

«The overflowing of dreams into real life», pathological imagination

Here began for me what I shall call the overflowing of the dream into real life. From that moment, everything took on at times a dual aspect – with my reasoning never lacking logic, nor my memory losing the slightest details of what was happening to me. It was just that my actions, to all appearances mad, were subject to what human reason would call illusion...

The paragraph I have just read is from *Aurelia*, that great text on madness. It is without doubt one of the first modern texts that speaks *of* madness *from* madness. Nerval constantly shifts back and forth between the clinical aspect of 19th century alienism and mystical poetry, originating not only from Swedenborg and Apuleius but also from his own knowledge of German fantasy literature, such as Hoffmann, Goethe, Bürger... This structurally complex narration is thus at the same time an account of a traumatic experience (a kind of self-analysis) and a modern and philosophical tale about the derangement of the psyche. Nerval appears in turn as the real subject of his own experience and as a literary character, an imaginary and ideal figure, “ cause and effect, subject and object, magnetizer and magnetized ”, to use Charles Baudelaire’s words to describe the power of imagination in his text *On Wine and Hashish*. This ongoing link between pathology and fantasy reflects the fundamentally double nature of his mental illness for which he was sent many times to Doctor Blanche’s asylum. For Nerval, his illness (what we would call today : schizophrenia) manifests itself as a split personality or a revelation of his own duality (of which sleepwalking was considered one of the standard manifestations at the time). In an additional effect of introspection, the split ego finds its most exact expression – if not its origin – in dreams. Nerval explains, before Paul Valéry, that in dreams, the dreamer is both actor and spectator, active and passive. Nerval goes on to describe one of his dreams : “...I seemed to see an uninterrupted chain of men and women in whom I was and who were myself...” Such identity disorders figure in *Aurelia* at the heart of the dream and outside of it at the same

time. It is in this respect that the opening quote expresses the ambivalent situation of the text and the author's psyche, because in proposing the "overflowing of the dream into real life", Nerval pinpoints at once his illness and his poetical fiction.

Clinical and poetical

This phrase, the aesthetic dimension of which has so often been discussed, relates to one of the most important ambitions of Romanticism, especially in the 1800s: "Romanticism, as *Lebenzstejn* explains, overturns the point of view [the neo-classic division], seeks union and the eradication of differences; the fusion of arts, the confusion of genres, the effusion of art into life and life into art." Fusion, confusion, effusion or outpourings are words that express the aesthetic revolution that was Romanticism with regard to Classicism and Neo-classicism based on mimetic disparity. Let's remember that «outpouring» is one of the possible translations of the German word *Herzensergießungen* which means outpourings or sentimental effusion (*gießen* means to pour or to spill in German) which is used by the Romantic writer Wackenroder in 1796 in a text about artistic religion in painting and music. The full title of the text, partly written by Ludwig Tieck, is *Outpourings from the Heart of an Art-loving Friar*.

However, it is often forgotten that these notions have strong medical and clinical connotations, which does nothing to diminish their impact, in fact, quite the opposite. In French both aspects (poetical and medical) can be described by the same word, *épanchement* and for the purposes of this lecture I am going to use the English words overflow and outpour. In the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* (dictionary of the French Academy), published in 1835, this is described as the "flow, the extravasation, of a bodily fluid into a part of the body that is not meant to contain it". One might add that this action is characteristic of pleurisy (exudation of fluid or fibrinous material into the pleural cavity in front of the thorax), which was, with tuberculosis, one of the endemic diseases of the time (there is also a form of pleural tuberculosis).

So when Nerval talks of an "overflowing of the dream into real life", he is of course aware of the medical nature of the term. It is therefore highly indicative that, to qualify the crossing of the borders between "The Dream and Life", which is the sub-title of *Aurelia*, he chooses a term borrowed from the field of physiology. In another text,

October Nights, gnomes relentlessly beat a sleeper's head and this action is compared to an effusion of the brain: "The wretched soul, said one of the gnomes, would wake up and then die of a stroke, which the Faculty would qualify as an overflowing of the brain – and we would get the blame from up there in heaven. Immortal Gods ! He's moving; he's just about breathing. Let's harden up the skull again with one last blow of the blade, – yes of the blade." It wasn't rare in those days that, in the writings of doctors, dreams were compared to delirium and hallucinatory madness. But what Nerval is suggesting here is that the literal meaning (medical) and the figurative meaning (literary) enrich and complement each other. The two go hand in hand, and the medical context lends itself to the unravelling of a physiological fantasy the effects of which I would like to look at now.

