

# REAL AND DREAMED STAIRCASES – SETTINGS OF (NOT ONLY) VESTIBULAR AROUSAL

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## ABSTRACT

Many authors provide examples of dreams in which a staircase figures as a setting for floating, flying, falling or dizziness. As is well known, Freud interpreted dream stairs as a symbol of sexual activity. Alternative symbolic interpretations of dream stairs have been suggested by Silberer, Eliade and Ouspensky. Based on a phenomenological analysis of published staircase dreams and reports drawn from my own interview samples, I will argue that dream staircases are a setting that appears in the dreamer's mind in (not only) vestibular aroused moments of sleep as a recollection of (not only) vestibular arousal experienced in real staircases. This phenomenological perspective corresponds to theoretical, clinical and experimental evidence concerning the role of vestibular arousal/stimulation (and its relation to rapid eye movements) in intense dreaming, i.e. dreaming that includes a heightened consciousness of the actual state of body and mind.  
(Abbreviation of the submitted abstract.)

Were I to ask you to imagine yourself flying or soaring, for many in the audience aspects of bird's flight would readily come to mind: arms become wings (or at least work like wings), one feels perhaps the wind and the sun, and almost certainly one looks down on scenery, houses, cars and people from a bird's eye perspective. – When asked to recollect dreams of flying, the same people that produce such wake fantasies of flight sometimes tell you that in their childhood or youth they had recurrent dreams of floating down a staircase; now and then even adult flying dreams take place in a location of this kind.

That's what I encountered when I elicited flying fantasies and asked for flying dreams in interviews or in the classroom. – How can one explain this difference between wake fantasies and dreams? – In the remainder of this paper, I will attempt an explanation that takes phenomenological details of staircase-flights as a starting point. I also will compare my view with traditional metaphoric interpretations of these dreams.

The fact that dream-flying regularly takes place in staircases is confirmed by many case-reports (e. g. Eisinger & Schilder, 1929; Mallon, 1989; Róheim, 1952; Schmëing, 1938; Volkelt, 1875)

and by an early statistical investigation into children's dreams. In 1905, in a report outlining the results of a questionnaire study of children's dreams, James R. Jewell stated: "In dreams of floating, a peculiarity is brought out which the writer has not seen mentioned elsewhere, viz., that in over half of the cases there is a definitive location for the dream experience, usually some particular staircase in the home." (p. 4) Jewell's report continues: "Many are aware of the experience being a dream, and say that they consciously repeat it for the pleasurable sensation it produces."

The consciousness of dreaming related in many of those dreams hints that such dreams take place in a highly aroused state of brain and mind. Even if we knew nothing about the involvement of central parts of the vestibular system in processes of arousal, we could infer the possibility of such an interaction from the correlation of a lucid or prelucid state of mind, dreamed take off, and a location where short – or in the case of jumping, prolonged – moments of being weightless are experienced again and again in our wake life.

From the point of view of wake fantasy, staircases are an odd location for flying. From the point of view of bodily habits, flights of stairs are a very apt place for flying and soaring. Hence dreams of flying in staircases could well be due to the fact that the dreaming mind tries to make sense of vestibular perceptions actually occurring in highly aroused moments of sleep. A closer look at dreamed flights on staircases corroborates this view (which is further backed by well elaborated aspects of sleep physiology).

Wilhelm Stekel (1911) reported a dream in which the dreamer flew one and a half meters above the stairs in a strange, sitting position; at the same time his hands made enigmatic grasping movements. Stekel interpreted this dream as an expression of the wish to be carried by a wet nurse ("Ein Ammentraum"). An alternate interpretation of this dream that corresponds with an aroused state of mind would be that the dreamer becomes rudimentarily aware of his sleeping body: the actual position of his legs is pictured as sitting, surprising sensations in the hands (perhaps due to the twitches that regularly accompany processes of arousal) are perceived as a kind of involuntary grasping. In one of my sample-cases, the dreamer had the impression of gliding with his hand on a kind of air cushion over the banister.

