SLEEPING

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Did our forefathers ever sleep? They must have done, sleep being an elementary body function. But sleep displays cultural variations and has cultural meaning as well. Sleep is staged with different artifacts, rooms and by different performances, culturally informed and individually decided. Like eating, dressing and housing, sleeping is a common human feature. Modern science tells us that we sleep at least 1/3 of our lives. A life of 70 years includes about 23 years sleeping and dreaming. Modern science also informs us that there are four periods of sleep interrupted by REM (Rapid Eye Movement) sleep, when we dream. Of the 23 years of sleep we might dream during as many as five or six of them. We remember very little of this (Alvarez 1995: 84).

Those who sleep are always a mystery. They are absent and present alike, apparently in peace but in reality (during REM-periods) engaging in wild adventure of the most private nature. Sleep is private; many modern people are shy about looking at a sleeping person. This may be in part because they sense that there is something going on which they can never be part of. People may also show many of the unflattering physical movements taking place. A sleeping person turns, groans, snores, talks in his/her sleep, usually quite unawares. Sleep thus constitutes a phenomenological paradox. It is a phase in which none of the waking life's rules are kept – including the rules that tell us what it is to be awake (Alvarez 1995: 101). Yet, if not forgotten, sleep is poorly accounted for in the discipline of European Ethnology.

Sleep is both a cultural process itself, and it is subject to other cultural processes; including time-space processes, conceptualisations of sleep itself, of order and chaos, public and private. For example, the private feeling of sleep is affiliated to a cultural process of making things intimate. This process is probably a child of Middle Age courtly culture wandering through times to be celebrated in the bourgeois classes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Frykman & Löfgren 1979; Elias 1980). "Intimatisation" often leads to feelings of shame when looking at a sleeping person. At the same level of thought, some feel tender, caring love when looking at a treasured one sleeping. Also, a sleeping female, nymphet, or goddess has for long been a common motif in European art. Beautiful and peaceful, but also promising for the wondering (male) mind, she is usually portrayed surrounded by wild nature. Sleep is also paradoxical because we make it so. Heraclitus said: "For the awake there exists only one world, but when we sleep each of us turns to our own private world."[1]

The Night

Sleep usually takes place at night. Sleep can appear as a flimsy topic for European Ethnologists who are used to cultural studies and ethnographic detail tied to specific places, historical periods, and social strata. We are more at home with the subject of "the night". There are two ways to make the night inhabitable. We can either close it off and go to sleep, dreaming sweet dreams. Or we can enlighten it. Several studies on this subject have considered the meaning of the

electric light, which changes the centuries-old relationship to the night to a point where we find it difficult to understand the nightly fears and anxieties of our forefathers (Schivelbusch 1983). The curious thing is that we tend to see this process as rather new, at the oldest after World War II. However, in 1914 the Danish cultural historian Hugo Matthiessen wrote a fascinating book on the night in medieval and renaissance towns, in which he says that we can hardly imagine the darkness of the dark in old times. Nor can we imagine the fears. The towns were fortified and locked up. Fire, thieves and night prowlers threatened decent citizens of the towns. Their worst fears were embodied by the people of the night; "dishonest" people, culturally and legally speaking, like the town-executioner, gypsies and vagrants (or other people in the broad early-modern category of "dishonest people"). Witches' foul rituals happened at midnight (Matthiessen 1914; Henningsen 1984). In these early modern towns garbage collection was taken care of by night men who carried their stigma in their name. Just like witches they did "dishonest" work at un-Godly hours.

The night *is* dark. In our European tradition we celebrate sun and light. One of the finest treasures in the Danish National Museum prehistoric collection is a bronze sun-chart pulled by horses, interpreted as a Bronze Age celebration of the sun and light. In classical Greece, Apollo drove the sun-chariot as well. Dawn meant the resurrection of order. In our Christian tradition, Christ is the *Lux Mundi*, the light of the world, and morality is built through dichotomies (so beloved in cultural studies) which oppose: light, goodness, order, sense, and God to darkness, evil, chaos, impulses and Satan (in some traditions the fallen angel of light). In the Greek tradition, the last dichotomy perhaps Apollo versus Dionysus.

