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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Dreaming the plague: Experiencing the pandemic present, experimenting with Anthropocene temporalities

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Abstract

Complementing readings in International Relations (IR) that understand Covid-19 as an Anthropocene effect, this article observes the pandemic as a laboratory for engagements with Anthropocene experience. It argues that the pandemic turn to dreams renegotiated the conditions of experienceability of Anthropocene temporality. Exploring the scientific, archival, and practical registers on which dreams attracted interest during the pandemic, the article traces how dreams were valued for their promise of capturing the affective exposure of subjects to the pandemic present. This conditioning of experienceability on the limits of the human subject resonates with the relational turn in IR and its affirmation of being-in-relation as a condition for becoming attuned to the Anthropocene. Drawing from Koselleck and Foucault, the article understands this resonance as indicative of a shared archive of experiments in transcending modern accounts of temporality. For this archive, rendering an Anthropocenic present experienceable requires a shift from the distanced account of a modern author-subject to a subject that gauges its own exposure to the present. Despite this ambition of the turn to dreams, the article also flags its constraints, observing how this turn regularly tipped back into reaffirming the modern subject.

Keywords: Anthropocene; dreams; Foucault; Koselleck; relationality; temporality

Introduction

Around April 2020, journalistic reports started flourishing that discussed the onset of a strange phenomenon. By then, amid the almost-global pandemic lockdown, societies experienced a 'dream surge', referring to the 'global increase in the reporting of vivid, bizarre dreams'.[1] Multiple prominent media outlets in the Global North deemed this phenomenon newsworthy, variously describing dreams as *vivid, bizarre, weird, unusual, strange, odd*, and *powerful*. The hope that these reports placed in pandemic dreams was one of an authentic glance at the 'anxiety of the moment'.[2] Despite their 'bizarre and individual'[3] character, pandemic dreams displayed striking

[1]Tore Nielsen, 'The COVID-19 pandemic is changing our dreams', *Scientific American* (1 October 2020), available at: {https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-covid-19-pandemic-is-changing-our-dreams/}.

[2]Brooke Jarvis, 'Did Covid change how we dream?', *The New York Times Magazine* (3 November 2021), available at: {https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/03/magazine/pandemic-dreams.html}; Will Pritchard, 'Coronavirus has created an epidemic of weird dreams', *WIRED* (12 April 2020), available at: {https://www.wired.co.uk/article/coronavirus-dreams-sleep}.

[3]Emma Grey Ellis, 'Why Covid-19 quarantine dreams are taking over the internet', *WIRED* (16 April 2020), available at: {https://www.wired.com/story/coronavirus-covid-19-dreams/}.

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formal and substantial similarities, which were taken to plausibilise this indication of authenticity.[4] Subsequently, commentators identified a global community of dreamers 'affected by the same experience'[5] that promised to 'glean something universal'[6] from the pandemic juncture. The pandemic dream surge fell into a historical sequence of events during and immediately after which dreams spiked, including 9/11, the earthquakes in San Francisco (1989) and L'Aquila (2009), and the aftermath of the Second World War and the first Gulf War. What set pandemic dreams apart was the supposedly global synchronicity of the experience on which they drew, as well as their circulation through global communication infrastructures: 'This upwelling of dreams is the first to occur globally and the first to happen in the era of social media, which makes dreams readily accessible for immediate study. As a dream "event," the pandemic is unprecedented.'[7]

Instead of asking whether dreams *actually* surged, this article starts from the more basic observation that dreams became a matter of public interest in 2020. As a striking counterpoint to the scientific modes of reasoning dominating the Covid-19 pandemic, which are epitomised by an epidemiological understanding of society, this concern marked an epistemic event in the pandemic order of knowledge.[8] This article suggests that the deeper implications of the turn to dreams only become apparent when attending to the Anthropocenic rupture that the pandemic constitutes.[9] As Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued, the pandemic 'connotes a time when our recognition of the microbial world we live amid cannot any longer be … forgotten as we go about our everyday lives'.[10] Doing so, it also vividly demonstrates the Anthropocenic reversal of the relation between the passive background status that modernity reserves for the non-human world and the active human subject that makes its own history on the stage thus provided. The turn to dreams reflected the challenge that this reversal poses to a modern understanding of history, as authored by a human subject that witnesses a linear, progressive unfolding of time.[11] The article traces three registers on which the problematisation of pandemic dreams unfolded: *scientific* attempts to study pandemic dreams, *archival* attempts to preserve pandemic dreams, and *practical* attempts to engage with pandemic dreams. This empirical engagement illustrates that dreams were consistently interrogated based on a hope of capturing how pandemic experience inscribes itself on subjects at a primary, unmediated level that bypasses their capacity to rational control. Thereby, the turn to dreams understood the relation between subject and history as one of experiential exposure rather than modern control. It thus affirmed the Anthropocene condition in which 'it is no longer we who take the Earth; it is the Earth who takes us',[12] as François Hartog puts it.

Responding to this observation, the first contention that the article puts forth is thus that the problematisation of pandemic dreams marked a historiographic experiment which probed

[4]For a recent problematisation of the politics of authenticity, see Andrew Hom, 'Heidegger's heritage: The temporal politics of authenticity, then and now', *Review of International Studies*, 49:5 (2023), pp. 885–904.

[5]Jarvis, 'Did Covid change how we dream?'.

[6]Linnea Feldman Emison, 'The mysteries and motifs of pandemic dreams', *The New Yorker* (10 February 2021), available at: {https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-new-yorker-documentary/the-mysteries-and-motifs-of-pandemic-dreams}.

[7]Nielsen, 'The COVID-19 pandemic is changing our dreams'.

[8]Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (Vintage Books, 1994), p. 345; see also Jemima Repo and Hannah Richter, 'An evental pandemic: Thinking the COVID-19 "event" with Deleuze and Foucault', *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory*, 23:2–3 (2022), pp. 220–37 (p. 230); see also Benjamin Bratton, *The Revenge of the Real: Politics for a Post-Pandemic World* (Verso, 2021), pp. 33–5.

[9]Unless discussing specific episodes in the past, I consciously use the present tense when referring to the Covid-19 pandemic in general to indicate that despite its official ending as an international public health emergency, the virus still kills and creates chronic suffering and exclusion on an everyday basis. The history of the popular will to the biopolitical sacrifice of those most vulnerable remains to be written.

[10]Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'The chronopolitics of the Anthropocene: The pandemic and our sense of time', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 55:3 (2021), pp. 324–48 (p. 333).

[11]Tom Lundborg, 'The Anthropocene rupture in International Relations: Future politics and international life', *Review of International Studies*, 49:4 (2023), pp. 597–614 (p. 602).

[12]François Hartog, '*Chronos, Kairos, Krisis*: The genesis of Western time', *History and Theory*, 60:3 (2021), pp. 425–39 (p. 436).

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accounting for a history that appeared to exceed the image to which modernity relegates it. At the same time – the second contention – the article argues that this empirical turn to dreams echoed the theoretical turn to relationality in International Relations (IR). Instead of affirming the outlook of this turn, for which decentring the human becomes the royal road to becoming attuned to the Anthropocene,[13] this article insists on its ambiguity. It stays with it by tracing how the application of a relational sentiment amid the pandemic dream surge continuously found itself on the brink of tipping back into a modern will to control and to re-enclose the excess of meaning in pandemic dreams.

Unfolding this argument, the article makes two main contributions to the broader IR literature. First, it adds to the ongoing discussion of the Anthropocene in IR and the nexus between the Anthropocene and the Covid-19 pandemic more specifically.[14] It does so by zooming in on the temporal stakes of the Anthropocene challenge and the question of how this challenge might effect a change regarding the modern experience of time. Further, it grounds some of the recent critical engagements with the 'celebratory projection of the world'[15] of relational approaches to the Anthropocene in an empirical case. This helps to problematise the tipping points through which relational sentiments fold back into a modern way of approaching the world. Second, the article takes its cue from an interdisciplinary engagement with dreams across the social sciences and humanities and introduces dreams to IR scholarship.[16] Rather than treating dream reports as sources in themselves, it starts from an empirical curiosity about how dreams were turned into tools to make sense of the pandemic present.[17]

The article proceeds in three steps. The next section situates the turn to dreams vis-à-vis the Anthropocenic character of the Covid-19 pandemic. It draws out how this turn to dreams echoed the relational turn in IR in its attempt to provide a response to the Anthropocene rupture. The following section turns to the works of Reinhart Koselleck and Michel Foucault to conceptualise the turn to pandemic dreams as an engagement with the limits of modern historiography. It outlines an *analytics of actuality* that guides the empirical analysis of the pandemic turn to dreams by zooming in on the *epistemic hope* placed in dreams, the *experiments with subjectivity* it implied, and

[13]Farai Chipato and David Chandler, 'Critique and the Black Horizon: Questioning the move "beyond" the human/nature divide in International Relations', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 37:3 (2024), pp. 277–95 (p. 288).

