

Simple Method of Producing Dreamlike Visual Images in the Waking State

A Preliminary Report

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FREUD POINTED OUT that the production of a manifest dream from a latent dream thought involves essentially the regressive transformation of the latent dream thought, as expressed in words, into perceptual forms, most commonly into visual images. These are then subjected to symbolic representation, condensation, substitution of a part for a whole, hints and allusions, and displacement of accent.¹ The technic of dream interpretation is therefore to discover the latent verbal thoughts behind the (usually disguised) visual imagery of the manifest dream by means of free association. That this is at times difficult hardly need be stated.

Many attempts have been made to solve the dilemma of dream interpretation. For example, the sleeper can be experimentally stimulated, as by having the limbs placed in various positions, being subjected to noise, cold, etc.¹ In addition, the symbolism of dreams has been studied by suggesting ideas to be dreamed to subjects under hypnosis.^{2, 3, 4, 5} However, as Freud so well pointed out, "We can often influence what man shall dream *about*, but never *what* he will dream; for the mechanism of the dream work and the unconscious dream wish are inaccessible to external influence of any sort."⁶

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Because of this, I decided to approach the problem from a different direction, and have attempted to synthesize one aspect of the dream, namely the transformation of verbal thoughts into visual images. It is therefore the purpose of this paper to describe such transformation of verbal thoughts into visual images (produced in the waking state) when the verbal thoughts represent bodily sensations such as pains or aches, or pleasurable or unpleasurable affects such as rage, anxiety, depression, happiness . . . , or verbal thoughts concerned with motor action. In addition, I shall point out the application of this method to the field of psychosomatic medicine.

Method

The visual images which are produced depend on whether the verbal thought is directed toward a specific object, or whether the thought relates to oneself (among other things). The subject may be seated or lying, eyes open, or preferably closed. The room, however, should be quiet and free of distraction.

A request to visualize a specific verbal thought is made. This request can be repeated as often as is desirable. When this is done, the successive visual images obtained in this way will be related to the same verbal thought. In

addition, it will often be found that the initial images obtained are screen images, which later will tend to be replaced by more significant material.

When an image appears, the examiner can ask, "Describe in detail the image you see. What or who does it remind you of? Tell me more about it. . . ." Every effort should be made to avoid suggesting to the subject what he should see.

The following is an actual example of the method.

A 27-year-old man, whom I had previously treated for numerous attacks of emotionally induced gastrointestinal upsets, came to the office complaining of "tenseness." Recently he had been discussing with me some personal and business problems in a casual, matter-of-fact way.

He sat down on a chair facing the desk.

Without any preliminary explanation, I said to him, "Sit back in your chair, close your eyes if you wish. Say to yourself, 'I am tense' and tell me the visual image which appears in your mind's eye."

He settled back in the chair, closed his eyes and said, "I see a large line. Now it is a circle."

"What else?" I asked.

"Now the circle is changing. It is now a ring, the rings of Saturn." "I am an amateur astronomer," he added as an afterthought.

"What does the circle remind you of?" I asked.

"I don't know," he answered.

I then asked him what he had been doing during the past week. There followed a conversation about some of his business problems. He began describing an attempt of his to secure a big contract with a large firm, but felt that he was wasting his time and "running around in circles."

At this point I asked him, "Do you think that the circle you just visualized might indicate your helpless feeling of running around in circles?"

"You know," he answered, "that's exactly how I have been feeling."

He then proceeded to tell me his fears that even if he did obtain the contract it might prove disastrous to his firm, because it entailed a large financial risk. Therefore he was in danger of losing, either by not getting the contract, or by getting it.

I then turned to the image of the rings of Saturn. "Does this image of the rings remind you of anything?" I asked.

He could offer no associations to the image of the rings.

I then asked him to tell me any further unpleasant experiences he had had in the past few days. At this point, he spontaneously associated the words "marriage ring" with the visual image of the rings, and began to describe some of the thoughts and doubts which had been on his mind on the subject of marriage the past week.

No attempt was made to study associations connected with the visual image of the planet Saturn.