The night is also a time of fear. Hunting animals come out and attack, and ill-minded people are up and about. The senses of "honest" people are slowed down and people must cope with nightmares. The night contains almost anything one puts into it. Lacking clear vision, fantasy wins free and finds the strangest places to wander. Just ask Romantic era writers who were famous for their intimate relationships to dreadful dreams. Ghosts and malign spectres come out at night too. When electric light arrived, to a certain degree it gave fear a name and a face, and it became, as Hannah Arendt would say, banal. Chaos turns to order. But we still fear the night, especially our uncontrolled minds when we sleep and dream. Fortunes are made in the medical industry because of this fear. More sleeping disorders are being treated (or lulled away) today than ever before.

The Bed

In Western culture we sleep in a bed, where we also take refuge in case of illness, where we make love and where we often choose to die. Sleeping rooms and beds are distinct artefacts telling us about this basic process in human life. Perhaps these material things are the most promising ethnological avenue to follow in understanding the cultural process of sleep, which otherwise seems to slip through our fingers. Material culture has the advantage of tying together many free-floating cultural processes into something more concrete. In scholarly research the study of artefacts is a promising way to understand sleep as a cultural, rather than biological process. Artefacts usually have an obvious central function; a bed is to sleep in. Its style can signify a time-period and socio-economic context. At the same time, a bed can be a complex cultural symbol for the meaning of sleep, and all its embedded and referred-to larger processes of privatisation, creating order, making the world possible for people to live in. All three meanings go together in a cultural analysis of an artefact (Gerndt 1986: 117ff.; Venborg Pedersen 2003: 92).

In my daily work at the Open Air Museum I come across beds all the time. Each season we make up about 120–130 beds, alcoves, benches, and cradles to illustrate sleeping habits from about 1650 to 1930, the period represented by the museum buildings. Some of the beds (as an all embracing term for the different pieces of furniture that were used for sleep) are very well equipped, others are modest. The beds also served as displays of wealth. A featherbed demanded the material from perhaps 10 to 15 geese, and in the eighteenth century bed linen was worth

as much as silver by weight (Venborg Pedersen 2004: 125ff.). It was a form of conspicuous consumption, just as today, we might buy a big car and make sure it is parked right by our house. However, in some places the bed is still a forceful sign of wealth. During a trip to the northeastern parts of the Balkans in the mid-1990s, I often saw beds made up for display in the best room of farm houses. Even there, modern times have come to farmers, though. Above the display of sheets and pillows, there was usually a shelf full of pots and pans in bright-coloured enamel. I believe the bed and the shelf of pots and pans had the same purpose as the displays of wealth.

Research on houses and historic dwellings has seldom given as much attention to beds and sleeping rooms as to kitchens and drawing rooms (Dröge 1999: 9–11). But in studies of elite culture, beds seem more important; after all Louis XIV of France governed from his bed and made his *lever* and *coucher* into important state ceremonies. Most ladies of higher social strata in the elegant eighteenth century would receive people in the morning while still in (or on) their bed. But when it comes to early modern peasant culture, beds are usually considered in terms of art history and folk-crafts (Dröge 1999; Steensberg 1949; Erixon 1938).[2] A bed is basically simple in construction, so it allows for many different modes of decoration. In European private homes and in museums one fantastic piece after another can be seen. As important as this approach is, it seldom tells us much about how people slept or otherwise used beds. The German ethnologist Gottfried Korff has done some work in this field (Korff 1981, 1986), but we have to turn to the museum researchers to find more elaborate work (Eder Matt 1994; Heidrich 1988).

There are good reasons to focus on the materiality of sleep – in the bed, in the house, in the heart of everyday life. In the house, cultural values meet technology, economy, and ecology. Here we also see personal choices and compromises that organise the reality of life (Roche 2000: 81–82). The house is a protected and protecting place providing shelter against the elements, against wild animals and ill-minded people. It is the place were work is done, where artefacts and possessions are kept. Here time is fixed in frames of remembrance and daily routines broken by times of celebration. Here one can connect the present and the past, and become a person in a cultural context (Venborg Pedersen 2003: 96ff.).