[14]For a helpful overview of the Anthropocene debate in IR, see Dahlia Simangan, 'Where is the Anthropocene? IR in a new geological epoch', *International Affairs*, 96:1 (2020), pp. 211–24; for the nexus between the Covid-19 pandemic and the Anthropocene, see Erika Cudworth and Stephen Hobden, 'Zoonotic politics: The impossible bordering of the leaky boundaries of species', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 50:3 (2022), pp. 647–68; Anne Aronsson and Fynn Holm, 'Multispecies entanglements in the virosphere: Rethinking the Anthropocene in light of the 2019 Coronavirus outbreak', *The Anthropocene Review*, 9:1 (2022), pp. 24–36; Eva Horn, 'Tipping points: The Anthropocene and Covid-19', in Gerard Delanty (ed.), *Pandemics, Politics, and Society: Critical Perspectives on the Covid-19 Crisis* (De Gruyter, 2021), pp. 123–37; Anthony Burke, 'Interspecies cosmopolitanism: Non-human power and the grounds of world order in the Anthropocene', *Review of International Studies*, 49:2 (2023), pp. 201–22 (p. 202).

[15]Ignasi Torrent, 'Problematising entanglement fetishism in IR: On the possibility of being without being in relation', *Review of International Studies*, online (2023), pp. 1–15 (p. 3).

[16]Most recently, Bernard Lahire, *The Sociological Interpretation of Dreams* (Polity Press, 2020); yet see also a longer-standing engagement in (cultural) history exemplified by Peter Burke, *Varieties of Cultural History* (Cornell University Press, 1997); and Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (Columbia University Press, 2004); for Foucault's engagement with dreams, see Michel Foucault and Ludwig Binswanger, *Dream & Existence* (Review of Existential Psychology & Psychiatry, 1986); Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self. The History of Sexuality: Volume Three* (Pantheon Books, 1986); Edward McGushin, 'Dream and the aesthetics of existence: Revisiting Foucault's ethical imagination', *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 47:8 (2021), pp. 987–1000; Vikki Bell 'Dreaming and time in Foucault's philosophy', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 11:2 (1994), pp. 151–63.

[17]While other approaches to pandemic dreams are thinkable, the present text opts for a second-order observation, i.e. observing attempts to observe the pandemic through dreams and making sense of this practice. This explains the absence of examples of pandemic dream *contents* from the text. For a psychoanalytical engagement with pandemic dreams, see Tihamér Bakó and Katalin Zana, *Psychoanalysis, COVID and Mass Trauma: The Trauma of Reality* (Routledge, 2023); for a different approach, see Suzanne Leonard and Diane Negra, 'Labour, self-care and respite: Neoliberal rationalities in sleep crisis rhetoric', *New Formations*, 106 (2022), pp. 43–59.

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the implicit *renegotiation of the relation between subject and history* it attempted. The final section follows these vectors across three empirical registers on which the 'dream surge' unfolded: a *scientific* register populated by psychologists, psychiatrists, neuroscientists, and dream researchers, dedicated to using dreams as indicators of the intensity of the present; an *archival* register that articulated the urgent concern for gathering pandemic dream reports as raw experiences of the pandemic present, pursued by laypeople running online dream archives and professional museum curators alike; and finally, a *practical* register that turned dreams into tools for coping with an unsettling pandemic present.

Covid-19 and the challenge of accounting for an Anthropocene present

The nexus between the Covid-19 pandemic and the Anthropocene has been articulated in multiple ways. Most straightforwardly, a causal reading views the pandemic as the actualisation of a risk that is increased through the changing land-use patterns and close proximities between the habitats of humans and wild animals that mark the Anthropocene.[18] Departing from this attempt to grasp the pandemic as an Anthropocene *effect*, a second way of articulating this nexus understands the pandemic as a laboratory for engaging with a generalised Anthropocene *experience*. Here, the pandemic appears as a momentary prompt to 'digest' the underlying 'change in cosmology'[19] that the Anthropocene brings about, as the late Bruno Latour put it.

The Anthropocene challenge of non-experienceability

Experiencing the Covid-19 pandemic therefore demands a reconsideration of previous problematisations of the *non-experienceability* of the Anthropocene. Primarily, this problematisation refers to the question of whether it is possible to grasp Anthropocene temporality, given the incommensurability of a human experience of time and the much vaster and deeper level at which humans, by now, influence and become entangled with the time of the planet. Within the frame of modern historiography, as François Hartog argues, 'the time fostered by the Anthropocene is excessive'.[20] Assuming the stability of the natural world, modern time became denaturalised to the degree that modern historiography accounted for 'a history of humans, and humans only, a history that is linked to human hopes, memories, and actions, or, if you like, human experiences and expectations'.[21] As the radicalised human capacity to *make* history at a previously unattainable, planetary scale re-entangles human and natural time, the Anthropocene thus problematises the very idea that historical reasoning should be grounded in human experience only. Its non-experienceability is an effect of a modern historiography that reproduces the human/nature binary. The subsequent incapacity to bridge 'the gap between the time of the Anthropocene and the times of the world' poses the challenge of finding ways of accounting for the present that allow for our 'dwelling in both at the same time'.[22]

The relational turn in IR as a response to non-experienceability

In parts as a response to this challenge, IR scholarship has increasingly turned to relational approaches.[23] Largely committed to new materialist, post-humanist, and/or pluriversal ontologies,

[18] Cudworth and Hobden, 'Zoonotic politics', pp. 656–7; Aronsson and Holm, 'Multispecies entanglements'.

[19] Bruno Latour, *After Lockdown: A Metamorphosis* (Polity Press, 2021), p. 129; for a similar argument, see Milja Kurki, 'Coronavirus, democracy and the challenges of engaging a planetary order', *Democratic Theory*, 7:2 (2020), pp. 172–9.

[20] François Hartog, *Chronos: The West Confronts Time* (Columbia University Press, 2022), p. 229.

[21] Helge Jordheim, 'Natural histories for the Anthropocene: Koselleck's theories and the possibility of a history of lifetimes', *History and Theory*, 61:3 (2022), pp. 391–425 (p. 412).

[22] Hartog, *Chronos*, p. 232–3.

[23] See Milja Kurki, 'Relational revolution and relationality in IR: New conversations', *Review of International Studies*, 48:5 (2022), pp. 821–36 (p. 827). While the label cannot do justice to the heterogeneity of the approaches it summarises, as a heuristic tool it renders broader tendencies visible that are described below in terms of a shared archive of relational approaches and the pandemic turn to dreams.

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these approaches 'offer an alternative reading of the "present"'[24] in the face of 'a new reality, where humans, non-humans, things, and materials co-exist in complex relations of life and non-life'.[25] Diagnosing the problem of non-experienceability as rooted in a modern hierarchical juxtaposition between a passive nature and an active human subject, relational approaches implicitly pursue a historiographic project that breaks with modern assumptions. Theirs is a desire for an altered '*historical consciousness*' that probes a new '*form of self-knowledge*'.[26] The self to be known reflexively understands its being-in-the-world as irreducibly a mode of being-in-relation.[27]

Tamara Trownsell exemplifies the practical consequences of this understanding when suggesting that 'confronting complexity requires a more diverse existential toolbox replete with nuanced, nimble tools. This may be achieved through synergistic exchanges with lifeways built off of a deep existential commitment to interconnection.'[28] In other words, accounting for a present that is understood to exhaust modern ways of sense-making needs to start from alternative modes of being-in-the-world. Therefore, enabling 'new conversations between polyphonic experiences of relationalities'[29] presupposes cultivating a self-knowledge that takes into account the fundamental precarity of (human) subjects which – as all beings – are 'vulnerable to the relations that compose them'.[30]

Pursuing a relational analytics, in other words, *necessitates* an entangled mode of being-in-the-world. As per Ignasi Torrent's recent account, the analytical and the normative prompts of relational theorising thus become increasingly indistinguishable.[31] Consequently, the problem of accounting for the present is resolved through a relational practice that senses 'how things resonate, feel, draw, or repel us … within a given timespace moment' and interpellates subjects to 'constitute the self-in-relation-to-others'.[32] Instead of seeking control over the present, restoring its experienceability proceeds through the imperative to gauge one's situatedness in, and exposure to, the relational entanglements that constitute it.

