

Galerie Mezzanin
Karin Handlbauer
Getreidemarkt 14/Eschenbachgasse
A-1010 Wien
T +43 1 526 43 56
F +43 1 526 91 87
office@galeriemezzanin.com
www.galeriemezzanin.com

Ready to Sleep (Arbeitstitel)
Félix González-Torres
Mina Lunzer
Jan Timme
Curated by_Sabeth Buchmann

Opening: 02.10.2014
Exhibition: 03.10.–08.11.2014

--

Text by: Mina Lunzer

And when sleep passed into the realm of life, the dream had to appear as a superfluous, romantic double.,
2009-ongoing, Mina Lunzer

A.

When pausing the video recording of a sleeping person, one might notice:
The sleeper seems to have turned into a dead person. Indeed, the visual appearance of sleep in every still image is strongly related to the iconography of death. Turning this notion around, any unmistakable depiction of sleep will already have achieved one thing: Bringing sleep to life.

Yet, the ability to show movement proves to be the possibility condition of cinematography (timebased, audiovisual). On that ground, the increased availability and particular aesthetic of “film” in the 20th century must have changed the deathlike appearance of sleep to a great degree. Yet, if the new aesthetic turned sleep from stillness to life (no longer discrete, but disintegrated into phases, full of snoring, breathing and heartbeats) the dream – as the former active side of sleep – could only appear as a romantic double.

B.

It was exactly in sleep research where time-based recording technologies (such as EEG and cameras) have been employed from the very start. In 1936 a huge cylinder made it possible for the first time to register brainwaves over a period of eight hours. It was only on the basis of this long duration that rhythmic changes in brainwave patterns were observed. In 1953 the sleep researcher Nathaniel Kleitman allowed his colleague Eugene Aserinsky to conduct wake-up studies on Kleitman’s own children. Woken up during moments of strong eye movement, more dream reports were uttered than outside the phase. The increased eye motility was correlated with the changing pattern in the brain and the phase was famously called REM (rapid eye movement). Since then, and for decades, REM, a sleep phase, was regarded as the phase of dreaming. Thus, inside the architectural, personal and technical structure of the sleep laboratory a particular notion of the dream emerged.

In 1977 the psychiatrists J. Allan Hobson and Robert McCarley from the Harvard Medical School underpinned the REM theory with examinations of cell signals in the brains of cats. Yet, the project had wider social ambitions: The new images of the brain intended to inform the arts, depart from the concept of the “unconscious” and thus liberate a scientifically enlightened society from what was perceived as psychoanalysis’ conservative grip.

But the project appeared to become entangled in image aporias: Film recordings of dreamers continued to consolidate the iconography of sleep. The circulating films of cat brains with microelectrodes on TV did not conjure a cat’s dream either, but instead caused protests by animal rights activists. Reaching out for objectifiable and convincing

descriptions of dreaming, J. Allan Hobson increasingly tried to win over artists to stage dreams in a naturalistic way – and asked them to adapt these mises-en-scène to the state of scientific research.

C.

In the 1980s J. Allan Hobson eventually sought correspondence with the Italian director Federico Fellini.

Fellini's interest in dreaming was embedded in a much larger aesthetic discourse in post-war Italian cinema, but also in his own psychoanalytic treatment. Cinematography proved to be largely resistant against neurobiology, especially when it stood under US-American influence during the Cold War.

And yet: It appears that in both fields “the dream” (as a particular cultural concept) rose up for the last time, before its unavoidable fall: In the 1990s dreams were revealed outside the REM phase as well and concepts such as “continuity theory” called for fully abolishing the demarcation line between dreams and waking.

And it seems, while sleep laboratories boomed immensely, that the dream more or less disappeared again from scientific research.

D.

In the past decades, however, studies on “lucid dreaming” have attracted wide scientific and public attention: The technique implies that dreamers are capable of “controlling” their dreams and of actively following the instructions of examiners, e.g. when placed in the time-based MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging). And yet, the boom of lucid dreaming is not conceivable without a transformative moment in media technology as well: Only in recent years has the MRI scanner become so quiet that it is possible to fall asleep inside it.

Early newsreel accounts from the famous Mammoth Cave reported that sleep had become an object to study via isolation. Through later ethnographic expeditions into the brains of others, sleep was synchronised with dreams. Today new technologies seem to have installed a live broadcast from the place where sleep and dream collide. With “lucid dreaming” as a model, dreams are now considered to be present and basically accessible. Dreaming is back, but the dream “itself” has changed.