

The Faithful Guardian

Martin Stejskal Talks about Dreams

(Interview conducted by Karol Baron, May 1983)

What is dream to you? What functions do you assign to it? What does dream mean to you and what role does it play in your life? Do you see it as a message, a divination, a riddle, or an object of analysis?

To me, dream is the product of my own hidden life, which I view, in contrast to my artwork, without any prejudice. To me, it is my “inner voice,” which, as a rule, I cognitively comprehend much later, or never, as the case may be. Thus, to me, a dream is a message, a divination, a riddle, and sometimes also an object of analysis. It is a “faithful guardian of my sleep.” The significant role dreams play in my life is manifested in their records, which I have been keeping systematically since 1964.

Are your dreams of comparable importance to your real-life experiences or memories of these experiences? Do your dreams influence your waking life? If so, how? Please give an example.

To me, dreams are of comparable significance to real-life experiences, and frequently their experience is more intense. Namely in the case of anxious or erotic dreams, the level of experiences is higher than in the conscious state.

My waking life is certainly affected by dreams to a higher degree than I am able to realize and understand. I only know my steps have often been led to places from my previous dreams and I have sometimes acted as if in a dream (a particular one) etc., whereas I have intentionally controlled my conscious activity according to a previous dream only once or twice. Much more frequently the influence has happened unintentionally. My artwork serves as an example of such influence as I explain in the answer to question 4.

What do you think of the so-called “premonitory” dreams? Do you have any experience with them? Has it happened to you that you have discovered

people or places you had previously “seen” only in a dream? If so, have you ever experienced something which might be called “illusion du déjà rêvé”? What is your opinion on divination from dreams?

“Premonitory” dreams exist, they are, however, rather rare, as is the case of “paranormal” phenomena. The point is, we still cannot read the symbolism of dreams reliably, therefore we miss a lot of it.

I have myself experienced two cases of such dreams. The predicted events were not shrouded in symbolism in those dreams, otherwise I wouldn’t have recognized them. In both cases, I carefully considered a normal explanation before assigning them to this group. Both of the dreams belong to a certain kind of premonitory events, although each to a different one.

The first example is my dream of *A Stag Beetle and Max Ernst* from 1976.

A Stag Beetle and Max Ernst

April 2, 1976

I am sitting on a bench next to an old man. After a while I recognize him, he is Max Ernst. I am telling him a verse. Around the bench, a stag beetle is scurrying—a monstrous beetle, about 20 cm-big, with a disgustingly pursed pink bottom.

In the morning, I recall the dream and wonder what the stag beetle might have meant. In the afternoon, I read the following news in Večerní Praha evening newspaper:

PARIS: Max Ernst died in Paris last night, a day before turning 85. He was a painter, sculptor, and one of the founders of Surrealism and Dadaism in the visual arts.

As far as I know, it was the first time in my life I had dreamed about Max Ernst. I had neither seen his drawings or paintings before, nor had he been

(continued on page 5)



Elbe River of Milk (dream); oil on canvas (1971)

Martin Stejskal - Dreams

The Comet Kohoutek

We are sitting in an auditorium of an enormous building *that probably serves astronomical purposes*.

We are listening to a lecture on the approaching *Comet Kohoutek*. It is a beautiful day, an early evening. Broad windows offer a *wonderful view* towards the south. I find the lecture *very theoretical* and therefore rather boring. I am looking out of the window.

Suddenly, I realize I can see *two moons* in the sky. The second one is constantly coming closer and changing colors. Before I manage to take this in, the object gets so close that I can see a transparent sphere in it with *an unknown astronaut* sitting inside, surrounded by a series of instruments. He friendly beckons to me and I make a gesture indicating to him to get out of the sphere. He refuses, and it is obvious he appears to be in a hurry. In a special alphabet, he writes something on the inner wall of the sphere, which opens protruding a metal tentacle.

I am now with my father. The tentacle draws him into another sphere prepared for the same purpose. *A specimen of humankind*, I realize. And indeed, father gets joined by a woman. Alien astronauts hastily leave the planet.

I look out the auditorium window again. On the southwest horizon, I catch sight of a small cloud shaped like a comet. I tell the others, so they can see it with their own eyes. The comet becomes bigger... I wonder why it is not as low above the horizon as we were told. The mushroom-shaped comet is rising in the sky, which can be observed from the auditorium, and after a while its head disappears above the upper window frame as if it was overflying us.

Now, we can see an enormous tail, which follows the comet's head, stretching as far as the horizon.