The possibility of a shared archive between relationality and the turn to dreams

If we follow Milja Kurki to assume that 'a multipronged wave of relational revolutions [is] taking place across the world and across fields of study',[33] the resonances of such a broader shift can be traced all the way down to the practices and sentiments surrounding the pandemic turn to dreams. Three very brief examples that are further developed in the last section of this article illustrate this:

(1) A scientific project based at the University of Turku took dreams as indicators of the intensity by which the pandemic was experienced. The authenticity of this experience resulted from the subject being 'unaware'[34] and thus lacking control over its own dreaming state.

[24] Lundborg, 'The Anthropocene rupture', p. 605.

[25] Cameron Harrington, 'The ends of the world: International Relations and the Anthropocene', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 44:3 (2016), pp. 478–98 (p. 481).

[26] Hans-Georg Gadamer, qtd in Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'The climate of history: Four theses', *Critical Inquiry*, 35:2 (2009), pp. 197–222 (p. 222), emphasis in original.

[27] While beyond the scope of this paper, it is absolutely crucial to think through the biopolitical stakes of this project, which reformulates what Michael Dillon has once referred to as 'the living thing that is now thinking itself beyond itself'; see Michael Dillon, 'Governing terror: The state of emergency of biopolitical emergence', *International Political Sociology*, 1:1 (2007), pp. 7–28 (p. 20).

[28] Tamara Trownsell, 'Recrafting ontology', *Review of International Studies*, 48:5 (2022), pp. 801–20 (p. 802).

[29] Kurki, 'Relational revolution and relationality in IR', p. 823.

[30] Torrent, 'Problematising entanglement fetishism', p. 7.

[31] Ibid., p. 11.

[32] Jarrad Reddekop and Tamara Trownsell, 'Disrupting anthropocentrism through relationality', in David Chandler, Franziska Müller, and Delf Rothe (eds), *International Relations in the Anthropocene: New Agendas, New Agencies and New Approaches* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021), pp. 441–58 (pp. 445, 452).

[33] Kurki, 'Relational revolution and relationality in IR', p. 829.

[34] Pilleriin Sikka, Jarno Tuominen, Alejandro Ezquerro-Nassar, et al., 'COVID-19 on mind: Daily worry about the Coronavirus is linked to negative affect experienced during mind-wandering and dreaming', PsyArXiv Preprint (2022), pp. 1–45 (p. 4), available at: {https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/bk4tn}.

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(2) The Museum of London justified its new-found interest in collecting pandemic dreams: To understand an event such as the pandemic that 'has affected the human condition', it deemed it necessary to capture people's 'raw encounters'[35] with it.
(3) The practice of social dreaming during the pandemic called on subjects to surrender themselves to their dreams. It suggested that by giving up control (according to the guidelines of social dreaming), an assumed reservoir of surprising, 'unthought'[36] knowledge in dreams may be tapped.

The turn to dreams directly referenced neither the Anthropocene nor relational approaches. Nonetheless, in its attempt to establish an experienceability of the pandemic present, by mobilising the dream as a terrain situated at the limits of modern imaginaries of subjectivity – *unaware, raw, unthought* – it betrayed an underlying quasi-relational sentiment. Albeit unfolding at different levels, both the relational turn and the turn to dreams thus provide traces of what Hannah Richter has called 'an evolutionary adaption of society's knowledge relations' to the exhaustion of 'the modern idea of a passive, distant nature'.[37] They thus come into view as elements of a shared, emergent archive of responses to the non-experienceability of the Anthropocene.[38] This archive, in turn, leads them to follow the shared imperative of experimenting with modes of being-in-relation and of finding practical tools to sense this existential condition.

Beyond ascertaining common themes, such a perspective can also draw out common pitfalls. Viewing how the pandemic engagement with dreams translated relational sentiments into tangible practices thus considers the 'orchestrations' required to engage in 'relational dialogues',[39] a blind spot which relational approaches have reflexively acknowledged. The ambiguities within those empirical orchestrations and the moments where they fail to redeem their quasi-relational ambition provide a fruitful opportunity to render this relational (self-)doubt productive.

Particularly because it might appear provocative to flatten out the differences between a sophisticated theoretical apparatus (such as that of the relational turn) and a peculiar empirical episode (such as the pandemic turn to dreams), it is important to specify the level at which these approaches coalesce. This section has suggested that this coalescence concerns the very attempt to provide a response – either theoretically or practically – to restore the experienceability of an Anthropocenic present. The next section conceptualises this observation as an engagement with the limits of a modern practice of historiography.

Dreaming of a ruptured present: Towards an analytics of actuality

Koselleck and Foucault can be brought into fruitful dialogue over their shared concern for the limits of modern historiography and their differential suggestions to engage with those limits analytically. Staging this dialogue, this section derives an *analytics of actuality* which links back to the shared archive discussed in the previous section and prepares the empirical interrogation of the pandemic turn to dreams.

At the limits of modern historiography

According to Koselleck, a modern understanding of historical time emerged in the 18th century. The will to demonstrate the 'naked reality'[40] of a bygone past was gradually replaced by the

[35]Museum of London, 'Museum of London to collect COVID dreams' (26 November 2020), available at: {https://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/news-room/press-releases/museum-london-collect-covid-dreams}.

[36]The Tavistock Institute, 'Social Dreaming Matrix' (27 April 2020), available at: {https://www.tavinstitute.org/news/social-dreaming-matrix}.

[37]Hannah Richter, 'The impossible, necessary outside of nature: A Luhmannian intervention into post-humanist ecology', *Globalizations*, 21:4 (2024), pp. 553–70 (p. 554).

[38]I refer here to Foucault's notion of the archive, as developed in Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (Pantheon Books, 1972), pp. 126–31.

[39]Kurki, 'Relational revolution and relationality in IR', p. 823.

[40]Koselleck, *Futures Past*, p. 205.

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reflexive acknowledgement of the fictional means necessary to do so. From then on, writing history meant producing a 'perspectivistic fiction of the factual'[41] through practices of periodisation and the construction of causal, diachronous explanations. This implied a shifting imagination of the relation between subject and history. Increasingly, the event-bound experience of 'the authentic eyewitness'[42] made way for a modern author-subject of history. Equating temporal distance with analytical rigour, the role of this subject consisted of speaking retrospective order to time. In a passage in *The Order of Things*, Foucault echoes this problematisation. He suggests that through practices of periodisation – fictionalisations, as Koselleck would have it – modern historiography produces an 'appearance of continuity'[43] that starts from the assumption of the *coherence* of history. Incoherence and rupture thus mark the outside of modern historiographic thought. Their absence becomes constitutive for projecting the idea of a linear temporality onto past, present, and future.[44]

Both Koselleck and Foucault are acutely aware of the limits of modern historiography. For Koselleck, these limits revolve around the gap between the experience of an emergent event and its linguistic and retrospective enclosure into a linear historical narrative.[45] This results in an absence of the *actuality* of history from modern historiography, by which he refers to the anthropologically grounded, lived experience of an event 'in the course of occurring', which he assumes to possess 'a different mode of existence from language'.[46] Leaving subjects with the primary experience of speechlessness, actuality is thus understood as ontologically preliterate. This results in an aporia of attempts to account for primary experiences through linguistic means. As Jan Ifversen and Christoffer Kølvraa suggest, such moments 'cannot simply be conceptualized retrospectively by the historian' because this would 'miss the heart of what made them an event' and defuse their rupturing potential 'by folding them into domesticated and complacent forms of historical consciousness'.[47] *Actuality* thus challenges modern historiography in its very functioning and points to a friction between the ontological register of primary experience and the epistemic register of modern historiography. In a sense, Koselleck anticipates the relational problematisation that 'conceptual ways of "gathering" the world' present us with a '"twisted world"'[48] and the correlated call to engage with existential questions of being-in-the-world.

