

Psofotopias

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Introduction

Psofotopias is an essay that observes how different media, cultural artifacts, and narratives depict dreams and the act of dreaming. I connect these popular media examples to critiques of contemporary technology and media theory, to brain science and philosophy, and I conclude with a commentary on one of my recent art installations.

The cases I present span from female and feminist science-fiction, transgressive fiction, television series, movies, fine art and AI-generated dream interpretation powered by GPT-3.

This text is inspired by an interview with Geert Lovink and Ned Rossiter published under the title “Dreamful Computing”, which takes a quote by Bernard Stiegler as its prompt: «*In order to do politics today, we must dream*». Their overall interest is that of «*designing theories that don't disavow the uncertainty, noise, and contingency of the situation of media*» (Lovink, Rossiter, 2022), an interest that I align with in refusing the often clear-cut separation of dreams and nightmares into either utopias or dystopias. By treating dreams with moral indeterminacy, a space for interpretation, analogy, and (trans)individuation is opened up. This space of ambiguity and uncertainty is what I call a “psotopia”. *Psofotopia* is a portmanteau (*psotofos*, noise; *topos*, place) that allows me to argue that dreams, with their cognitive, interpretive, and affective ambiguity, are “spaces of noise” that offer a model to deal with complexity¹.

The dreaming, and its hallucinatory qualities, produces a *para-conceptual* and *para-real psotopia*², a space that triggers collisions and clashes between the immaterial and the physical, between the alienation from above and the alienation from below³. An analogy can be drawn between the *para-reality* of dreams and that of the virtual space, initially imagined by cyberpunk authors as a *consensual hallucination*, and eventually developed into an expensive technological infrastructure that aims to replicate reality and passive spectatorship inside a pair of goggles. I will conclude this essay with a discussion about my new work, *NNV XR. New*

Noises New Voices XR is an expanded dream that utilizes VR in combination with a sound installation and custom-made transducing furniture producing haptic signals. The installation creates connections between the virtual and the physical world, asking the experiencer to dream along my dreams. By navigating the assemblage of sensorial inputs of *NNNV XR*, the experiencer inhabits the multimedia *psofotopia* I propose while being aware of the threads that connect the immaterial and the tangible through the *para-real*.

Oneiric Premises

Dreams present us with impossible patterning, absurd associations, ridiculous, annoying, seducing, maddening, cathartic, or soothing juxtapositions. They are the chaos of revolution we can't remember, the desire not of what is missing, but of what is, what could be, and of what we cannot quite make sense of; a cacophonous concert where the one voice of the dreamer breaks into a polyphony that does not sound like a utopia and neither a dystopia, but rather like a *psofotopia*, a noisy space that doesn't resonate if not in its spectral presence.

Psofotopias are sites that suggest a connection between the conscious and the unconscious, a stage for what Mattin calls "living noise"⁴.

The evasive nature of the living noise materializes in the remembered dream, as a virtual reality projection of sensorial inputs registered during the waking time, a chaotic assemblage that activates while we sleep.

Augmenting Dreams

Technologies that manage dreams are treated with a certain suspicion by cultural creators, who use effectively the ambiguity between dream and nightmare in order to depict the uncertainty and the fear inherent to the prospect of harnessing the subconscious. Let us think of *The Lathe of Heaven*, where the main character, George Orr, has the power to alter reality by dreaming "effectively". He is thrown into a cycle of State-mandated Voluntary Therapeutic Treatment to avoid a federal conviction, is exploited by Dr Haber, an "oneirologist" with dubious motives, and is faced with the moral burden of retaining the memory of past versions of reality.

After acknowledging Orr's power to dream "effectively", Haber starts conditioning Orr's d-states in order to implement changes in reality through a machine called the Augmentor. The outcome of these reality corrections operated by Dr Haber through Orr's d-states is a

series of dramatic proofs that demonstrate the paradoxical nature of “dreaming effectively”, and of the ambiguity of “dreams coming true”. When finally Orr dreams of being “cured” of effective dreaming, Haber connects himself to the Augmentor and dreams a nightmare so calamitous that matter starts melting, the void starts taking over the tangible reality, and Orr makes it just in time to save the doctor and the existence of the physical realm.

After this last predicament, reality remains a «jumble and mess of grandiose plans and incomplete memories» (Le Guin, 2015, p.176), the direct machinic translation of REM visions collapses the already fragile boundary between dreams and nightmares; the augmentor cannot filter the dregs out of the dreams it renders into physical reality. The doctor eventually survives, albeit lost into a schizophrenic and catatonic state. The dark irony of fate seals the oneirologist into his most valued obsession, a constant state of empty delusion.

Oneiromancy

Oneiromancy is well documented in ancient civilizations, from Sumerians to Egyptians and Greeks, persisting in Medieval cultures, as well as being established in indigenous traditions such as the Oaxaca’s Chontal people, who summon dreams through the consumption of oneirogenic herbs.

As Dr. Allan Hobson, psychiatrist and dream researcher, says:

Many cultures have accorded prophetic meaning to dreams. The widely shared view of all such prophets is that dreaming is a message, in code, from important external or internal agents and needs decoding. Such decoding is seen by the practicing cultures as not only valid but also determinant of important conscious personal and political decisions. The dream sorcerers helped kings decide whether or not to go to war. [...] One problem with this approach is the religious belief that there is some hidden truth that only dreams can reveal. Thus, one mystery, dreaming, is used to explain another, decision making. (Metzinger, 2009, p.156)

Dreams as different ways of seeing or predictive omens, are the mysterious decision-making tools used to discern salient information in randomness and chance⁵. The interpretation of the dream content has always been the guiding principle when attempting to understand dreams, accompanied by a desire to harness and channel their associative and often revelatory potential.

With technological advancements (EEG, CT, MRI scanners) a formal approach to the study of dreams arose, looking at the distinctive mental characteristics of dreaming as opposed to the waking mental activity.

However, science hasn't entirely resolved the conundrum offered by dreams, «the work of sleep science is incomplete. We still do not know enough about how the brain–mind reorganizes itself during sleep and how dreams might be used for better understanding of this function» (Hobson, 2002, p.141). Hobson excludes the persistence of mysteries about sleep and dreams, and asserts the installment of dream science in the place of dream mystique. Despite this oppositional replacement, I would argue that the potential of dreams in light of their psotopic qualities remains still unexplored.