Strange body-positions are a well-known aspect of flying dreams in general (of which staircase dreams in my view are prototypical examples). Patterns of flying in a sitting position are, for

example, mentioned in Artemidor's *Oneirocritica*; Mourly Vold (1912), in his meticulous observations of the content of his dreams and their circumstances, reported that unexpected modes of flying (for example on his back with hanging legs) corresponded exactly to the position of the body in the moment of waking up from the dream (some depictions of dreams of flying and soaring in the fine arts hint at the same point; cf. Schönhammer , 2000a)

Strange sensations of touch are not limited to the hands. Vold, for example, reports a dream in which he jumped downstairs touching the steps only once (very slightly). Other dreamers report of several soft touch-downs between long phases of jumping. Alan Worsley, reporting his personal experiences in lucid dreaming, notes that in a recurrent prelucid dream he has

“(…) a trick (…) of descending stairs by slipping from the edge of one stair to that of the next as if my shoes were skis. I feel clever when I do this, and it became a habit. (...) It would be dangerous to use the slipping technique while awake, and I would not attempt it. On the other hand, I often seem to think I am awake in some sense when I use it in dreams; that is why I feel so clever when I do it.“ (1988, 341)

In Worsley's case the (vestibular) sensation of fast movement together with sensations of touch that are more consistent with gliding on skis than with jumping evoke a scene that meshes downhill-skiing with staircase-recollections. In some staircase-dreams the dreamers at first stumble (stumbling in real life involves sudden vestibular-sensations as well as kinaesthetic-sensations in the lower limbs and sensations of touch in the feet); then they surprisingly do not fall to the ground but stay in the air.

As stated by Vold, for example, the dreamer's mind in flying dreams typically fluctuates between the certitude of being awake and the reflection that one is dreaming. Even after waking from such a dream, sometimes dreamers wonder, as highlighted for example by Havelock Ellis (1911), whether 'this time' it might not have been a wake experience. As reported by interviewees in my sample, this doubt is particular lingering when the flying was located in a stairwell. Sometimes irritating recollections of flying come to the mind of dream-stair-flyers the next time they use the dreamed of stairs in wake life. – The threshold between wake life and dream becomes especially blurred in the case of these dreams. This irritation, in my view, may be elegantly explained by common sensations in both situations and an equally activated state of

mind (cf. the state-shift-theory; Lehmann & Koukkou 2000). – Of course, the perceived momentum in dreams often transgresses the bodily memories of wake life. Thus it is quite a common experience that the staircase flight is just a starting point for further flying outdoors; in other dreams stairs act as a brake and shortly after dreamers wake up from a dream of falling down the abyss of a derelict stairs.

The sitting position of the body, as mentioned by Stekel, implies that the body is at rest. Often dreamers just float over the stairs in a stiff upright position. Freud (1900; translation quoted according to 1997) once dreamed: “I am very incompletely dressed, and go from the flat on the ground-floor up a flight of stairs to an upper story. In doing this I jump up three stairs at a time, and I am glad to find that I can mount the stairs so quickly. Suddenly I notice that a servant-maid is coming down the stairs – that is, towards me. I am ashamed, and try to hurry away, and now comes this feeling of being inhibited; I am glued to the stairs, and cannot move from the spot.” (134) In his lengthy discussion of this dream, Freud draws a conclusion which involves the combination and opposition of dynamic movement and movement-inhibition: “A peculiar condition of my motor system during sleep cannot be responsible for this dream-content, since a moment earlier I found myself, as though in confirmation of this fact, skipping lightly up the stairs.” (136). – We may move with a momentum and feel paralysed in our dreams, even at the very same moment. This fact does not contradict an explanation that takes into account actual perceptions of the sleeper. Both aspects of the dream-experience correspond to the physiological situation of aroused moments of sleep – and may be perceived exactly because of that activation. How these possibilities are figured out individually may depend on psychological factors as well as on peculiarities of the physiological conditions (cf. Glonig & Sternbach, 1953; Hoff & Pötzl, 1937; Hunt, 1989; Lesie & Ogilvie, 1996; Nielsen, 1991).

In Freud’s view the pleasure of flying on a staircase doubly symbolizes sexuality: flying in the classical Freudian view is a metaphor for the erection of the male sexual organ; the use of staircases, on the other hand, implicates physical activation during a rhythmical movement of the body and thus, according to Freud, has to be understood as a symbol for sexual intercourse.

In flying dreams in general, and in the case of flying or floating in staircases in particular, episodes of a manifest sexual content quite often occur. Otto Rank contributed such a dream to a later edition of Freud’s dream-book (1942). In this dream (“Ein Stiegentraum”), the dreamer

seems to rape a girl while soaring over the stairs after having jumped down the stairs in a flying manner. Towards the end of the dream, he sees himself (in a blurred manner) above himself on the half-landing in his bed. The manifest sexual dream-content might well be explained as part of a – physiologically as well as mentally – highly aroused moment of sleep (near the very threshold to wakefulness). Indeed the dreamer noticed “pollution” when he woke up. – To postulate that flying or stairs symbolize sexuality makes as much sense as maintaining that, on the contrary, sexuality symbolizes stairs or flying.

