

# somniloquies

## Verena Paravel, Lucien Castaing-Taylor

**Producer** Valentina Novati, Verena Paravel, Lucien Castaing-Taylor. **Production companies** Norte Productions (Paris, France), S.E.L. (Paris, France). **Directed by** Verena Paravel, Lucien Castaing-Taylor. **Director of photography** Verena Paravel, Lucien Castaing-Taylor. **Editor** Verena Paravel, Lucien Castaing-Taylor. **Sound** Verena Paravel, Lucien Castaing-Taylor, Mike Barr. **Sound design** Gilles Bénardeau.

Colour. 73 min. English.

**Premiere** February 12, 2017, Berlinale Forum

Songwriter Dion McGregor became famous in the 1960s for narrating his dreams in his sleep. His flatmate recorded him doing so.

In their new film *somniloquies*, Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Verena Paravel overcome the boundaries between inner dreamscapes and human bodies. At the start, flowing forms can be seen and a gentle, undefinable sound made out in the background. McGregor's voice appears and makes an invitation: „I have expected you, come-on in, I said I would grant an interview“. The more we listen to him and enter into his dreamworld, the clearer the contours of the sleeping bodies become, before they seem to dissipate once again. The dreaming man speaks with people who are sawing open his body, removing his organs and stitching him back up. As we find out how painful he finds the stitches, we ask ourselves for how long we'll want to follow the camera, which sometimes seems to caress the bodies tenderly, but at other times seeks to pierce them almost brutally, like an x-ray. Just in time, we hear his voice: „Let's go to future land (...) it's shining near the corner“. In this case, sleeping in the cinema means pushing forward to its very limits.

*Stefanie Schulte Strathaus*

## Flesh, dream, and vulnerability

'Dreams are a second life.' (Gérard de Nerval)

*somniloquies* is a descent into the dream world of our unconscious. A wild orgy, a mass drowning, a dwarf city for rent, a surgical operation that goes tragically awry, a baroque mansion for sale that doubles as a torture chamber, a de-pressurised experiment hall that causes ladies' fingernail polish to fly off their nails... such were the nocturnal dramas of the world's most garrulous sleep-talker. An American lyricist who yearned for a career on Broadway, Dion McGregor dreamed out loud while his New York roommate recorded him over seven years in the 1960s.

A panoply of ghosts and demons emerges while McGregor is taking his forty winks. They are by turns hilarious and hallucinatory, salacious and scurrilous, wicked and wise. His dreams traverse the spectrum of our emotions, from joy and desire, anguish and disgust, to horror and hatred. Marked both by tender empathy and vile misanthropy, they offer a cartography of our sleeping selves, when the brain is left to weave its yarns outside our daytime regime of consent and constraint. In *somniloquies*, McGregor's nightly musings are coupled with images of sleeping nudes. A roving camera that moves indiscernibly from one contour and orifice to another, one body to another, one gender to another, one ethnicity to another, one animal to another.

The juxtaposition of unguarded sleepers and uncensored dreamer engenders a slippage between seer and seen, intimacy and voyeurism, oneiric fantasy and brute corporeality. Over an ambiguous landscape of flesh, vulnerability, and abandonment, the film evokes at once the startling fantasies of one man, the cultural preoccupations of North America in the 1960s, and the caverns of the soul that haunt all of our days and nights alike.

Our intention is to reconnect with why documentaries are made: to awaken the flesh with which we sense and make sense, to question the enigma that is our lives and what it means to be human, and to reflect and incarnate a world beyond ourselves, our relationships with other creatures, animate and inanimate, real and surreal. The film reminds us that our wakeful self is no richer or more important than our dormant being that is irrepressibly ruminating on the remains of the day. Quite the contrary.

