



Myths and Texts: Joanna Kiernan's *Dream-Work*

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Perhaps reflecting the emphasis in contemporary film theory upon psychoanalytic approaches to filmmaking and film spectatorship, a number of independent and avant-garde directors have recently completed works which revolve upon themes and texts borrowed from Freud. Such films have ranged from respectful dramatizations of case studies (*The Story of Anna O.*) to irreverent explorations of psychoanalytic themes (*On the Marriage Broker Joke . . .*), from highly sophisticated, probing feminist critiques (*Sigmund Freud's Dora*) to sophomoric, convoluted spoofs of standard film genres and Freudian concepts (*Raw Nerves: A Lacanian Thriller*). With her latest film, *Dream-Work*, Joanna Kiernan adds a distinctive contribution to such efforts by subsuming a series of dream descriptions and analyses, taken from *The Interpretation of Dreams*, within the framework of a coolly-distanced vision, which, in contradistinction to the explicatory thrust of Freudian exposition, delights in the generation of paradoxes and in the adumbration of ambiguities. In *Dream-Work*, Kiernan continues to explore questions of sound/image disjunction first raised in her earlier films such as *Representing* (1977), where a camera pans four times past postcard images of desert flora, a San Diego beach, a David Hockney painting, a stop on Highway 6, Los Angeles' Farmer's Market, etc., as different off-screen voices offer information which sometimes relates directly to the image before the viewer and which at other times teases the spectator by seeming to suggest a less certain, though potentially more intriguing, connection between image and text. The extension of this strategy to *Dream-Work* enables the bracketing of Freudian methodology so that it is neither endorsed nor disavowed, but instead tested implicitly as a basis for approaching experience (e.g., interpretation of the dream-work) and as an impetus, whether tacit or acknowledged, for creating art (i.e., construction of film-work).

The spectator is forced to participate in the film's unraveling and interpretation, becoming a quasi-dreamer/analyst and, in so doing, confronting both the cultural and individual assumptions which the film's structure either supports or subverts, but which remain the spectator's own contribution to *Dream-Work*.

The opening image of a stick probing a small, icy-edged black pool, for instance, might suggest to the viewer already aware of the film's title (which is not offered on screen till the film's conclusion) a palpable example of the sort of imagery which, following Freud, is often interpreted sexually. A more idiosyncratic response might stress the "mystery" and "fluidity" conveyed through this image and thus might lead the viewer to expect a "lyrical" work which conforms to his or her preconceptions about films which are "like dreams" and, possibly, adheres as well to his or her assumptions about the communication of a "feminine sensibility" through a recognizable manner of representation. As the stick fishes a large sheet of crumpled silver-paper from the inky pool and sets it in the foreground, the spectator experiences opposing impulses, on the one hand desiring to explore the general implications of the imagery while on the other hoping to establish a specific connection between what is glimpsed and its function within the film. When Kiernan later qualifies the status of some sounds and images, she raises new questions about their significance by underscoring the ambiguities implicit within the disjunctions of her "narrative." If, for instance, the silver-paper, illustrative of part of an ensuing description of one of Freud's own dreams, is divested of its "mystery" by the reading of Freud's text, which offers a rational explanation of its appearance and significance, at the same time the image deepens in "mystery" since the filmmaker undermines Freud's systematic designation of how and why the object appeared by extracting this episode from the rest of the dream and by recreating it on screen, in an even more disjointed fashion than Freud's, according to her own less explicit "system."

A central irony of *Dream-Work* is that Freud's role as authority-figure is co-opted—or at least opposed—not so much by Kiernan as filmmaker as by the sounds and images of her film. Most of these sounds and images seem discrete entities, possibly contributing to the Freudian text, whether illustratively or symbolically, but not relinquishing their identities to this text. Even so apparently direct a conjunction between text and image as the Freudian assertion that a heavily-laden basket tossed at a woman in her dream might "serve as the mark of a servant," followed by the shot of a woman scrubbing a tile floor, slyly subverts image/text unity through its sound track, which for no apparent reason matches the tones of an unseen piano to the sight of the woman on her knees. And, just as many images appear temporally disconnected from the texts they serve to illustrate, some images, such as a lengthy, silent black and white view of a girl playing with a doll house, seem to relate only tenuously to any specific dream description or analysis, thereby implicitly supporting a feminist sub-text which arises at unpredictable intervals to add an additional dimension to the film.