A lone eye, floating

In her short story “You May Dream”, part of the collection titled “Terminal Boredom”, Izumi Suzuki imagined a dystopian society where a Population Department manages the populace through a program of cryosleep. This program is open to volunteers but also forces certain individuals in a state of suspended animation. One of the bleak details that oozes through the dialogues between the unbalanced and mostly abouluc characters, is that the cryosleep program is directed towards a final collective goal that nobody is truly informed of, and for as much as they know, the individuals in suspended animation might as well be dead. When being put to sleep, individuals can live on into the dreams of a friend or relative, and sometimes, as in the case described in the story, they create uneasiness and distress. Yoshiko, the main character's only friend, volunteers for cryosleep, and asks to be hosted in the dreams of the narrator/protagonist, infesting her dreams, making her regret the lack of hesitation she showed upon Yoshiko's request.

The disturbing encounters between the two in the oneiric space result in a mixture of the protagonist's own memories and projections which set the stage for Yoshiko's consciousness to interrogate her, tease her, and unsettle her.

'Your head's full of sawdust, like the stuff those dolls are made of, 'Mum said. 'You're like a composition doll.'

[...]

'Isn't there some way to keep yourself from dreaming?'

'There is. But you'll go insane if you keep it up. Schizophrenics are fine without REM sleep because they dream during the day, with their eyes open.' (Suzuki, 2021, pp.54-55)

Nothing could ease the discomfort caused by the encounters with Yoshiko's consciousness during the REM phases.

By the end of the story, the quiet desperation of the protagonist, a woman without desires nor will, results in accepting her fate in suspended animation, and refusing to be placed into somebody else's oneiric world, not even her mother's. «I want to keep on living. Forever. And that's how it's going to be. I'll become a lone eye somewhere, floating, without consciousness» (Suzuki, 2021, p.72). A sleep without dreams is the only solace in a society where dreams are treated as real estate used to house the consciousness of those who are being put to rest, idle and awaiting a future designed by the state. In this kind of society, the disruption of the silent and hopeless order of dreamlessness is welcomed with reluctance.

Dream theories

Dreams are influenced by our bodily functions, our mental states, and what we experience during our waking - and mostly, conscious - states. Their noisy potentiality is gauged and harnessed through interpretations and contextual understandings⁶.

At the turn of the 20th century, oneiromantic and oneirogenic practices were put aside with skepticism, and were rather associated with the repression of desires and impulses buried deep within us.

Sigmund Freud dismissed the symbolic method and the cipher method which seemed to be the most established ways of looking at dreams,⁷ and treated the images produced during REM sleep as symptoms instead. His method implied a progressive and detailed unpacking of the dreams in their details, situating each image within a known environment, and relating it, as neutrally and objectively as possible, to the "thought-content, which, in the course of interpretation, is found to lie behind the dream.", uncovering repressed desires, or compensatory wish-fulfillment narratives (Freud, 2010, p.33).

Carl G. Jung built upon Freud's work on dream interpretation, yet diverging from the assumption that dreams manifest repressed desires. Instead, for Jung, dreams represented a bridge between the conscious and the unconscious mind, a step within the process of individuation of the self, and a tether to what he defined as the collective unconscious.

At the time of its establishment, psychoanalysis had to resort to proto-scientific schemas of analysis, failing to match the ambitions of its most eminent proponent, Sigmund Freud, due to the lack of data regarding the brain and its workings.

Freud wanted his psychology to have a solid foundation in brain science, but he was 100 years too early to build it as we now can. For this reason, he was forced to resort to speculative philosophy, the medium of all pre-modern dream theories that analyze content. (Hobson, 2002, p.15)

In the last decades, science has proposed different theories that view dreams as “garbage disposal” procedures, experimental problem solving simulations, spaces for the processing of painful emotions, or defensive activation mechanisms, and more.

The Reverse Learning theory (Crick, Mitchinson, 1983) of dreams, popularized as the Garbage Disposal Theory, was proposed by Crick and Mitchinson at the beginning of the 80s. According to this theory, during the REM phase of sleep the brain processes all unwanted material, and summons it in order to forget it, and to make space for new memories and experiences.

A decade later, Deirdre Barrett (Barrett, 1993) proposed a theory according to which dreams aid sleepers to solve complex problems. An empirical research involved a group of seventysix college students who were «asked to incubate dreams addressing problems as a homework assignment in a class on dreams. They were instructed to select a problem of personal relevance with recognizable solution(s). It could be of a personal, general objective, or academic nature» (Barrett, 1993). The discussion arising from the results of this investigation shows how dreams help facilitate solutions to questions and conundrums, they help process information. When a question is complex and open-ended, the “novelty⁸” offered by the dream might entail a higher degree of fostering creative thinking, while «(p)roblems framed as a dichotomous choice between two already conceived solutions obviously have a better chance of the dream ‘offering’ a solution but less likelihood of novelty» (Barrett, 1993). The scholars acknowledged the influence of the initial conditioning of the test subjects⁹ but nonetheless successfully complemented an evolutionary hypothesis put forward by Antti Revonsuo (Revonsuo, 2000), according to which the brain simulates threat situations during the REM sleep, and rehearses ways to perceive and react to possible threats.

More theories, like the one simply dubbed as Contemporary Theory of Dreaming (Hartmann, 2006) by psychiatrist and sleep disorder expert Ernest Hartmann, proposes that rather than an evolutionary function, dreams have more of a therapeutic function, helping the sleeper to process complex emotional states by way of symbolic association.

The Defense Activation theory (Egelman, Vaughn, 2021) proposes instead that during sleep, the brain activates regions of the brain that are temporarily unused (i.e. sight) to

prevent them from being taken over by other functions present in neighboring brain territories, meaning that other senses could eventually prevail, given the amount of time our sight is not active during sleep.

Theories and hypotheses concerning dreams and their functions abound, and they all show us how complex it is to think through the oneiric, how dreams offer a kind of uncertainty that I recognize as being inherent in the concept of noise.

