



# Déjà vu

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## Abstract

Deja vu is mostly misunderstood because of preconceived notions. The best observers are teenagers because of their untrammelled powers of observation. They know that it is indeed something seen before because they can recall the dream in which it occurred. The classic Deja vu consists of very trivial events. Yet the fact that it has happened in an earlier dream demonstrates that dreams are the blueprint of waking. Certainly, we confirm this in everyday phrases like, "It's a dream come true", or "I never dreamt that this would happen"! In spite of this we often exclaim, "I had a weird dream" without realising that weird harks back to Shakespeare: The Three Weird Sisters, the counterparts of the Three Fates, Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos, thus once again incognisantly confirming that we are all in the hands of fate.

Leaving schizophrenia and injuries to the brain aside, there are three major diagnostic errors of the deja vu:

1. Coincidence,
2. A glitch in brain functions
3. Past life experience.

A related phenomenon to deja vu is premonition. It is in fact the reverse of deja vu since we sense that something will happen which then is confirmed.

A variation of the deja vu is the incident where two people are engaged in conversation when one of them suddenly exclaims, "You've broken my dream"! At such occasions a key word in the conversation triggers off the memory of the dream that prefigured the conversation. From this we can infer what I have called the Recall Rule: 'When we recall a dream spontaneously, the dream is manifesting in waking time'. Such moments are opportunities to consult the living dream dictionary.

There are also déjà vu's that consist of less trivial occurrences and also come to pass well after the day of the dream. Sikorsky's deja vu of a dream he had thirty years before is one example. It is compelling evidence that one's life path is predetermined. We prize free will and a common catch cry is, "We have a choice"! But when we observe our dreams carefully, we notice that the last thing that took place in the final dream before waking is the first thing to manifest. There is no better testimonial to this than the now famous dream of Maury (1878) discussed by many authors, including Freud. He woke at the moment when the guillotine crashed down on his neck only to find that it was the bedhead that had fallen onto that part of his body.

Freud, who denied the dream's oracular power, was no less puzzled about this occurrence than a plethora of writers and philosophers. They all wondered how the impact of less than a second could trigger off a dream that would have taken at least twenty minutes or more to recount. Not one of them thought that it could have been the dream that woke Maury, and not the bedhead.

Thanks to extensive dream laboratory research we know today that the final dream before waking can last up to forty minutes. As well as that, Daniel Erlacher et al have shown that counting in lucid dreaming takes up the same amount of time as does counting in waking reality. When we add to his that dreams are precursors of waking, this age-old conundrum is resolved in one stroke.

**Keywords:** Deja vu, premonition, cryptomnesic recall, predestination, weird

## Introduction

This fairly common, yet for most of us very puzzling experience bears a French name because it was Emile Boirac, a French scientist who, in 1876, coined this phrase in his book called *L'Avenir des Sciences Psychiques*, the 'Future of the Psychological Sciences' [1].

While being one of the first investigators to broach this fascinating phenomenon, he did not research the subject in depth. The deja vu, which means 'seen before' is such a vexing and intriguing experience because it overwhelms us, as it unfolds, with the adamantine

conviction that this has happened before when we know for certain that it is the first time, we have encountered it.

Yet it has happened before! Ask any teenager who had the experience for an explanation, and you will get one that is disarmingly simple and accurate. He or she will insist that they have experienced the exact same thing in a dream. And why not? Aren't we constantly referring to the dream as an anticipatory agent? We exclaim: "It's a dream come true!" and think no more about it. Or we say full of hope: "It's my dream to become an actor, a pilot, a doctor", or indeed, "I never dreamt that this would happen"!

In spite of this, we hear more often than not: "I've had such a weird dream"! By which we mean to express our puzzlement at the absurdity of the dream's freakish plot. Yet, in doing so, we acknowledge, once again, the dream's oracular nature without realising it, for this word, which we use to discredit the dream's sanity harks back to Shakespeare's *Weird Sisters*. There are, as is widely known, three of them, corresponding with the number of the three Sisters of Fate in Greek mythology: Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos.