Rank, in his discussion of this dream, reports that the dreamer recollected having experienced sexual arousal in his wake life while sliding down the banister, as well as during rough and tumble play. – As a location where secret pleasures and adventures of childhood and early youth take place, stairs provide more than just one link to aroused moments of sleep.

Sharp turns are a further aspect of the experience in real staircases that corresponds to objective characteristics of activated moments in sleep. Paul Federn, in his overview of phenomenological details of flying dreams published in 1914, mentioned that sharp turns are typical features of these dreams. Staircases provide a well-fitting scenario. The fun of flying sharply around the corners on the half-landings of which some dreamers report might well be correlated with rapid eye movements. (I think it is more fruitful to look for correlations of eye movements with changes of direction in general than to focus on changes in the direction of the gaze of the dreamer as Howard Roffwarg and his colleagues (1962) did in their famous study from 1962. It is probable that the vertical deflections they found in the oculogram correlated with the dynamic movement on a stairs are reflected rather in the dreamed movement of the body than in the eye-movement necessary for the fixation of the steps. – “I was walking up the back stairs of an old house. I was holding a cat in my arms.(...) I was being followed up the steps by the Spanish dancer Escudero. I was annoyed at him and refused to look back at him. I walked up, as a dancer would, holding my head high, and I glanced up at every step I took. (...) I reached the head of the stairs and walked straight over to a group of people about to begin a circle dance.” (p. 239) (note: the cat – a hint to sensations of touch)

The phenomenology of flying dreams includes nightmarish features. This tends to be neglected, as I pointed out four years ago at the ASD-meeting in Washington (Schönhammer 2000b). One of my examples then was the childhood dream of Mary Arnold-Forster (1921) which initiated her career as a passionate dream-flyer; today I will focus on the setting of this

dream: “The flying dream, when it first came, was connected with the sensation of fear. Half-way up the dimly lighted staircase that led to our nursery a landing opened on to the conservatory. The conservatory by day was a sunny place full of the pleasantest associations, but with the coming of darkness its character changed altogether. In the night-time anything might be imagined to lurk in its unlighted corners; decidedly it was safest always to hurry past the landing, and even the other landings which, though they did not open on to any such dark spots, were not places where a child cared to linger alone. In some of the first dream I can remember I was on that staircase, fearful of something which was especially anxious never to have to see. It was then that blessed discovery was made, and that I found that it was just as easy to fly downstairs than to walk (...)” (38) – Uncanny feelings of felt presence that are so characteristic for many intense dreams obviously fit the staircase setting. (That these uncanny feelings can be understood as complementary to the other aspects of strange perceptions of the body can only be mentioned here; I discuss this point elsewhere; Schönhammer, 2004, 2005).

At any rate, the phenomenology of staircase dreams hints that these dreams are somatic autosymbols as defined by Herbert Silberer (1988/1911). Silberer himself viewed stairs as functional autosymbols: as indicators of the threshold between sleep and wakefulness. The explanation given in this paper is in tune with Silberer’s focus on the twilight state of highly aroused sleep. But the fact that stairs are a typical scenario of children’s dreams lends more plausibility to a link via comparable bodily perceptions in both dreams and wake staircase experiences than to the cognitively quite demanding metaphoric ‘transition’ bridge. For the same reason, I am sceptical of Eliade’s plea (1961) to interpret stairs as a general symbol of transition. Ouspensky (1970) reflected on an aspect of transition that more closely relates ‘transition’ to a bodily felt uncertainty and also takes into account the kinesthetic dimension and is thus more in tune with the explanation favoured in this paper. Ouspensky stated: “Everybody in his life often experiences on stairs a sense of something new and unknown awaiting him that very moment on the next floor, behind a closed door. Everyone can recollect many such moments in his life. (...) For children it is often their arrival at school (...). (...) this taken together with memories of motion creates dreams about staircases.” (translation according to Green, 1968, pp. 154-5)

My explanation as to why many experience dream-flying in a location not appropriate to fantasies of flight in a wake state would seem to support the activation-synthesis-thesis of Hobson & Co. (Hobson & McCareley, 1977; Hobson, 1988). At the same time, the dream-

phenomenology attempted in this paper underscores the necessity of integrating this theory within a broader concept that explains intense dreams as a reflection of arousal processes and threshold-states of brain and mind (cf. Schönhammer, 2004, 2005).

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