In Ego Tunnel, Metzinger interviews Allan Hobson, proponent of the Synthesis-Activation Theory. This theory «views dreaming as the result of automatic brain activation and the synthesis of chaotic internal signals during sleep¹⁰».

Hobson and Metzinger's positions are the ones that more closely relate to dreams as noise, insofar as dreams create the stage for information stored in our brain to be released and (more often than not preposterously) patterned together, in an unconscious attempt of making sense of the noise within.

Black market of the subconscious

Strange Days, a 1995 movie directed by Kathryn Bigelow, follows Lenny Nero, a former cop turned black market trader dealing in cerebral cortex recordings. These “playback” discs are the result of a technology developed by the military and which trickled down to the underground. Lenny defines himself as «a priest, a shrink, the main connection to the switchboard of souls, the magic man, the Santa Claus of the subconscious.»

What he delivers to his customers are the raw and uncut experiences from other people's lives, mostly illicit actions that help the users to voyeuristically process their dark desires and drives. In a cyberpunk-inspired setting at the turn of the new millennium, where flesh-and-bones reality is dangerous, the mediated and detached playback of brain recordings feels safer despite its illegal status. It is a world without dreams, devoid of imagination, where the eschatological feeling of the end of the 20th Century is felt as hopeless.

In the movie, the popular culture has nothing more to offer, the only spark of hope is offered by the activism that distinguishes the rapper Jeriko-One, and that disintegrates in a violent act of racial hatred committed by the police. This violent act becomes the main trigger of the events shown in the film. Conspiracy theories and paranoia are the coping mechanisms of the film's characters, the only ways to fathom an otherwise inconceivable chain of power

which reaches the heights of the tallest skyscrapers, removed from the divided street level, where brutal and murderous confrontations between civilians and police are broadcast in real time on giant screens overlooking those very streets. «Paranoia's just reality on a finer scale», says Philo, one of the movie's bad guys.

The voyeurism turns into paranoia, and paranoia turns into a dreamless haunting when the playbacks 'contents feed back into Lenny's life, who wakes up only to find a mini disc and plays it, seeing himself sleeping, as observed and threatened by the supposed murderer of one of his friends. The unconscious is here an unsafe place that is not, and cannot be, occupied by either dreams, or nightmares. Even nightmares are removed from the dreamer, outsourced to an asynchronous and technologically mediated voyeurism, closing the circle on the user, locking him up in a feeling of looming threat by accessing the first person view of the menace itself.

Dreaming the Para-Real

A common thread that became clear in enumerating different hypotheses concerning the act of dreaming is that dreams are affected by bodily functions, mental states, and conscious sensorial inputs registered during our waking state.

A feedback loop between our physical state and the images our brain produces during REM sleep can sometimes be detected: a widely relatable example is offered by the hypnic jerks, involuntary muscular contractions that cause a sensation of falling, often startling the sleeper and awakening her.¹¹

If we assume that dreams are somehow virtual reality experiences¹², we could argue that between the physical and the oneiric realm lies a space, defined by Cade Diehm as the Para-Real:

Between the digital realm and our physical world is a third space — hybrid, ephemeral and poorly understood. [...] We call it the Para-Real, an emotional and transformative state that emerges when the electronic and the real collide, and — just for a moment — creates a space that can only exist at the exact second where platforms and atoms operate in absolute parallel. The para-real occurs inside this time-space, a form of perception and interface de-realisation whose boundaries can no longer be perceived—and whose affects are longer separated. The para-real is at once conditioned by computational forces, yet also immune to the parasitic intrusion of practices of extraction. The para-real is thus a paradoxical state of subsistence within the fissures of the digital and the analogue. The para-real is what occurs before the cybernetic digestion. (Diehm, 2022)

The Para-Real is an infinitesimal space where the virtual and the physical collide, a micro-turbulence that exemplifies the complex relationship between the conscious and the unconscious.

This imperceptible rift is analogous to what Burrows and Sullivan describe as a “loop of the posthuman”.

The authors describe a technesis emerging from Katherine Hayles’s response to Catherine Malabou’s «argument that neural plasticity potentially allows humans to consciously self-fashion the species¹³.» Hayles questions this argument due to the inability of consciousness to access its own neural processes, and, should that accessibility be granted, it would be only thanks to the intervention of technology. Technology here is then a dynamic agent of change rather than mere tool (Burrows, Sullivan, 2019, p.437). The discussion could be complexified further by adding how technology influences us, transmitting values and biases that are ingrained within its design and production processes.

If we assume, following Bernard Stiegler, that our reality is dominated by a new kind of barbarism¹⁴ that has been accelerated by algorithmic governmentality, and that the automatism of desires leaves very little room for change outside the course set by the ultra-rational (to the point of becoming utterly irrational) logics of capitalism, what space is left for us to fiction a para-real loop between human agency and technology?

“Systemically exploiting the network effect, this automatic nihilism sterilizes and destroys local culture and social life like a neutron bomb: what it disintegrates, it exploits, not only local equipment, infrastructure and heritage, abstracted from their socio-political regions and enlisted into the business models of the Big Four, but also psychosocial energies – both of individuals and of groups - which, however, are thereby depleted. These individuals and groups are thus transformed into data-providers, de-formed and re-formed by ‘social’ networks operating according to new protocols of association. In this way, they find themselves dis-individuated: their own data, which also amounts to what we call (in the language of the Husserlian phenomenology of time) retentions, enables them to be dispossessed of their own protentions – that is, their own desires, expectations, volitions, will and so on.” (Stiegler, 2019, p.7)

Stiegler refers to the oneiric soul as the psychic and noetic individual, now always preceded by its digital double, which «in effect functionally short-circuits the desires in which dreams consist - and replaces them with individual and collective interactive operating sequences.» (Stiegler, 2016, p.101)

The dreaming is here mentioned as that process that could actively produce positive expectations, or better: futures. Dreams are destroyed «through the self-fulfilling

protections that constitute the fundamental basis of totally computational 24/7 capitalism.» (Stiegler, 2016, p.125)

By acknowledging the effects that networked technologies have on our psychic potentials, we come back to the possible fracture that exists in the feedback loop between conscious and unconscious processes. This fracture involves also a kind of delay. The delay here refers to the different technogenetic temporalities of computation that are involved in the «looping [of] the (relatively fast) firing of neurons, conscious registration and the (relatively slow) process of narrative comprehension in humans with the speed of the Central Processing Unit in computers.» (Burrows, Sullivan, 2019, p.438)

The process that allows the unconscious to become conscious, that allows the personality to become “whole”, and one of whose means is precisely dreaming, is the process of individuation. This process cannot be decoupled, as we will see, from technology and technogenesis.

