

FOREWORD

Narrating Dreams

Dreams are not just physiological phenomena, but also cultural ones. This recognition has fuelled the development of what is known as cultural dream studies, a field of scholarly inquiry that investigates how dreams are understood, narrated, and represented across societies and eras. Within literary, cultural, and philosophical traditions, dreams have transcended their physiological function to become a wellspring of narrative production. That in itself is not surprising, since our ability to discuss dreams is inherently tied to their narration. Dreams themselves exist only in the mind of the dreamer, inaccessible to direct observation by others. Therefore, all discussions of dreams necessarily refer to dream narratives, which are reconstructions of the dream experience shaped by memory, language, and the act of telling, and filtered through various presuppositions. Hence, the telling or retelling of a dream may usefully be understood as a social, literary, and cultural practice. It has the power to arrange or rearrange our lives symbolically, imaginarily, and narratively; it may help individuals find their way through a difficult situation; and it may even provoke formations or reformations of identities. Dream narratives, then, are collective as well as individual modes of solution and dissolution.

The present special issue of *The Wenshan Review of Literature and Culture* sets out to explore new ways to investigate the value and function of dream narratives. Through narration, through processes of telling and retelling, and through the construction of meaning via relations to listeners, readers, and interpreters, dreams transcend personal experiences and connect to social, political, and cultural concerns. Consequently, oneiric tales may deconstruct and reconstruct the fragments of our lived experiences, confront anxieties in a surreal yet cathartic manner, and even forge nascent expressions of selfhood. This can be seen in Native American cultures, for example, where dreams are collectively discussed as to their concrete meaning and their foretelling of the future, thus forming the foundation of social practices. The custom is also observed in many other indigenous cultures. In psychoanalysis, moreover, the structure of attempting to discover needed alterations in the patient's situation

(and in their very being) follows the same process of a collective discussion between the doctor and the analysand.

In art and literature, important dreams abound in narratives from antiquity to the present day. An example is the legend of St. Patrick's Purgatory, the subject of a play by the Spanish dramatist Pedro Calderón de la Barca and included also in *The South English Legendary*, a thirteenth-century hagiographical compilation. It tells of how St. Patrick was challenged by his potential converts to prove the existence of Purgatory. Falling asleep before an altar, he had a dream vision in which he was handed a book about the Gospel and God's secrets and shown a pit in the ground, which was called Purgatory. For Saint Patrick, the dream thus grants access to higher truths and, through the process of narration, concretises into waking reality, providing the solution to a seemingly insoluble problem. The transformative power of dreams, where the act of recounting them becomes a vehicle for resolution and/or disintegration, is a recurring theme explored in various works including the Bible, Homer's *Iliad*, Geoffrey Chaucer's dream poetry, the plays of William Shakespeare, novels such as Leo Tolstói's *War and Peace*, Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* and George Orwell's *1984*, the writings of Louise Erdrich, and the achievements of Surrealism such as those of André Breton. Reflecting on dreams and literature, Ludwig Wittgenstein famously wrote of an analogy between Shakespeare and dreams:

Shakespeare and dreams. A dream is all wrong, absurd, composite, and yet at the same time it is completely right: put together in this strange way it makes an impression. Why? I don't know. And if Shakespeare is great, as he is said to be, then it must be possible to say of him: it's all wrong, things *aren't like that*—and yet at the same time it's quite right according to a law of its own. . . . [Shakespeare's plays] create their *own* language and world. In other words, [Shakespeare] is completely unrealistic. (Like a dream). (83e)¹

Wittgenstein's reflections on the boundaries between truth and falsehood, as they pertain to dreams and literature, also apply to dream narrations. As

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein. *Culture and Value*, edited by Georg Henrik von Wright and translated by Peter Winch (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980)

narratives, dreams function as constructed realities, shaped by the author's presuppositions or their creative vision, rather than replicating the original experience of dreaming. Narrated dreams may also be fictitious, or they may be misinterpreted, for example, as supernatural dreams when they may just as likely be fits of conscience or expressions of latent thoughts and desires. All of that might be said to render dreams *wrong*. But at the same time, as Wittgenstein observes, dreams have the power to create their own reality, logic, language, and authenticity, despite ostensibly being fantastical or even fictitious. The present collection of essays engages with these questions about the unconventional logic of dreams and about their epistemologically and ontologically complex relationship with the world by positing two central premises: firstly, that the linguistic and emotional world produced by dreams depends on intratextual and/or extratextual acts of narration, recording, explication, or interpretation; and secondly, that interdependences exist not only between dreaming and artistic imagination but also, because of the shared reliance on narrative, between dreaming and social, political, and cultural imagination.