Romantic pathology, whether a physical or psychological illness, structures the poetics of this period, the way shapes and figures are envisaged, the links between the inside and the outside. "Hypochondria, as Novalis explains in one of his philosophical manuscripts, is a pathological fantasy connected to a belief in the reality of its production – phantasms." As for Nerval's formula, it suggests that dreams that overflow their banks and invade reality, resemble disease in two ways: they are, first of all, an hallucination, a delirious production that blends in with reality and attempts to override it. Hippolyte Taine said in 1870 that perception is a "true hallucination". While contemplating suicide, Nerval thinks he can actually perceive the effects of his hallucinations, in imagining he's witnessing the end of time, at the Place de la Concorde, in a sort of generalised chaos of the cosmos (part two, chapter 4). Secondly, the "overflowing of the dream into real life" does indeed suggest the overflowing of an intimate and invisible substance into a foreign body. It also speaks of the power of contagion and contamination, characteristic of dreams, and most of all of the danger that this power implies when it escapes from the dreamer's brain. And we know that viral and contagious diseases are among the great fears of modern times, maybe even the greatest dread. Because if the project of modern philosophy, in its link to practice, is to allow man to become "master and possessor of nature", as Descartes wished, everything that escapes this control will inevitably be suspicious. A dream invading reality in a capitalist world is surely suspect as it threatens the integrity of its subjects and the division of its fundamental nature, even to the establishment of ownership. In another

way, but it isn't so different, the reactionary doctor Gustave Le Bon considers in his text from 1895 called *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, that the advent of modern crowds threatens the social balance. In other words, they challenge the middle classes and the supremacy of the ruling class. According to him, crowds are a regression from order to anarchy, from reason to instinct, and he does not hesitate, slightly in advance of Nazi biology, to compare them to contagious diseases or infectious germs. "Through their uniquely destructive force, he writes, crowds act as germs do in the decomposition of debilitated or dead bodies." By moving beyond the psychic area, dreams, just like these oblivious crowds which threaten the middle classes, also challenge the division between public and private space, even the community itself. Therefore it is when the dream begins to overflow from oneself that the dream really – literally – turns into a nightmare.

Bodies of horror

It seems to me that contemporary horror films are precisely about this, the imaginary tipping point of dreams into reality by way of the soma. A certain kind of horror film at least brings back the clinical basis of the aesthetics of the end of the 18th and a part of the 19th centuries. I don't pretend to make this cinema the more or less direct descendant of dark Romanticism, even though it wouldn't be completely illogical. Let's not forget that, in the 1950s and 60s, Roger Corman produced a set of films dedicated to the work of Edgar Allan Poe, among which were *House of Usher*, *The Raven* and *The Masque of the Red Death*. One could rightly argue that Romanticism often pursues mystical concerns that are absent from this type of dark, brutal or grotesque work. Yet the pathological or even pathologizing imagination, to use the term coined by Novalis, that runs through Romanticism does find its visual and plastic equivalent in the way that certain contemporary directors work with horror films, although often unintentionally. It isn't about horror in the sense of Burke's aesthetics of the Sublime: a dread caused by natural experiences that result in the disappearance of the subject or threaten its integrity; darkness, an abyss, and primarily, a shock caused by a sudden and destabilizing surprise. What I am referring to has much more to do with biologic horror, actual gore, the Italian *giallo*, the horror from films that border on experimental and

popular cinema. A horror that incites abjection, revulsion, disgust and that has a lot to do with anti-sublime impressions. The horror that interests me here operates mostly in areas of the psyche and involves the porosity of bodies riddled by disease and nightmares.

Lotte Eisner points out on more than one occasion in *The Haunted screen [Die dämonische Leinwand]* that German Expressionist cinema is, in its own way, an extension of the dark and mystical dimension of Romanticist literature – which is also widely used and reworked in the rest of the movement known as Expressionism. In the same way, by treating dreams as a medical and a poetical problem, Romanticist literature made horror cinema possible a long time before it existed. In nightmare scenes, the body is indistinctly a clinical object, endlessly manipulated and dismembered, a malleable material that gives rise to countless imaginary metamorphoses. This is the case for my first example, the fifth Freddy, *Nightmare on Elm Street, The Dream Child*. I can't make up my mind whether its extremism is completely ridiculous or absolutely fascinating. In the excerpt I am about to show, we see something without really understanding what we see, and the strangeness only gets greater when one tries to describe what is shown. Which is in itself already a manifestation of horror. Because the question is not whether it is a good or a bad film: horror, by nature, is that which shows all and above all the most unfathomable.

The Freddy Krueger series, beginning in 1984 with Wes Craven's first film, tells the story of a psychopath, a child killer, who was killed (set on fire) by their parents. Freddy comes back in each episode to seek revenge by murdering his victims in their dreams. He thus returns via a psychic channel and, by invading the mental space of his victims, he passes little by little back into real life. The whole point is of course that dreams and reality are entwined and end up being so confused that we don't know, as with Nerval, in which space we actually are. Freddy leaves traces in the real world of his passage through the nightmares, with the metal claws he wears on one of his gloves, a kind of cursed signature.

In this case, the confusion between nightmare and reality takes on quasi-surrealistic proportions. Everything is confused and tangled: identities, spaces, bodies, time, relationships. The director tries to make this confusion obvious by using infinite and reversed staircases that recall Escher's drawings of course. What can we see exactly?