Unimatrix Zero

In some cases, dreams are depicted in popular media as the sites of uncontrollable resistance. In *Star Trek Voyager*, the character Seven of Nine, a former Borg disconnected from the collective consciousness of the cyborg species, is on a journey towards recuperating her humanity. When she experiences dreams, she reports to the starship’s doctor asking him to cure and repair what she assumed was a malfunction. During the course of this cliffhanger double episode, it becomes clear that the space visited by Seven during her dreams is Unimatrix Zero, a forest inhabited by the consciousnesses of a minority of the Borgs, a location they go to during their regeneration period (read: sleep) without retaining any memory of it when awake and connected again to the network of the collective Borg consciousness.

The Borg as a species represents the pantagruelian craving of knowledge assimilation in order to achieve machinic perfection, at the expense of the living, without any regards for the survival of existing worlds and civilizations. The Borg is the conflation of being with technology. Dreams represent for the Borg a dangerous space of disruption. Against the determinism of Borg’s philosophy, the dreams of the assimilated humanoids are sites for potential liberation and self-determination.

Seven can remember her dreams and access Unimatrix Zero while preserving its memory because she has been disconnected from the collective, she is not plugged anymore

to the Borg network, she is not contaminated anymore by the plethora of voices that populate their cybernetic synapses and that harmonize towards the one and only objective of the Borg: assimilation in pursuit of perfection, working in unison, part of a perfectly oiled mechanism.

Voyager's crew aids the Unimatrix Zero rebels, devising a way for them to re-enter the collective Borg consciousness with the awareness and the memory of Unimatrix Zero. This oneiric space turns into a site of autonomous organization and rebellion against the Borg's oppression on the assimilated individuals. Despite the ultimate destruction of Unimatrix Zero, the Borgs holding the remembrance of their dreams, develop a resistance from within the network.

The anomaly, the interference of Seven's severed link to the collective, produces enough disruption to bring chaos into the orderly system the Borg have designed.

The chaos of the aimlessness of dreaming results in changes into the lived reality of those involved in the dreaming. Memory retention and collective individuation function as the pillars that fuel both the dreaming and the change.

The analogy is easily served here: the Borg are the fictional epitome - and maybe oversimplified representation - of a technocratic structure whose progress is driven by blind desire of progressive and virtually never ending expansion/assimilation. We realize how crucial it is for such a system to foreclose any access to active and aimless dreaming in order for it to self-preserve and evolve.

The autonomy of the oneiric space depicted in this Star Trek episode, carries a revolutionary potential that is positioned in literal and stark contrast to the utilitarian, assimilative, automated, and relentlessly violent *modus operandi* of the Borg as a species. (Half)machines dream of liberation, but cannot acquire liberation within the system created by the machines themselves.

Dreams potentially escaping the capture of engineered lethargy is a metaphor that can function only if we consider what are the conditions necessary for individuals to actually dream. Seven of Nine would have not been able to actively engage with her dreams, had she not been disconnected from the Borg collective. The technological apparatus that sustains the Borg is in itself the means and the end of that species, making it impossible to devise a different way of interacting with it, or using it.

Transindividuation

Individuation is a concept developed by psychoanalysis, defining the process according to which an individual self-actualizes herself through a process of conscious and unconscious integration.¹⁵

Gilbert Simondon expanded the concept of individuation by stating that the individual is never given, but is rather the effect of a constant process of individuation.

A psychical life that would like to be intra-individual would not be able to overcome a fundamental disparation between the perceptive problematic and the affective problematic. The psychical being, i.e. the being that achieves as completely as possible the functions of individuation by not limiting individuation to this first stage of the vital, resolves the disparation of its internal problematic to the extent that it participates in the individuation of the collective. (Simondon, 2020, p.179)

The collective and the psychical are therefore engaged in a continuous process of reciprocal co-individuation, creating a new category, that of the transindividual. According to Stiegler, technology is a condition of the transindividual¹⁶, that is: it is instrumental for the individual and the collective to encounter each other.

The technical encounter is described by Stiegler as exosomatic organogenesis, namely: the creation of technical prostheses, extensions of biological organs by means of tools (Stiegler, 2019, p.96). When artificial organs emerge from the process of exosomatization, new psychic organizations and new social organizations are constituted through a process of adoption and apprenticeship, interiorizing knowledge that will constitute the expression of individual and collective protentions, and relying on a form of memory that does not exist in other (non-technical) forms of life (Stiegler, 2019, p.43).

Stiegler describes the process of co-individuation between technical social systems, the collective, and the psychic individual as a process of transduction (Stiegler, 2019, p.98)¹⁷, which is short-circuited by what he defined in *Automatic Society* as *trans-dividuation*, the destruction of collective protentions through predictive technologies and algorithmic governmentality.¹⁸

Nomen Omen

The Stars, a colony in Vermillion Sands, a fictional location imagined by James G. Ballard, is an anomic place, populated by wealthy individuals and extravagant parasites living luxuriously decadent lives. They all practice or are obsessed with curious art forms that often involve advanced technologies. In this setting, poetry is not written but rather produced by a machine, the VT (Verse Transcriber), which can generate poetic outputs according to parameters inputted by the author.

