream-consciousness.

The presentation will corroborate the plausibility of these speculations by phenomenological in-depth analysis of selected case reports as well as by triangulation with outlooks on a broader range of results of interdisciplinary inquiry of dreaming.

(The suggestions concerning the 'evil presence pattern' in the submitted abstract had been revised by the presented paper; see below. The revised concept is further elaborated in Chapter eight of my book 'Fliegen, Fallen, Flüchten', published in 2004, and the paper 'Typical Dreams. Reflections of arousal', published May 2005 in the Journal of Consciousness studies.)

Artemidorous, author of the famous ancient Greek dream book, evaluates flying in dreams in general as a good sign. Some circumstances of flying, however, he interprets as omens of evil. Being chased, in Artemidorous' view, constitutes one of the bad subtypes of flying dreams:

“To be followed while flying by a wild animal, a person or an evil spirit is a bad omen, auguring great horrors and perils. The fear in the dream has become so great that the earth alone does not suffice as a refuge, and one tries to flee to the heavens.” (1979, pp. 197-8)

Flying in the context of overwhelming fear, while clearly not the prototype of flying dreams, is, nonetheless, a phenomenon that, even today, should deserve some attention when examining the nature of dreams. More, I believe, than it actually does.

In an attempt to grasp the enigma of flying dreams, I conducted interviews and scanned scientific and popular literature on case reports. I learned that dream flying and overwhelming fear show connections beyond the Icaric constellation of crashing which Domhoff (1996), for example, takes account of.

In this paper I will sketch - and try to make sense of - two, to a certain extent, distinct patterns of nightmarish flying: chase, and evil presence.

As already stated by Artemidorus, flying can be a means of escape when being chased. In ‘Women dreaming’, a book based on questionnaire research within a British sample, Brenda Mallon (1987) notes that, for women, escape is a common trigger for flying in dreams. Mallon asks (rhetorically): "Why don't we use it for pure joy and exhilaration rather than waiting for the fear to press us?" (1987, p. 43)

Let's take a closer look at the phenomenology of these kind of dreams (instead of discussing a possible difference in their frequency in females and males). Joy and exhilaration - affective qualities which led Murley Vold (1910/12), for example, to define flying dreams as the opposite of nightmares – characterize some cases of escape-flying. In others, anxiety overshadows the whole dream. One of my interviewees, a young woman also acquainted with happy flying dreams, states in respect of flying in a dream of escape: "There was nothing joyful, it was just pragmatic in this case." Others emphasize the continuity of fear even after take off. Somehow, the pursuers manage to stay within reach (they touch, for example, the feet; sometimes they use poles, sometimes they themselves, too, are able to fly). Quite often it takes a "terrible effort" to get high enough not to be caught.

“(...)it's like a nightmare (...): I'm being followed by a group of people I don't know, an anonymous crowd of some sort, and I manage to rise up off the ground, but it's really difficult

because I....of course my arms are stretched out and I have to make a terrible effort, not a physical one but more of a mental one, like I have to think "higher, higher, higher". They're still really close but I've just about managed to escape when I wake up.....they're still very near.....I've had this dream a number of times.....strange."

As Mary Arnold-Forster reports in her biographical 'Studies in Dreams': "The flying dream, when it first came, was connected with the sensation of fear" (1921, p. 38). As a little child she was - in her waking life - afraid of a "dimly lighted staircase": "...anything might be imagined to lurk in its unlighted corners; decidedly it was safest always to hurry past" the landings. In one of the first dreams that she remembers she found herself on that staircase, "fearful of something which I was especially anxious never to have to see". Arnold- Foster continues euphorically: "It was then that the blessed discovery was made, and that I found that it was just as easy to fly downstairs as to walk; that directly my feet left the ground the fear ceased - I was quite safe; and this discovery has altered the nature of my dreams ever since." At first, however, the joy of flying was a rather limited one: "... for some years I was unable to rise to any great height, or to fly with real ease. It was only gradually that the flying dream ceased to be connected with the sensation of fear and escape. For a long time it was often an effort to fly; every year, however, made it easier and more sure."(pp. 38-9)