Freddy, ousted in the last episode, comes back through the dreams of a child while still in its mother's womb. As in a set of Russian dolls, Freddy appears before the mother of the child by passing through the body of the dreaming foetus. We are, in short, inside an inside – in other words, in the dream of a being who is himself in his mother's body. But, on the screen, everything is happening on the outside, so much so that we see the unborn child as a little boy, facing up to the serial killer with his mother. Stranger yet, in a totally bizarre two-headed close combat, the killer, who has entered the child's dreams, invades the mother's body. The struggle goes on until the moment when Freddy gives birth to himself and expels his grotesque and gnashing foetus, which then climbs back into its mother's womb – a nun who was raped by a hundred mental patients in a psychiatric hospital... which brings us back, but from a very different point of view to Nerval's problematic.

Anyway, when delirium reaches this level of structural complexity (without mention of the psychoanalytical implications: doesn't Freddy then become his own father who gives his new born body to his mother?) we're getting into, if not genius, at least quite a staggering aesthetic strangeness, something indefinable, beyond good or bad. In any case, this interlocking of bodies and situations seems to me a thousand times more interesting, even in its absurdity, than the very conventional aesthetic of Christopher Nolan's *Inception*, which, under the pretext of opening up a myriad of spaces inside a dream, leads us to a cramped, normative and moralising space dedicated to the ego... instead of the insane reserve of the "id", or whatever one wants to call it, since the key to the upheaval staged by Nolan is in fact everyone's need for recognition.

When nature gets involved

In cinema, examples of the "overflowing of dreams into real life" via the body are innumerable. From this point of view, isn't horror essentially a way of giving a malleable body to dreams, of embodying the contamination of the nightmare and the traces of its passage? In this respect, Philip Kaufman's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, 1978, one of the four existing versions of this B movie, offers a striking and very physiological scene of the infiltration of reality by fantasy. It shows how the alien doppelgangers replace their originals during their sleep. Hence the recurring order in

such films: “ do not sleep! ” since it is the sleep of reason that produces monsters. These pods, which are like large seeds, literally give birth to slimy bodies, while living off the sleeper with roots and feeder stems that grow slowly and pierce through the skin (Abel Ferrara’s version is remarkable in terms of visual effect).

It is significant that the alien invasion does not rely on any advanced technology, but that it unfolds by way of a vegetal transfusion. The reasons for this modern myth of body thieves, duplications of a cold and neutral humanity, are numerous. The part played by political context is often evoked: dread of communism in the 1956 American version by Don Siegel, and conversely, condemnation of the military machine by Ferrara. Kaufman’s version is probably the one that pushed the dream-like and fantastical aspect of this myth the furthest. As if the director had reversed or corrupted the Romanticist representation of nature, and most of all their representation of vegetal growth. I say this with Philipp Otto Runge’s flowery arabesques in mind, intricate lines in which Kant would see the “ free beauty ” of nature at work, as opposed to the “ dependent beauty ” of the artificial. This sequence of the vegetal invasion of sleep offers us a contrast to a drawing by Caspar David Friedrich, *The Musician’s Dream*, circa 1830. Here, sleep does not father monsters, as in Goya famous drawing series, and in this excerpt it allows the musician to hear celestial music: nature thus seems to bind the artist to the divine. But mostly, Friedrich suggests that the artist’s dream, a pathway to the musician angels, spreads and disperses literally through the vegetal profusion that unites them.

I note that the nightmare scene that opens *Day of the Dead* by George A. Romero starts in an empty room at the back of which is a calendar the image on this completely ordinary calendar depicts a multitude of large seeds just like the pods in the *Body Snatchers*, hybrids of the larva and foetus of the nightmare. Contemporary zombie figures, monsters hungry for flesh, descendants of the possessed spirits of voodoo and 19th century sleepwalkers, might not seem to have much in common with the fantasy figures I have described so far, precisely because their psychic spaces are empty. But, the first zombie of Romero’s political cinema seemed to embody a child’s game, a nightmare turned real. Barbara and her brother Johnny are laying flowers on their father’s grave like every year, until the moment when Johnny, half-joker half-blasphemer, reminds his sister of a ghoulish game they used to play as children. Then

he starts to frighten his sister, while repeating : «There coming to get you Barbara, they're coming...» And it isn't only the titles of the first films of the series, *Night of the Living Dead*, *Dawn of the Dead*, *Day of the Dead*... which evoke the progressive and relentless contamination of night over day, sleep over wakefulness.

Nevertheless, everything has changed, since zombies have no – or no more – interiority. Nightmares have become diseases for good, in this instance viruses, like those bites that can contaminate anyone and zombify them in turn. As for the “overflowing of the dream into real life”, it is no longer an infectious disease that eats away at the body, with no possibility of hope or salvation. When the clinical is separated from the imaginary, then begins a journey of no return.

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