In the home work, rest, food and social life meet, and the wheel of life is symbolised by the bride's chest, the bed, the table and the chairs, the clock, and the deathbed. Public and private meet; from the pump in the courtyard to the street door; from the warmth of the fire and to bed. Production, reproduction and consumption intermingle. In short, here life is lived! More than any other furniture, the bed is a symbol of life. Many everyday artefacts may be symbols; the table can be a ceremonial item for celebration – the altar. A chair may be the seat of a judge or the throne of a king. The bed can be conceived as a token of fulfilment. In early modern culture as well as in the traditional anthropological perception of Mediterranean societies, the bed is the very place where conception is proven. There were eye-witnesses at the bedside, or bed linen was displayed to tell its own silent story. Childbirth, engagements, consummation of marriage, and wills before death are just the most prominent events that had the bed as a focal point (Mørch 1972: 6).

The Metaphor

So, did our forefathers ever sleep? Biologically yes, they must have done. Culturally – again yes. They slept and they put meaning into it, changing from time to time, between social strata, and from place to place. The study of sleep (in this view) will not follow a certain place or a specific condition, but will follow the metaphor, the meaning of sleep, its extension, use, and history, in social, economic and ecological contexts (Marcus 1995). Sleep has always been important because it is biologically necessary. Hence humans have always needed a way to perceive it, make it speakable, including sleep in cultural discourse. However, culture at any given time is often like the debris or "fall-out" of past ideological systems, rather than a system or a coherent whole, as the British-American anthropologist Victor Turner has pointed out (Turner 1974:

14). Hence we must follow the idea of sleep down twisted roads.

Let us turn towards Europe's classical heritage once more. According to the Roman poet Ovid, Morpheus was the chosen son of the god of sleep, Hypnos – we recognise the name in the concept of hypnosis. Is it good or bad to be under the influence of hypnosis? If one sleep walks through life, today we would see this as a negative quality. Though we could also connect it to the idea of a free man who has not surrendered to modernity's busy life. Hypnosis is a tool for laughter at cabarets and sideshows. But it is also a tool in psychoanalysis, drawing on the classical wisdom that Hypnos is a gift. For Homer in the *Illiad*, Hypnos and Thanatos (Death) were twin sons of the Night (Nyx); and Hypnos donates the gift of sleep to man. With wings he hovers above the ground, touching the tired with a small twig dripping with dew, or pouring sedative juices from a horn. This is overwhelmingly positive. The needy are given the chance to rest.

In the Greek tradition most phenomena are made objects, carried by the gods. This is a way to make them speakable! But we do not necessarily see objects most clearly though. In an enquiry from the newspaper *Le Figaro* around World War I, the novelist Marcel Proust was asked about the power of habits and our way of perceiving the world. Proust's most thought-provoking answer may have been an aside about Noah and his Ark. Proust should have answered (according to Alain de Botton) by telling a small story about his childhood's understanding of Noah. When he was a small child, no one in the Bible seemed more pitiable than Noah forced to be in the Ark for forty days. Later, when Proust became ill and often had to stay in an ark (that is, his bed) he understood that Noah would never have been able to see the world as well as he did from the Ark, even though he was shuttered up and it was night (Botton 1998: 173–175). To make one see what one usually cannot see is Proust's strength. But how could Noah have seen anything of the planet sitting in his Ark with his Zoo? For the first time, because he could not see bushes and trees, Noah really *saw* trees and bushes, and for the first time in six hundreds years of life he really understood the *meaning* of trees and bushes – that is the point of Proust's short story.

