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# Dreaming the Stage Within the Screen in *The Screen Dreams of Buster Keaton*

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I wrote and directed *The Screen Dreams of Buster Keaton* as an exploration of the ways that cinema, sleep and dreams make manifest performance both on screen and on stage. The work is inspired by a moment in Buster Keaton's *Sherlock Jr.* (1924), a film about the relationship of sleep and dreams to cinema, where cinema and performance dissolve into one another. In the film, Keaton, a projectionist, falls asleep in a projection booth and dreams himself onto the screen as a detective to solve a real-life crime, catch a thief and win his beloved. Keaton jumps onto a stage disguised to look like a screen to create his illusion of entering a film. Theatre and film at this moment are face to face, encountering one another.

In *Screen Dreams*, the screen became a stage. The character of the Dreaming Girl falls asleep at the beginning of the play like Keaton. She meets Keaton when he peels away from his projection and crawls through the screen

(leaving his projection sleeping). Both realize neither is sure who is dreaming and who is a part of the dream. The rest of the play is the texture of their mutual dream inhabited by Sigmund Freud, Samuel Beckett, Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle and multiple doppelgängers. *Screen Dreams* allows the dream world to talk, give messages and unscramble reason as the encounter between Keaton and the Dreaming Girl unfolds at the end of the twentieth century on stage and screen.

Cinema is theatre's subconscious. Theatre doesn't know it though. Cinema dreams the stage partly for us to understand its place in our innermost desires. Puck intimates as much: 'That you have but slumber'd here ... / No more yielding but a dream' (Shakespeare 1979: 127). In his delicate meditation on illusion and the real, the spectator sees that an act of a theatre isn't life itself – 'All the world's a stage' (Shakespeare 2006: 227) – but just a dream,

■ *The Screen Dreams of Buster Keaton*, 2013. Andrew Thornton. Photo Siggı Ragnar



that, as Peggy Phelan has reminded us of performance, disappears (1993: 146). Cinema, often referred to as a kind of 'dream factory', has been theorized in terms of sleep and dreams. Yet, it is also a factory, a place of reproducibility, where dreams are built. Theatre disappears then reappears as if in a dream throughout the history of cinema. Could it be that theatre on film is a message in light and shadow from the Real?

*Screen Dreams* premiered in August 2013. Richard H. Armstrong's performance review in *Theatre Journal* said that the 'gauntlet thrown down' by the work was 'forcing us to see the movie actor as a sweaty embodied being' (2014: 448). The performance of the screen performer as in the material present converses with Woody Allen's film *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985) when Tom Baxter steps off the screen and leaves the rest of the actors in the film stranded on screen, unable to make the narrative continue and repeat. In the film within the film, instead of a shadow on screen, a now real persona, Tom, intertwines with the realities of corporeal existence. In *Screen Dreams* the attempt is to witness the stage within the screen as if a fevered dream at the end of celluloid. Cinema's dream factories attempt to refuse live performance's inevitable disappearance – even with threat of its own obsolescence.

In 1924, the year *Sherlock Jr.* was released, cinema was still learning what it meant to be cinema – what for example made it different than theatre? At the same time, Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* had worked its way into the public's consciousness. The two, cinema and psychoanalysis, grew together, side by side, and one could imagine that cinema and dreams are inseparable. Of course, dreams occurred long before the birth of cinema. They emerged in another form: a kind of waking dream – performance. Cinema contains performance as performance contains cinema, and dreams contain all. In 1924, Keaton combined all in one silent film.

Dreams within dreams unfold in *Sherlock Jr.* and its famously edited sequence of Keaton being cut (as in edited) from location to location when he tries to enter the house – first he's in

the garden, a busy street, then on a cliff, in the snow, by a lion. Each cut shatters his conception of reality, leaving him calmly trying to get back to his beloved to solve the crime. Cinema misses its own disappearance much like Keaton's edited universe as scene after scene disappears, and like a dream it does unwind mostly to be never seen again (especially true of early cinema). Yet cinema repeats – mechanical reproducibility takes over.