But of course, such acknowledgement is incognisant, or subconscious, as psychology prefers to call it. And just as such acknowledgment is subconscious, so is our resistance to the oracular disposition of the dream. Moreover, it is this very resistance that has led to a plethora of misdiagnoses of the mechanism of the *deja vu*.

Leaving schizophrenia and injuries to the brain aside, there are three major diagnostic errors of the *deja vu*:

1. Coincidence
2. A glitch in brain functions
3. Past life experience.

Coincidence is, of course, self-explanatory. The 'glitch in brain functions' consists of a variety of explanations hardly worth giving any space here since they are based on pure speculation instead of on pure observation. One such instance is the assertion that anyone experiencing *deja vus* must be prone to epileptic attacks since such attacks can be preceded by a *deja vu* experience. Another is Freud's theory that *deja vu* is the consequence of repressed desires, as if the

*deja vu* of a fly landing on our toast might be some compensatory event for unfulfilled wishes. 'Past life experiences' may also be readily discounted since the classic *deja vu* is typically made up of such trivial and inconsequential situations as just exemplified. In short, such occurrences would hardly be memorable enough to be recalled from yesterday let alone from a past existence. But there are also less trivial *deja vu* episodes, which may be thought to hark back to a past life. A good example is the case of a high school

girl who was overwhelmed by a *deja vu* experience as she entered the sports ground of her school. "This has happened before"! She exclaimed and wondered if it could have been in a past life. But then she reasoned: "This school is brand new and so it could not have existed in a past life!"

Resistance to the dream's precognitive disposition is, of course, not always unwitting. Indeed, there is often very conscious and frequently quite belligerent opposition to this notion. Freud for one, dismissed the idea point blank: "And the value of dreams for giving us knowledge of the future"? he asks in his seminal work and without any further ado answers it with unapologetic paucity by asserting, "There is, of course, no question of that" [2].

In many respects this dismissive view still encapsulates the prevalent view of the general public to this very day. More importantly, it also lingers on among many researchers in the field of dreams. Perhaps the best witness to this attitude towards the dream quite generally is the predominant usage of the phrase 'we have a choice'. Indeed, we treasure this capacity to an astonishing degree. It shows itself most conspicuously when in the course of an everyday conversation we dare to put the contrary view. At times this can stir up vehement emotions and cause storms of deprecating attacks on such an idea (and often on its proponent) that implies the despicable notion of being slave to one's destiny.

Perhaps, there is nothing we crave more passionately than free will. At the same time there is probably also nothing else we treat with so little consideration as the matter of choosing. Indeed, when we impulsively or habitually proclaim that we have a choice, we can't have considered the fact that in the first instance choice is a thought before we can act on it. In other words, the question of choice, the conundrum of free will depends entirely on our thought processes. From this follows that we only would have free choice if we could produce our own thoughts at will. But even then, fate would have a hand in it since the transition to such a superhuman, or indeed, nonhuman state would require the gift of the Three Sisters of Fate, something which would inevitably mean that we would still remain under their sway.

The conclusion to be drawn from this is that life is predetermined, which includes the *deja vu*. In other words, dreaming things ahead, no matter how trivial or momentous they may be is as natural to existence as the alternation between sleeping and waking. Indeed, since this very mechanism of alternation is fully automated, why should the dream life and its subsequent waking life not also be fully automated? Clearly, life is nothing but an indeterminable series of incognisant *déjà vu*'s.

There are, of course, exceptions to such incognisance to which I have alluded to earlier on in connection with the teenagers' untrammelled observational skills. Not that younger or older individuals would not be able to enjoy such bewildering episodes,

but it seems that the teens are the phase in human life when we are most likely to be introduced to them. Indeed, it appears most fitting that they are contemporaneous with so many other revolutionary developments of body and mind that are reshaping the growing youngster.

Part of those developments is the revelation of so many of life's secrets of which the *deja vu* is one of them. In fact, from the point of view of understanding life, *deja vu* is the most important window on the secret machinations of human existence. Even if we don't understand precisely how it all works, it gives cause to pause for reflection. While most of us will drop the phenomenon after a while as a curiosity or anomaly of life's operations, there will be some who will find themselves compelled to ask some ground-breaking questions.