All in all, narrating dreams is a significant act. It can be a linguistic act in writing or verbalizing dreams experienced within one's own mind. It can also involve reenacting dream visions, as exemplified in works like *Black Elk Speaks*. Dream narratives serve to externalize the ineffable or the unspoken. Whether utilized for sharing, healing, artistic exploration, or socio-cultural empowerment, dreams persist in their ability to animate and critique the world we live in. When we accord them with recognition and attention they deserve, dreams will continue to invigorate our inner world privately and inspire action in the public sphere.

The essays contained within this issue shed fresh light on cultural and literary manifestations of dream narrations, based upon an explicitly interdisciplinary framework. Each of them explores how dream narratives can be tools for different kinds of solution and dissolution, including self-discovery, social critique, and artistic expression. By rethinking questions of the participation of dreams in social, political, racial, and nationalist narratives, the present collection presents itself as a contribution to our understanding of the roles of dreams within the social, spatial, and cultural imaginaries of different communities. In the collection's introduction article, titled "Narrating Dreams: The Solution and Dissolution of our Desires—An Introduction," Juliet Flower

MacCannell deftly presents conceptual frameworks for understanding dreams as communal and collective, rather than individual, phenomena. Her starting point is that a dream must be retold, revisited, or shared in order for it to be interpreted or understood. The very act of sharing transforms the dream into a medium that has audiences or readers and participates in social, cultural, or political conditions. She contends that the meaning of a dream is “constructed only by the circumstance of its *telling*, of its being relayed, in language, within a specific interpersonal situation and at a particular socio-cultural moment” (viii). Drawing on a wealth of material including dream reports from Native American communities, Freudian psychoanalysis, and Emily Brontë’s novel *Wuthering Heights*, MacCannell explores dreams as interdisciplinary modes of narrative exchange.

By framing dream narration as a form of communication, MacCannell establishes a platform through which dreams can engage in dialogical exchanges and contribute to cultural, social, and political changes. She emphasizes the objective is to unravel the insights provided by dreams regarding the origins of our desires and the potential for redirecting them in the future. She challenges egocentrism, which renders individuals “deaf to the desires and dreams of others” (xi). Her plea is for letting others in.

Maintaining the collection’s interdisciplinary focus, the two articles that follow each tackle dream narratives in different cultural and aesthetic media. In his article “The Dream of the Iron Groom: The Construction and Function of a Symbol in Ralph Ellison’s Unfinished Novel,” David Dennen illuminates the role of dream narration within Ralph Ellison’s diagnostic, aesthetic, and poetic project, including Ellison’s expressions of social criticism. Dennen argues that Ellison’s unfinished novel *Three Days Before the Shooting . . .* strategically utilises dream sequences imbued with Freudian symbolism to move beyond the constraints of realism and guide characters (and the reader) towards a more complex understanding of racial identity. Thus, dream narration emerges as a powerful tool for both psychological and social exploration within literature. In “Escaping from Dreamscapes: On the Politics of Space in Films by Young Independent Vietnamese Directors,” Giang Hoang extends the collection’s interdisciplinary focus into the field of film studies. She shows how Vietnamese independent cinema utilises black comedy and magical realism to challenge not only the dominant government narratives of state-sponsored films but also the capitalist ideologies of commercial cinema. While dreams in state-sponsored

cinema tend to function as “a symbol and a cultural code used to indicate revolutionary heroism” (43), dreams and dreamscapes in independent Vietnamese films, she argues, participate in a “politics of imagination” that opens new avenues for exploring the inner lives of individuals in the country’s post-socialist era (47). By drawing on a rich selection of Vietnamese films, Hoang’s incisive analysis broadens our understanding of how dreams can be employed in cinematic media to challenge “homogenising” social and economic structures.

Taken together, the articles in this collection underscore the importance of cultural dream studies as an interdisciplinary approach to unlocking the intersubjective meanings and possibilities within dreams. They illuminate the social and political roles of dream narratives and invite us to investigate the telling and retelling of dreams as a practice that lends to, and borrows from, different social, spatial, environmental, gendered, and racialised imaginaries.

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(Taiwan, co-editor), *An Introduction to Ecoliterature* (Taiwan), and *Ecocriticism in Taiwan: Identity, Environment, and the Arts* (Lexington Books).