It is getting dark. Suddenly, it starts snowing. *The snow is weird*. I take it in my hands as it settles on the windowsill.

I say to myself that it is actually only natural; with the Earth having got into the comet's orbit, the comet consequently *seems to be revolving* around the Earth, and *the remains* of the comet's tail are falling down on our planet in the form of snow.

Slowly, it gets bright as the last *remains of the smoky veil* trailing behind the comet disappear above the upper frame of the lecture hall window. The beautiful bright day is coming back. The atmosphere has cleared; one can see far away *like after a rainstorm*. Small clouds, which start to gather behind the distant peaks in the south, are coming close.

A break comes soon. I leave the auditorium and go to see the other side of the building in the direction the comet flew away. In the distance, I can see a large edifice to which cables lead from where I am. I observe the comet and can see it *descending* and nearing the edifice. A collision is inevitable. Fascinated, I watch the explosion. Suddenly I realize its consequences will soon be felt here as well. I shout at everyone to leave the trench below our building with ropes leading from the smashed edifice.

I am running to a forest as fast as I can. As I run, I can see that the ropes start cracking; I got nearly killed by one. Our building begins to lean and tumble down into the valley. There are still hundreds of people standing below it who have not realised yet the full extent of the catastrophe. Soon they will be buried under the ruins of the collapsed building. I have no money; I don't know what is going to happen. I am walking through small sub-mountain villages, which offer wide views of the countryside. Nothing seems to be happening. Somewhere far away, thin smoke is rising from the ground. It is probably from where the comet fell down.

Rusty spots are moving in the distance. After a while I can discern a *herd of enormous mammoths*. A plane flies over my head at a tremendous speed. It is Captain X who is *escaping post-comet era rogue military forces*. Indeed, I can see he is being followed by fast triangle-shaped aircrafts with *letters NSC* on their wings. I learn they stand for *the North Socialist Councils*, a state jointly governed by scientists and

officials. I am looking towards the north, where inhabitants dwell in huge tenement buildings in the shape of mutually connected polyhedrons.

The popular entertainment consists of hundreds of people dancing while *carrying the buildings on their shoulders*. I can see the buildings slowly move in a snakelike manner. Taking a closer look, I can see that a popular theater performance is about to happen. There is a young boy sitting on a window frame of one of the buildings and a woman below him.

I find myself in a room. There is a stage in front of me with a naked woman sitting on it. She looks dirty and her thighs are smudged with blood. The hall is filled with people eagerly watching her acting. In the back there are several armed black police officers wearing helmets.

In a different room there is a different kind of *entertainment for the people*. There are about ten women, whom men are trying to get hold of and carry through one of the doors arranged in a circle around the room.

I am watching a couple. They enter a small room, where the already naked woman is laughing and tearing the clothes off the man. When they are both naked, a guard pushes them further on towards a small iron door. The door opens and the couple is pushed behind it.

They find themselves in a stall with bars on one side. It looks like a *tiger cage* in a zoo.

Behind the bars, one can see an excited crowd demanding a show. They shout at the engaged couple. The man gets worried and the woman loses her good humor. Spectators force them to couple. For that purpose, *an iron torture device is available*. Using prolonged artificial arms, which reach inside the cage, spectators can torment the couple with ease.

I am now in front of another cage. There is a crowd of school excursion participants, including two teachers. The children are very excited about the show. They shout at the couple and keep hurting them. The couple have nowhere to hide, so they obediently have sex. The children demand further and further acts. Both the man and the woman appear to be ready to fall down.



(January 4, 1974)

Jiřík and the Princess

I am watching a performance (film?) *Jiřík and the Princess*. Jiřík goes to free a princess from the claws of a terrible dragon. The dragon grabs him and devours him. Everything that follows this moment takes place in the dragon's mouth, which is somewhere high up in the mountains. Actually, the mouth is a piece of architecture similar to a pavilion.

Inside, there is the princess, the dragon himself (represented by Radovan Lukavský*) and another young woman. The two women are engaged in a dialogue. I am standing nearby and, fascinated, I am alternately looking at the Princess and her counterpart. Although they are both *somewhat* dressed, they appear to be naked and their breasts are shining seductively in the dim light. The whole scene is very erotic. Eventually, as if from deep down, Jiřík emerges and begins to strike. I can hear blows being struck and the thrashing of the dragon (of R. Lukavský).

*Radovan Lukavský was a Czech actor.