Verena Paravel, Lucien Castaing-Taylor

### The dream catcher

Dion McGregor (1922–1994) was an American songwriter who yearned in vain to make it on Broadway. His greatest success came with Barbra Streisand's song 'Where is the Wonder'. But he is better known to posterity as the most garrulous sleep-talker in recorded history. Struggling to survive in 1960s New York City, he would 'couch surf' at friends' apartments, including the actor Carleton Carpenter and 'the grandfather of gay porn', filmmaker Peter De Rome (in whose film *Mumbo Jumbo* he starred). When he moved in with his friend and fellow songwriter Mike Barr, Barr was astonished to find out what they already knew, that he would dream – out loud, and at length – in the wee hours of the morning. Over seven years, Barr would tiptoe into his living room where McGregor was still asleep on a tiny twin bed, and record his somnolent stories. They were curious confabulations whose content was often outlandish and surreal, but whose structure was more coherent than dreams as we usually understand them. They were populated with existential quandaries, violent fights, invented languages and songs, riffs and puns, and black humour of the most unimaginable kind.

McGregor's biographer and archivist, Toronto-based poet Steve Venright, describes his dreams as 'vividly macabre as Lautréamont, as decadently vicious as Sade, as comically absurd as Jarry, as sensorially deranged as Rimbaud, as eccentrically inventive as Roussel, and as charmingly splenetic as Baudelaire.' By turns insouciant and insolent, he would adopt multiple personas in a voice quite unlike his own.

When Barr played the recordings back to McGregor, he was astonished and ashamed in equal measure. He wondered if someone had slipped him a shot of LSD. 'It's like being famous for wetting your bed,' he would later say.

In 1964, Barr released a selection of them as *The Dream World of Dion McGregor*, as an LP from Decca Records and a book from Random House. An early fan, record producer Phil Millstein, released a more salacious album in 1999, *Dion McGregor Dreams Again*. Since then, Venright has released two additional albums on his Torpor Vigil label, *The Further Somniloquies of Dion McGregor*, and *Dreaming Like Mad with Dion McGregor*.

In 1967, Barr moved to Los Angeles and McGregor soon followed him. Later, he and his partner Clement Brace moved to Oregon, where his anxieties seem to have deserted him, and his nocturnal 'emissions' petered out, long before his death in 1994.



Verena Paravel was born in 1971 in Neuchâtel, Switzerland. She studied Anthropology at the École nationale supérieure des mines in Paris and at the University of Toulouse. In 2004, she began post-doctoral studies at Columbia University in New York. Since 2008, she has worked with Lucien Castaing-Taylor at the Sensory Ethnography Lab at Harvard.



Lucien Castaing-Taylor was born in Liverpool, Great Britain, in 1966. He studied Philosophy, Theology, and Anthropology at Cambridge University and Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley. Castaing-Taylor is a filmmaker, anthropologist, and ethnographer who works as a professor of Visual Arts and Anthropology at Harvard University, where he is also the director of the Sensory Ethnography Lab.

### Films

**Verena Paravel:** 2008: *7 Queens* (21 min.). 2010: *With Such a Wistful Eye, Interface Series #1* (15 min., Video Installation), *Presented with Severe Pain, Interface Series #5* (23 min., Video Installation), *Foreign Parts* (82 min., co-directed by J. P. Sniadecki). 2012: *Leviathan* (87 min., co-directed by L. Castaing-Taylor, Berlinale Forum Expanded 2013). 2016: *Canst Thou Draw Out Leviathan with a Hook* (Four-part project, co-directed by L. Castaing-Taylor). 2017: *somniloquies*.

**Lucien Castaing-Taylor:** 1990: *Made in USA* (co-directed by Ilisa Barbash). 1993: *In and out of Africa* (59 min., co-directed by Ilisa Barbash). 2009: *Sweetgrass* (101 min., co-directed by Ilisa Barbash, Berlinale Forum 2009). 2012: *Leviathan* (87 min., co-directed by Verena Paravel, Berlinale Forum Expanded). 2016: *Canst Thou Draw Out Leviathan with a Hook* (Four-part project, co-directed by Verena Paravel). 2017: *somniloquies*.