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The Nightmare

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Abstract

This is a film review of *The Nightmare* (2014), directed by Rodney Ascher.

Author Notes

Jodi McDavid is an instructor in Folklore and Gender & Women's Studies at Cape Breton University. She earned her BA at St. Thomas University (New Brunswick) and her MA and PhD from Memorial University of Newfoundland. Her PhD dissertation was on anticlericalism in folk and popular culture. Her current research interests include vernacular religion, digital culture, the folklore and popular culture of children and adolescents, and gender and women's studies.



The Nightmare

(2014)

Directed by Rodney Ascher

The Nightmare is a documentary which chronicles the experiences of eight people from around the world who suffer from sleep disturbances. The individuals share personal experience narratives about what is frequently called sleep paralysis, but is often also connected to the traditional belief of the succubus. Beliefs in supernatural nightmare visitors such as the succubus are found in a number of cultures and have a variety of names associated with them. Through dramatic re-enactment and interviews, the documentary explores what it is like to live with this condition, and what meaning sufferers make from their experience.

The traditional description of a succubus is that of a demon that sits on one's chest when one is sleeping, often to torment, crush or steal the soul of the person while they sleep. Many of the interviewees in the film talk about this phenomenon, or seeing other figures in the room, as well as having auditory and visual hallucinations.

Interviewees talk about shadowy figures suddenly being in the room with them when they wake up, and being unable to move to get away from them. The commonality of experiences across age, gender and culture is interesting, and some of the subjects discuss how they feel the apparitions are drawn from common archetypes of fear that exist in the human experience.

Religion plays a significant part in the experience of two of the interviewees. One woman experienced sleep paralysis for several years and states that she was tortured by demons when she was in this state. As a non-Christian, she prayed “in Jesus’ name,” at which point the experience ended and never returned. She then changed her life significantly and became religious. Several of the sufferers talk about out-of-body experiences, one woman equating this with the feeling that someone is trying to rip her soul out of her body and that she is struggling to haul it back.

A book written about this experience, “The Terror that Comes in the Night,” by David Hufford (a folklorist), is cited in the film. It is an in-depth treatment of the experience of sleep paralysis based on interviews conducted in Newfoundland about the “Old Hag,” the local name for this experience, and a scientific discussion of sleep paralysis. It becomes clear in the film that those who have this experience draw different levels of meaning from it, and some equate it as a purely supernatural experience in which other realities are trying to cross into ours. Others suggest that descriptions of alien abduction may also come from this experience. While it is tempting to look for scientific reasons behind this experience, there are a number of descriptions about the experience which make it sound extremely unusual, including the phenomenon mentioned in the film that many people begin suffering from this experience once it is described to them by others (as if the act of describing it is enough to inflict others with the same effect).