The Dreaming Girl and Keaton in *Screen Dreams* are much like Harper and Prior in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* when they find themselves in one another's dreams. In Mike Nichols' HBO film version, the dreams of Harper and Prior were placed as if they were in Jean Cocteau's *Beauty and the Beast* (1946). Statues holding candles line the walls of the dream space as in the Cocteau film, complete with shifting eyes. As Harper and Prior marvel at their own unconscious they unconsciously marvel at becoming film. Prior's running popular culture references are embedded in such a way that the play becomes a film that has ingested other films. Keaton and the Dreaming Girl, in liminal spaces, find themselves in a dream that may be on stage or may be in the screen or somewhere in between – here is where dreams and death are uncomfortably close.

When Buster Keaton enters the screen, he doesn't just exit the world; he enters a medium of technological reproducibility that threatens to stop his presentness dead in its tracks. Cinema contains Keaton like it always has contained Keaton – he just stages it so that the audience can see the real swallowed by the machine. Slavoj Žižek in Sophie Fiennes' documentary *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* (2006) remarks that 'dreams materialized have one word for them: nightmare.'<sup>1</sup> Could Keaton's projectionist (when transformed into a successful detective) be creating an inadvertent nightmare for himself? What would that nightmare be? He does, after all, catch the thief and win his beloved. Perhaps the beloved and Keaton, after the flush of union, unravel into a hellish reality where it is revealed as cracked, flawed and not at all what one once thought – endless reproducibility.

<sup>1</sup> For more on dreams becoming nightmares see a similar point in 'The screened stages of Slavoj Žižek' (Joseph 2015a).

■ *The Screen Dreams of Buster Keaton*, 2013. Andrew Thornton. Photo Soggi Ragnar



In David Lynch's *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* (1992), Laura dreams that she enters into another dimension through a painting. Within this red-curtained theatrical world she is offered a ring. Agent Cooper warns her away – 'Don't take the ring, Laura.' She stops just before taking it, but when she awakes she uncurls her hands and there it is to her horror. Dreams suddenly enter the world and their very fleshiness makes them abject – a sign of death to come.<sup>2</sup> This is part of the Dreaming Girl's amazement and (verging on) revulsion – Keaton has climbed through the screen to the stage and she is face to face with his very corporeality.

If dreams are, as Freud theorizes, 'a wish from the unconscious', then why should their leakage into the world mean nightmare (2010: 561)? Perhaps a wish as dream is another realm, one not meant to be of material substance – a hand shouldn't open and reveal contents tumbling from sleep. Later Freud too puzzled over nightmares and trauma. Dreams become death masks.

*Screen Dreams* cannot separate dreams from the screen, which in turn cannot separate itself from the stage, which in turn dreams the screen and so on. Bert States says of dreams: 'In short, you get out of a dream exactly what you put into it' (2003). What is the dream's usefulness after Freud? According to States:

At best all these useful delights seem an evolutionary outgrowth of mind's encounter with experience. If art is powerfully grounded in them it suggests that we make art for much the same reason that we go through the day seeing parallels and contrasts in things, telling parts from wholes and vice versa, feeling unity stirring in our experience ...

Therefore the dream is what interests us in art – 'detecting order and disorder' and guarding our very moments of sleep (States 2003). So when Laura takes the ring in *Fire Walk With Me*, she violates the precepts of dreaming – you can't take it with you.

In Jacques Lacan's reconceptualization of dream work, he connects dream imagery and the ego. Dream interpretation's task is to locate the ego (1991: 167). Using Freud's dream of Irma's injection, Lacan locates the emergence of the unfathomable real to the moment Freud looks in Irma's mouth: '*She then opened her mouth properly and on the right I found a big white patch; at another place I saw extensive whitish grey scabs....*' (Freud 2010: 132). Lacan claims that the real emerges as 'something faced with which all words cease and all categories fail, the object of anxiety par excellence' (1991: 164). Dreams, within their bits and pieces, hold the Real at bay with a kind of false memory that hides the true meaning within like a jewellery box with a hidden compartment.