This sub-text is advanced at the film's outset when a female voice describes the dream "dissection of the lower part of my own body, my pelvis and legs." Not until the ensuing analysis of this dream, read by the same woman, does it become clear that the dreamer was no female but Freud himself. Aside from alerting the spectator to regard carefully matters of gender, the filmmaker tacitly calls into question both the subject and the object of Freudian analysis ("dissection"), implying that the roles women play in such a procedure merit fresh scrutiny. Soon after this dream description concludes, a camera pan

around the interior of a shack focuses suggestively upon a number of objects, including sharp garden tools, plastic gallon bottles, disconnected car radios, a cord hung on a wall, and scarlet-hued synthetic material on a chair. As surely as the garden tools appear inescapable phallic symbols, the last item, bulkier and brighter than the other scanned objects, seems, a bit insistently, to represent female genitalia. The analysis which follows expands upon this image, for in it Freud mentions offering a woman colleague Rider Haggard's *She*, which he describes as "a strange book, but full of hidden meaning . . . the eternal feminine, the immortality of our emotions . . ." He relates the strangeness of this book to the strangeness of his dream, itself about "dissection" or analysis, just as in later writings he asserts that the "strange 'manifest' content of the dream can regularly be made intelligible" through psychoanalytic investigation. Seen from this perspective, the very impulse which led Freud to attempt dream analysis appears bound to his equating the "eternal feminine" with "hidden meaning"; it seems therefore appropriate that both Freud's account and interpretation of this dream should be read by a woman. The Mephistophelian lines from *Faust* with which he interrupts his own analysis of this dream—"The best of what you know cannot be told to boys"—handwritten on screen with a black marker, raise anew the issue of Freud's views on females by calling into question the role of women within the psychoanalytic cosmos.

Throughout *Dream-Work*, Kiernan counterbalances the dense information communicated through the reading of Freud's suggestive texts with a visual sparseness that yields relatively uncomplicated, filmically "underdetermined" images, sights (and often sounds) easily grasped because they are uncluttered and presented in clear focus. Such minimalism serves on one level as an antidote to what might be termed the "psychoanalytic fallacy" ("phallicy"?) which adopts a narrowly anthropomorphic approach to experience, transforming "neutral" objects into psychical symbols. Susan Sontag notes that "a large part of the popularity and persuasiveness of psychology comes from its being a sublimated spiritualism: a secular, ostensibly scientific way of affirming the primacy of 'spirit' over matter." And this leads to myth: "The promise of a temporary triumph over death," says Sontag, "is implicit in much of the psychological thinking that starts from Freud and Jung." But in the film the base-line of representation might be said to be the primacy of the *object*, including that most devious of "objects"—Freud's text. Yet because *Dream-Work* is not a dream-work, but a film-work where, as the coolly calculated interplay between image and sound suggests, the rational processes of the filmmaker proceed in less covert fashion than those of a dreamer, the question of the primacy of objects, which are first reconstituted in the dream, then recalled in the dream account and analysis, cannot be resolved. Accordingly, the filmmaker's "open system" of representation subverts attempts at closure by both dream-interpreter (Freud) and spectator, achieving considerable ambiguity through its sometimes direct, sometimes elliptical, relationship to the psychoanalytic text. Ultimately, however, it refuses to surrender its autonomy to this or any other text. Though the filmically "underdetermined" image may, in conjunction with Freudian "narrative," soon appear psychologically "overdetermined," the accompanying sound track and preceding or ensuing images often sabotage any effort to settle conclusively upon the image's meaning, thus placing all "determinations" within the realm of the provisional.



Joanna Kiernan at the Millennium (Photo Credit: Bruce Meisler)

Kiernan's refusal to follow a predictable course is basic to the interrogation in *Dream-Work* of systematically-derived attempts to fix meaning. If the Freudian texts cumulatively form the most obvious structural unity, the sounds and images, by offering the possibility of alternative textual "readings," challenge this unity and, in so doing, generate new structures which, depending upon the spectator's interpretation of the filmmaker's intent, may be thought to support or to subvert the Freudian system. For example, the slicing of onion, pepper, liver, and meat, which recalls similar preparations of parsley and tomato in different segments of Kiernan's *Trilogy* (1977), accompanies the reading of Freud's analysis of his own "dissection" dream, which he considers emblematic of his decision to embark upon dream interpretation. The psychoanalyst explains how the dream was prompted by his recollection of two novels in which "the guide is a woman," both books being "concerned with perilous journeys," while one "describes an adventurous road that had scarcely ever been trodden before, leading into an undiscovered region." Instead of offering

an image either literally illustrative of Freud's words or in accord with his implicitly heroic view of his pioneering role as dream interpreter, Kiernan accompanies this text with a shot of the completed dish, plunked down on a counter and tilted toward the viewer. The image suggests a relationship between Freud's mystification of women (the "eternal feminine" serves as "guide" to "undiscovered regions") and the subjection of women (most dishes are still prepared by female "homemakers"); as the extraordinary achievement of one man is linked to the quotidian experiences of many women, any notion of the heroic endeavor which led to *The Interpretation of Dreams* is undercut—or at least qualified—by the mundane vision of the completed dish. And the spectator is further encouraged to question whether the sort of violence glimpsed in preparation of the dish is adequately acknowledged and accounted for by Freudian constructs or if the ahistoricism of such concepts as the id derives from the same paternalistic ideology which tacitly engenders such violence.