This is particularly apparent when Koselleck outlines practical ways of engaging with this ungraspable, yet existentially present, terrain of history that escapes modern historiography. Intriguingly, this leads him to turn to dreams.[49] Contrasting with the modern will to fictionalise history, Koselleck suggests that dreams testify to the 'irresistible facticity of the fictive'.[50] Dreams, in this reading, subvert the modern configuration of the relation between subject and history. Rather than sovereignly detached, the dreaming subject appears to be existentially exposed to a present which it cannot control but which is being 'dictated upon the body'[51] by dreaming. A 'vivid

[41] Ibid., p. 209.

[42] Ibid., p. 208.

[43] Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p. 50.

[44] Ibid.; as Lundborg has carefully shown, the continued salience of this modern understanding of history and its (author-)subject haunts attempts to envision more desirable, post-Anthropocene futures. As long as claims to transcend the present remain dependent on the subject's outline of progressive change in history, 'the envisioning itself is based on a movement that cancels out such a future'. Lundborg, 'The Anthropocene rupture', p. 602.

[45] Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann and Tom Lampert, 'Koselleck, Arendt, and the anthropology of historical experience', *History and Theory*, 49:2 (2010), pp. 212–36 (p. 219).

[46] Ibid., p. 219.

[47] Jan Ifversen and Christoffer Kølvraa, 'Groping in the dark: Conceptual history and the ungraspable', *Contributions to the History of Concepts*, 18:1 (2023), pp. 1–23 (p. 3).

[48] Kurki, 'Relational revolution and relationality in IR', p. 831.

[49] He does so against the background of reading Charlotte Beradt's *The Third Reich of Dreams*, a dream collection gathered between 1933 and 1939 and subsequently analysed by the German-Jewish journalist; see also Jan Eike Dunkhase, *Absurde Geschichte: Reinhart Kosellecks historischer Existentialismus* (Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach, 2015).

[50] Koselleck, *Futures Past*, p. 209.

[51] Ibid.

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inner truth'[52] thus subsists in dreams. For Koselleck, they become traces of an authentic encounter with a 'physically and affectively lived experience'.[53] The value of the dream as a source subverting the assumptions of modern historiography thus lies in its character as a mode of observing without active observer. It haunts the subject *involuntarily* yet also testifies to 'a state of experience *in eventu*'[54] that is *immediately grounded* in the present. Situated at the very limits of rationality, the dream (stylised into an anthropological fact) helps to overcome the basic gap between history and its articulation.

Foucault shares a basic interest for moments that confront the modern historiographical pretence of coherence with an experience of rupture. However, in contrast to Koselleck, he situates the unfolding of such moments on an epistemic rather than an ontological register. As will be suggested below, this analytical decision is a prerequisite for pursuing an interrogation of the turn to dreams in light of its shared archive with relationality. Experiences of 'discontinuity within a historical layer of continuity',[55] so Foucault suggests, result from an exhaustion of the episteme that suggested the prevalence of such a continuity in the first place. Whatever their ontological undertones, these moments of *actualité* (as Foucault calls them) thus gain traction when they are reflexively asserted as such. In other words, it is the very articulation that the present is ruptured and that it therefore exceeds the coherence within which modern history wants to enclose it that renders it analytically relevant. Observing such moments means observing how 'thought' – understood as a sedimented mode of reasoning, for instance, modern historiography – 'contrives to escape itself'.[56] Once recognised as such, *actualité* endows subjects with the task of probing new 'mode[s] of relating to contemporary reality',[57] not least to reflexively gauge and relate to their own being-in-a-rupture.

To summarise briefly, Koselleck and Foucault share the diagnosis that modern historiography reaches its limits when it comes to accounting for moments of rupture; these moments disrupt the plausibility of coherence and of the modern author-subject recognising it. Nonetheless, both develop markedly differing responses to this finding. Koselleck ascribes ontological priority to the experience of rupture. He suggests that this experience – *actuality* – inscribes itself on subjects on a primary level that cannot be articulated but is felt intensely. Grasping actuality thus means 'tracing something ungraspable',[58] which eventually leads Koselleck to dreams and their promise to testify to such an excessive, primary experience. This search for alternative ways of accounting for the present beyond the limits of modern rationality brings Koselleck's approach surprisingly close to the attitude relational theorising adopts in response to the Anthropocene. Foucault, in contrast, changes the mode of observation. He approximates the limits of historiography from the perspective of moments in which these limits are reflexively problematised. He thus refrains from joining the attempts to capture the authentic encounter with actuality and to gauge the existential stakes involved in it. Instead, he paves the way for turning the very attempts to capture actuality, and the experiments in subjectivity they require, into an analytical concern.

Towards an analytics of actuality

Based on the previous discussion, *actuality* can be understood as an empirical terrain on which the limits of (modern) historiography are being problematised and attempts are formulated to move beyond it. When observing the relational turn in IR and the pandemic turn to dreams as speaking

[52] Ibid., p. 210.

[53] Ifversen and Kølvraa, 'Groping in the dark', p. 13.

[54] Koselleck, *Futures Past*, p. 217.

[55] Judith Revel, '"What are we at the present time?" Foucault and the question of the present', in Sophie Fuggle, Yari Lanci, and Martina Tazzioli (eds), *Foucault and the History of Our Present* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 13–25 (p. 19).

[56] Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p. 50.

[57] Michel Foucault, 'What is enlightenment?', in Paul Rabinow and James D. Faubion (eds), *Ethics: The Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984* (New Press, 1997), pp. 303–20 (p. 309).

[58] Ifversen and Kølvraa, 'Groping in the dark', p. 14.

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from a shared archive, this concerns the mutual engagement with such a terrain of actuality. To translate this conceptual approximation into a practical instrument which prepares the empirical interrogation that follows, it is possible to outline three vectors of an *analytics of actuality*:[59] (1) *epistemic assertions of actuality*, (2) *experimental engagements with subjectivity*, and (3) *renegotiations of the relationship between subject and history*.

(1) Interrogating *epistemic assertions of actuality* implies asking how the difference of contemporary reality is articulated, and which tools are employed to render this contemporary reality intelligible. Linking back to the previous section, relational theorising claims the radical difference of an Anthropocene present that exhausts modern ways of knowing. Renegotiating being-in-the-world by loosening *into* a world of entanglements that has become ungraspable if approached through the tools of modernity becomes a prerequisite for cultivating a fundamentally different mode of knowing.[60] Mobilised for an interrogation of the pandemic turn to dreams, this first vector asks how knowledge of and through dreams is mobilised during the pandemic to render the contemporary moment intelligible. This experiment in knowledge production marks an epistemic event that problematises the blind spots of other forms of knowing the (pandemic) present.

(2) Complementing this first epistemic level, a second vector concerns the *experimental engagements with subjectivity* that emerge in response to this reflexive assertion of a ruptured present. The previously thematised theoretical call to cultivate a sense of one's relational entanglement with the world moves along this vector. For the following analysis of pandemic dreams, this calls attention to how the distinction between the dreaming subject and its rational, modern counterpart is articulated and how, linking back to the first vector, the mobilisation of the limits of this modern subject overlaps with the epistemic concern to grasp actuality. In view of this interlocking, the vector cautions of an immediately affirmative stance towards these (quasi-relational) experiments in subjectivity. It advises close attention to how attempts to cultivate different forms of subjectivity amid the turn to dreams are being orchestrated[61] and hence 'understood in terms of power-relations and relations of knowledge' and potentially 'reintegrated'[62] into the schemes they sought to escape.