<sup>2</sup> For more on *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* see Joseph 2015b.

Freud's appearance as a character in *Screen Dreams* connects dreams to reality and imbues screens with presentness. In 'Screen memories', an 1899 essay (a year before *The Interpretation of Dreams*), Freud attempts to fit childhood memories into some kind of understandable paradigm. Screen memories are different from dreams in that they are a kind of fragmentary catching up of experience from real life rather than from sleep. Yet, the reasoning used in analyzing screen memories is related to Freud's dream work. Often the screen memory is saturated such that it arouses multiple feelings at once in the dreamer. These memories haunt the edges of consciousness like sleep and are projected onto the world. They could be argued to be cinematic in construction. Keaton in *Sherlock Jr.* captured a dream of a film that is partially contained within a stage. In *Screen Dreams*, the character of Freud theorizes about screen memories while the character of Beckett sits in her rocking chair like Billie Whitelaw in *Rockaby*, tangled in film negatives that she cannot seem to remove. Perhaps this Beckett is even dreaming of Didi as she rocks: 'Was I sleeping, while the others suffered? Am I sleeping now? Tomorrow, when I wake, or think I do, what shall I say of today?' (Beckett 2006: 83). Beckett, like Keaton and the Dreaming Girl, cannot escape her dreams waking or sleeping. Freud muses:

The dreamer remembers bits and fragments from the day. They drift and sift through the people and things displayed in the screen memory. Now, the screen memory is that which is sliced up like apples and distributed throughout the dream. Delicious. A girl with a blue flowered dress holding a dandelion on top of a grassy hill recalls the war and the grenade that blew up like a flower when breath hits it just so. The flowers on the dress recall my mother in the garden the summer before she died coughing up blood and crying for mercy on the bathroom floor. Of course this wasn't my mother. My mother died and I felt little or nothing. Surprisingly so. Of course the grassy hill is me. (Joseph 2014)

Now within the universe of the play Freud is remembering his theory as a screen memory (with its false twists and turns) that is caught

within a dream that he can't wake up from. The explanation is false with some truth scattered in just like a dream (or a film). In the essay 'Screen Memories,' Freud puts forth a screen memory (slightly disguised) of his own: 'The scene appears to me fairly indifferent and I cannot understand why it should have become fixed in my memory.... I see a rectangular, rather steeply sloping piece of meadow-land, green and thickly grown; in the green there are a great number of yellow flowers – evidently common dandelions.... We are picking the yellow flowers and each of us is holding a bunch of flowers we have already picked' (Freud 1989: 119).

The play conflates the memory. Just as the Freud in the play cannot parse his own childhood projections, I mistakenly imagine a scene that I think just might be real (Freud's mother horrifically dies 'coughing up blood and crying') when it in reality is a story (or dream) that was visited upon me in some other time and place. Freud says of his screen memory, 'Altogether, there seems to me something not quite right about this scene. The yellow of the flowers is a disproportionately prominent element in the situation as a whole ...' (1989: 120). As the scene from *Screen Dreams* plays out, I too, as the author and director, feel exactly the same way ('something not quite right'). Later Freud remembers the flowers in relationship to a lost love:

A strange thing. For when I see her now from time to time – she happens to have married someone here – she is quite exceptionally indifferent to me. Yet I can remember quite well for what a long time afterwards I was affected by the yellow colour of the dress she was wearing when we first met ... (1989: 121)

This ultimately leads Freud to theorize that he had 'projected the two phantasies on to one another and made a childhood memory of them' (122). He conjectures the screen memory 'must be content to find its way allusively and under a flowery disguise into a childhood scene' (125). The theatricality of the language suggesting costuming ('disguise') positions projected 'screen memories' being on stage – performed. He concludes, 'Our childhood



memories show us our earliest years not as they were but as they appeared at the later periods when the memories were aroused' (126). Alongside the incompleteness of presentness – it is always missed – and the inability to see the whole, there is always the hole into which part of consciousness is sucked. The unconscious is running the show and doling out truths theatrically – disguised, costumed with a seemingly cohesive narrative. In reality each appearance is false, concealing the Real.