(January 19, 1977)

Laughing Mountains

I am shown *pricelists*, but to me they are rather large postcards with views of *mountains that are laughing*. The effect is brought about by the illusory vision of some cracks in the mountainsides, in which towns, castles, or individual buildings are set. Thus, the distant view of the whole mountain creates ghostly illusions of laughing mouths, gums and toothed jaws.

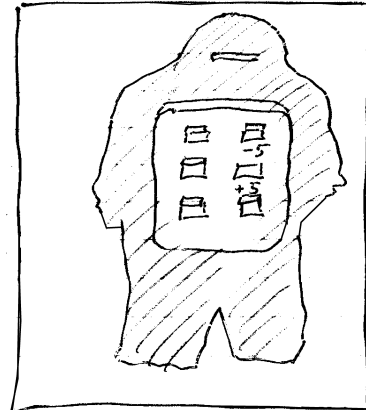
I can see a mountain in which a fierce battle is being fought.



(September 3, 1980)

The Little Golem-Calculator

I am travelling on a long trip (to the Falklands?) on a bus that is thoroughly salted with seawater. I am accompanied by people from the Labour Daily newspaper and high school classmates. The bus is full of insects. Ants are crawling on me, I keep shaking them off my body, they have made up a *swarm on my chin* resembling a long beard. It is very unpleasant. From the ceiling of the bus there are trumpeters hanging down, a kind of polyps with tube-like bodies having a pair of legs. A spider is crawling on me and, at the moment I try to squash it with all my strength, it changes into a small grey-black Golem. On its chest there is something inserted that looks like a pocket calculator with buttons. It is a toy, but it terrorizes me in a quite annoying way. It asks me questions that I am supposed to answer by pressing the right button. When the answer is wrong, an unpleasant rattling sound goes off.



(August 18, 1982)

We Talk to Things

Ludvík Šváb is showing me a picture (perhaps a smudged photo). There are several strokes in it made in green ink by Ludvík's hand. There is a caption:

"We personify and animate things, we talk to them in order that they show us our own faces." I immediately realize how pertinent this is. The idea is accompanied by an illustration of "how we talk to things."



The handwritten caption at the top of the painting reads:

We personify and animate things, we talk to them, they give evidence about us.

(October 8, 1992)

Visiting R. Alleau

I am going to see René Alleau, a historian of alchemy and an old friend of the surrealists. He lives alone on the outskirts of Prague. The place is rather wild, with strange individuals roaming about. Awful prefabricated housing blocks stand all around. There, Alleau occupies the whole ground floor of an old building.

He is lying in bed. He is a half Karel Šebek*. We talk. Someone in the kitchen (?) or in the hall (?) keeps cutting in.

We are driving and crossing a railway track, that is already in France. It is terribly bumpy; I almost drive the car off the road. Nearby, a truck starting to go vertically is being tested. Firefighters are there so that they can put out the fire when the truck falls down. Somehow, we got lost. I stop to look at the map.

*Czech surrealist poet.

(September 1, 1992)

God in a Gyroscope

I am visiting an unknown publishing house, which is going to publish *the records of my dreams*. What I see first is a xerox copy of my dream object drawing. I am told that it should be additionally included in the book according to the opinion of the publisher.

Then I am in an empty editorial office. On the table, there is a creased page torn out from my “dreamiary” with a record of my dream and my

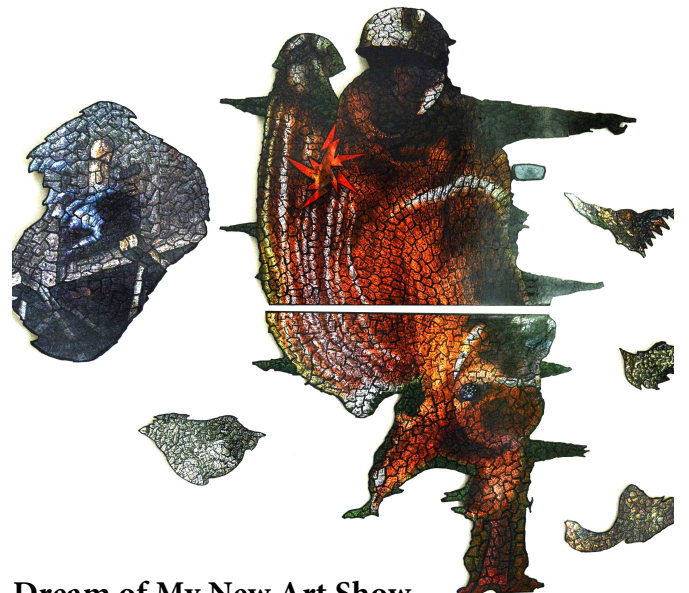
original drawing of a dream object, the copy of which I saw a while ago. I do not like how neglectfully it is handled.