One of the first discoveries this type of enquirer will make when looking more closely at the *deja vu* is the fact that there are two types of *deja vu* experiencers. The first one is the kind that instantly recognises that the phenomenon is dream based. The other type has to ponder the matter for some time until it suddenly dawns on him or her that they have dreamt the incident before. Both of these types can clearly recall the dream that triggered off the *deja vu*. Such insights are, of course, not just cause to reflect on the mechanics of the phenomenon, but equally on its philosophical consequences.

Interestingly, for these investigators another, closely related phenomenon will soon spring to their attention in the course of probing the mystery of the *deja vu*. This is the curious matter of precognition. Some instances of this phenomenon have their own, yet *deja vu* related feelings. Instead of being overwhelmed by that weird notion of having experienced all this before, the feeling is no less weird, but differs from the *deja vu* sensation in as much as we feel overwhelmed by a distinct sense of expectancy. We sense that someone is going to fall, for instance, and then, when it happens shortly after, we are not at all surprised.

With the secret of the *deja vu* laid bare, it does not take too long before we find out that premonition is a *deja vu* in reverse. We recognise that both are dream inspired. While in the case of the *deja vu* the dream is recalled as it manifests (or after, in the case of the second type of experiencer) in the case of precognition the dream is recalled before its manifestation. However, there is a proviso here that needs to be taken into consideration. In most cases of precognition, the recall of the dream is cryptomnesic. This means that we recall the dream's content without realising that our foreknowledge is dream knowledge. In short, it is only after meticulous recording and considerable researching that those clandestine connections that make up the premonition will be exposed.

It is because of the fact that these operations are so secretive that their mystery is often categorised under the heading of the

'paranormal'. Yet there is absolutely nothing 'para' to this; on the contrary, it is the very nature of the way waking life operates. Once it is understood that both the *deja vu* and premonitions are dream based, it becomes easier to accept that waking life is ruled by the dream not just in isolated cases, but across its entire spectrum. Such a view often receives confirmation by additional episodes that are closely related to the *deja vu* and premonitions. One such circumstance is what I call 'you have broken my dream'. I have given it that name because it is an exclamation of wonder when in the course of a conversation between two people one of them suddenly remembers his or her dream and cries: "You've just broken my dream!"

In a sense, this is really a type of *deja vu*. It certainly is that for the person who had cause to exclaim, "You've just broken my dream"! For at that moment, or more precisely immediately before it, he or she was reliving the dream of the night before. At such a moment it is imperative that we ask the dreamer what exactly it was that triggered off the memory of the dream. She may say, for instance, that it was the mention of baby Alice while discussing childcare in general. And if the dreamer does not volunteer to retell the dream spontaneously, it is crucial that we ask her to recount it, since it is then that we have the opportunity to compare the live situation with the dream story.

It will then be revealed, most likely, that it was the baby dream that had spawned the conversation the two were having in the first place and that one of the features in the dream was baby Alice. Such a situation not only exposes the fact that it was a dream that engendered the conversation the two were engrossed in, but also that certain aspects –most likely the highlight- of a dream triggered off its hidden memory. Apart from this, it also shows that the dream is constantly 'shadowing' our daily life in much the same way, as computer software will while it transmutes from program code into common scripts and images on the desktop monitor. Such moments are precious and must be seized upon in order to unravel further secrets of the dream's operation. For one thing, the most important of them all is that here we discover that the moment of spontaneous recall of a dream is also the moment the dream manifests in waking terms. From the given example, it is easy to see that it manifests its highlight or central theme first. Since that is only the core of the dream story, it is crucial that we 'stop in our tracks' and look around at the waking situation and then compare it with the dream scenario, for at such moments we are face to face with a living dream dictionary.