What is the unconscious trying to do when it gives out its clues in the form of memories and dreams? If we look to Lacan perhaps the answer resides in his claim that the 'unconscious is structured like a language' (1998:203). The language of the unconscious needs translation to understand. Dream language unfolds in sleep like a film. One might argue that cinema is structured like the unconscious (therefore like language) and uses filmic techniques to embed affect through form and content. *Screen Dreams* asks: what does it mean to put a stage in the screen and a screen on the stage when dreams engulf the subject? How might we gain the distance to understand these messages from sleep?

Walter Benjamin's conception of the aura is worth considering here. If the aura is the 'unique appearance of a distance no

matter how far away or close it appears' then this in-between space of cinema, between dreaming and waking, between reality and our transference fantasies, inherently has the quality of shifting distances (2008:23). The distance of the long shot becomes theatrical in its ability to capture the whole body in movement and travelling across a distance. Yet, the long shot also is cinematic in that it is captured through the mechanical point of view of the camera. The long shot connects theatre and film together through shifting distances. The camera and its distances install an ever shifting connection between cinema and theatricality (waking and dreaming) that gives rise to aura. In this way cinema both plays with the possibilities of its future as a form and looks back at, as Samuel Weber puts it, the 'dilapidated' aura of the live (2004:87). Cinema grasps at it through its invocation of the stage.

To the reviewer, Armstrong, 'The action of the play unfolded as an encounter between Buster [Andrew Thornton] and the Dreaming Girl [Elizabeth Anne Cave], whose oneiric visions seemed to merge with nothing less than the history of cinema' (2014:450). Keaton, in *Screen Dreams*, takes us through the whole history of this 'dilapidated' aura by way of cinema's progressions:

■ *The Screen Dreams of Buster Keaton*, 2013. l-r: Dru Barcus, Andrew Thornton, Mary Griffith, Richard Anthony, Elizabeth Anne Cave. Photo Siggie Ragnar.



First there was a crowd and a train and then there was a trick and a disappearing lady and then there was a voyage to the moon and then there was a robbery which happened to be great (train again) and then there was a fall and a laugh and a cane and a hat and a dance and a slap and a gun and close lips and teeth and lovely hair and swimming too and space and the center of the earth and ghosts and zombies and tigers oh my and this and that and this and that and the whole world practically and you. (Joseph 2014)

Zooming by in the speech are the origins of film reaching out into now. Keaton and his double, a projection of himself sleeping in the projectionist booth throughout the play (the evocative video design was created by Daniel Jackson), trade ideas about dreams:

**Keaton** (to the Projectionist's Projection): Taken together and taken apart the dream is that which could never be and yet is and was all at the same time.

**Projectionist's Projection** (recorded): Some have said this is similar to sitting in the dark with a bag of popcorn. (2004)

Cinema and dreams (not to forget popcorn) here become their own screen memories. Later Keaton tries to connect the end of the twentieth century, his own disappearance and celluloid's surrender to the digital:

Listen. This isn't the end of film and the twentieth century (though it is) and all of that and it isn't even a screen I had in mind and instead of this or that or my love you have something blank like a screen (there I said it) and my very face is as blank as a screen (ol' stoneface) at the end of the road. (2004)

Keaton screened gives way to presentness. *Screen Dreams* invites the spectator to a liminal space between cinema and performance, waking and dreaming within which they may wonder what is the Real and when, if ever, they will wake up.

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