In other words, Noah was able to create cultural images of all the things he could not see. Giving them status as images, symbols, and metaphors, he was able to understand them. In the Western realm of thinking, sleep provides the same advantage. As Proust could walk to the Dukes of Guermantes or Swann, and found the two roads eternally intertwining, metaphors may help all thought. A metaphor is a meta-symbol collecting the manifestations of cultural values expressed by symbols. They are, as the famous anthropological phrase goes, "good to think". The word metaphor is often used to mean "figure of speech," but it may just as well be a "figure of thought", the "web of significance" as Clifford Geertz' famous phrase goes. Symbols and metaphorical relations are, in this line of thought, both models for and of reality, they take part in creating reality and they are used to express the cultural understanding of reality. Perhaps most important, and where we return to Proust, they are "tangible formulations of notions, abstractions from experience fixed in perceptible forms, concrete embodiments of ideas, attitudes, judgements, longings or beliefs ... they are as public as marriage and as observable as agriculture" (Geertz 1993 [1973]: 91ff.).

The analysis of metaphor is a useful and proven approach when dealing with the, for us as European Ethnologists, familiar fields of peasant culture, material culture, and cultural systems. It is also not difficult to see how this approach can be applied to the study of sleep as a condition. But we are familiar with the idea in another way as well.

During the last fifteen to twenty years the ethnological and historical study of nations, nation-states and nationalism has drawn much attention. European ethnology's own history has also drawn interest as it relates to nationhood. The metaphor of sleep and sleeping does not just deal with beds and sleepy peasants. It is a cultural metaphor for what could be called a kind of "culture hiding yet not being away", a culture of hibernation playing the tune of the "nationalisation of culture" performed during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Löfgren 1989) and which

gave birth to nationality studies (Stoklund 1999). The basic idea of romantic nation building was that the people of the nation were asleep, and needed to be awakened to see and fulfil their role as Frenchmen, Germans, Danes, and Swedes. The idea of latency is close to the idea of sleeping, taken the metaphor to its broadest extent. It seems to me that the metaphor of sleep not only can provide an entry into the study of sleep but is indeed a thought-figure appearing at the most unforeseeable places both in the world we claim to study and in our own studies themselves. Scholars and scientists are, after all, in and not outside the world they study.

The Sleep

In this article I have already discussed sleep as a field for science and medicine. We have also seen sleep as an expression of the private, as a condition more than a process. In sleep we turn ourselves over to the merciful peace of Hypnos. We say we "sleep like a child". Doing so, we are approaching the unspoiled condition of nature, turning towards a state dreamt of by Rousseau. But this happens according to our own rules, or to sleep's own rules (we remember Heraclitus), to a kind of returning Charivari, which through creating an intimate culture turned upside-down, makes us safe in public culture during day, and brings us through the daily menace of life.

Cultural change is often slow, but is usually felt as being very quick by those who experience it. As today also in early modernity people felt that during their lifetime the world had changed far too much, far too quickly, and far too thoroughly. Studies of modernity have celebrated change, often rapid change, as a token of the speedy process of modernisation and, hence portray slowness and sleepiness as belonging to pre- or early modern conditions, or as defense strategies by individuals. However, this is only the case to a certain degree. "Festina lente" (hurry slowly) may have been the wise words of Augustus, Caesar of Rome, and perhaps because of this affiliation caution is still considered a virtue today. But the sluggish, slow, inert, slack peasant of the eighteenth century is hardly an ideal in the modern world. The Enlightenment killed this cultural ethos' positive connotations (Christiansen 2002).

Small phenomena speak to large issues. A project following the lines above is being conducted at the Danish National Museum, the Open Air Museum. Our study of the cultural history of sleep includes such artefacts of sleep as beds. We are not trying to solve the eternal riddle of sleep, but to understand a bit of what our ancestors thought about sleep, how they solved the problem of sleep and, hopefully, thus make our selves a bit wiser. This means using phenomenological sensibilities, and seeking interpretations, in the broadest possible ways. In what way does sleep fit into the cultural creation of order, making the world possible for people to live in?

Notes

1 Heraclitus' statement is translated by me. The same is the case later in the essay.
2 Steensberg's and Erixon's studies are mentioned just as examples of this way of studying peasant furniture – and hence beds. Others could have been mentioned but it appears fair to say that the lines of study laid out by Steensberg and Erixon are still broadly followed when dealing with peasant furniture.

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