It is moments like these that have encouraged me to formulate the Recall Rule, which simply says, "When we spontaneously recall a dream it is in the process of manifesting in waking terms". In view of this, we have reason to promote the *deja vu* in the broadest sense – a dream recalled – to the centre of the dream lore. It provides the clearest window on the machinations of the dream and if

handled skilfully, it will become a wide-open portal to the mystery of the dream world. The manner in which I have phrased that last sentence is, of course, a direct contradiction of life's manner of working. For if the dream is in charge, then all skill and care is vain hope without the grace of the dream. Without the gift of the dream itself, without its permission to discover its secrets, without its guidance to penetrate its mysteries, the *deja vu* will remain forever a window with its curtains drawn. In other words, even the best of dream interpreters, even the most experienced and skilled among them will, without the dream's gift, stare blankly at curtains drawn across the most precious window on one of life's deepest mysteries.

There is no better example of this than Carl Jung's failed attempt to interpret the rather impressive scarab dream a young woman, one of his more difficult patients, was telling him one evening [4]. In her dream she was given a costly piece of jewellery in the shape of a golden scarab. In the midst of recounting her dream to Jung, he noticed a gentle rapping on the window. The moment he turned around, he discovered that "it was a fairly large flying insect that was knocking against the window-pane from the outside in the obvious effort to get into the dark room" [4]. After Jung had opened the window, he caught the insect as it flew in. "It was a scarabaeid beetle", he wrote, "or a common rose-chafer whose gold-green colour most nearly resembles that of a golden scarab. I handed the beetle to my patient with the words, 'Here is your scarab'!"

Jung was so taken aback by this startling occurrence that he had no better explanation for it than to declare it to be a meaningful coincidence without a detectable cause! Amazingly, he was unable to see that this episode was nothing but a type of *deja vu*, if not for him, most certainly for the patient since she was given a 'golden' scarab in both her dream and in the corresponding waking state. So far, we have dealt only with dream recall that reaches back to yesterday. There are, however, *deja vus* that occur not only to older subjects, but also wait for considerable time before they materialise. One of the more extraordinary ones I know of is Sikorsky's *deja vu* that occurred to him almost thirty years after his dream.

"During the year 1900, at the age of about eleven, I had a wonderful dream", so wrote the Russian aeronautics engineer in his autobiography of 1939. In his dream "he felt a slight vibration, of the kind experienced in a ship, but he knew it was no ordinary ship – it was flying" [5]. In waking reality this turned out to be the American Clipper he had designed and built in his USA factory. It was during the acceptance flight in which he took part that he decided to leave the cockpit to take a look at the passenger accommodation. When the passage light was switched on for him, so he reports, "I realised at that very moment that I had already seen all this a long time ago, the passageway, the bluish light, the walnut trimmings on the walls and doors, and the feeling of smooth motion, and I tried to recall when and how I could have received such an impression, until I finally remembered the details of my dream some thirty years before".

Although this dream had made a powerful impression on the boy, it faded eventually, and he forgot all about it. At this point we need to ask ourselves how much Sikorsky would have been able to deviate from the assigned path of his personal history without failing to reach the precise moment and circumstance of his *deja vu*? The answer to this can only be, "not one jot".

Clearly, under such circumstances one's life path appears to be predetermined not just from the moment of conception, but even before it. The impression one gets when contemplating such a scenario is that everything must pre-exist in some way. Since consciousness is the *sine qua non* of existence, it is without a doubt the foremost candidate for holding the primal position of pre-existence. In its universal or absolute state, in its formless condition, it seems most fitting to regard it as the Matrix of Creation.

Two principle manifestations emanate from it: Thoughts and things. The moment we wake, our thoughts run irrepressibly onwards, manifesting as pure mentation and as the world we live in. But they never spring directly from the Matrix. If we watch carefully, we notice that the first thing to occur upon waking is the manifestation of the last thing we dreamt before waking. There is no better testimonial to this than the now famous dream of Maury (1878) discussed by many authors, including Freud [6]. His dream had landed him in the Reign of Terror where he witnessed a number of atrocities before he was captured himself, interrogated, condemned to die and finally led to the guillotine. As the blade crashed down on his neck, he felt his head being separated from his body at which moment he woke in extreme anxiety.

