

Dream Light: Categories of Visual Experience During Lucid Dreaming

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I have put into sixteen categories visual experiences associated with my lucid dreaming. The basic difference between lucid dreaming and ordinary dreaming is that in lucid dreaming I know I am dreaming, and in ordinary dreaming I do not. Lucid dreaming often has the visual characteristics of ordinary dreaming. On the other hand, lucid dreaming may lead to some experiences of light similar to what is reported in mystical or supposed mystical accounts (Gillespie, 1986). Therefore, the categories actually apply to a continuum from ordinary dreaming through lucid dreaming to phenomena associated with mystical experience.

I have tried to make as few categories as possible. The inclusion of a category is based on a decision that something essentially different happens in that category that does not happen in the other categories. Each category has a pure form, but not every visual phenomenon is a pure form of a category. The categories are set against the norm of ordinary visual dream experience. The categories are:

1. *Ordinary dream light*. Often lucid dreams have the same visual quality as ordinary dreams. In ordinary dreams I see people and other creatures, places, and objects, perhaps strange or exaggerated, but basically in forms that copy my waking experience. My surroundings appear to have the normal brightness of everyday life or at times less. My visual experience is coordinated with my movement and other sense experience. If I move my dreamed eyes or head or body, I experience new visual content relevant to my new position.
2. *Bright, clear dreams*. A prominent characteristic of lucid dreams is that they are often much brighter and clearer than ordinary dreams. This brightness and clarity may precede my realization that I am dreaming. In lucid dreams the colors are often intense and varied, at times even more than in waking life. The extra brightness and clarity are often noted during the dream itself.
3. *Areas of bright light*. Often there is a particularly bright and colorless light in one part of the visual environment. When this ill-defined bright area appears in the context of a scene, the light may appear to coincide with something in the scene, such as a hole in the sidewalk. I have often seen a general ill-defined area of light not coinciding with anything in the environment and partly obscuring the view. This light has always been to the left and center of my view. My reaction, until I trained myself differently, was to believe I was waking up and seeing the light of my room.

Sometimes I see a vague area of bright light against darkness, as after I have closed my dreamed eyes. This has usually been on the left side of my view. Patricia Garfield (1979) has reported seeing light as coming from underneath a closed door or shining through a window, in lucid dreams.

I have occasionally seen bright light on the periphery of my vision, so far off to the side that I cannot tell whether it has a particular shape or not. I cannot look at it directly. The effect is as though this intense light is sitting in the left corner of my left eye. It remains there no matter what movement I make.

Certain areas of light appear to play no part in the ongoing dream. They appear to be something else happening in the visual field. They can be taken as part of the dream scene if they happen to look like they fit in.

4. *Room light*. Room light is light from outside me carried into the dream in the images or outlines of objects in the room. At night, when only the bedroom window has light, the shape of the lit window may become a part of the dream, presenting the general perspective in the dream that is given to my sleeping eyes. If there is complete daylight in the room, some of the room objects may be seen though to some extent transformed. In none of these experiences have I awakened to find my eyes already open.

In one lucid dream I saw a green towel hanging from a bar on the wall in front of me. But instead of hanging down from the bar, it stuck out from the bar towards me. This utterly confused me. After I woke up, I found that I had seen in detail the towel that was hanging towards me from above the bed. Another lucid dream led to the "out-of-body" sensation. As I projected through space, stomach downward, I watched a large square of light to my left. It remained still as I sped forward. When I awoke directly from that experience, I was lying on my back. I saw that the square of light was the light of my room window. It had the same relation to my eyes that it had had in the dream. Thus I was assured that I had not really projected anywhere.

In the two cases just described, I did not realize at the time that what I was seeing actually belonged to my room. But sometimes I have seen doors or windows in a lucid dream and understood at the time (correctly) that they were the actual doors or windows of the bedroom.

5. *Imprecise visual environment*. There are times when no specific visual environment can be discerned, yet the visual field is not empty. What I see is unclear, blurred, confused, and/or changing. Imprecise visual environment seems to be the initiation of imaging without resolution as to its content. In lucid dreaming, when I interact less with my environment and anticipate less, upon turning my head I tend to see either nothing or this nonresolution of image. In one lucid dream I saw a building. I willed it to change into something, but I had not decided what to change it to. It became imprecise and its elements moved constantly until I looked away.

6. *Memory and imagination*. This category is not a visual experience in the sense that the other categories are. When awake, I can look about me while voluntarily recalling or imagining what another place looks like. While dreaming lucidly, I can likewise keep my attention on what is presented to me visually, while I picture something in my mind. I was able to bring to mind specifically to some degree correctly the general layout of my grandmother's house. This I did in a number of dream contexts. The visual memory or imagined scene does not appear as if before the eyes. It does not replace what I am seeing.

7. *Uniform darkness*. Although in a sense nothing is before me when my visual field is dark, darkness is a visual experience, for it is seen. When lucid, I often choose to close my dreamed eyes, and my view becomes dark. There are degrees and kinds of darkness. There is darkness comparable to what I see with my eyes closed while awake. There is what looks like a dark night sky or a moonlit night sky. There is dull darkness. There can also be shiny darkness, such as of black lacquer.

8. *Textures in darkness*. Sometimes I notice faint and formless textures in the darkness. These variations in the darkness are usually difficult to identify or describe. There are no patterns or definite shapes. This mottling is perhaps little different from common waking closed-eye darkness when a faint and formless light of entoptic origin may be seen.

