

Grupo de la revista

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Franlito González Díaz - 1947-2004

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ISBN 1-933485-49-3

Impresión:

Publicaciones Puertorriqueñas, Inc.

Calle Mayagüez #44

San Juan, Puerto Rico 00918

Tel. 787-759-9673 Fax 787-250-6498

www.publicacionespr.com



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Dreams, Collections and History: From Freud to Benjamin¹

I

generally speaking people do not expect to experience symptoms. Nobody waits around expecting to get hysterical; generally no one looks forward to being neurotic. In short, symptoms, like diseases or death, are not usually welcome. It is not surprising then that Freud defines symptoms as being "derived from the repressed."² As such there is no straight forward way towards their understanding. Nor is there an uninterrupted linear development for their emergence. Therefore, for Freud "a symptom is a sign of, and substitute for, an instinctual satisfaction which has remained in abeyance; it is a consequence of the process of repression."³ Furthermore, according to Freud "all phenomena of the formation of symptoms may justly be described as the 'return of the repressed'."⁴ Consequently what we find here is that symptom formation is intrinsic to repression. In Freudian psychoanalysis the resolution of symptoms generally takes place between the patients' dreams, her telling of the story and its interpretation. It is in this conjuncture, between the telling of history and dreaming that one can think of a theoretical articulation of dreams and the symptoms of history. This articulation is particularly interesting and productive when

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interfered with the relation between history and politics in the thought of Walter Benjamin. I consider this an intervention on the political character of the telling of history. The proposition is to read Walter Benjamin's historiographical proposal along the lines of Freud's theory of dream interpretation.

II

In *The Arcades Project*,⁵ Benjamin finds expression for the arising of dreams in one of his always-keen allegories. The allegory he tells brings to the forefront ancient Greece as a source of dreams. This ancient source enjoys a plethora of hidden powers that fill our imagination and illuminates our understanding. In the same way in which Freud found many of his words in the tragedy of Oedipus, Benjamin also searches in the labyrinths of the Greek mythic world. Benjamin reminds us that although dreams can come from different places, those coming from what the Greeks thought of as the underworld have a special quality to them. He argues, "one knew of places in ancient Greece where the way led down into the underworld. Our waking existence likewise is a land which, at certain hidden points, leads down into the underworld—a land full of inconspicuous places from which dreams arise."⁶ These 'hidden points' also captured Freud's attention in his investigation of the sources of dreams. Freud's search led him to an underworld of forgotten (and repressed) infantile experiences and to the inconspicuousness of the indifferent details of one's day. In Benjamin, as in Freud, the experiences of waking life, the indifference of everyday phenomena, and the richness of childhood, they all lead down into the underworld. But the underworld here has a dimension beyond being the "abode of the departed." The underworld is also "a sphere or region lying or considered to lie below the ordinary one. Hence also a lower, or the lowest, stratum of society."⁷ These multilayered meanings embrace different possibilities for understanding the metaphoric language used in reference to the sources of dreams. Of these possibilities two are particularly suggestive. On the one hand we have the Greek connotation of a complex world referring to that which takes place in Hades. Although a place where there is a continuity of being, Hades (for the living) constitutes an experience in another world and hence does not participate in the continuity of the living world. On the other hand, there is the connotation of referring to the lower stratum of society. Both instances

can be understood in terms of otherness: of the dead and of the 'living dead' as those who do not participate in the progress of history. There is the allegorical underworld where a recollection of past experiences takes place and where these experiences become a source for the present, our dreams and eventually our future. The second entails a contemporary class element to the underworld. It is the real world of the excluded, the marginalized; a place mostly fit for the 'Other.' The metaphor here becomes a social reality, but it also allows engaging Benjamin with Freud at a more significant level. For Freud and Benjamin the sources of dreams are intimately connected to that which is excluded, that which seems unimportant or quotidian, and that which is repressed.