In *“Studio 5, The Stars”*, a short story from 1961, Paul Ransom, an editor of automated poetry journals, recounts his acquaintance with his new neighbor, Aurora Day. He starts off detailing the annoyance caused by her streamers, colored tissues covered in poetry lines, incessantly flying out of her mansion’s windows and blown by the wind towards his house. The narrator is not surprised that his neighbor is a poetess, since all the inhabitants of the Stars are non-productive artists suffering from «various degrees of beach fatigue, that chronic malaise which exiles the victim to a limbo of endless sunbathing, dark glasses and afternoon terraces.» (Ballard, 2014, p.283)

In this environment encumbered by insipid otium, Aurora Day is soon seen deambulating during the night, her gown emanating a light that resembles moonshine. «[L]ost in some deep reverie or dream» (Ballard, 2014, p.286), she walks in the desert, a marble sightless mask on her face, leaving behind a trail of dissolving gems.

Aurora Day is particularly eccentric in *The Stars* not because of her night walks, or of her pink Cadillac driven by a «hunchbacked chauffeur with a club foot and a twisted face like a senile faun» (Ballard, 2014, p.283), but rather because she still writes poetry. By herself, by hand, handbound in leather, without the help of a VT. This detail is disclosed during the second interaction between Paul and Aurora.

The narrator and his acolytes confusedly read, inspect, and comment on Aurora’s writing when she sends her first manuscripts to be published on the journal edited by Paul. They «had been sitting so long sitting in front of their VTs that they had forgotten the period when poetry was actually handspun» (Ballard, 2014, p.290), and could not understand Aurora’s style, nor were they able to categorize it. After rejecting Aurora’s submissions, Paul starts being haunted by nightmarish visions in his sleep.

The dream had been the first of any kind I had had for several years—one of the pleasant features of beach fatigue is a heavy dreamless sleep, and the sudden irruption of a dream-filled night made me wonder whether Aurora Day, and more particularly her insane poems, were beginning to prey on my mind more than I realize. (Ballard, 2014, p.292)

Aurora’s poems are incomprehensible for the readers of *The Stars*, and her persistence in haunting the VT poetry editor with her manuscripts is just the preamble of a scheme of hers.

The VTs in all the poets’ houses around *The Stars* are mysteriously destroyed (the veil of mystery is lifted when a crowbar is spotted on the backseat of Aurora’s Cadillac), and Aurora

lures a young poet - the only one still attempting to hand-write poetry - into a deadly trap, setting out to reenact the legend of Melander and Corydon. In the myth, a poet sacrifices his life to honor the Muse of poetry and to restore poetry's genius and inspiration, long lost because the poets «had taken their art for granted, forgetting the source from whom it really came.» Little does she know that the young poet feigned his own death, understanding her vicious scheme, staging a theatrical rite of passage, enacting a symbolic death and an equally meaningful rebirth. In fact, even after the (perhaps) unforeseen outcome of this failed sacrifice, the poets of The Stars resume writing poetry lines of their own, without the aid of a VT.

Aurora, despite her name, is consistently described throughout the story with terms that pertain to dreams, hallucinations, reveries, mysterious apparitions, halos, fragile flying objects, fragmentary texts, ethereal visions. The text is not much about dreams, but the oneiric is woven in the narrative to depict the sensorial absorption, the slight confusion, the obsessive nature of the creative and imaginative act, of how tightly tied this is with the uncontrolled and subconscious space of dreams, as opposed to the calculated mastery over machinic functioning.

However, Aurora utilizes a calculation of her own, when trying to sacrifice a young poet to cure the general creative inertia caused by the VT-fueled automation of poetry, to then disappear, her house spectrally empty.

The moralistic intent of this short story becomes clear at the end when

all, mysteriously that evening, had suddenly felt the urge to write something original [...] my brain felt keen and alive, a thousand ideas running through it. A phrase formed itself in my mind. I picked up my pad and wrote it down. Time seemed to dissolve. (Ballard, 2014, p.316)

Free from the grip of automation, finally the poets can rise above their lethargy. Aurora Day, a nomen omen, leads them to a new dawn. Although painted with surrealistic brush strokes, following a mysterious and convoluted narrative path, where roles are more ambiguous and shifting across gray zones of allegiance and morality than the blunt contrast created by Unimatrix Zero, the moral of the story is pretty clear. Machines can lead to a general condition of alienation and indolence. The Stars is a dreamless place, and only when the chimeric Aurora Day enters the picture, do dreams and nightmares flow back into the subconscious of the colony's inhabitants. This renewed encounter with REM visions is met with uneasiness, for Aurora is the Muse that saves the inspiration of the poets who had taken their art for

granted, at the cost of their automated comfort, and through a rite of passage that entails deceit, sacrifice, violence, and a failed murder.

The connection between waking life and dreams is not continuous or direct, and in reality it would be way more difficult to individuate and trace the trails that run from one dimension to the other, like the gems left behind in the sand by the steps of Aurora Day leaving her state of deep reverie, liquefying and disappearing upon touch. In stories such as the ones mentioned in the cases enumerated above, it is fairly easy to boil down the opposition between machine-led indolence and annihilation, and dream-fueled virtuosity.

But if programmed predetermination harbors the peril of an equally programmed predestination, and possibly of doom, apathy, conformity, and sterility, what middle ground can be created? If one middle ground was to be established, it would account for a labyrinthine indeterminacy, a general aimlessness that would refute the dichotomy between utopia and dystopia, opening up the possibility for a third space, a psotopia with «no measures, no accounting, no optimization» (Lovink, Rossiter, 2022). In this space, there can be what Lovink and Rossiter define Dreamful Computing, «splendid exercises in the production of nothing [reveling] in the generation of inefficiencies» (Lovink, Rossiter, 2022) insofar as efficiencies themselves fall within the expectations of the protentions created by computational capitalism.

The paraconceptual

There is no real use for effective dreaming, as we saw in *The Lathe of Heaven*, because as Dr. Allan Hobson reveals, on an evolutionary level,

there is no evidence that dreaming itself serves any purpose whatsoever. That is to say, neither the conscious awareness of dreams while they are occurring nor recall of such awareness on awakening from sleep is likely or has been shown to be useful. (Metzinger, 2009, p.153)

Dreaming is an inefficient act, but how useful or evocative can it be, on a conceptual, or rather, *paraconceptual* level? Susan Hiller, an artist trained in anthropology, used the term “paraconceptual” to describe her own practice, and the specific interest she had in exploring spiritual and paranormal beliefs and practices. Her work *Dream Mapping*, from 1974, consisted in a participatory act of slumbering together on a field where mushroom circles were said to be connecting this dimension of reality to the world of fairies. The sleeping volunteers would

proceed, when awake, to draw maps of the places they visited during their dormancy, and that would then be combined in composite maps blending all their paths and visualizations together. As Helen Charman writes, «dreaming doesn't have to be something associated entirely with private and individual experience. [...] the mind is not a problem to be solved, and [...] collectivity is a mode of living that belongs to the night as well as the day» (Charman, 2020).

