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The Dream Effect

In 1968, Roland Barthes published a short essay on the ›reality effect‹. Basically, the term refers to the existence of non – significant descriptive details, ›apparently detached from the narrative’s semiotic structure« (Barthes), whose sole function is to create an illusion of ›realism‹. Undoubtedly, Barthes’s term has its problems. But it may turn out to be useful in an analogical transfer to the poetics of fictional dreams – as what I will call the ›irreality effect‹ or ›dream effect‹.

If fictional dreams try to imitate the peculiarities of real dreams (which is by no means obligatory) they must have at least some of the following characteristics: (1) strong visualisation (requiring an extensive use of the descriptive mode); (2) bizarreries (i.e. various deviations from the reality principle); (3) metamorphoses (i.e. fluid identity of persons, objects, actions); (4) discontinuities of time and space; (5) lack of causal motivations, etc. These will create the dream effect.

But how do these specifics of dreams influence the process of semiosis? Basically, there are three options: (1) Oneiric qualities can mark dream elements as carriers of meaning (following semiotic conventions which we know from satires, parables, and similar genres). (2) They can (this is the closest parallel to Barthes’s argument) have no meaning (at least none that can be easily identified). In a semantically over – determined realm, as which dreams are considered in many dream theories, they will, however, act as free – floating significant which increase the ambiguity of dreams. (3) Intensified oneiricity in combination with low – key semanticity can foreground a reader or observer response which is focused less on finding a meaning than on enjoying the dream effect in itself.

My paper will outline different variants of this conflict between plausible oneiricity and signification by analysing fictional dream representations from various periods of literary history.