For Freud it was an indisputable fact that "all the material making up the content of a dream is in some way derived from experience, that is to say, has been reproduced or remembered in the dream."⁸ But what is the relation of this material and its seemingly inconsequential character. The relation between the dream and its meaning has enjoyed an important status for thought in both Freud and Benjamin. The analyst in Freud and the historian in Benjamin go through great pains in order to bring that meaning to light, and even more to interpret it. We know that for Freud the seemingly inconsequential is the result of the mechanism of displacement in dreams. When Freud presented his hypothesis regarding the daydream many thought that the psychological significance of indifferent recollections was a bogus thesis. We already know Freud's response. In the mechanism of displacement "ideas which originally had only a weak charge of intensity take over the charge from ideas which were originally intensely cathected and at last attain enough strength to enable them to force an entry into consciousness."⁹ The seemingly irrelevant is taken over by the unconscious latent content and is transformed into manifest content to bypass one's defenses and enter the realm of consciousness. We see the same trope operating in Benjamin. A particularly important instance of this mechanism can be seen when Benjamin refers to the minutiae of the day to the experience of everyday life. Benjamin points out: "All day long, suspecting nothing, we pass them by, but no sooner has sleep come than we are eagerly groping our way back to their corridors in the dark corridors. By day, the labyrinth of urban dwellings, its corridors consciousness; the arcades (which are galleries leading into the city's past) issue unremarked onto the streets. At night, however, under the tempestuous

parts of the houses, their denser darkness protrudes like a threat, and the nocturnal pedestrian hurries past – unless, that is, we have emboldened him to turn into the narrow lane.”¹⁰ The Benjaminian dweller suspects nothing; he does not realize that the arcades are “galleries leading into the city’s past.” His day whether relaxed or distressed, whether he thinks the city is beautiful or ugly, whether he should embark in a new life or be content with his predicament, i.e., just dwelling in the city for the sake of it or bewildered by the panorama of his life, the surroundings are just the ambiance where his life is taking place. Little does he know that at night the city’s “denser darkness protrudes like a threat.” Here we can see how the play of metaphor as well as the sense of experience mediates both discourses to make the Benjaminian dweller and the Freudian dreamer one subject. For if Benjamin’s dweller is unaware of the threat of the city, Freud’s dreamer suspects nothing of what lies ahead. Those dark corridors, the cause of beautiful fantasies as well as horrible nightmares, can come in Freud as dream material from Benjamin’s ‘labyrinth of urban dwellings.’ Waking life provides for much of the manifest content of dreams. Benjamin’s labyrinth of urban dwelling becomes Freud’s day-dream.

Benjamin’s dream “is the earth in which the find is made that testifies to the primal history of the nineteenth century.”¹¹ The materiality of the ‘earth’ here serves to bring together the supposedly externality of waking life and the psychic internality of the dream experience. The relation of exteriority and interiority is dialectically worked-out in both Freud and Benjamin. Whereas Benjamin collapses the distinction with his metaphorical language, later infused with political commentary, Freud does it through the theory of dream interpretation; a theory that will show through analysis the mediation and unfolding of the latent content of dreams. A content that once subjected to interpretation emerges out of the tensions between the conscious and the unconscious. What in Benjamin grows out of the dream as earth in Freud is manifest content. As anyone familiar with Freudian dream interpretation knows, the dream-work in Freud consists of transforming latent content into manifest content. While in Freud the individual recounts his dream as he remembers it, as manifest content, in Benjamin we see a working-out of remembrance not in the language of manifest content but in the metaphor of boredom.

Benjamin tells us that “boredom is a warm gray fabric lined on the inside

with the most lustrous and colorful of silks. In this fabric we wrap ourselves when we dream. We are at home then in the arabesques of its lining. But the sleeper looks bored and gray within his sheaths. And when the later wakes and wants to tell what he dreamed, he communicates by and large only his boredom. For who would be able to at one stroke to turn the lining of time to the outside? Yet to narrate dreams signifies nothing else.”¹² To narrate the dream is trying to show the colorful inside of a pale gray outside appearance. To narrate is to work out a condensed relationship not only between the told and the untold but also more importantly between the silence of that which is been told and the unheard noise of the untold. What comes out of that narration will necessarily have to go back to itself and emerge again as another voice or rather, as the voice of an-other. This is essentially a dialectical movement. While sometimes this movement relates to different phenomena (but not in the dream, which is our concern) in Benjamin and Freud shares essential features for its delivery: narration, analysis, interpretation, and working-out among others. Instead of expressing the “arabesques of its lining,” instead of revealing our latent thoughts, we only communicate the boredom of the dream, the manifest content that overcame our defense. And yet “who would be able to at one stroke to turn the lining of time to the outside?” Hence, eventually the arabesques will reveal themselves and overcome the narration of mere boredom. Latent content will be discovered, revealed: the colorful inside of a gray pale outside will be turned inside-out not once but many times until we see the constitutive tension, the colorfulness of the gray and the grayness of color, but cannot take a hold of it. The dialect of it escapes us, it is no longer at a standstill, but we go back to it, from another perspective: this motion is philosophically eternal, only politically can we take a hold of it. In Benjamin it is the collector, or rather, the historian as collector, as *chiffonnier*, the one that can turn the lining outside.¹³ In Freud the analyst performs such labor.