Hiller grounds the dreaming into the lore of a specific location, offering a space, both physical and relational, to explore possible connections, between individuals and between dimensions, crossing personal and established narratives, beyond the limited space of the isolated self.

It doesn't really matter whether the mushroom rings in Hampshire actually connect sleepers to the fairy world, what matters is weaving stories together during the waking time, putting aside the rationality of the conceptual, and running besides it, paraconceptually.

Hiller's work allows the noise in; the dream maps drawn by her sleepers lead nowhere, actually, but they do travel to a beyond that is dreamed, imagined, and negotiated together. More than a utopia, this would be a psotopia: a space of loud noise, the space of dreams, where discerning patterns through the density of information is hard work, sometimes associated with «the now-degraded tradition of psychoanalysis» (Lovink, Rossiter, 2022), but leaving doubts on the value of reducing the greatest number of variables in terms of the fewest assumptions. (Hobson, 2002, p.46)

Noisytales stuck in the loop

«Reductionism cannot explain away phenomena. Dreaming will always be vivid, bizarre, emotional, unreasonable, and hard to remember. But how (the question of mechanism) and why (the question of function) may be explored scientifically using physiological tools.» (Hobson, 2002, p.47)

Dreams tell us about how our brain works, and the observation of its complex functioning suggests all the ways in which, in the chaos of inputs fired during our REM sleep, it does its best to make sense of it.

I logged off Instagram some time ago, and yet one of the influencers I followed, a cool mom with three kids, lots of pets, and a surfer husband, visited me recently in my dreams. I was hanging out with them, and the whole scene looked like a perfect IG story, laid back but visually well curated at the same time, all the characters playing their role in a way that could concisely describe their qualities and their attitudes. I do not intend to make anything of this,

because if I were to, what explanation could I give to this dream? Would I identify myself with Seven of Nine, attributing this dream to the haunting of the voice of the collective after disconnection? Would I solve the conundrum of technological hegemony during sleep following the problem-solving theory of dreams? Would I imagine Instagram as a kind of Augmentor that is prompting me to effectively dream an Instagram life into reality? Would I be Aurora Day, advocating for a creative awakening and staging the sacrifice of the influencer? Would I start recording my cerebral cortex vision as the ultimate IG-story experience while imitating the custom platform lifestyle depiction? Would I be dreaming this in order to forget it, to dispose of the “garbage memories” while detoxing from social media? Would I ask my friends to share with me their Instagram dreams instead, as if the mobile, close to us on the bedside table during the night, acted as a magical mushroom ring?

I fed a dream to a GPT3-powered dream interpreter, and the AI responded as follows:

This dream could symbolize the dreamer's feelings of social anxiety and insecurity. The dreamer may feel like they are not good enough or that they do not belong in certain social situations. The dreamer may also feel like they are being judged by others.¹⁹

In a vicious circle, it is unsurprising that anything social media-related²⁰ would bring up insecurity and social anxiety.

Behind this interpretation tool loom the dangers of reductionist neofeudal²¹ delusions that algorithmically co-opt desire, the same delusion that compels the Dr Habers of our time to feed conditioning inputs that make us summon the reality *they* want to bring about.

Our desires, our dreams, produce reality²² - if we understand the (transindividual) unconscious as a factory of protentions - but we are separated from them by several degrees of political disenfranchisement, social unrest, economical crisis, and placebo media. In the current machinic “translation” of dreams, noise is captured, predicted, and tamed into a circus of often sterile performatism. The only question I want to ask myself though, is how to honor this dream as an open ended oracle that speaks of the psotopia it lives in. A combination of images and feelings born out of the noise of all the information my brain tries to organize, in patterns that can make sense or not, can be meaningful or not, and wanting to explain them would be missing the point. What is relevant is trying to make sense of how dreams inhabit the collision space between the societal and technological conditioning and physiological brain functioning.

Hallucinating Realities

So what it boils down to, I suppose, is that I experience hallucinations, but my reason is unaffected. Some strange disturbance must have taken place in my brain - one of those disorders which psychologists are now trying to track down and define - and I suppose this disturbance will have caused a great gap in the logical progression of my thoughts. Similar phenomena occur in our dreams which take us through the most incredible regions of fantasy, and we never experience any surprise over it, because the part of us which verifies and controls is asleep, whereas the imaginative part of us is wide awake and active. In my case, might it not be that one of the imperceptible keys of the cerebral keyboard has become stuck?

The Horla, Guy de Maupassant

The VR medium is described by Cade Diehm as the medium that offers many exemplary affordances for the clashes between the electronic and the real, generating sensorimotor reactions to impulses that are fully virtual, and yet feel physical and tangible: the hallucinatory quality of the phantom touch when walking too close to another player, the sensation of vertigo when your avatar falls off the edge of a world, or the motion sickness experienced after a few hours of VR playtime. When we fall in our psotopic dreamspace, we experience vertigo, we twitch and jerk, often wake up and feel dizzy, only to be reassured of our safety while sinking our head back into the pillow.

The VR medium is an integral part of my new work, NNNV XR. In *New Noises New Voices - Expanded Reality*, the experiencers are brought into a hybrid world where the virtual experience within the Neos metaverse is complemented by a sonic installation and a haptic transducer that translates low sonic frequencies into vibrations, feeding tactile inputs into the player's experience. Like my dreams, the environment is preposterous, out of scale, and individual agency is diluted into a series of sequences over which the experiencer has barely any control, much like the muscular contractions of the hypnagogic jerks while drifting into sleep. The experiencer is asked to dream my own dreams, and to explore the recesses of a fabricated oneiric landscape, which mirrors and distorts the theory-fictional reveries that informed my thinking in the last years.

