

Parasomnia

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Sleeping is an action associated with sinking downwards. In English, one literally “falls” asleep. While sleeping, one experiences disengagement from everyday life, from emotions, and from the bodies we possess that bear the burden of our daily work. There are several versions of the European fairytale *Sleeping Beauty*, including those by the Brothers Grimm and Charles Perrault, in which the common plotline sees the heroine, because of a curse or prophecy, falling asleep instead of death. As the heroine slumbers, every little thing around her also falls asleep, joining in unison with the gentle rise and fall of her breath. Bedtime stories are words that float between sleep and wakefulness. They are an escape from life’s myriad expectations and labors. Just like a plant, all aspects of a sleeper seem to disappear aside from basic bodily functions. Like death, sleep is unbiased. A tall bed and soft pillow can create favorable conditions, but they do not raise it up and make it anything more than just sleep. Our eyelids and the rhythm of breathing sink, and the sleeper descends into slumber oblivious to the world around him. Cheng Ran’s video series *Before Falling Asleep* (2013) is comprised of adaptations from children’s bedtime stories. One aspect of the series comes from his own experiences coaxing his young child to sleep, while the other is the visualization of hypnagogia, the transitional state between being awake and being asleep. *Before Falling Asleep*’s four videos are drawn from Aesop’s fables (*The Fire and the Tree* and *Two Pigeons*), Ivan Krylov (*The River and the Pond*), and Hans Christian Andersen (*The Butterfly and the Flower*). All four stories are well known, and behind each of them are moral lessons that everyone knows by heart. A butterfly brings himself loneliness by hesitating too long in a cluster of flowers. A surging river and a clear, bright lake have a debate about ease and adventure. Fire and a tree deceive each other in a bid to survive while a thirst for freedom impels a pigeon to leave its warm nest. Taking risks leads to loss. Hearing these didactic narratives, it’s not hard to imagine a sleepy eyed small child lit up by the yellowish glow of his bedside light. *Before Falling Asleep* dives deep into this idea, immersing all the shots in bluish grays and yellows.

Cheng Ran has often used non-human images, particularly animals, in his artworks to give the works an anthropocentric symbolic meaning. For example, in his three-channel video work *Hot Blood, Warm Blood, Cold Blood* (2011), horses and birds are treated equal with people, and their biological differences from people are ignored. Their blood temperatures and environmental factors function like mathematical attractors until an equilibrium is reached. A similar example is the gray pigeons flapping nervously around an indoor lighting fixture in *Rock Dove* (2009). The original text of *Before Falling Asleep* used anthropomorphism, bestowing upon objects human qualities like indecision, lethargy, vanity, and indolence. In this way it was a kind of two-sided mirror demarcating the boundary between human and non-human. However, the final artwork itself uses zoomorphism and personification—fresh-faced performers portray things from the natural world such as a body of water, a plant, an animal, and fire. When a person falls asleep, awareness descends into the unconscious and into the inner absent self. The anthropomorphized objects are the absent subject

of human. It is like another kind of sleep.

Fairy tales often use non-human characters to strike home a clear educational lesson. However, in *Before Falling Asleep*, these lessons become ambiguous and flirtatious whispers. The narrative is no longer the story. Rather it's the sensory and emotional intensity. In *The Fire and the Tree*, the fire needs something to burn to stay alive, while the tree is full of a vain desire for lush foliage. The collision of their two desires leads to deception and tragedy. In its original text, selfishness and disloyalty are righteously condemned. In the filmed performance, however, the two actors sit face-to-face on a lakeside tree trunk while music by Beethoven plays in the background. A scene of debating turns into and ethics turns into one of sexual tension. In *The Butterfly and the Flower*, the mechanical eye of the camera lens—an extension of the artist's eyes—replaces the compound eye of the butterfly and circles a yellow lily. The focus shifts from far to near, from flower petals to flower sepals and glides down to the moist heart of the flower. Given that flowers are the sex organs of plants, the sexual tension here is more overt than the flirtation between tree and fire, and it echoes the biological clocks of all living things, a topic fundamental to Cheng Ran's 2013 novel *Circadian Rhythm*. In *The River and the Pond*, flocks of pigeons come and go on a busy square. Together with the heavy stone architecture of the plaza and its air of endurance through time, they reflect the steel blue color of the cloudy sky. Two men are sitting at the base of a wall, representing the river and the pond from Krylov's story. All around them are the hustle and bustle of the crowds: tourists, vendors, someone selling hot dogs from a van, etc. The pair are drinking beers and discussing the favorite topic of young artists—a life of comfort or a life of adventure?

