

**IMT Institute for Advanced Studies - Lucca**

# **L'ART DE LA RÊVERIE**

**FEMALE DAYDREAMS IN NINETEENTH CENTURY PAINTING**

PhD Program in Management and Development  
of Cultural Heritage  
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By

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# ABSTRACT

The focus of this research is analysing forms and meanings of dream representations in the visual arts of the nineteenth century.

The research has compiled an extensive collection of dreams representations or dream-related images, primarily in painting. Such a heterogeneous collection has allowed to remark how during the nineteenth century the iconographic categories of dream images which were previously to be found are almost not existing anymore. On the contrary, the emergence of a new category has been observed: a new form of dream representation is now the daydream, best defined by the originally French term 'reverie' for reasons of linguistic accuracy.

The thesis, therefore, aims at defining this type of representation in its essential and recurring features, and at questioning its diffusion and meaning. These answers are based on observations of common factors found within this new iconography; predominantly, the fact that the main actors of these represented reveries are almost exclusively women.

To illustrate how this new iconographic category varies during the century and who the artists contributing to its definition are, several artworks have been considered and analysed from an iconographic and stylistic perspective. This artworks analysis has led to the conclusion that the reverie in this century is understood as a primarily feminine activity, and as such it depends on both the societal role concretely attributed to the woman, and on the abstract view of the woman, whether it be idealising or degrading, in the different fields of knowledge, from medicine and psychology to art and literature. Additionally, the thesis intends to illustrate the other possible forms of reveries when they are not images of femininity.

In conclusion the reverie, and above all its representation, will be identified as a specific phenomenon invested with several theoretical and socio-cultural implications, above all concerning the common

understanding of femininity. Being symptomatic of the nineteenth century's mentality, this conception of the reverie, as well as its visual representations, will have a different evolution already from the first decades of the following century.

# INTRODUCTION

## 1. APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

“In a circle of men [...] curiosity arose one day concerning those dreams which have never been dreamed, those created by authors, and attributed to fictitious characters in their productions. The proposal to submit this kind of dream to investigation might appear idle and strange; but from one view-point it could be considered justifiable”<sup>1</sup>.

My idle and strange investigation commenced from the realisation that dreams are incomprehensively examined phenomena that need to be contemplated more thoroughly. The idea Sigmund Freud exposed to introduce his analysis of the novel *Gradiva* by Wilhelm Jensen (1903) is, indeed, that not only real dreams can be analysed and psychoanalysed, but also fictional dreams that are invented by writers. According to Freud, writers are valuable to psychoanalytic research because in their creation they seem to have

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<sup>1</sup> Freud Sigmund, *Delusion and Dream. An Interpretation in the Light of Psychoanalysis of Gradiva, a Novel by Wilhelm Jensen*, New York: Moffat, Yard & Company, 1922, p. 111 (original edition 1907).

A note on translations: most of the documents used for this work were originally in French and their quotes, unless otherwise stated, have been translated by me. In the cases in which an official translation in English existed and was available, the quote has been done by reporting its words. Additionally, in some cases the French phrasing and terms were worth being quoted directly; in these cases they have been inserted in the body of the text, with English translation in the footnotes.

interiorised the way dreams really work on a psychological level: “For, when they cause the people created by their imagination to dream, they follow the common experience that people’s thoughts and feelings continue into sleep, and they seek only to depict the psychic states of their heroes through the dreams of the latter. Story-tellers are valuable allies, and their testimony is to be rated high, for they usually know many things between heaven and earth that our academic wisdom does not even dream of”<sup>2</sup>.

The present research aims at collecting and analysing dreams that have never actually been dreamt and have been imagined instead. While Freud and his colleagues refer to the dreams invented by writers and integrated as part of their novels, my research will push the analysis further and apply the same idea to invented dreams that were instead expressed in visual arts.

This thesis will not go as far as to suggest, as Freud does, a psychological analysis of such images<sup>3</sup>. In contrast, the approach to this study has been iconographical and sociological, collecting and comparing dream images and investigating their actual meaning. Beyond the basic level of visual description and iconographic analysis, these images might prove highly revealing when collected as a whole and analysed in their similarities and differences.

The first clarification to be made is that the term ‘dream’ (and consequently ‘dream representation’) can be intended in several ways. The first and original definition is the nocturnal dream activity—the images and events that are seen and perceived during sleep. The second meaning derives from the fact that visions seen in dreams often reflect a real aspiration and accomplishment desired by the dreamer; thus the term dream becomes a synonym of wish or desire. This utilization is also very common in our daily life and exists in almost all languages, as well as in idiomatic expressions<sup>4</sup>. Finally the term dream

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 113.

<sup>3</sup> Which is the focus of Ernst Gombrich’s article titled “Freud’s Aesthetics”, in *Encounter*, Jan. 1966, pp. 30-39.

<sup>4</sup> To be seen in expressions such as “live your dream”, “a dream that comes true”, “I have a dream” etc.

might be understood as a fantasy, a visionary image, a *capriccio*; this definition, despite being infrequently diffused in common language, can be more frequent in visual art, where paintings representing fantastical landscapes or *capriccios* can be defined as ‘dreams’.

In its original intention, this research was concerned exclusively with the first definition of the term ‘dream’ (that of the images seen during sleep). Nonetheless, observations of the sampled artworks has produced a shift towards the second definition—that of a wish or desire. To address the issue of the invented dream, the first step would be to observe different aspects of the actual dream experience.

In describing the main features of the everyday dream phenomenon, two aspects are apparent: its subjective character - always self-referential to the individual - and its ineffability. This second aspect is perhaps its most appealing quality: the fact that images and situations experienced so intensely can disappear in an instant and never be recalled again. This is also the reason why dreamers often try to remember and share their dreams.