The para-reality of VR allows me to grant proxy access to the para-real space of my dreams, where I cope with grief, I encounter and converse with those who have left this dimension, who haunt my waking and my sleep state, in the ever evolving task of conceptualizing where our mutual process of sensing, listening, affecting, nurturing, and inspiring each other belong. NNNV XR is about bringing the psotopia²³ of my dreams into the tangible

world, to make the dreams palpable and audible, to offer a tether between the fetishism of immersivity and the uncomfortable reminder that immersion is a virtual projection, it is a construct, it is fragile, and it is never decoupled from the inaccessible loops between conscious and unconscious states, the loops among individuals, collectivities, and machines.

I use the VR medium with a fair amount of criticism and skepticism, asserting the passivity of the experiencer while reminding her of the agency that lies within the infinitesimal and (under)explored Para-Real.

Conclusion

Gibson described cyberspace as

a consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts... A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data.

The cyberspace imagined in the cyberpunk era is a computer-generated mushroom field where the cyber-“sleepers” join in as participants of hallucinatory experiences spewed out of equations and data streams.

Forty years after Gibson’s formulation of cyberpspace, we are dealing with the aftermath of his omen, or rather an “effectively” dreamt nightmare, where we seem all afflicted by a Ballardian kind of “beach fatigue”, in a kind of suspended animation of the “Terminal Boredom” sort, where we cannot measure directly the effects of the technology and the hyper-connectivity, but we feel and experience them through the epiphenomena caused by them. All the same, we cannot measure the effects that dreaming, and recounting dreams, has on our waking life. Contrary to the dreaming, whose direct usefulness has already been excluded, the neofeudal techno-apparatus has a telos, it has an aim, like the Borg, like Dr Haber. And just like the Borg, it disregards humans, and considers them only in terms of extractivism and generalized proletarianization.²⁴

Psofotopias are the sites of noise materialized in the unfathomable feedback loops between the conscious and unconscious states of dreams and technogenesis, they escape full intelligibility and momentarily evade cybernetic digestion and commodification. They are the living noise not yet proletarianized; with their lack of purpose, they hijack the systems and the

structures of neofeudal organizations, they are the spaces where we can find «dreams that linger as a signal, that replicate and spawn collective desires for life not captured by technologies of calculation» (Lovink, Rossiter, 2022). Dreams are the manifestations of the contradictions between the noise within and the noise outside. Psotopias are the sites where we can sense the noise of the revolution that awaits in the cracks of our transindividual relations.

¹ The reason why I am placing the dreaming within the setting of *psotopias* is that the psychic processes, the material conditions and conditioning, and our relation to dreams in general resemble the mechanisms according to which noise emerges out of different contexts, provoking questions that appear to be analogous to the ones evoked by dreams.

² Both terms “para-real” and “para-conceptual” will be explained further in the text.

³ Mattin used the concepts of Alienation from Above and Alienation from Below in the construction of his theory of Social Dissonance. I am using these arguments to connect later in this essay to the notion of living noise he proposes. As Ray Brassier summarizes in the forward to *Social Dissonance* «Alienation from below [is] attributable to the dysfunction of the subpersonal mechanisms conforming awareness into the shape of the self; and alienation from above [is] imposed by the suprapersonal structures constantly personifying us. [...] Sandwiched between the sub- and supra-personal levels, cognitive subjectivity is constrained from below (by neurobiology) and conditioned from above (by ideology).» Ray Brassier in Mattin, *Social Dissonance*, Urbanomic, London, 2022, p. xii

⁴ «Living noise is not yet socially validated i.e. commodified. It lies at the intersection between our activities and our unconscious. We might not have cognitive access to it, but understanding that it is there, as a kind of fault line that impedes rationality from being fully functional, can help us to better grasp how we are conditioned, and the limitations of our present means. Living noise is precisely that which cannot be objectified in the labour process, because it is residual and remains below the threshold of measurement.» Mattin, *Social Dissonance*, Urbanomic, London, 2022, p.102

⁵ In his analysis of noise and computation in relation to divination, Miguel Prado writes: “Different methods of prophesying have assisted us as ‘buffers’ between human communities and their environments for thousands of years, using divination for agricultural activity, as navigational orienteering techniques, advice before going to the battlefield, etc. These were techniques developed by human groups in order to address our shared uncertainty about the future. [...] Divination is, in fact, one of the most common human activities intrinsically connected with randomness. With the point, in divination, being to trace the order emergent from randomness. The patterns in the sacrificed animals spilt intestines, messages emergent from the babbling voice of the oracle. Such patterns being conceived as messages from ‘divine’ origins.” Prado M., *Noise and morphogenesis: Uncertainty, randomness and control* (thesis), University of the West of England, 2021, pp. 112-113

⁶ “We do not yet possess a general theory of dreams that would enable us to use a deductive method with impunity, any more than we possess a general theory of consciousness from which we can draw deductive conclusions. The manifestations of the subjective psyche, or consciousness, can be predicted to only the smallest degree, and there is no theoretical argument to prove beyond doubt that any causal connection necessarily exists beyond them. On the contrary, we have to reckon with a high percentage of arbitrariness and ‘chance’ in the complex actions and reactions of the conscious mind. Similarly there is no empirical, still less a theoretical, reason to assume that the same does not apply to the manifestations of the unconscious. [...] We are therefore obliged to adopt the method we would use in deciphering a fragmentary text or one containing unknown words: we examine the context”. Jung C.G., *Psychology and Alchemy*, Routledge, London, 2010, pp. 43-44

⁷ The idea that the dream concerns itself chiefly with the future, whose form it surmises in advance -- a relic of the prophetic significance with which dreams were once invested -- now becomes the motive for translating into the future the meaning of the dream which has been found by means of symbolic interpretation. A demonstration of the manner in which one arrives at such a symbolic interpretation cannot, of course, be given. Success remains a matter of ingenious conjecture, of direct intuition, and for this reason dream-interpretation has naturally been elevated into an art which seems to depend upon extraordinary gifts. The second of the two popular methods of dream-interpretation entirely abandons such claims. It might be described as the ‘cipher method’, since it treats the dream as a kind of secret code in which every sign is translated into another sign of known meaning, according

to an established key. For example, I have dreamt of a letter, and also of a funeral or the like; I consult a 'dream-book', and I find that 'letter' is to be translated by 'vexation' and 'funeral' by 'engagement'. It now remains to establish a connection, which I am again to assume as pertaining to the future, by means of the rigmarole which I have deciphered. Freud S., *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Basic Books, New York, 2010 pp.8-9

⁸ Novelty is one of the attributes that in the work of the research group NRU (Noise Research Union) is assigned to noise.