How can we make sense of this connection of fear, flying and a sense of effort? Could it be that (a) fear causes or involves a shift in dream consciousness towards a growing perception of the sleeping body? That (b) this perception signals levitation? That (c) the sense of effort is an expression of the attempt to maintain, in an act of active, voluntary attention, this perception which started as a discovery of passive attention? - As for questions (a) and (b), there seems to be strong evidence to support an affirmative answer if one takes into account the common features - both phenomenological and physiological - of flying dreams, nightmares, and lucidity (cf. Hunt, 1989). This concerns the interrelation of intensity (or 'feeling of reality'), reflectedness, and raised (REM-sleep) arousal. With regard to the second question, one can point to the lack of a sensory awareness of the body and the involvement of central parts of the vestibular system in the process of arousal; both aspects may contribute to the perception of a transgression of gravitational forces (Hobson & McCarley, 1977). For objective or subjective reasons these impressions may be relatively weak and, therefore, may be maintained only by intentional effort. But, as the case of Arnold-Forster illustrates, it gets easier once you know what to look for: the more her attention was focused, the easier it was for her to fly.

That there is a relationship between fear or chase and greater consciousness of the body is corroborated by some details of the escape which, at first glance, contrasts with the freedom of movement finally attained. Two examples of recurrent childhood dreams illustrate this:

“I was always trying to escape, to run away from someone. I always had the feeling that I was running against the wind and that the other was catching up from behind. The closer it gets, the more I want to escape this strong wind I’m running against and to rise up and fly away. As soon as I manage to get off the ground, the wind is gone and I can fly off over it. Suddenly, it’s all really easy and the strong headwind just seems to disappear.”

“As a child, I used to get this recurring dream which was very unpleasant and always had the same theme. I am running down a street. A man is following me. I run up a hill. I am really scared. I know he’s going to kill me. My legs start to go limp and I get slower and slower. The dream has different endings. Sometimes, I just get weaker and weaker until my legs go completely limp and I fall down. I try and crawl on all fours and just get slower and slower. But he never gets me because the dreams always end first. In the other version, I suddenly rise up making these flapping motions again and begin to fly although my legs have gone limp. This is usually the end. Flying in the dream isn’t particularly pleasant, it’s more of a relief. It’s not even that, really, because I’m still not really safe. The dream is always very, very long. This chase is like an endless approach. I’m running, the man is slowly closing in, but he never catches me. It’s almost like a mathematical function.”

Even if it sounds paradoxical: The fact that flying is, in some cases, preceded by inhibition of voluntary movements strengthens evidence for the hypothesis that flying in nightmares is due to a raised consciousness of the body. I assume that the imagined movements of the body are experienced as inhibited – if, and only if - the dreaming mind looks for a feedback (which it of course lacks). Put in technical neurological terms: The mismatch of motor efferential copy and sensory reafferential (only) makes a difference to dream content if a shift towards a somehow waking consciousness of the sleeping body takes place. That's the way Havelock Ellis looked at "dreams of failure of movement" (1911, p. 102) which he - by the way - did not relate to "aviation in dreams". This assumption, I think, is more apt than Hobson's (1989) view that inhibition of movement in dreams expresses the impossibility of intending something which is determined bottom up. A heightened (approximately waking) awareness of and attention to bodily sensations can be viewed as the common ground for the perception both of inhibited movement of the limbs, and the sensation of levitation or flying. The sense of effort which we have already mentioned could be ascribed to an ambivalent perception of the body as to active attention as discussed above.

From a more microscopic perspective I assume:

- (a) that the lack of sensation of the body is open to apperceived as well as inhibition and feelings of weightlessness
- (b) that the different performance of lower and upper limbs in the dreamed experience of movement inhibition and flying (as illustrated by one of the examples quoted) is connected with differences in the sensation of the sleeping body
- (c) that the dream sensation of being touched by pursuers can be labelled as a kind of paraesthesia, i. e. a rudimentary sensation of the body, perhaps caused by twitches breaking through the blocked motor efferents.

It should be mentioned that the subject who reported the latter example also mentioned chase dreams resulting in effortless flying, full of bliss and brightness. Obviously, in this case, it's not a personal trait which is decisive at the crossroad of nightmarish and joyful flying. Perhaps this is rather a question of the actual background of mood and/or actual (quantitative and qualitative) variation of arousal.