In a common experience, the dream is at first “lived” during the night while dreamers watch and participate with the images presented to them: this concerns the individual’s psychological life. In a further level of experience, the dream is remembered and recalled into memory, becoming part of waking life as well. Lastly, the dream is sometimes told to others and shared, incorporating dreaming into a social practice.

The representation of dreams in visual arts, being produced and shared within a (more or less) large community, refers to this third level of experience, and does not involve the self-referential character of the two first levels. Additionally, the fact that represented dreams are fictional adds a fourth layer of experience: the dream is not only dreamt, remembered and retold—it can be also invented.

This ineffability of the dream, its resilience to be re-told, was the first point of interest that initiated this research. For this reason one of the very first questions at the origin of this study was how and through what means a dream, whether invented or not, can be reproduced.

The most common way of recording dreams is undoubtedly through writing. Most people who attempt to remember their dreams utilise dream journals (as does psychological research). Writing, with abundance of details and subjective explanations, can report a dream rather accurately. However, as all people experience, the most common sensorial impression in the dream is the visual stimulation<sup>5</sup>. This would lead to the conclusion that the most effective way to report a dream accurately is by transposing it into images.

The origin of this research questions whether and how the dream can be transposed through a visual representation and, furthermore, whether a dream can be represented in visual arts. The cases in which recalled dreams are represented in images rather than in words are not common, but obviously occur more frequently among artists and people with drawing skills<sup>6</sup>. Although highly interesting, these dream images will not be part of this study, that will examine exclusively fictional dreams.

Once assessed that the more natural—though not more common—way of reporting a dream is through a visual account, we shall consider the idea of dreams that have not actually been dreamt but are fictional. These are by far much more widespread than real ones both in literature and in visual arts; they are worthy of investigation at least as much as actually dreamt dreams because, as anticipated, even invented and represented dreams follow the same mechanisms that are acting in real dreams<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> It has been proven that the dream is a prominently visual experience: though also other sensorial experiences are perceived in the dream, the visual stimuli dominate the senses, with a rate of 80% of the whole sensorial impressions.

<sup>6</sup> For further explanations, see *infra*, 'subjective dreams'.

<sup>7</sup> Freud also insists on the fact that authors and artists invent their dreams, which prove to be psychologically realistic, but they do this without being aware of it: "One of the circle who, as was explained at the beginning, was interested in the dreams of *Gradiva* and their possible interpretation, put the direct question to Wilhelm Jensen, whether any such similar theories of science had been known to him. Our author answered, as was to be expected, in the negative, and rather testily". Freud Sigmund, *Delusion and Dream. An*



For general consideration, this study will first attempt to understand the fictional dream image in relation to its implications, artistic approaches, and how it could be perceived by the public.

Throughout art history and until relatively recent times, artists, considered little more than craftsmen, have been mostly bound to the constraints of subjects and patrons' requests in regards to artistic taste and expression; although, this general rule does not apply to fantastical images, like *fantasias*, *capriccios* or, most importantly, dreams.

The dream, as a fantastical representation *par excellence*, might have provided the artist with much more freedom than any other representation; the artist might have felt more comfortable when depicting a dream, taking more liberties than in a plain, realistic scene. The dream representation, therefore, has often been the place where the artist's personality, wishes, and wills would actualise: it might have been the space in which subconscious thoughts would be more likely expressed<sup>8</sup>.

This observation illustrates that artists expose deeper and more subtle truths, consciously or otherwise, within fictional dream images. For this reason, after individuating the type of dream images to be investigated, their meaning and functions will be analysed. The analysis determined that fictional dream images were more deeply rooted in culture and society of the period than expected .

All considerations made thus far generally refer to dream representations in visual arts.

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*Interpretation in the Light of Psychoanalysis of Gradiva, a Novel by Wilhelm Jensen*, New York: Moffat, Yard & company, 1922, p. 210.

<sup>8</sup> Being unconscious, the dream can as well be the place to hide something of which the artist does not want to take responsibility; it can be the place for criticism, for satyr, for avoiding censorship. This expedient has been use both in literature and visual arts; one important example on this purpose can be the famous *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* by Francisco de Goya (1799), where the artist represents, in the form of a dream, his dark vision of his epoch, in which barbarism has prevailed over reason.

The analysis of dream representation in early modern art had been the object of my previous research, titled “The Stuff Dreams are Made on”<sup>9</sup>, which considered a significant timespan from the late Middle Ages until the end of the eighteenth century.

The present research was originally conceived as a continuation of this work; its purpose was to investigate dream representations in the period following the one already analysed. However, the present research will focus on a much more limited timeframe – exclusively the nineteenth century—since the specificity of both the artistic and the socio-cultural situations generated unique features and instances to analyse.

To conduct the same type of iconographic analysis for the present study, as utilised in the previous one, similar methodologies and approaches will be adopted.

## 2. L’ANCIEN RÉGIME DU RÊVE

Reporting the findings of the aforementioned research was necessary to provide an overview of historical precedents and the cultural context in which the new dream representation of the nineteenth century emerges. This historical parenthesis highlights the applied methodology and exposes the reasons why this was relevant to the nineteenth century, though giving wholly different results.

The phrasing “*l’Ancien Régime du rêve*” has been utilised<sup>10</sup> to define the entire epoch preceding Freud’s ‘revolution’ in the psychological understanding of the dream at the beginning of the twentieth century. While the Freudian influence certainly plays a major role in the artistic representations of the dream as well, representations of visual arts observe instead a relevant shift already from the beginning of the nineteenth century. In this case, the expression

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<sup>9</sup> Developed at the University of Pisa, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Ripa Yannick, *Histoire du rêve. Regards sur l’imaginaire des Français au XIX siècle*, Paris: Fayard, 1988, p. 12.

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