

Sleep

in the Fine Arts



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...and our little life is rounded with a sleep
Shakespeare, *The Tempest* (IV i)

1. Introduction

From earliest times, both secular and sacred art have drawn on fables and realistic subjects concerning sleep, as well as on sleep-related episodes from mythology and The Bible. Sometimes it was to make of them a primary subject, and at other times to treat them merely as a pretext for something else. Almost always, the aim was to signify, via the mediating force of allegory, spiritual enlightenment, a premonition in dreams, or simply a salutary and indispensable pause for rest.

The most valued sleep is redemptive, the most magical is filled with wonders, and the most feared is that visited by nightmares. Like certain skies that can convey the four seasons in a single day, sleep can blend rosy hues with blackness. It is of no abode, it is approbation; it is the reward of wakefulness. And in art, which it nourishes, it is an additional stillness layered onto that privilege of sleep that is silence.

The world of sleep is more complex than is generally thought. Ever since the existence of an arsenal of machines capable of recording and analyzing its phases, the brain's neuronal connections have been the object of countless studies, especially since the 1960s. "Get some exercise and you'll get a good night's sleep" is a commonly-heard refrain in childhood. What does this suggestion signify? Above all, it implies the restorative function of sleep that action—the spending of muscular and cerebral energy—promotes.

Indeed, the daily cycle of wakefulness and sleep is the very rhythm of our life: It is described as 'circadian' (a cycle of about twenty-four hours). More precisely, adult existence is divided into three successive states: wakefulness, quiet Slow Wave Sleep (SWS, itself divided into stages according to electroencephalographic profile), and paradoxical (REM, with Rapid Eye Movements) sleep. This cycle should be kept in mind, as it is the basis for a number of explanations to come.

Willingly, for the most part, and to a greater or lesser degree, we submit to this cycle throughout our lives. We need to renew our energy, because our muscles and the neurons of our brain undergo a certain "wear and tear" during the day; sleep, directed by an internal biological clock, fulfils this function. In effect, we move from a more or less acute state of wakefulness to a different state, one in which neurochemical activity modifies the circuits of our cerebral neurons, expressing stages of SWS ("recharging our batteries") and REM sleep, called paradoxical or dream sleep because characterized by dreams, hallucinations, etc. At least one third of our lives is spent sleeping. This shows the extent to which fatigue, resulting from an expenditure of energy, induces recovery and rest.

Sleep has never left anyone indifferent. It has occupied, and still occupies to some degree, the imagination of artists, often resulting in the most singular of artistic creations. Out of a natural need and reflex, the wakefulness of each day leads invariably to sleep, with billions of people lying down every night to sleep in a bed, on a mat, in a hammock or directly on the ground. In a ritual that has been repeating itself for millions of years, people submit to

an unchanging biological cycle where sleep has its own life: the triumphant sleep of youth, the intermittent sleep of adulthood and the brief, elusive sleep of old age.

Everywhere the ritual of sleep is the same. Nevertheless, far from being unvarying, sleep occurs in many forms. If we think of sleep as a landscape, art expresses that landscape's enigmatic intelligibility, unfolding its steep, flat or rolling terrain.

Art outlives scornful gazes, appraising looks, and joyful scrutiny, as well as eyes that feel its ideality and dangers, its disappointments and consolations. Paradoxically, sleep-related themes make one lucid: "Let there be light!" is a call to lucidity on the intricate paths sleep takes, paths we will follow as this work unfolds.