(3) The last vector approaches the zone between the epistemic assertion of actuality and the experiments with subjectivity mobilised to attain it as the site of a *renegotiation of the relationship between subject and history*. Whereas the first two vectors adopt a largely Foucauldian outlook on actuality, this last vector returns to the basic insight offered by Koselleck that shifting historical experiences of time are accompanied by reconfigurations of the relation between the subject accounting for history and the history it observes. The previous section has shown how Anthropocene temporality undermines the plausibility of prioritising human experience when accounting for the unfolding of time. It also challenges the capacity of the human subject to act as the sovereign observer of a history, which is by now recognised as more-than-human. Relational theorising responds to this problematisation by implicitly shifting historiographic aspiration itself. It exchanges 'a modern desire to control the passage of time'[63] with an interest in the experience of actuality. This also involves a shift from the modern author-subject that *explains* history towards a relational subject that gauges its *exposure* to it. Bringing this analytical vector to the grounded engagements with pandemic dreams then implies asking if and how these engagements translate

[59] In loose reference to Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), p. 82. I delineate such an analytics from a genealogical history of the present in order to point specifically to a problematisation of a rupture in the experience of time. The problematisation of pandemic dreams is particularly challenging in this regard, as it finds genealogy's aim for producing a 'denaturalising effect' confronted with an empirical terrain that reflexively engages with a present it encounters as denaturalised; Christine Andrä, 'Problematising war: Towards a reconstructive critique of war as a problem of deviance', *Review of International Studies*, 48:4 (2022), pp. 705–24 (p. 713).

[60] See Kurki, 'Relational revolution and relationality in IR', p. 828.

[61] Ibid., p. 823.

[62] Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault* (University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 103.

[63] Lundborg, 'The Anthropocene rupture', p. 613.

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an existential assumption of exposure to a ruptured present into concrete practices of sensing this present.

The following section mobilises these analytical vectors to examine the different registers of pandemic dreaming. Doing so, it flags the interference patterns with relational theorising that thereby emerge, as well as the moments in which practices with a quasi-relational ambition tip back into modern modes of reasoning.

Dreaming the pandemic

The problematisation of dreams during the pandemic eclectically stretched *scientific, archival*, and *practical* terrains. Across these terrains, this section discerns a differential yet consistent engagement with actuality that echoes relational sentiments. In particular, the preoccupation with dreams was at the same time one with the limits of subjectivity. While mobilising these limits held the epistemic promise of a different way of accessing the pandemic present, it also displayed a tendency to tip back into the 'trap of reaffirming the primacy of the human subject within a modern politics while claiming to overcome it'.[64] Tracing this ambiguity starts with two *scientific* projects, one based at the University of Helsinki (UoH project) and one interdisciplinary consortium led by psychologists from the University of Turku (MIND project). It then moves on to *archival* approaches to pandemic dreams, looking at the amateur dream archive i dream of covid and the Museum of London's (MoL) 'Collecting COVID' project. Lastly, it turns to the self-help book *Pandemic Dreams*, and the Social Dreaming Matrices developed by the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations and conducted during the pandemic between April 2020 and June 2021 to examine *practical engagements* with pandemic dreams.

Register 1: Capturing pandemic dreams scientifically

By globally synchronising the experience of a disrupted everyday, the pandemic provided unique conditions for the scientific study of dreams. It formed a 'natural experiment'[65] for accessing the field of dreams which normally 'doesn't allow a lot of doorways in'.[66] Besides this hope of understanding dreams themselves better, the scientific register also marked an attempt to better understand the pandemic situation as such. Turning to dreams, so the UoH project suggested, promised access to the 'shared mindscape between individuals' that echoed 'the apocalyptic atmosphere of the circumstances brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic'.[67] Pursuing a similar ambition, the MIND project saw dreams as an indicator that 'shed[s] light on how exceptional circumstances, such as the coronavirus pandemic, affect our mental contents'.[68] Both projects thus started by epistemically asserting the actuality of the pandemic event in terms of an *atmospherically* present affective intensity. The ontopolitical commitment underlying this assertion equated the reality of actuality with the pre-reflective experience it evoked.[69]

[64] Ibid., p. 602.

[65] Jarvis, 'Did Covid change how we dream?'; see also Ruby, qtd in Radio France, 'Confinement/déconfinement: Quel impact sur notre sommeil et nos rêves?' (14 May 2020), available at: {https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/podcasts/la-question-du-jour/confinement-deconfinement-quel-impact-sur-notre-sommeil-et-nos-reves-2576614}, and Anu-Katriina Pesonen, Jari Lipsanen, Risto Halonen, et al., 'Pandemic dreams: Network analysis of dream content during the COVID-19 lockdown', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11 (2020), pp. 1–10 (p. 2).

[66] Nielsen, qtd in Jarvis, 'Did Covid change how we dream?'.

[67] Pesonen, qtd in University of Helsinki, 'Research: COVID-19 is echoed in dreams' (1 October 2020), available at: {https://www.helsinki.fi/en/faculty-medicine/news/news-archive/research-covid-19-echoed-dreams}.

[68] University of Turku, 'Dream reporting' (2023), available at: {https://link.webropolsurveys.com/Participation/Public/99466159-e119-4a72-a129-9003f1cb1ae4?displayId=Fin2458977}.

[69] See Nicolas Gäckle, 'Governing pandemic fatigue: An International Relations case of experiential biopolitics', *European Journal of International Relations*, 29:4 (2023), pp. 877–902 (p. 880) and David Chandler, *Ontopolitics in the Anthropocene: An Introduction to Mapping, Sensing and Hacking* (Routledge, 2018).

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The mobilisation of dreams as valuable indicators of actuality followed the so-called continuity hypothesis. Widely shared in dream research, this hypothesis suggests that dreams imaginatively mirror 'the intensity of personal concerns'[70] that occupy people in their everyday, 'especially when they're pressing and significant'.[71] Dreams thus testify to the affective intensity encolouring the experience of the present and, hence, its actuality. Attempts to grasp this epistemic terrain – one attracting interest not least given its close link to mental health[72] – are intimately linked to the peculiar figure of the dreaming subject. It is precisely its liminal and 'unaware' situatedness, 'fully immersed in an internally generated hallucinatory world',[73] where reflective control is suspended yet experience prevails, that guarantees the authentic witnessing of the dream. On the scientific register, during the pandemic, the dreaming subject became a sensor tapping what 'exists in the present, in the actual, but is unknown or unseen'.[74] Grasping what goes on at the oneiric limits of subjectivity became a crucial factor for the epistemic assertion of actuality.

Amid the technicalities that sought to enable such a grasp, the ambiguities of this scientific advance towards actuality come into view. The MIND project responded to the ontologically 'fleeting' quality of dreams through 'methods that come closer to capturing momentary experiences'.[75] To capture 'dream experiences *as such*'[76] it mobilised ecological momentary assessment (EMA). EMA aims to assess 'experiences in real-time, in real-world settings, over time and across contexts' in order to depict 'the dynamics of life as it is lived, day-to-day, hour by hour'.[77] Meaningfully studying dreams thus meant becoming methodologically attuned to them by modelling scientific practice in the image of the phenomenon it sought to capture.[78] The momentary itself needed to be penetrated. Practically, this meant that participants filled in a dream-log right upon awakening for 14 days, and thus, as long as the dream experience was still lucid, specifying dream contents, emotional experience, sleeping quality, and a number of other aspects. To maintain the promise of authenticity that, as outlined above, is intimately linked to the liminal subjectivity of the dreamer, the study further requested participants 'to not censor their dreams, or try to make them more logical, organized, and complete than they remembered them'.[79] The passage towards the hidden semantic of the dream required bypassing the subject whose modern will to make sense of the dream risks distorting its immediate sensual grounding in the present and hence its epistemic promise.

The attempt through which the UoH project sought to fulfil its promise of capturing the atmospheric quality of the pandemic similarly started by asking study participants to 'describe [their] dreams during the pandemic lockdown'.[80] Subsequently, it focused on identifying correlations between clusters of dream contents and the stress levels that participants reported.[81] These clusters were assembled by an unsupervised algorithm that mapped the proximities between different

[70] G. William Domhoff, 'The invasion of the concept snatchers: The origins, distortions, and future of the continuity hypothesis', *Dreaming*, 27:1 (2017), pp. 14–39; see also Michael Schredl and Friedrich Hofmann, 'Continuity between waking activities and dream activities', *Consciousness and Cognition*, 12:2 (2003), pp. 298–308.

[71] Sikka et al., 'COVID-19 on mind', p. 4.

[72] Pesonen et al., 'Pandemic dreams', p. 6; Windt, qtd in Alyx Gorman, 'Welcome to my nightmare: Researchers to investigate the strange world of Covid dreams', *The Guardian* (1 September 2020), available at: {https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2020/sep/01/welcome-to-my-nightmare-researchers-to-investigate-the-strange-world-of-covid-dreams}.

