



Karin Badt

Professor of theater and cinema in France

Posted: April 8, 2010 05:14 PM

Can Dreams Predict the Future? Amy Hardie's New Documentary

A woman has a dream in which her favorite horse collapses and buckles to the ground. Disturbed by this nightmarish vision, she wakes up, walks out into the fields in the middle of the night and finds her horse dead, just like in the dream.

A week later, this woman has a second dream in which her deceased first husband Arthur announces to her that she will be dead by her 48th year. At this point, the woman -- a self-avowedly rational scientifically minded film director -- panics and believes this too will come to pass. Age 47, she prepares for her ensuing death by filming this perhaps last year of her life.

This is the story of *Edge of Dreaming*, a new documentary by Scottish director Amy Hardie, recently premiered at the Thessaloniki Documentary Festival in Greece. The true account of the year following the dream prophesy, the film is, on a manifest level, a lyrical celebration of the precious moments of the filmmaker's life, offering poetic images of Ms. Hardie and family in a gorgeous Scottish countryside: scenes at sunset swinging on the hammock with an adorably concerned daughter, shots of the director snuggling with her psychologist husband in an airy bedroom, dark birds moving in formation in the clouds. "I wanted my eyes to feast on what I love," the director comments.

We get a sense of true thankfulness for the richness of love (husband and children) as well as lush dreamy shots of the fields and home. We also have musings on mortality, the voice-over noting that the word "human" comes from meaning those that bury their dead in

Edge of Dreaming a film that sticks sober panic ("I had a pit in my the question that persists: can dreams "We think we know a lot with our but perhaps we know a lot more in brain." So Ms. Hardie, already science documentarian (working with researchers) contacted the foremost scientists working on the brain today, to discover how dreams 'really' work.



humanitas, the earth. But what makes with you is the stomach") -- and tell the future? rational brain, our irrational acclaimed as a stem cell

One, Adam Zeman, neurologist at the University of Edinburgh, explains how her mind might have created a likely story about stimuli she might have sensed in other ways: a whinny from a neighboring horse, her own intuitive knowledge that the horse looked old and unwell. Another, Mark Solms, a neuroscientist and psychoanalyst, brings up how during dreams, the emotional sector of brains is wildly alert, which is why our dreams have such an emotional nature.

These clips from the scientists are so intriguing that one wants to know more -- and indeed I contacted Adam Zeman, whose work on consciousness (*Consciousness: A User's Guide to the Brain*) is considered cutting edge in the field, and he generously imparted to me the basics of dream research -- as well as some intriguing musings of his own. For example, I learned we have five stages of sleep which we alternate between, including one in which we are like zombies, with 30 percent less metabolism in the body (slow stage sleep). I also learned that in REM sleep, our brains are as active as when we wake (with acetylcholine, the neuron responsible for wakefulness, especially in gear), except with different parts taking the fore (the limbic system, responsible for emotion/memory), and others (i.e., the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, responsible for logic) going under -- which may explain why we have revelations of sorts when we dream, as our inhibitions are down.

Even more eye-opening: the reason our dreams seem to have a story may, Adam mused, be because of our brain's inherent need for patterning. "The brain is a natural storyteller," he pithily opined. As for the peculiarly symbolic quality of dreams, the brain already works metaphorically by nature -- constantly filtering impressions of the present with the memory of past, hence conceiving reality through habitual bridge-making. Quoting "Orlando," Zeman notes: "Everything is in fact always something else."

Zeman's own fascinating new research, incidentally, is on a relatively unknown function of the sleeping mind: to "consolidate memories". The stuff of dreams, I learn, is hardly dreamy.

None of these scientists, however, seem to have an answer for the "prophetic" quality of dreams, this quality that has fascinated humans for millennia, and this film director in particular.

For this, the director, in her quest, turns to Karl Jung (his notion of *adumbratio* in the essay "The Soul and Death") and ... in a final desperate move (as the fear becomes insurmountable, when mid-quest she is diagnosed with a life-threatening lung collapse), to a Brazilian shaman who takes her into the mouth of a snake.

How does this all end? With a startling surprise. No, the filmmaker -- whom I interviewed last week by phone in her home in Scotland -- was not a victim to the "charm's wound up" prophesy. And yet -- in a paradoxical twist -- she still holds that the premonition nevertheless was "true." The dream had prophesied her death. More importantly, the entire experience of pursuing this dream was life-changing for the director: "it opened my mind to different ways of seeing." The world is far more than we perceive, she notes.

One sideline discovery: the director's awareness of the interconnectedness of nature and human, and---an awareness that came to her during the shamanic journey --- a sense of the fragility of the eco-system. The movie ends on this evocative turn: images of fine-webbed leaves, snow-crystals cracking on the earth, birds soaring in an icy winter, undercut with an ominous threat that all this may be doomed.

Amy Hardie's film is one of a thousand entries selected for the North Carolina Full Frame Film Festival, to be screened this Saturday, April 10th, in Durham North Carolina, at 201 Foster Street Cinema Three at 4:10 pm.