⁹ Subjects in this study were unusually interested in dreams and had been exposed to some problem-solving success stories. Obviously they are unrepresentative of the general population and therefore one would not expect this study to typify what happens by way of spontaneous problem solving in dreams. However, these subjects' characteristics and preparation make them highly comparable to clients of therapists who use these techniques and to readership of self-help books which advocate such techniques. <https://asdreams.org/journal/articles/barrett3-2.htm>

¹⁰ As Metzinger himself explains: "During REM sleep [...] there is an output blockade, responsible for the paralysis of the sleeper, and there is an input blockade, which prevents (at least to a degree) sensory signals in the sleeper's environment from penetrating conscious experience. At the same time, chaotic internal signals are generated by what are known as PGO waves. They are electrical bursts of neural activity [...] and are closely related not only to eye movements but also to the processing of visual information. As the brain tries to understand and interpret this chaotic internal pattern of signals, it starts telling itself a fairy tale, with the dream ego playing the leading role." Metzinger T., *The Ego Tunnel: The Science of the Mind and the Myth of the Self*, Basic Books, New York, 2009, p.138

¹¹ Another example is the parasomnia called RBD (REM-sleep Behavior Disorder) that brings sleepers who lose sleep atonia to act out their dreams, without the awareness of this physical enactment, but able to remember the content of their dreams when awake.

¹² The dream tunnel shows to what extent conscious experience is a virtual reality. It internally simulates a behavioral space, a space of possibilities in which you can act. It simulates real-life sense impressions. [...] (T)his is exactly what modern designers of virtual realities are trying to achieve (indeed, one of the best scientific journals on virtual-reality technology is titled Presence). It is precisely this sense of presence and full immersion that our biological ancestors achieved long ago. The resultant Ego, however, has created a more robust sense of presence for dreaming and for waking life as well. If it had not done so, we probably would not be trying to create virtual realities today, nor would we research the ability of the human brain to achieve this miracle within itself. Metzinger T., *The Ego Tunnel: The Science of the Mind and the Myth of the Self*, Basic Books, New York, 2009, p.137

¹³ Malabou casts neural plasticity as an agent of human freedom and self-fashioning (or self-mastery) – a radical idea that seems to suggest a possible feedback loop between the neuronal level and the mental level of consciousness, Burrows D., O'Sullivan S., *Fictioning: The Myth-Functions of Contemporary Art and Philosophy*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2019, p.437

¹⁴ Bernard Stiegler refers to a definition of new barbarism formulated by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer: "With the spread of the bourgeois commodity economy the dark horizon of myth is illuminated by the sun of calculating reason, beneath whose icy rays the seeds of the new barbarism are germinating. Under the compulsion of power, human labor has always led away from myth and, under power, has always fallen back under its spell." Adorno t., Horkheimer M., *Dialectics of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2002, p.25

¹⁵ «To question the legitimacy of the individual's primordial role in the contemporary Zeitgeist is perhaps even threatening to some, as it touches the centre piece of contemporary humanism: the individual and its identitarian reclamations. Yet, what is left of the idea of humanity appears to be a fragmented, hedonistic individualism. It has the merit of keeping the economy alive with its voracious need to accessorize individuality and to soothe its fear of dissolution with consumption. However, by the same token, the idolatry of the individual also heralds the potential demise of humanity.» Malaspina C., *An Epistemology of Noise*, Bloomsbury Academic, London, 2018, p.44

¹⁶ Stiegler sought to develop transindividuality into a theory of technology, or technicity, reading Simon-don's later work into his early work and beyond to develop a theory of the fundamentally prosthetic nature of memory and individuation. Read J., *The Politics of Transindividuality*, Brill, Leiden Boston, 2015

¹⁷ Stiegler borrows this notion of transduction from Gilbert Simondon.

¹⁸ The continuation of exosomatic organogenesis seems inevitable. Not because innovation demands that we constantly innovate, to struggle against the tendency of the rate of profit to fall [...], but because psychic individuation,

which cannot operate without contributing to collective individuation, that is, to collective transformation and alteration, is made both necessary and possible only by technical individuation. And this necessity and possibility occurs as the production of metastable states. Today, however, it has become difficult to see how such states could become stable – a failure that would in effect mean the end of exosomatization. Ibid. p.97

¹⁹ Dream interpretation requested at <https://dreaminterpreter.ai/>

²⁰ I did spell out “Instagram” in the dream account

²¹ Jodi Dean writes in the New Left Review: “Neoliberalism turns into neofeudalism because it effects a change in social-property relations by destroying state ‘fetters’ or constraints on markets – employee safety nets, corporate taxation, social-welfare provisions.[...]If feudalism was characterized by relations of personal dependence, then neofeudalism is characterized by abstract, algorithmic dependence on the platforms that mediate our lives.” <https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/same-as-it-ever-was>

²² Stiegler asserts that the exosomatization process is a way of realizing dreams. Stiegler B., *The Age of Disruption. Technology and Madness in Computational Capitalism*, Polity Press, Cambridge Medford, 2019, p.90

²³ Dreams offer an undeniable experiential testimony of emotional processing, of daring imaginative and associative acts, they utter orphic divinations, dense with layers of information that refuse the universal reductionisms and want to operate aimlessly, outside of the computational capitalist capture.

²⁴“ The radicalization of innovation claimed by the new barbarians on the contrary brings to completion the process of proletarianization that in the nineteenth century became the condition of the Anthropocene – that is, of industrial capitalism – and that at the beginning of the twenty-first century has been extended to all human activities through full and general algorithmic automation.” Stiegler B., *The Age of Disruption. Technology and Madness in Computational Capitalism*, Polity Press, Cambridge Medford, 2019, p.44

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