[73] Sikka et al., 'COVID-19 on mind', p. 4.

[74] David Chandler, 'Actor network theory and sensing governance: From causation to correlation', *Perspectives on Science*, 31:1 (2023), pp. 139–58 (p. 152).

[75] Sikka et al., 'COVID-19 on mind', pp. 6, 30.

[76] Ibid., p. 6, emphasis added.

[77] Saul Shiffman, Arthur A. Stone, and Michael R. Hufford, 'Ecological momentary assessment', *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology*, 4:1 (2008), pp. 1–32 (p. 3).

[78] Paraphrasing Brian Massumi, *Ontopower: War, Powers, and the State of Perception* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), p. 11.

[79] Sikka et al., 'COVID-19 on mind', p. 14; University of Turku, 'Dream reporting'.

[80] Pesonen et al., 'Pandemic dreams', p. 7.

[81] The period under investigation was the sixth week of the Finnish lockdown in late April 2020.

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dream contents, warranting the alleged 'purity'[82] of the study. Dreams, in other words, needed to be understood on their own terms. To do so, however, a series of translations rendered participants' dream reports readable: they were translated into English, formally harmonised by turning full sentences into lists of nouns (chronologically lined up in their order of appearance), certain words were summarised into thematic supra-categories, and researchers made a qualitative assessment to classify whether or not reports comprised distressing episodes and whether their content could count as pandemic-specific.[83] This process effectively submitted the poetics of the dream to that of the machine analysing it. Eventually, what remained of the atmospheric actuality that the project initially set out to grasp were correlations between algorithmically produced word clusters and differential stress levels.

Taken together, the scientific register epistemically asserted actuality as the intensely lived experience of the pandemic present. Dreams became indicators of the authentic state of this 'collectively shared consciousness',[84] testifying to how the pandemic actuality affectively inscribed itself on the subjects living through it. Capturing authenticity – which was understood to emerge at the very limits of subjectivity – became dependent on preventing the dream as much as possible from first passing through rationality's filters. This was achieved through methodical traps. The scientific hope invested in the dream as a way of grasping the immediate affective entanglement between the subject and the present thereby echoed a hope for a form of knowing 'located in the feeling heart and not the head … and in specific experiences of reality',[85] as present in relational theorising. Nonetheless, this affirmation remained ambiguous. While a quasi-relational sentiment appeared to inform what, for the scientific register, *counted as* reality, it did not translate into its practice of observation. Here, the modern habit of 'fixing' what relations are and how we should 'capture' them'[86] retained a continuous influence. Mirroring the aporia drawn out by Koselleck, that accounting for primary experiences of events unavoidably betrays their ungraspable quality, the scientific translation of dreams into data deprived them of their previously affirmed excessive quality. The initial quasi-relational affirmation of the experiential entanglement between subject and pandemic present collapsed in the scientific observation of this relationally entangled observation.

Register 2: Archiving and exhibiting pandemic dreams

While the scientific register mobilised dreams as indicators of pandemic actuality, the archival register transfigured them into tools that allowed subjects to engage with their experience of being-in-a-rupture.

The online archive i dream of covid invited visitors to share their own dreams and browse those of others. Its initial focus was on gathering data. It asked dreamers to submit their location, age range, and the date of the dream report they wished to share, which was subsequently tagged by the admins with thematic keywords. In turn, this enabled a systematic searchability of dream reports (by content or location), through which the site mirrored the scientific problematisation of pandemic dreams. The explicit ambition to sense 'dreaming patterns and trends'[87] and 'growing theme[s]'[88] further reinforced this impression. i dream of covid explicitly reflected on the proximity that this convergent hunt for the pattern suggested, as one of the admins articulated the caveat

[82] Pesonen et al., 'Pandemic dreams', p. 7; in contrast to previous studies that relied on pre-defined dream contents of interest.
[83] Ibid.
[84] Ibid., p. 6.
[85] Arlene B. Tickner and Amaya Querejazu, 'Weaving worlds: *Cosmopraxis* as relational sensibility', *International Studies Review*, 23:2 (2021), pp. 391–408 (p. 399).
[86] Kurki, 'Relational revolution and relationality in IR', p. 830.
[87] i dream of covid, 'I dream of Covid' (2022), available at: {https://www.idreamofcovid.com/about}.
[88] Theresa Machemer, 'Insomnia and vivid dreams on the rise with COVID-19 anxiety', *Smithsonian Magazine* (23 April 2020), available at: {https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/insomnia-and-vivid-dreams-rise-pandemic-anxiety-180974726/}.

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of neither being a 'data scientist nor a researcher'.[89] Instead of adopting a scientific ambition, i dream of covid thus pursued an ethics of archiving that stressed the need to balance the diversity of submissions with publishing what appeared 'representative of larger dreaming trends'.[90]

As a 'more art- than science-based'[91] approach, i dream of covid transfigured the pattern itself. Freeing it from the constraints imposed by those considerations of *accuracy* that are necessary to depict a community unaware of its existence (as per the scientific interest in the cluster where dreams became a tool for objectification), the online archive turned the pattern into an affective site of identification that *enabled* community. Formal and thematic similarities, along with the recognition that 'others are dreaming about the same things as you',[92] should help to tame what appeared 'bizarre and individual'[93] to the isolated dreamer. Adding to this reassuring recognition of one's patterned self, sharing dreams promised a sense of connection and intimacy that answered to the affective needs of pandemic subjects.[94] i dream of covid thus encouraged subjects to probe an experimental engagement with their being-in-a-rupture. Particularly where the pandemic suspended social relations, the engagement with dreams was presented as a factor in repairing the affective intimacy taken to be (re-)constitutive of a caring community. As such, by turning to dreams, the online archive also experimented with a different way of conceiving community that mirrored the relational ambition to 'represent experience, affect, silence, situatedness in assemblages'[95] as important factors. However, what was community-making in this regard was the enclosure of the potentially excessive and uncanny aspects of dreams (by making them visible as patterns) and thus precisely the bracketing of those elements that appeared to reach *beyond* the human and disrupt the present. As a case in point, a psychologist commenting on the archive encouraged its use 'as long as people aren't frightened'.[96] In the case of i dream of covid, the imperative of avoiding disturbance thus set the normative limit of experimental engagements with subjectivity and different representations of (pandemic) community.

While i dream of covid invited experiments in subjectivity that were performed through the act of archiving dreams itself, the Museum of London was more explicitly concerned with rearranging the relation between history and the subject accounting for it. Gathering oral histories of dreams as part of the 'Collecting COVID' project was 'the first time that dreams' were 'collected as a museum object'.[97] The museum positioned dreams as 'a key shared experience' that mirrored 'the anxiety, stress and worry brought on by the global COVID-19 crisis'.[98] The exhibitory experiment sought traces of 'raw encounters'[99] with the pandemic. There is an affinity between this approximation of the pandemic through an unmediated encounter and the scientific assertion of actuality. Consequently, when commenting on the project, a MIND consortium member praised the curational exercise as a 'very valuable source of information for future historians, scientists and artists interested in how the pandemic affected … our innermost experiences of dreams and nightmares' and cited 'preliminary [scientific] evidence'[100] for the pandemic's impact on dream lives.

[89] Ibid.
[90] i dream of covid, 'I dream of Covid'.
[91] Ibid.
[92] Ibid.
[93] Grey Ellis, 'Covid-19 quarantine dreams'.
[94] Ibid.
[95] Kurki, 'Coronavirus, democracy', p. 177.
[96] Propper, qtd in Grey Ellis, 'Covid-19 quarantine dreams'.
[97] Museum of London, 'COVID dreams'.
[98] Ibid.
[99] Ibid.
[100] Noreika, qtd in Nicola Davis, 'Museum of London asks Londoners for Covid pandemic dreams', *The Guardian* (26 November 2020), available at: {https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/nov/26/museum-of-london-asks-londoners-for-covid-pandemic-dreams}.