The entire discussion took about forty-five minutes. At the end, he said that he felt much better and that the muscle tension had disappeared.

Results

This method does not always succeed. A subject may begin to describe a visual image. Then a pained or quizzical look may appear in his eyes or face and he may say, "Now I don't see anything." Or he may be unable to describe any visual image. Some subjects may at times be able to produce visual images, and at other times may be unable or unwilling to. (At present, it is not possible to describe in detail how often the method succeeds in the same subject or in different subjects. Furthermore, up to the present time, we have not attempted to determine whether the visual images seen are in shades of gray or whether they involve color.)

It will be noted that from what has already been said that the visual images are used not only as a source of interpretive material, but as a source of verbal associations and further images.

When the expression of a subject's face indicated that the visual image was producing anxiety, no attempt was made to continue the observations.

Preliminary observations indicate that the visual images obtained when an attempt is made to visualize a bodily sensation or an affect can be divided into two main categories.

I. An Object Which Produces the Pain or Affect in Reality Is Visualized with Some Degree of Distortion

"Life With Father" two days previously. In the show, Father spent an afternoon "fixing" things, including a clock, in the house. Father

EXAMPLE NO. 1

<i>Subject</i>	<i>Bodily sensation experienced</i>	<i>Visual image obtained</i>
Man with neuro-circulatory asthenia.	"I have a drawing pain in the right knee and lower extremity."	"Someone (an artist?) is drawing the articulated bones of the right lower extremity, attached to a pelvis." Lying horizontally across the pelvis is a stalk of celery. The celery reminded the subject of an impressionistic drawing of a tuberous plant he had seen several months previously. At that time, the plant reminded him of the male genital organs.

Interpretation

One interpretation of this visual image would be: The visual image representing drawing pains in the knee becomes a literal drawing of the knee and bony lower extremity. The distorted image of the genitals suggests a relation between the pain and sexual matters. The horizontal position of the celery stalk reminded the patient, when questioned, of the female escutcheon. Further discussion of this image brought out that since childhood he had felt tense if he tried to fall asleep with his leg protruding from the side of the bed, and revealed other evidence of fantasies indicating that he was afraid he might lose his penis.

was depicted as a fool (and he feels that his own father was foolish in wasting time on projects like this.) In addition, three days previously, he had also visited a town where he had worn the cap he visualized in the image.

Interpretation

One explanation would be this: The boring pain in the chest was directly visualized as the boring of a hole in wood. The image of his father doing the boring suggests that the pain was precipitated by external factors. In this case, further discussion revealed his great hostility to his father. Also, when he was a boy, he deeply resented that he had to help his

Source of This Visual Image

The subject had seen the television show

EXAMPLE NO. 2

<i>Subject</i>	<i>Bodily sensation experienced</i>	<i>Visual image obtained</i>
Same as in Example No. 1	"I have a boring pain in the chest."	"Someone is boring a hole in the cellar door of my house to insert a lock there." He "knows" that it is his father (dead ten years), even though the image is not clear. The brace and bit being used is one his father had often used. He is standing by. However, he is only about thirteen years old. (He dates this from the particular cap he is wearing.) The scene then changed and he visualized a dining-room table cluttered with parts of a lock tumbler, or was it a clock?

father on the innumerable projects his father enjoyed doing, such as minor carpentry and fixing locks and clocks.

Interpretation

At this time, the subject felt overwhelmed by personal problems, and the thought had

EXAMPLE No. 3

<i>Subject</i>	<i>Affect experienced</i>	<i>Visual image obtained</i>
Same as in Example No. 1	"I am tense."	He is on a high balcony (boardwalk) overlooking a beach. Then the scene changes and he realizes that this is an airplane view and that he is actually flying. His breathing becomes rapid, he feels very anxious, and develops pain in the chest.

Interpretation

The immediate cause of the anxiety is the fact that the subject has just made arrangements to take his first airplane trip and is afraid. The dangerous image of flying was first screened by a boardwalk scene. In relation to this, the subject stated that when he was an adolescent, he used to walk the boardwalk at Coney Island and derive great pleasure from watching the bathers. Other associations about being afraid of heights reminded him of his fear, at about the age of five years, of being carried off by a giant into a castle in the sky (the giant being the one in the fairy tale, *Jack the Giant Killer*).

come to him that if this continued he might "crack up" emotionally. The image of the sanitarium is derived from the fact that he passes it on his way to work frequently.

