The haunting depths of Francisco Goya’s etching “The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters” represents more than meets the eye, carrying both scientific and political implications. Goya created this etching between the years of 1797 and 1799 in a series of 80 etchings titled Los Caprichos, or in English, The Caprices. One must evaluate this work in the context of the era of its creation. The Enlightenment, also referred to as the Age of Reason, stands as an intellectual and philosophical epoch that unfolded primarily in Western Europe, during the 17th and 18th centuries. Its impact reverberated globally, shaping thought and society across a myriad of realms. Several philosophical concepts arose during this era: No ruler should have unlimited absolute power; There should be a balanced distribution of power among executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government coupled with the separation of church and state; People are entitled to liberty, individual rights and equality. Los Caprichos criticized pre-Enlightenment practices in Spain, which were still taking place at the end of the Eighteenth century. Due to its profound critique of contemporary Spanish society, Los Caprichos was eventually censored. Number 43 out of the 80 etchings, “The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters,” was seen as Goya’s manifesto—to warn about a world absent of reason. Many thought that Goya intended this etching to be a self-portrait. “El sueño de la razón produce monstruos” as seen in the foreground of the etching suggests an interpretation beyond a painter, presumably Goya, asleep at work.

Goya’s etching deliberately portrays the delicate balance between reason and imagination. In this dark image, we see an artist asleep at his desk with creatures associated with mystery and evil in Spanish folk tradition, such as bats, owls, and a lynx, encroaching on him. These creatures are intended to be a figment of the artist’s dream and symbolize ignorance and evil. The negative depiction of what comes to life when the artist sleeps and enters his subconscious emphasizes Goya’s political stance in accordance with Enlightenment values: reason over imagination. If we allow ourselves to wander into the subconscious, only evil will come out of it, Goya says through this etching. The title of the print is also drawn onto the front of the artist’s desk: “El sueño de la razón produce monstruos,” or “The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters” in English, is essentially Goya’s proclamation of the values of the Enlightenment and a reinforcement of his etching—without reason, evil prevails.

The creatures in Goya’s etching represent irrational fears and anxieties, which are common themes found in dreams and nightmares. At the end of the Eighteenth century when this etching was made, nightmares were defined as “disease when a man in his sleep supposes he has a great weight laying upon him.” Sigmund Freud, in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, described dreams as a window into the unconscious mind with either manifest content or latent meaning, but Freud lacked empirical evidence for his claims. Although the meaning of dreams remains largely unknown and is difficult to define, it is now understood by many that the emotional tone of dreams is often reflective of an individual’s mental and emotional state. The amygdala, the major processing center for emotions, has high activity during rapid eye movement (REM) sleep, which is when 80% of the dreams occur. This might indicate the processing of emotional memories during REM dreams, where negative emotions are far more frequent than positive ones. Because dreams may help us regulate our emotions, and furthermore help us solve problems and process memories, a dream is a perplexing choice for Goya’s proclamation about the dangers of the subconscious.

Goya’s depiction of the subconscious aligns most closely with the Activation Synthesis Model proposed by John Allan Hobson and Robert McCarley in 1977. These scientists claimed that dreams arise due to random brain activation during REM sleep, and dreams are the mind’s attempt to make sense of this erratic activity. This model views dreams as serving no real purpose, which is perhaps why Goya drew a dreaming artist to show the dangers of listening to the
subconscious over reason. However, critiques of the Activation Synthesis Model suggest that dreams are too organized for them to be random, and sleep science has shown that the subconscious, while we are dreaming, can in fact be productive and have evolutionary benefits. A study published in 2000 by Antti Revonsuo on children with trauma showed that they dreamt about more severe threats than the children without trauma. Because dream content is strongly linked to real-life threatening events, dreams may serve as a rehearsal platform, preparing individuals for these precarious situations, and thus for their survival. Goya uses a dream in his etching to demonstrate the evil that is produced when we listen to our imagination, but sleep science suggests that this imagination may actually be productive.

Lastly, we must consider the scientific accuracy of this etching. Dozing off while drawing would not lead to such vivid dreams as the one portrayed by Goya in his etching, unless the artist he drew was sleep deprived or had some sleep disorder. Vivid dreams as such occur during REM sleep, which is not entered during a nap in a normal individual. If we interpret the artist to have a sleep disorder, then this etching can be considered scientifically accurate.

Despite some modern-day scientific holes in Goya’s etching, the science of his time (and disagreements among sleep scientists) allowed the political implications of his etching to be widely received. Through the evil he drew as the painter’s dream, Goya aimed to show that our subconscious is dangerous, and we must listen to reason above all else—we must give into the lessons of The Enlightenment. This political argument is complicated by the scientific one, which shows how dreams can help us process emotional memories and solve problems, along with their evolutionary benefits. Enlightenment politics aside, maybe it was best that “The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters” was censored since it wasn’t exactly scientifically accurate.

Declaration of conflict of interest

The authors have declared no conflicts of interest.

References


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