(The torn-out page is a lined A4 sheet, whereas my real dream diary is A5-size.)

Next to the drawing, which looks like a part of a mysterious “gyroscope,” there is a record of the dream. Almost each word has been crossed out, the replacements are written above and below, some of them have been crossed out as well. This clearly demonstrates my effort and determination to find the right expressions. With difficulty I decipher the first sentence; after waking up I can remember only its beginning: “I am God...”



(April 6, 2001)



Dream of My New Art Show

I enter a little gallery in Prague, where my new paintings are exhibited. On the walls there are images cut irregularly. The colorful shapes are covered by a dense network of my “contourages” in black ink.

Since then, in a waking state, I have been working on these dreamlike images. I am trying to reconstruct a wonderful dream experience.



The Meat of Contourage
(November 11, 2016)

(continued from page 1)

spoken about in my presence, nor had I remembered him. I included the other dream in the category of “premonitory dreams,” several years later, while reading my records altogether. I admit there is another possible perception of the dream—that being its influence on my conscious life. Anyway, it should be acknowledged that, if this is the case, it is no less worrying.

The second dream:

December 1, 1980

I am an actor on stage in Fellini’s scene of “miraculous healing of the crippled.” At that moment there is also a young conman on the stage pouring holy water onto some hay in a dark corner. I pretend my legs are failing me and get some of it also poured to me. Then I’m asked what exactly the matter is. Pointing to my left knee joint, I sigh: “Atrophy.” And, indeed, I cannot move. My expression shows the cure has not helped but all of sudden I rise and leave. The conman invites on stage a young woman from the audience, asking her to finish what I have left uncompleted.

When reading the dream account a year later, I was struck by its similarity to a much later event. In the following summer (1981), I hurt the ligaments of my right knee when bending it quite innocently. This was followed by troubles like knee puncture and near inability to walk. Actually, the knee has not fully recovered yet. “Atrophy of muscles around the joint,” stated the orthopaedist then using the same word I uttered as a self-diagnosis in the dream.

If it was a real premonition, then the way it was projected in my dream was strictly a mirror effect. In comparison to reality, not only it was the other leg in the dream, but also the course of events in the dream was reversed.

Despite these spare experiences I haven’t experienced discovering in my waking life people or places I had previously seen in a dream. Thus, I do not remember having ever experienced the “illusion du déjà revé.”

I believe in oneirology in the same way I believe in palm reading or astrology. If I admit there is such a possibility, I wouldn’t view it as result of oneiric submersion into “the astral realm” or “collective unconsciousness” to use the concepts from occultism or Jungian psychology, but rather a more or less systemized process of volitional dealing with analogies of unorganised clusters of oneiric visions, via which a person endowed with intuition can sometimes derive precognition.

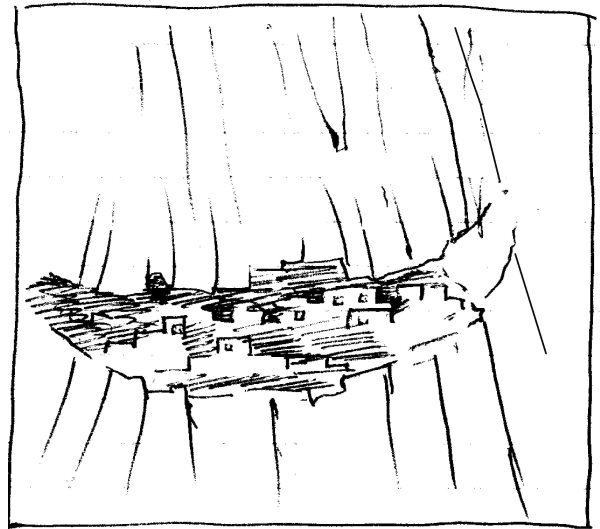
What is the relationship between your dreams and your artwork? Do your dreams bring inspiration or stimuli to you? Do you try to illustrate or describe your dreams faithfully? What is your opinion on the likeness and difference between a dream and a poem or another form of art? Do you think your dreams are of equal importance to others as they are to you?