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The MoL's curational discourse thus marked an event in the order of (historical) knowledge: it reinstated dreams as 'worthy of historical account',[101] which, following Koselleck, they had not been since early modern times. Dreams promised 'capturing something that's neither fiction nor fact' but 'an experience that people create with a kind of force of an otherness'.[102] The previously sketched shared archive that links relational theorising and the turn to dreams is evident here. As Chipato and Chandler argue, 'a relational rather than rationalist ontology enables the (post)human to galvanise the powers of rescue and salvage alleged to exist outside or exterior to the enclosed "world" of being, of the modernist ontology' – therefore 'access to the outside or alterity' requires 'the ability to move towards, to feel towards or to approach this outside'.[103] In the MoL's attempt to capture a historical juncture that evades conceptualisation, curational practice encountered what Koselleck had sketched as an 'irresolvable hiatus between the "primary experiences" of those who participated in occurrences and the "secondary experiences" of non-participatory observers or later narrators'.[104] Since this hiatus demarcates the limits of what modern historiography is able to render visible, the attempt to move beyond this limit equally indicates doubts regarding the plausibility of modern historiography as such. Amid the historical juncture of the pandemic, Koselleck's problematisation of the limits of a historically contingent mode of historiography entered historiographical practice itself. Thereby, it testified to an emergent experience of time that sketches a present that cannot be adequately accounted for as rationally *explainable* and instead needs to be rendered *affectively accessible* and *experienceable*. No longer in control *of* history, the subject needs to be gauged for its exposure *to* history. Despite this outlook, the prospects of this attempted move beyond modern temporality remained ambiguous: the pandemic present was recognised to require an understanding of elements that exceed clear conceptualisations. However, translating this into a need to 'provide a more emotional and personal narrative of this time for future generations'[105] ignored the precarity of any account of these excessive elements and denied the excessive phenomenon in question precisely the absence that constitutes it.[106] Excess, instead, was re-enclosed into a progressive narrative according to which the future would learn from the present.

Register 3: Practically engaging with pandemic dreams

Complementing the scientific and archival concerns, a third register outlined practical instructions allowing subjects to engage with their own dream experiences during the pandemic. These practices meandered between attempts to control dreams and attempts to affirm the creative, imaginative potential within them.

Published in 2020, the popular scientific book *Pandemic Dreams* argued that 'a better understanding of our collective dream lives' could help to guide 'us through the crisis'.[107] In line with i dream of covid, it understood dream sharing as an opportunity to foster empathetic, intimate relationships. Based on this outlook, the book described concrete techniques for engaging with dreams.

A first set of techniques – *reducing anxiety dreams* and *re-scripting traumatic nightmares* – highlights the need to control the excessive aspects of dreams. To do so, the subject needs to appropriate and redirect the inherently imaginative and, in the case of traumatic nightmares, repetitive quality of dreams. To counter anxiety dreams, the book thus prompts subjects to visually imagine more

[101] Koselleck, *Futures Past*, p. 209.

[102] Sliwinski, qtd in Sofia Rodriguez, 'Weird pandemic dreams are a thing, and researchers in Canada and U.K. are collecting them' (1 December 2020), available at: {https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/london/museum-of-dreams-covid-19-pandemic-1.5822419}; see also Davis, 'Museum of London'.

[103] Chipato and Chandler, 'Critique and the Black Horizon', p. 288.

[104] Hoffmann and Lampert, 'Anthropology of historical experience', p. 230.

[105] Museum of London, 'COVID dreams'.

[106] Theodor W. Adorno, *Vorlesung über Negative Dialektik* (Suhrkamp, 2022), p. 105, 126; Ifversen and Kølvraa, 'Groping in the dark', p. 3.

[107] Deirdre Barrett, *Pandemic Dreams* (Oneiroi Press, 2020), p. 2.

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enjoyable scenes before going to bed. Given the 'extremely visual' character of dreams, such contents are 'especially likely to get through to your dreaming mind'.[108] Similarly, repetition provides a hook that allows subjects to gain control over dreams because it establishes stable expectation. According to *Pandemic Dreams*, knowing what the traumatic content will look like enables subjects to rehearse a 'script' that involves 'solutions'[109] that mitigate the disturbing nightmare imagery.[110] A second pair of techniques – *incubating problem-solving dreams* and *cultivating big dreams* – shifts the perspective towards leveraging the excess that separates oneiric experiences from normal waking rationality. According to the book, *problem-solving dreams* may be incubated by following a detailed step-by-step procedure. Mental discipline (e.g. visualising 'the problem as a concrete image'[111] before going to sleep) and physical performance (e.g. lying 'quietly in bed before getting out of bed'[112]) are taught here in detail. *Cultivating big dreams* uses the same technique to confront larger questions of 'imagining the future – personal and global – as the pandemic wears on'.[113] Following the analytical concern for experiments in subjectivity, even though both sets of techniques partly affirmed the excessive character of dreams, they eventually aimed at reinstating the subject's control over them when it came to the pandemic situation. Eventually, the engagement with dreams was fully enclosed into a modern orientation towards overcoming crisis and moving progressively towards a better future.

At first glance, the Social Dreaming Matrices (SDMs) offered by the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations during the Covid-19 pandemic pursued a more radical affirmation of the excess present in dreams.[114] Dreams were understood as a 'unique source of information'[115] that was firmly grounded in 'the [then] current socio-political environment – in particular the COVID-19 pandemic'.[116] SDMs aspired to endow the pandemic present with 'new meaning and understanding'[117] but also to move beyond the strictures of current thought through the 'unexpected visions of the future'[118] residing in dreams. The protocol from the first session exemplifies these ambitions. It quotes 'a need to find a new attitude' since 'our societies are not sustainable for the new future' and an intense feeling of '"hunger" to come into the matrix' to seize the 'freedom to express what had been pent up/"locked down" for so long'.[119] Dreams thus became a medium for subjects to engage with what Foucault had called the task that actuality poses.

As a technique, social dreaming works through two tools that are instrumental in enabling subjects to relate to actuality through dreams: the form of the matrix and the technique of free association. Both emphasise the need to restrict the subject in order to attain to the 'unthought known'[120] of the dream without tampering with it. Free association essentially means sharing

[108]Ibid., p. 34.

[109]Ibid., p. 50.

[110]The book offers the example of how traumatic nightmares in the wake of 9/11 could be mitigated in therapeutic settings by imaginatively equipping people jumping off the Twin Towers in nightmares with parachutes; see ibid., p. 51.

[111]Ibid., p. 61.

[112]Ibid.

[113]Ibid., pp. 74–5.

[114]The Tavistock has been characterised as a 'a key element, model and example in the development of an expertise of subjective, interpersonal and organizational life and its wide extension in modern society'. Peter Miller and Nikolas Rose, 'The Tavistock programme: The government of subjectivity and social life', *Sociology*, 22:2 (1988), pp. 171–92 (p. 175).

[115]W. Gordon Lawrence, Mark Maltz, and E. Martin Walker, 'Social dreaming @ work', in W. Gordon Lawrence (ed.), *Social Dreaming @ Work* (Karnac, 1988), pp. 169–81 (p. 169).

[116]The Tavistock Institute, 'Social Dreaming Matrix'.

[117]The Tavistock Institute, 'Social Dreaming Matrix'; see also Social Dreaming International Network, 'Dreams of the global pandemia and visions of the future. An international social dreaming matrix' (April 2020), available at: {https://www.tavinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/SDIN-international-matrix.pdf}, accessed 23 October 2023.

[118]Social Dreaming International Network, 'Dreams'.

[119]The Tavistock Institute, '#1 Social Dreaming Matrix during the Covid-19 pandemic. Notes from 30 April 2020' (April 2020), available at: {https://tavarchive.modernactivity.com/?p=14676}.

[120]The Tavistock Institute, 'Social Dreaming Matrix'.