9. *Patterns in darkness*. Although I have often seen darkness in a dream, it was not until I began to examine darkness closely that at times I came across faintly-seen patterns. The time I saw the patterns most distinctly, I was also tossing about in the air. I saw a collection of patterns that remained before me in a fixed position in spite of my tumbling about. My view was divided into possibly eight to twelve irregularly shaped sections. Each contained its own pattern. Each section of pattern seemed to vibrate or twitch within itself, though the section divisions remained stable. I was able to examine the whole display, scanning right to left and back again. Most of the sections had line or herring bone designs; one had all dots close together; and one had a chess board pattern. The chess board and dot designs I have seen often in hypnopompic experiences, though not the parallel lines. The overall effect is roughly as illustrated by Shepard (1978, plate I:E. and F.), where he labels them "entoptic images." My patterns were all in shades of grey and did not contain the brightness shown in his illustrations.

10. *Hypnagogic-type images*. The term "hypnagogic image" properly refers to an image that appears while I am falling asleep. I have seen the same type of image while studying the darkness before me while dreaming. After closing my dreamed eyes I

have seen before me faintly a series of briefly-appearing, small, still scenes that never had the brightness, clarity, or size of dream images. For example, these were of a series of row houses, then a little statue of a Buddha in an alcove, then a storefront window. I saw these as though through darkness. The scenes were unrelated to the dream in which I had closed my eyes. I was definitely asleep. After this I noticeably woke up.

11. *Minor lights*. Minor lights are small bright lights appearing against a dark or blank background. They may be points of light, small lines, a crack of light, or other forms. They normally lack color and are not representational, though points of light can be taken for stars, or a flash of light can be taken for lightning. They show no pattern or regularity. Normally I see these after eliminating the visual dream environment and starting to float, fall or fly in the dark or blankness. They shift in and out of view with my movement.

12. *Disks of light*. The disk of light is a perfectly round bright light, with a well-defined circumference. It appears in a variety of sizes. Its light is perfectly white and uniform, and not visually overwhelming like the sun. It is not accompanied by rays and is always seen against darkness. If a dream has been in progress, the disk may be seen against what is taken for night sky and be thought of as a moon, if it is the right size. Sparrow (1976) mentions seeing a moon at times in lucid dreams and has reported that once one appeared to move. I cannot say I have seen a disk of light move. Although I may spin about while I see a disk, it maintains a fixed location before my eyes. One such light appeared to be as though about ten inches away from me, about three or four inches to the left of my point of concentration, and about four inches in diameter. Naturally, no such distances can be involved.

13. *Patterns of light*. Sometimes I see only swiftly moving patterns covering my visual field and appearing to surround me. They are constantly changing versions of lattices, lines, dots, and colors. I am usually moving quickly when I see these, as when I have eliminated my normal environment and begin to toss about. These patterns are basically variations of elementary hallucinatory form constants (Siegel & Jarvic, 1975) seen from different perspectives. They contrast with the patterns in darkness (described above) by their brightness, their appearance at other perspectives than face on, and their constant change. Moss (1985a, 1985b) reports many variations of moving patterns such as of tunnels, funnels, lattices, and particularly of what he calls the vortex effect.

14. *Contentless light only*. Sometimes I see nothing before me except light. It may appear to be the sky and may vary from almost dark to very bright. The color is uniform and clear. When I have eliminated visual dream content or am flying, falling,

or tossing about, I may not think of the view as sky, but as being blank. In ordinary dreams I experience contentless light less, because I tend to remain in in-teraction with what is in view and I do not try to free myself from what I am seeing.

15. *Light with sun only*. The appearance of a sun in contentless light marks an intensification of light. The appearance of the sun is uncommon in my ordinary dreams, and like the view of contentless light, usually marks the cessation of interaction with ordinary dream images. I am usually falling or floating when I see the sun and am greatly exhilarated. The sun varies in size and intensity, often seeming to be at a distance. I may or may not be aware of a defined circumference. As I fall or float, the sun moves in and out of view. van Eeden (1969) reports having seen the disk of the sun. A variation, which I consider to be a greater form of the sun, is the appearance of multiple suns. On one occasion I saw six or seven suns, each gold and bright, with rays. The suns were not located in any obvious relationship to each other. They remained in a fixed position before my eyes though I was spinning. Most often I see the sun without other visual dream content. Sometimes I see it when I desire to see the fullness of light (the last category). Although the sun is much less than the fullness of light, it is also as different from the disk of light as the actual sun is from the moon.

16. *Fullness of light*. There is a light that fills the visual field with overwhelming brilliance. It usually has the whiteness and intensity of the light that is next to the sun high in a clear sky, though it is not difficult to look at. Whereas the milder appearances of the sun seem to be "out there," in the fullness of light a vivid white fire appears to come upon me and surround me. I am normally in darkness when the light first appears, though twice I was in an ongoing visual dream. Often I notice the sun first to be above my head. It then appears to descend to a place high before me, and I am overcome by light. I may or may not continue to be aware of the sun's circumference. If I see the orb of the sun, it remains in a stable location before my eyes even while I move or dance. While I keep my attention on the fullness of light, my awareness of my dreamed body decreases.

The fullness of light is accompanied by intense spontaneous feelings of joy and devotion. I feel that God is present in the light. There is nothing like these feelings with the lesser sun. There would appear to be a continuum from the mildest appearance of the sun to the greatest fullness of light. But the fullness of light is incomparably brighter than a simple view of the sun. And the exhilaration that may accompany the view of the lesser sun is nothing like the intense feelings of devotion and joy in the fullness of light.

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