In my case, the relationship between dreams and artwork is close. I became fully aware of it quite recently when reading the entire record of my dreams. I have hardly ever tried to consciously reproduce a dream or its appealing detail in my artwork. The few exceptions breaking the rule could be converted to a common denominator. In all cases, they were unusually clear and explicit oneiric visual perceptions; thus, formal elements related merely to the visual aspect of the dream.

The relationship is reciprocal. I learned from the recent reading of my dream accounts that many more permanent themes of my paintings had their models in my dreams, which foresaw them, guided them, and finally almost quoted them. I specifically refer to the theme of “the mountains” which has been significant to my artwork since the mid-1970s. According to my records, rudiments of the motif of living mountains appear in the early 1970s and the motif persists until today. It is also the theme of my latest “illustration of a dream,” the painting called *Geological Smiles*.

Thus, dreams certainly bring me inspiration; however, as a rule, only in the areas which are beyond the reach of consciousness at the moment.

In connection with this, I have to mention several literary attempts, in the origins of which a dream, on the contrary, consciously played an initiation role, and in most cases the dream became an integral part of the text.



Geological Smiles (1980)

In my “dreamiary,” I try to describe my dreams in most faithful way, however, the time of recording them, i.e. early in the morning, is not that favorable when it comes to readiness to articulate or to artistic accuracy. So, any of the dream accounts taken separately is an awkward distortion, which acquires its meaning only when linked with the others.

The correspondence between painting and dream does exist. Namely because a work of art is also part of “the other” life, and is detached from the author. The enigmatic feature of an authentic artwork stems from the feeling that, while perceiving a certain art piece, we are uncertain whether it is part of our dream or not—in other words, from the sudden uncertainty whether our dream persists in our conscious state. Such works of art are capable of destroying the habitual way of conventional perception and of widening one’s responsiveness to transmental communication. The differences are caused specifically by different environments of origin. Dreams are sovereign products of the unconsciousness and an integral part of its “life,” whereas a piece of art is an artificial product, a “reflexion of the night.”

I am attracted to other people’s dreams, therefore I think most of my dreams might be attractive to other people. However, some of my dreams are not very interesting (in the common meaning of the word) and are likely to be significant solely to myself.

How do you regard dreams from the perspective of surrealism’s theory and practice? And also from the point of view of psychoanalysis? Do you find these two aspects identical or different? How do they differ? How do you view Freud’s theory of dreams? Also, the traditional divination based on dreams? Do you think there is something like a “gift for dreams”?

From the perspective of surrealism’s theory and practice, I consider a dream an authentic manifestation and one of few proofs of everlasting revolt of our inner strengths against outer pressures. For that reason, it is in central focus of my and the Group of Czech and Slovak Surrealists’ research.

From the perspective of psychoanalysis, a dream appears to be a necessary guide to conscious state, in which suppressed conflicts are solved and which provides space to satisfy one’s desires and longings.

Psychoanalysis has substantially influenced the way surrealists regard the dream. As a science, psychoanalysis does not go further than analysing elements of dreams and presenting its findings, whereas surrealism aims to merge dream and reality at a higher dialectical level and takes dreams as a means of intersubjective communication.

Freud’s theory of dreams is an outstanding synthetic work with that necessary dose of inspiration that is common to great accomplishments. It is the result and summation of 19th century’s knowledge. On the other hand, it remains a logical failure, because being based on a therapeutic foundation it considers the dream a pathological product. This leads to the simplistic conclusion that at night each person falls “ill” some way or another; this proposition seems to be overturned these days, which, however, is a very inaccurate statement as well.

(continued on page 6)

(continued from page 5)

Concerning dream symbols—which is perhaps alluded to in the question—their interpretations, being derived from an old divinatory practice, have acquired a clear sexual tinge.

What does the term “dream talent” mean? I assert all people have dreams that are perhaps of comparable frequency and intensity. I derive it from my own observation of “forgetting” and “recollecting” dreams. So, how can we talk about a talent? I can, however, derive from the existence of somnambulists that there can be individuals with particularly “expressive” dreams. But what of it? It is a known fact that talent does not establish authenticity.

Are there any recurring themes in your dreams? Do they correspond to your waking life? Give an example. What causes the recurrence of the themes, in your opinion?

I think dreams with recurring themes are most common with me. I have numerous dreams in which such themes are combined—and I do not usually record them, since I regard them “insignificant” upon waking up.

Among my main dream themes belong: erotic adventures, service in the army, childhood, flying using my arms, and dreams in which someone shows me completely unknown images.

Apart from obvious explanations, such as fulfillment of desires or feelings of anxiety, I suppose these “familiar themes” are the most reliable in dealing with the unsolved remains of the day.