Cheng Ran's works can be much like the study of modal phenomena entitled 'cymatics'—an area of study in which frequency and field wave patterns are rendered visible to the naked eye through a film coating or layer of liquid, or a reification of sensory rhythms. Sometimes the rhythm in Cheng Ran's artworks dominates, like the sound of a musical instrument. Despite being musically illiterate, Cheng Ran has worked with Beijing experimental musicians 'Soviet Pop' who used him like a marionette to play the drums. *Everything Has Its Time* (2011) features the sound of a saxophone, and in *Chewing Gum Paper* (2011), a silver chewing gum wrapper jumps about to the imposing sound of Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech. At its heart, rhythm is the period of repetition, and sleep is 'rhythm, regularity, and repetition',¹ a mechanism formed by breath and biological tempo. A day is always another day, but night repeats the darkness that is parallel to sleep and unconsciousness. Lullabies have much in common with bedtime stories in that they are both repetitive familiar whispers, like ripples pulling the listener slowly down into sleep. In this way, stories are much like the food we consume. When food enters the body, it is digested and absorbed for use. When we hear a story, we process it and then it comes to rest on the lips, ready to be passed onto the next listener. Jacques Derrida believed that eating was a negative behavior for an animal. Eating involves oneself in an internal reflection, but as the food enters the stomach and is digested and assimilated, ontologically speaking, it is still of the 'other.' Telling and listening to a story involves the same kind of relationship of contrasts.

Another pattern in Cheng Ran's works is the adaptation of symbols and narrative constructions. For example, *The Sixth Angel for the Millennium* (2012) refers to Bill Viola's video installation *Five Angels for the Millennium* (2001), where angels ascend to the heavens out of water (except that the film is presented "upside-down"—the figures are of course diving into the water). And in *1971–2000* (2012), Cheng Ran appropriated iconic elements from Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), while *The Last Generation* (2013) refers to American writer Steffan Postaer's novel. The stories in *Before Falling Asleep* are also repetitions. For years they have been passed on from one person's lips to another person's ears using sound and rhythm to link fantasy with reality and people

with things through transferring the words to flesh. Repetition requires memory, and the latter begets the possibilities of the former. However, what memories bring is not coincidence but a rupture. They bring all kinds of possibilities from the past to the present. Cheng Ran's *9-Hour Film* (2015) is based on true stories from *Three Generations* (2015), including the disappearance of Dutch conceptual artist Bas Jan Ader during the realization of his project *In Search of the Miraculous* (1975), in which he tried to sail across the Atlantic Ocean on a 12-foot boat. Cheng Ran's film mirrors the narrative of past incidents.

Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure used the following image to describe the structure of language: two parallel wavy lines, one above the other. The upper line represents the plane of thought, while the lower wavy line is sound and image. A straight line imagined as passing through where the two lines overlap symbolizes where concept overlaps with sound and image. The relationship between the sounds of a language and awareness is like air suspended above water. The relationship between language and music is not as calm, however. It is constantly moving back and forth. Plato believed the three elements of music to be words, harmony, and rhythm. Sound is the medium for all three, but when people hear the words to a song they concentrate only on the meaning to the extent that the narrative of music becomes a kind of silence. *Before Falling Asleep* adapts the narratives of children's stories, but the original meanings have long since been worn away by repeated retellings so that they have similarly become silent. It's like the original meaning has fallen into a deep sleep, and what remains ends up highlighting the work's physical and sensual rhythm, the speed and expansion of the image, the temperature of the film's colors, and the form of the non-linear narrative like so much mist on the water's surface. Ingmar Bergman claimed that his actors' performance from *Summer with Monika* was "the first time in the history of cinema, a direct, shameless contact is established with the viewer." As images, actors far outstrip their symbolic function and are able to connect with the audience on another level. It is the same with the reflections of Carina Lau in Cheng Ran's *Always I Trust* (2014), as her image responds to the modern architecture of the environment while the reflections of glass and metallic structures continually repeat their geometric shapes. Another form of dark, wavy undulations is found in Cheng's *Three Generations*, in which banal bookshelves are torn down and reconstructed. The torn edges resemble sea foam solidified in cold air. Objects are scattered sparsely on the shelf, such as a copy of Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain* or various rock albums from the 1970s. They are connected to the incidents in the movie in that they appeared in the same era and share a specific spatio-temporal plane. They may have influenced each other and formed a certain contemporaneity together as the word "contemporary" does not only mean a certain temporality but also implies a network of humans and objects connected by subtle rhythms in which they attach to a specific time while keeping a blind internal distance. This is much like how a subject detaches from themselves in slumber. It is worth extra attention to look at some objects in *Three Generations* that do not bear a logical linkage with the events narrated in Cheng's *9-Hour Film*. For example, a CD sharing the title with Ader's boat is a relationship based on the objecthood of a coincidental proper noun. These kinds of loose connections are like the reflections of the constellations upon the sea as they appear and disappear within the artist's visual narratives. The bookshelves themselves are from a ubiquitous multinational furniture manufacturer that dominates the market with its clean, functional aesthetics capable of surviving the tides of trends and changes in personal taste. Thusly, they demonstrate a certain universality of the late capitalist present we find ourselves in.

Before Ader sailed off for *In Search of the Miraculous*, he arranged a choir to sing sea shanties at his Los Angeles gallery. This act of singing was supposed to be repeated when he finished his voyage, but the project, instead, ended in the artist's long slumber and with oceanic howls drowning out the sounds of the songs that were once used to synchronize the work

movements of sailors. The clashes between these different rhythms becomes another new territory to open just as others are closed. The various kinds of repetition in *Before Falling Asleep* are like Gilles Deleuze's refrain. They are territorial behaviors, like when people hum a familiar song when they are nervous as a way to mark out the intimacy of the personal space around themselves. The concept of a "bedtime story" reminds us of Walter Benjamin's 1936 lament over the death of the story and the decline it experienced following World War I. In the past, a minstrel would bring stories of faraway travel and extend the space and time of a story by spreading it via word of mouth. The spatio-temporal distance of a story is perpetuated by the verbal act. *Storyboard Film* (2015), a clip of around 22 minutes, is an experiment in storytelling: Cheng describes the imagination of the scenes, dispositions, angles, and lights while doodling in a simple computer graphics program. The abstract visual elements do not bear a logical or representational relation to the artist's description. They are subtly connected by the artist's narrative rhythm as an audio object that resembles one's breath while floating in sleep. *Modern Nature* (2015) and *Modern Nature 2* (2015) are installations comprised of deconstructed boats. The absence of the hulls indicates a functional inability to avoid sinking into the symbolic sea in a way that suggests an unfathomable freedom. In our current world that moves at the speed of light, information is the most important thing. People fight to satisfy their needs to gain access to it as quickly as possible. People no longer need these stories, a product of distance. Sleep has also similarly started to fade away, and that's not to say that we no longer need sleep, but rather that the 24/7, day or night work schedule has eradicated any concept of the 'break.' With its repetitions and rhythms, and by using the form of sleep and storytelling, Cheng Ran's practice shows a familiarity with video media and narrative forms while transforming the irrational, unproductive, and undefined aspects of sleep into a brand new territory for the senses.

Translated from the Chinese by Dinah Gardner

¹ Jean Luc Nancy, *The Fall of Sleep*, translated by Charlotte Mandell, New York, Fordham University Press, p.29.