Collecting and the collector enjoy a salient role in *The Arcades Project*. Furthermore, what is involved theoretically in the labor of collecting in Benjamin corresponds to the same operation involved in displacement and condensation in Freud’s dream-work. Thus the historian as a collector shares a correspondence with the analyst as a ‘rag picker’ of dreams. In Benjamin “What is decisive in collecting is that the object is detached from all its original functions” Thus, the object will have, rather than

a function, a meaning for the endeavor of the collector. A new meaning will be developed for the object; a meaning that will have historical determination in the sense of what it comes to be a part of. Along the same line we see that for Freud what is decisive in the dream is that the images that we took from the day's experiences are detached from their original function and take a whole new meaning. Here the Freudian dream-image and the Benjaminian collected object share the same theoretical place for understanding their respective enterprises. For Benjamin, the collector detaches the object of its original function so the object can "enter into the closest conceivable relation to things of the same kind." In Freud dream images enter the unconscious and form a relation that is detached from the original function that the now-image had in waking life. The relation of the dream images takes a meaning in the realm of latent thoughts, thoughts that apparently have no relation to these images. It is at the level of the dreams' manifest content that the dream 'makes sense'—i.e., seems to be associated with things of the same kind. This passage of the dream image from latent thoughts to manifest content is the result of displacement and condensation in Freud. Benjamin shows that in collecting an object is displaced out of its original context, not for the mere sake of decontextualization and the formation of a new meaning, but for the sake of understanding a larger and more important meaning regarding a particular object. One should not be thrown off by the thought that the collection in Benjamin might be of anything (toys, cards), the important point here is the theoretical proposition we get from the relation Benjamin sees between collecting, the object, meaning, and history.

Regarding the relation between the objects and things of the same kind Benjamin tells us that "this relation is the diametric opposite of any utility and falls into the peculiar category of completeness. What is this 'completeness'? It is a grand attempt to overcome the wholly irrational character of the object's mere presence at hand through its integration into a new, expressly devised historical system: the collection."¹⁴ The psychoanalytic process as a whole shares the same logic as seen in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. The dream images related by the analyst and initially express a distinctive irrational character. One of the interpretations' aims is to reveal the latent content of the dream. As such, this revelation has an interpretive purpose in the analytic process. Here the "expressly devised historical system" is not the collection but its metaphoric other, the logic

of psychoanalytic knowledge: analysis. The collector is to his object what the analyst is to a dream. The work of analysis is repeated by Benjamin as the logic of historical knowledge.

Both the collector as well as the analyst is not only taken by objects and dreams but with understanding and knowledge of their objects. Their phenomena are at the end constitutive of knowledge. Benjamin posits that "for the true collector, every single thing in this system becomes an encyclopedia of all the knowledge of the epoch, the landscape, the industry, and the owner from which it comes."¹⁵ For the analyst, every element of the dream is material for interpretation and it provides him with knowledge. As the collector sees every single thing as part of his system, the analyst also sees every dream and all the 'mistakes' the analyst makes and tells as part of analysis. For Benjamin all we find in our epoch, from the minutiae of our lives to the cultural production, is material for the historian, whose labor consists of interpreting it as a dream of the collective. In this interpretation the historian's most important task is to get from the 'manifest content' of our landscape to the 'latent content' of our experience. The position of the analyst is that of the subject-suppose-to-know. His knowledge comes from the things—images, dreams, objects, slips—and its place is in the transferential relation. The historian has to become a subject-suppose-to-know, his epistemological position, different from that of the analyst, is not taken for granted. The process of acquiring that knowledge begins with his 'fanatic' with everyday life and ends with his interpretation of the dream of history; an interpretation that never ceases. Benjamin believes that "It is the deepest enchantment of the collector to enclose the particular item within a magic circle." The collector is enchanted and looks forward to the eventual completion of his magic circle. However, this completion is understood as a "grand attempt to overcome the wholly irrational character of the object's mere presence." Hence, Benjamin's magic circle should not be understood as an enclosed totality but a fluid enterprise. In an allegorical fashion, the analytical process is a source not of "enchantment" but of "jouissance," the analyst's work is not to enclose but analogically to interpret the significance of an "item" for his "magic circle" of interpretation.