Can you name what instances never appear in your dreams, for example, a color or a sound, rain, wind, darkness, etc.? Enumerate them right now, so that their absence is not remedied in your next dream. What role do you assign to colors in your dreams?

I cannot assert with certainty whether I regularly dream in color or in black and white. When I, however, have an intensive dream in color, it is a grand experience, namely for its colourfulness and “wide screen takes.” At times I also experience intensive hypnagogic states in color, which regularly happen when I am tired, sick, or have smoked too much. Apart from that, I have not discovered any other conditions for the presence of colors in my dreams.

For the most part, my dreams are of a visual character, rarely are they accompanied by sound or voice—which tend to be accompanied by a written text. I also have dreams in which I do not hear, or do not hear well. I cannot recall any other moments that do not occur in my dreams, perhaps all of the listed ones apply.

Do you have dreams that occur in regular cycles or in particular

situations? Could you define what are they conditioned by?

In my childhood I used to have two dreams that kept regularly repeating. Both were anxious dreams with very limited plots. Before falling asleep I was regularly afraid I would have them again, which was precisely the way to invite them.

Since then I have not had explicitly identical dreams, at least I am not aware of having them. Sometimes I feel “I have fallen into” an old dream, but actually the new dream is a follow-up of the old one.

However, I tend to have dreams in which a problem I face is dealt with.

Do outer influences, for example, music played while you are sleeping, light, people tumult, scents, street noise, etc., or the place and position you are sleeping in interfere with your dreams, or they become their organic part?

I do not have much experience with outer stimuli except several bodily feelings. (I have noticed that touches of the tongue on the palate and teeth influence a specific type of anxious dreams.) From outer influences, I remember only the sound of the alarm clock, which the dream attempted to weave into its fabric several times, and the chewed blanket, which represented a disgusting meal in the dream.

What kind of dreams prevail in your case? And what kind of emotions do they trigger, for example, anxiety, erotic feelings, etc.? What do you ascribe their predominance to? Do you think a dream—as opposed to other manifestations of the human psyche—is an expression of increased sensibility, which may facilitate intersubjective communication?

Some kinds of dreams are certainly more frequent than others. Among these belong erotic dreams, anxious dreams and dreams about travel. Less frequent are “apocalyptic” dreams (about the end of the world), and lately, dreams about “initiation.”

I explain their predominance in a quite traditional way, as the fulfillment of an unconscious desire.

Some experience with premonitory dreams might indicate that a dream is truly an expression of increased sensibility (if we accept such an interpretation). A dream possesses a reservoir of symbols which is to some degree common to all, and which has been so far interpreted only at the psychological level. It still remains a huge and complex task to attempt to understand “oneiric communication”—namely via experimenting with active influence of dreams between subjects. As far as I know, only a few initial attempts have been conducted in this direction. (“Dream Grafting” is a game played by the French Surrealist Group aimed to study the oneiric treatment of contents given in advance.)

Notes on Dreams

It is the oneiric climate that dominates landscapes we have many reasons to regard as familiar, despite being absolutely positive that we have never entered them. Dream and reality mutually exchange stimuli, which most frequently occur at the moments closely preceding or following sleep.

Verbalisation in dreams represents an attractive topic, which includes various directives, neologisms, numbers, proverbs and sayings. Although some of these mechanisms may have been already explained—for example, condensation, transference, etc.—our everyday oneiric life offers plentiful enigmas to solve, since discovering mere general principles cannot quench our desire to understand their urgent challenges.

Exploring dreams poses a question of sensory perception during dreaming (as in the old experiments with somatic dreams). The sight is

the only sense that is completely eliminated during sleep, yet visibility remains the strongest content of dreams. Another question is the imagination of pseudo-perception of other senses, the receptors of which are attenuated, but, as opposed to sight, not completely eliminated.

We know that night was attributed a special power by poets of all times. While for surrealists it is synonymous to a superior femininity, hermeticists view it as a significant energetic space belonging to the “black planet” of their operations; it would be interesting to see to what extent night itself participates in the creation of dreams and what is the difference between diurnal and nocturnal dreaming. If we admit that there are individuals who are active during the day and others during the night, it will be interesting to compare the dream contents of the two groups.

Martin Stejskal, May 21, 1979

(We gratefully acknowledge Dagmar Štěpánková as the author of all translations from the Czech featured in this special issue of *Dreamdew* dedicated to Martin Stejskal.)

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