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dreams by 'saying what comes to mind' without subjecting it 'to rational control'.[121] It calls on subjects to 'surrender oneself to trains of thought, without monitoring for importance'.[122] Hosts facilitate this practice, intervening where association tips into interpretation and hence, where the subject re-imposes itself. The matrix supports this through a physical arrangement of chairs that prevents eye contact and thus breaks up the social relations between dreamers (when SDMs moved online in pandemic times, the same end was pursued by turning off videos).[123] Social group dynamics are seen to hamper the free flow of dream associations. Therefore, 'to "see" what was in matrix, one had to be temporarily "blind" to what was known of group'.[124] In case the set-up fails to prevent the intrusion of group sensitivities, hosts intervene to maintain the productive blindness of the matrix.[125]

In social dreaming, the link between the epistemic assertion of actuality as a different way of knowing the present and the mobilisation of the limits of subjectivity – two of the analytical vectors sketched above – comes into its own. SDMs probe an experimentation with subjectivity that ostensibly abolishes the hallmarks of its modern figuration altogether: *blinded* to its social embeddedness, *denied* interpretation, and called to *surrender* to the dream. The realm of truly new knowledge attuned to actuality, referred to as an 'imaginative space of reverie with its wonderment and surprise'[126] that dreams are, is suspected at the periphery of human rationality. Explicitly, social dreaming thus positions itself as a 'subversive activity' that undermines 'the entire structure of Western epistemology' in its gridlocked 'linear and rational' ways.[127] When taken up during the pandemic, social dreaming thus echoed the relational call that 'legitimate ways of paying attention to and navigating the world will exceed the intellectualized terms sanctioned by Enlightenment thought'.[128] Further, the dreaming sessions during the pandemic subscribed to social dreaming's aim to turn the matrix into 'a multi-verse of meanings'[129] so as to acknowledge that 'dreams are not solely the property of the dreamer but belong to a greater context of which the dreamer is a part'.[130] Mirroring relational sentiments, the matrix thus became a tool for 'embracing interconnection as a fundamental existential assumption'; its call to participants to understand themselves through the figure of the dreamer became a practical way to experiment with ways 'to constitute the self-in-relation-to-others',[131] for which the pandemic dream became the vehicle.

Particularly in light of these resonances, it is productive to draw out some of the tensions inherent in the practice of social dreaming. On the one hand, this concerns its quintessentially modern rationale for engaging with dreams. Opening up to the 'non-logic of the unconscious'[132] is seen to pave the way to 'recapture'[133] their creative excess. The links drawn to a better, even liberated future, which the appropriation of the imaginative potential in dreams aims at, serves as a strong reminder of the precarity of escaping the ties of modern history that Lundborg has shown. Dreams become a means to an end, another tool to steer history in the right, progressive direction. The prevalence of modern reason remains salient when turning to the figure of the dreamer that social dreaming cultivates. Considering the modern epistemic desire for new and better knowledge, the sheer methodical rigour with which the move *beyond* the subject is outlined is striking. While social

[121] W. Gordon Lawrence, *Introduction to Social Dreaming: Transforming Thinking* (Karnac, 2005), p. 38.
[122] Ibid., p. 42.
[123] Ibid., p. 96; The Tavistock Institute, '#1 Social Dreaming Matrix'.
[124] Ibid., p. 39.
[125] Ibid.; David Armstrong, 'The practice of social dreaming: Guiding principles', available at: {https://www.tavinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/The-Practice-of-Social-Dreaming-Guiding-Principles.pdf}.
[126] Lawrence, *Introduction*, p. 24.
[127] Ibid., p. 42.
[128] Reddekop and Townsell, 'Disrupting anthropocentrism through relationality', p. 445.
[129] Lawrence, *Introduction*, p. 42.
[130] Lawrence et al., 'Social dreaming @ work', p. 180.
[131] Reddekop and Townsell, 'Disrupting anthropocentrism through relationality', p. 452.
[132] Lawrence, Introduction, p. 16.
[133] Ibid., p. 24.

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dreaming requires the subject to give in to the dream and to give up its will to control, this never escapes the air of a performance of carefully planned self-restriction. It is hard to oversee the parallels to Odysseus, the conceptual persona of modern reason, who after all 'chooses for himself … He listens, but does so while bound helplessly to the mast'.[134] As such, while social dreaming amid the pandemic critically insisted on how the actuality of the contemporary moment exhausted modern epistemic practices, the alternative it outlined easily tips into a practice 'by which the self survives adventures, throwing itself away in order to preserve itself'.[135] Social dreaming, as performed during the pandemic, thus testified to how claims to move beyond the rational subject and modern reason may end up reasserting both.

Conclusion

Intrigued by the pandemic turn to dreams, this article has suggested that the phenomenon invites a reflection that points beyond its positioning as an event in the order of pandemic knowledge. It argued that the turn to dreams may be read as an experimental attempt to account for the excessive temporality of the Anthropocene which the Covid-19 pandemic instantiates. If the Anthropocene challenges a modern account of temporality, because it displaces its reliance on human experience, the pandemic turn to dreams experimented with a mode of accounting for the present that is based on an experience consistently painted as grounded deeply *within* the human yet fundamentally *beyond* the borders of its rational understanding. Across the empirical registers that the article interrogated, it was precisely this excess of rationality that was linked to an authentic grasp of the pandemic juncture: for the *scientific* register, the dream became a sensor for the affective intensity of the pandemic present. However, the subject's will to rationalise the dream needed to be methodically pre-empted to capture its authenticity. For the *archival* register, dreams rendered the affective and experiential components of community visible; mutual exchanges over dreams allowed for repairing those intimate relations lost by lockdown. An adequate museum preservation of the pandemic event in turn ended up gathering the raw and authentic encounters assumed in dreams. For the *practical* register, dreams were seen to provide a reservoir of imaginative potential that could enable a better grasp of the pandemic present. Access to this reservoir, however, was preconditioned on bypassing the rationality of the subject and instead cultivating a practice of opening it up to its limits.

This articulation of the move *beyond* the human subject as a condition of experienceability of an Anthropocenic present strongly resonates with IR's relational turn. By and large, this turn has similarly rendered an existential affirmation of being-in-relation – and thus a move beyond the limits through which modernity imagines the human subject – a condition for becoming attuned to the Anthropocene. In light of this resonance, the article has turned to Koselleck and Foucault to suggest reading the empirical turn to dreams and the relational turn in IR as elements of a shared archive of *actuality* that assembles reflexive engagements with the limits of modern historiography. The very basic shift that takes place in this regard concerns how the configuration of the relation between the subject and the (emergent) history it accounts for is imagined. Modern historiography prompts the subject to conceive of itself as standing apart from history, in a position of active retrospective control over it. The empirical space of this article allows the conjecture that the Anthropocene subject, in contrast, is invited to understand itself through its entanglement with and its exposure to the present. Subsequently, this subject is called to gauge the intense experience by which this new passivity inscribes itself. Nonetheless, the article also serves as a reminder of how easily this attempt to go beyond the subject is compromised, orchestrated, and re-enclosed by the cunning ways of modern reason: amid the pandemic, science turned the excess of dreams into a measurable unit, archives gathered oneiric experiences to anticipate a progressive order of history in which the

[134]Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 26.
[135]Ibid., p. 39.

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future would learn from the present, and practices outlined instructions aimed at allowing subjects to control their dreams.

Overall, this interrogation of the peculiar pandemic turn to dreams has contributed to the discussion of two broader themes in the study of IR. First, while others have problematised the relational turn in IR for the exclusions neglected in its 'celebratory all-encompassing affirmation of an entangled world',[136] the article has added a somewhat more cautious nuance to this forceful critique. While acknowledging the genre-stretching contemporary move towards relationality that relational theorists have ascertained, the present article has offered a critical twist on this tendency.[137] By observing the turn to dreams and the relational turn in IR as elements of a shared archive, it emphasised the remaining grip of modern reason within this abovementioned tendency. Against the grain of contemporary critique which is increasingly judged by its ability to attune to immediacy, the article also tried to recoup the value of taking-a-distance.[138] Second, the article has sought to move the conversation on the Anthropocene in IR forward. On the one hand, it has done so by qualifying the Covid-19 pandemic as an experiential testing ground for the Anthropocene rather than merely conceiving of it as a material effect. On the other hand, by exploring the experience of time that the pandemic turn to dreams conveyed, it has shown how the temporal rupture of the Anthropocene[139] evokes reflexive societal attempts to articulate and relate to this experience in unexpected ways and places.

Perhaps assembling more of these engagements can provide the traces for observing a nascent experience of time in the Anthropocene.

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[136] Torrent, 'Problematising entanglement fetishism', p. 15.
[137] Kurki, 'Relational revolution and relationality in IR'.
[138] Anna Kornbluh, *Immediacy, or The Style of Too Late Capitalism* (Verso, 2023).
[139] Lundborg, 'The Anthropocene rupture', p. 600.

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