For Benjamin "this is the way things are for the great collector. They strike him. How he himself pursues and encounters them, what changes in the ensemble of items are effected by a newly supervening item—all this

shows him his affairs in constant flux.”¹⁶ Isn't the work of interpretation in constant flux? Isn't the historian's work as an interpreter of dreams in constant flux? If we go back for a second to Freud's interpretation of Irma's dreams we clearly see that interpretation changes, takes on new meanings with the emergence of “new items.”¹⁷ The analyst also “pursues and encounters” new images, new dreams, new material which bring a turn to analysis. The more material comes out, with more fluidity analysis proceeds. Isn't this also the logic of the historian? Moreover, Benjamin states that “At bottom, we may say, the collector lives a piece of dream life. For in the dream, too, the rhythm of perception and experience is altered in such a way that everything—even the seemingly most neutral—comes to strike us; everything concerns us.”¹⁸ The ‘seemingly most neutral’ concerns the analyst and the historian. Many times that which is considered trivial, that which would not arouse suspicion to the mechanisms of defense is precisely the material that the dream-work uses to condense and express that which the ego would deem unacceptable.

In a wonderful and revealing passage, Benjamin indicates, “The collector actualizes **latent** archaic representations of property. These representations may in fact be connected with taboo....”¹⁹ Doesn't the analyst actualizes the latent content of dreams? Aren't many of our childhood-repressed memories, particularly those of a sexual nature, “connected with taboo”? Isn't the Oedipus complex the quintessential “latent archaic representation of property”? Isn't the child's object of desire the sole “property” of the father? This is precisely what Freud's metaphor points to.²⁰ If we follow Benjamin's quote further we can see how telling he is on this respect. He says that it is “certain that taboo is the primitive form of property. At first emotively and ‘sincerely,’ then as a routine legal process, declaring something taboo would have constituted a title.”²¹ Aren't in Lacaness the “Law of the Father” and in Freudian terms the “Castrator” psychoanalytic titles? The symbolic status of the function of the father enjoys the reception of his message as words of love or, “emotively” and “sincerely,” as Benjamin says. However, these loving words of prohibition, Freud discovered early, were to become a fundamental psychic “legal process.” Many of the laws of the unconscious as developed and described by Freud emerged out of the observations of apparently insignificant everyday occurrences. These presumably “neutral” everyday phenomena belonged to a profound and unamusingful psychopathology. Everyday occurrences were in many respects

attempts at wish fulfillment when understood in the language and works of the unconscious.

Benjamin's initial emphasis on perception serving as the primary source of dreams constrained him to move more smoothly towards his dialectical explosion. However, he moves beyond it as did Freud. Although physical stimulus is one of the sources of dreams (among others), by itself does not allow one to interpret the dream. In the same fashion in Benjamin, the historian has to look for sources of dreams that go beyond these bodily stimuli. Dreams “gather around the framework of physiological processes” in the same way that “artistic architectures gather” around the “role of bodily processes.”²² However, we should point out that the formation of dreams comes from deeper places and their interpretation requires from the historian more than iron requires from the architect.

Notes

I want to end in a metaphorical manner so as to leave something for the reader to ponder: There is an old joke (a kind of a cliché actually) that goes something like this: *When a WASP tells a story it usually begins 'once upon a time...,' but when a Black or a Latino tells it, it usually begins 'you ain't gonna believe this shit...'* There is a double character to the joke. On the one hand the underlying expectation is that one presumably is not going to believe what one has just been told because of the story's unexpected events. These will present the singularity of being uncommon, surreal, and even astonishing. On the other hand, at the level of the joke as discursive device, it has what Freud would call a relation to the unconscious. In this case such relation may be interpreted as the structural, but unnamable social relations of the subjects interpolated by the joke.²³ While the story of the WASP is portrayed as a fairy tale, both discursively and politically the power relation remains unchallenged. In a (probably obscure) sense, I have wanted to present the relation of dreams and history in Benjamin as an exhortation to the historian to start believing and account for such “shit.” And finally, such a reversal of perspective may serve as an initial path towards the challenging of the aforementioned power relation.

This short essay was initially presented at the Cultural Studies Conference, Northwestern University. I would like to thank Monica Espinosa and Antonio Y. Viquez for their critical reception of these ideas. As always, I'm grateful for what may be described as the coldness of friendship in intellectual matters.

²³Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1981), vol. 22, *Two Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, 57.

²⁴Freud, SE, vol. 20, *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Dreams*, 91.

ISBN 1-93945-49-3
E-64-59466-T NBSI
9 781933 485492

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