II. The Object Which Produces the Bodily Sensation or the Affect is not Visualized: The Visual Image Represents a Wish Fulfillment

Interpretation

The people reminded him of a new maid in his house, who is very cheerful in spite of all the troubles she has. The affect, anger, apparently has not been visualized. Instead, the visual image which appears represents a wish-

EXAMPLE No. 4

<i>Subject</i>	<i>Affect experienced</i>	<i>Visual image obtained</i>
An adult	"I am sad."	The first image was a large plain and, in the distance, three large hills. This changed into a large <i>white</i> hotel, nestled in the hills, reminding him of an advertisement he had seen in the papers several weeks previously. He wasn't certain whether the hotel was in <i>White Sulphur Springs</i> , or in the <i>White Mountains</i> . The scene then changed to a picture of a sanitarium for nervous disorders. The name of the sanitarium is <i>West Hill</i> . The buildings are painted <i>white</i> .

EXAMPLE No. 5

<i>Subject</i>	<i>Affect experienced</i>	<i>Visual image obtained</i>
An adult	"I feel angry."	He visualizes a group of identical colored people standing on the porches of a row of identical shacks, singing very happily.

fulfillment: "Oh, if I could only be happy like our colored maid, instead of getting angry about unimportant matters!"

Discussion

The first systematic investigation of visual imagery was made by Galton,⁷ who, however, did not understand the psychological significance of the visual images his subjects observed. Later, Silberer,⁸ showed how verbal thoughts can be transformed into visual images. However, to accomplish this, he had to induce a hypnagogic state between sleep and wakefulness in himself or in his subjects. More recently, Kubie and Margolin,⁹ have also described a method of utilizing hypnagogic reveries for dream analysis.

Freud pointed out that a dream is essentially an attempt at wish fulfillment.¹ He further pointed out that a dream need not be disguised. This is especially true of the dreams of children, and as an example, he cited the dream of the young child, Herman, who, against his will, had to give a basket of cherries as a birthday gift. That night he dreamed, "Herman has eaten: all the cherries."

The ordinary distorted dream of an adult is the disguised fulfillment of a repressed wish.

The visual images which appear in the waking state as a result of the verbalization of specific affects may also represent wish fulfillments (Example No. 5). (Up to the present time, we have not been able to find examples of bodily sensations being transformed to visual images which represent wish fulfillments. The reason for this is obscure.) However, and more important, the visual images which appear may also represent the source of the affect. Such visual images are usually distorted and disguised and represent screen images. This is not necessarily a disadvantage because one can use these screen images to obtain earlier and more significant sources of the bodily sensations and affects.

It is interesting to note in this connection that it is difficult to have the affect of great rage visualized directly. Instead the visual image which appears usually represents a wish fulfillment. However, if the verbalization is

"I am angry at A or B," instead of "I feel angry," a visual image illustrating the anger toward an object will usually appear.

One reason that it is difficult to visualize directly the general affect of great anger or rage, whereas an affect such as anxiety is usually visualized, may be that visualization is under control of the ego (although its source is in the id¹⁰). If one assumes that rage is a product of the id, the visualization even in disguised form, of great rage, by the ego, may be capable of producing so much anxiety, that the visual image is repressed. (This may be the reason that it is possible to be afraid of one's rage—i.e., of one's inability to control his rage). However, if anxiety is a function of the ego,¹¹ it is theoretically possible to visualize even great anxiety, even though the visualization is distorted. The subject of the visualization of affects is discussed further, elsewhere.¹⁰

It has been pointed out that at one instant, a visual image may represent an actual, if distorted, visualization of the affect, whereas, even a few minutes later, the same affect will call forth a visual image which represents wish fulfillment. If one again assumes that the visual images are under the control of the ego, the following explanation of this phenomenon may be tenable: One function of the ego may be to mobilize or discharge affects, which are aroused by desires of the id. Therefore, when an affect is present, the ego will visualize it with as little disguise as possible, and carry out voluntary motor actions capable of discharging or mobilizing the affect. However, if the mobilization of the affect involves great danger to the ego (as may occur in rage), the ego will repress the visual image and substitute an image representing a wish fulfillment.