Paradoxically, although the lucidity of the Freudian texts offsets the impressionistic interplay of images and sounds, preventing *Dream-Work* from functioning "like a dream," the resultant dialectic between image/sound and text, insofar as it is multileveled and protean, is also "dreamlike." Sounds and images, in conjunction with dream descriptions and analyses, shed and assume "meaning": adjoined to the Freudian text ("The opening and shutting of windows was one of the main subjects of dispute between her and her husband"), the thud of a shut window implies female anger; associated with a different section of the same analysis ("... her daughter had been very cruel to animals. She was collecting butterflies and asked the patient for some *arsenic* to kill them with"), the spread wings of photographed butterflies suggest female genitals. But such allusiveness is ultimately unsystematic; indeed, one way the film is "dreamlike" is in its nearly ceaseless sound and image transformations "with a view to the possibility of representation, condensation, and displacement," "achievements" which Freud ascribes to the dream-work and by way of which Kiernan constructs her *Dream-Work*. Throughout, patterns are varied prior to becoming predictable; for instance, just as it seems that Kiernan's method will parallel Freud's by moving from one dream account/analysis to the next, two segments from the interpretation of "the may-beetle dream" are recapitulated. The initial treatment of the first segment shows the male reader of a text on "the contradiction between appearance and character" seated at a round table in an otherwise unfurnished section of a room. The "neutral" image appears to match his uninflected style of reading. Later, however, when a woman standing before a pond in a forest clearing reads in even less inflected fashion the same passage, and continues on to another passage originally read by the man, not only is the formerly "neutral" reading now seen as "expressive," but the female reader's ambiguous relationship to the text raises questions about the value of Freudian interpretation for women (and, more generally, for everybody) as well as about the filmmaker's intentions (does she wish to distance the spectator from the text? does she desire, through repetition, to make her film more "like a dream"?). So, too, when a platform beside a railway stop, initially the site where a woman and other passengers boarded a train, is glimpsed during the final shot of the film from the dirty back window of a moving train, the "dreamlike" *deja vu* (is it really the same platform?) is counterbalanced by a

reflexive gesture on the part of the filmmaker, for on the platform, kneeling before a tripod with her back to the spectator, is a woman, perhaps someone who just happened along, perhaps someone in the service of the filmmaker, perhaps the filmmaker herself. "If we were to judge from this single example," states the reader of the text at this point, "we should be inclined to think that the apparent absurdity had been permitted or even designed," and these last words quoted from *The Interpretation of Dreams* slyly underscore the film's reflexive conclusion.

If mythology generates text in such neo-Romantic avant-garde works as *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome*, *The Illiac Passion*, and *Dreamwood*, where male filmmakers literally luxuriate in myth, in Kiernan's more devilish, less demonic, effort, a deromanticized text encourages pursuit and isolation of the sources of mystification. Though this course parallels that of psychoanalysis insofar as both are predicated upon the assumption that "in dreams begin responsibilities," it veers wickedly away from the Freudian path whenever it takes on the additional "responsibility" of interrogating Freud's own work on dreams ("dream-work"). "If a woman dreams of falling," according to Freud "it invariably has a sexual sense: she is imagining herself as a 'fallen woman'"; yet in *Dream-Work*, following Freud's (unconscious?) revelation of his enthusiasm for the notion of the "eternal feminine," the dogmatic tone and closure of meaning themselves become subject to analysis. Though on one level *Dream-Work* moves against interpretation and toward demystification, on another it reinterprets the Freudian text, seeing in it, as in myth, a system open to nearly ceaseless "symbolic" representations. Freud is quoted in the film as claiming that "in dreams as in mythology, the delivery of the child from the uterine waters is commonly presented by distortion as the entry of the child into water; among many others, the births of Adonis, Osiris, Moses, and Bacchus are well-known illustrations of this"; so psychoanalysis assimilates outmoded myths and, in their stead, offers itself as text. Yet Freudianism, too, is vulnerable to such assimilation, becoming, for example, a type of "found object" in Kiernan's film, where its status as both myth and text is called into question. Neither "major mythopoeia" nor systematized critique, *Dream-Work* responds non-reductively to this tension between myth and text. Kiernan refuses to adopt either a fully "distanced" or "committed" approach; instead her concomitant high seriousness and playfulness serve to mediate between dream interpretation and filmic representation, between Freud's myths and texts and her own.