Understandably, this dream caused endless arguments among writers and philosophers because they were all of the opinion that it must have been the fall of the bedhead on Maury's neck that had triggered off his lengthy dream. They all wondered how an impact lasting less than a second could engender a dream that would take twenty minutes or more to recount. Naturally, Freud, who denied the dream's anticipatory capacity, shared the view all the other intellectuals held as is evident from this, "Examples of this kind leave an impression that of all the sources of dreams the best confirmed are objective sensory stimuli during sleep" [6]. With this, Freud could not have come to a more misguided conclusion, as we shall see.

Thanks to extensive dream laboratory research we know today that the final dream before waking can last up to forty minutes. As well as that, Daniel Erlacher et al. [7] have shown that counting in lucid dreaming takes up the same amount of time as does counting in waking reality. When we add to this that dreams are precursors of waking, [8] this age-old conundrum is resolved in one stroke. And so, Freud's comment should really have been: "The best confirmed interpretations of dreams are those that are verified by 'objective sensory' experiences after the dream. Indeed, it is worth impressing upon oneself here that it is not the stimuli of the waking

world that arouse the dreamer, but that the dream arouses us to its very own waking manifestation. Thus, we might say that for Maury the falling bedhead was his first 'deja vu' of the day. But of course, it was not the classic type of deja vu since the impact on his neck was not a literal manifestation of the dream, but a metaphorical one, nor was it a trivial encounter.

Nevertheless, such manifestations are precious opportunities to consult the living dream dictionary. What is important at such occasions is to identify the highlight of the dream first - the impact on the neck in Maury's case - and then look for its corresponding manifestation in the light of day, which is the bedhead in the case at hand. After that we need to inspect the plot and compare it with the actions subsequent to waking. A match will be found. We should ask ourselves at this point why this eluded Freud so utterly despite the fact that he had learnt his craft of interpretation from Artemidorus, the 2nd century dream diviner. Indeed, he had adopted all the steps of dream interpretation from him except the last one, which was the transposition of the interpretative result into the future tense. We have already witnessed how dismissively he had dealt with that facet of interpretation.

Yet his abrupt rejection of the dream's oracular capacity gets even more astonishing when we see that he seems to delight in exemplifying a dream's play on words that was capable of predicting 'singlehandedly' the coming of an important historical event. "The nicest instance of dream-interpretation", so he declares, "which has reached us from ancient times is based on a play upon words. It is told by Artemidorus: I think too that Aristander gave a most happy interpretation to Alexander of Macedon when he had surrounded Tyre (Τύρος) and was besieging it but was feeling uneasy and disturbed because of the length of time the siege was taking. Alexander dreamt that he was a satyr (σάτυρος) dancing on his shield. Aristander happened to be in the neighbourhood of Tyre in attendance on the king during his Syrian campaign. By dividing the word for satyr into σά and τυρος he encouraged the king to press home the siege so that he became the master of the city" [9].

When we know that 'σά' means 'yours' and 'τυρος' refers to the city of Tyre, we have the meaning of the dream, which is underpinned by Alexander dancing on his shield as a satyr. History tells us that Alexander did indeed become master of Tyre. Astonishingly, for Freud, this seemed to be of no interpretative consequence. He was too consumed by his fervor to demonstrate that dreams do have a meaning contrary to the prevalent views of his time.

Thus, instead of having a second look at the outcome of the dream, he wrote, "I have been driven to realise that here once more we have one of those not infrequent cases in which an ancient and jealously held popular belief seems to be nearer the truth than the judgment of the prevalent science of today". Indeed! Yet since his comment overlooked the fact that part of the popular belief was the conviction that dreams do come true, he steered the scientific fraternity away from the second, no less important part of the two facets of interpretation: its oracular potency! So, we need to reflect, is that Freud's fault? Certainly, when we know that it is the dream that dictates our thoughts and deeds, it is difficult to attribute blame. Yet blaming him we will! And that too is dictated.

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