The second nightmarish context of flying which I will briefly depict and discuss is that of haunting or evil presence: Cases where an uncanny feeling of presence arises during flying and floating without preceding chase. Havelock Ellis (1910) mentions a case where levitation is accompanied by an "agonizing fear of evil presence". His correspondent noted:

"I have often had such dreams and have wondered if others have them. Mine however are not so much dreams of flying, as dreams of being entirely devoid of weight and of rising and falling at will. A singular feature of these levitation dreams is that they are always accompanied by an intense and agonizing fear of an evil presence, a presence that I do not see but seem to feel, and my greatest terror is that I *shall* see it. The presence is ill defined but very real, and it seems to suggest the potentiality of all possible moral, mental and physical evil. In these dreams it always occurs to me that if this evil presence shall ever become embodied into something that I could *see*, the sight of it would be so ineffably horrible as to drive me mad. So vivid has this fear been that on several occasions I have awakened in a cold sweat or a nameless fear that would persist for some minutes after I realized that I had only been dreaming." (1910, p. 473)

In one of my sample cases, the dreamer feels attracted by the uncanny presence; he can't see it but he is aware that something is staring at him. He is involuntary swinging around it - to and

fro - very fast. It feels like being moved by a magnetic field. In other cases, dreamers report the impression of being pulled from behind over the edge of an abyss. Obviously, the haunting presence is correlated with vestibular sensations. These may also contribute to the strong sensation of nausea which a female dreamer reports while flying over a gruesome, dirty landscape of ruins: "I smell death."

In his 'Psychology and the Soul', Otto Rank (1930/1950) postulated that the attitude of the sleeper towards the deathlike state of his sleeping body constitutes the essence of dreaming. He added: "This attitude changes according to the kind and depth of the sleep and the psychic mood of the dreamer." (p. 139). Rank's focus on dreams as a metaphor of sleep may not hold true for dreams in general but it helps to make sense of the evil presence pattern. In a state of raised consciousness of the sleeping body, the sleeper can be haunted by the perception of his own – alienated (see the mismatch of efferential copy and reafference mentioned above) – body. Evil presence can be understood as a complementary phenomenon to OBEs. It is a split of body and consciousness looked at from "inside". This becomes quite evident if the uncanny presence turns out to be the dreamer's double (in 'The Multiplicity of Dreams', Harry Hunt discusses two of his own dreams of this nature). The research on the autoscopia of waking subjects provides further evidence for connections between the haunting presence and the double as well as for the involvement of vestibular irritation in both phenomena (cf. Brugger, Regard & Landis, 1997).

Looking back to the patterns of escape, we can speculate that the pursuers (who are often not clearly identified) are nothing but more mundane metaphors (or apperceptions) for the haunting awareness of the self's own body. Thus, in the end, it seems that the different aspects of the patterns of dream tales which we have considered are interrelated because they all are facets of an emergence of waking consciousness in the sleeping body.

References

- Arnold-Forster, M. (1921). *Studies in dreams*. New York: The Macmillan company.
- Artemidor von Daldis (1979). (Karl Brackerts, Hrsg.). *Das Traumbuch*. München: dtv.
- Brugger, Peter, Marianne Regard & Theodor Landis (1997). Illusory reduplication of one's own body: Phenomenology and classification of autoscopic phenomena. *Cognitive Neuropsychiatry*, 2 (1), 19-38.
- Domhoff, G.W. (1996). *Finding meaning in dreams. A quantitative approach*. New York: Plenum press.
- Ellis, H. (1910). Aviation dreams. *Athlantic Monthly*, October 1910, 468-475.
- Ellis, Havelock (1911). *The world of dreams*, London: Constable & Co..
- Hobson, J. Alan (198). *Sleep*. New York: Scientific American Library.

Hobson, Alan J. & Robert W. McCarley (1977). The brain as a dream state generator: An activation-synthesis hypothesis of the dream process. *Am. J. of Psychiatry*, 134 (12), 1335-1348.

Hubbard, D. G. (1971). *The skyjacker. His flights of fanasy*. New York: The Macmillan company.

Hunt, H. T. (1989). *The multiplicity of dreams*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Mallon, B. (1987). *Women dreaming*. London: Fontana.

Schmëing, K. (1938). Flugträume und "Exkursionen des Ich" [Flying dreams and "Excursions of the Ego"]. *Archiv für die Gesamte Psychologie*, Vol 100, 541-554.

Vold, J. Mourly (1912). *Über den Traum*. Bd. 2. Leipzig: Johann Ambrosius Barth.