A final answer to this cannot be given at this time. However, this double aspect of the visualization of affects may provide a clue to Freud's observation that the dream work can transform all dream thoughts into their opposites.¹

Freud pointed out that every element of a dream is overdetermined. The same statement is valid for most, if not all, of the visual images produced in the way described in this paper.

For instance, in Example No. 3, the image of the subject walking the boardwalk was a screen for his flying in a plane, and this too was a screen for his childhood fear of being captured by a giant and taken to a castle in the sky.

Although the transformation of verbal thoughts involving bodily sensations and affects into visual images has been emphasized in this paper, abstract verbal thoughts can be similarly visualized, as Freud¹ and Silberer⁸ have previously shown. Verbal thoughts representing motor actions can be similarly visualized. We have pointed out elsewhere¹⁰ that in the id, a need is associated with a visual image representing an object in the external world and a motor action which can satisfy this need. However, this visual image is subject to distortion and repression by the ego when it represents an object or situation incapable of immediate fulfillment because of a fear of punishment. The type of distortion of the visual image depends on the type of defense mechanism which the ego uses at this moment in its conflict with the id or the superego. Without going into a detailed discussion of this here, we can briefly describe several specific forms of distortion which may occur when the verbal thought involves aggressive motor action, such as the verbal thought "I want to kill you."

1. The action may be visualized but the subject is disguised; e.g., the verbal thought of a child, "I am biting my father," results in a visual image, "A tiger is biting father."

2. The action is visualized, but the object is disguised; or both the subject and the object of the action may be disguised.

3. The action may be visualized with reversal; that is, the subject visualizes the act passively instead of actively.

4. The action is visualized with the subject performing it on himself.

5. The action is visualized, but with reaction formation.

6. The action is visualized completely in a symbolic way, with the action, the subject, and the object disguised. For example, a man who was angry with his wife, visualized the verbal thought, "I am choking my wife," with a visual

image which consisted solely of a cupped hand, within which was a flexed photograph. The subject stated that the photo was a particularly unflattering one of his wife taken before her marriage to him.

According to Freud,¹ the immediate source of the dream material consists of visual impressions of the previous day or two; and pictures from the past do not appear unless covered or screened by these visual percepts. Similar findings have been reported by others.¹² Observations such as Example No. 2 confirm this.

We have pointed out above that every attempt was made in our observations to avoid suggestion to the subject. However, it is well known that suggestion can influence bodily processes. In the same way, suggestion can influence the visual images, as the following example shows: A subject was suffering from a running nose, due to a vasomotor rhinitis. I asked him to visualize the verbal thought "My nose is running." He said, "I see a waterfall." Now say "Stop running," I suggested. He did this. Immediately, he saw the waterfall dry up. A moment later, he said that his nose was beginning to feel drier. In a few minutes, the nasal secretions had stopped. (We shall report separately our observations of this method of therapy of psychosomatic disturbances using visual images in association with suggestion or autosuggestion.)

It might be argued that the visual images produced in the ways described above, during the waking state, are not identical with dream images. However, like dream images, they may represent wish fulfillments, are plastic visualizations of verbal thoughts, and are characterized by symbolism and the other mechanisms of dream production, as was mentioned above. In addition, and similar to a dream, there is usually little or no affect attached to the visual images produced in the waking state.

Conclusions

A simple method of producing dreamlike visual images in the waking state has been described. In this method, the subject is merely

asked to visualize a bodily sensation, or an affect, or a motor action directed toward an object. Preliminary observations indicate that the method is useful in studying psychosomatic disturbances. The method is also useful in studying the steps by which a verbal thought is transformed into a visual image. In addition, it may also be of value in checking the results of dream interpretation arrived at by free association, and finally a means of therapy used in conjunction with suggestion.

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