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## **Symbolic Cinema & Audience Engagement**

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Chicago audience for *The Edge of Dreaming* 2011

### **Abstract**

This paper defines one aspect of symbolic cinema: the 'observing consciousness', translated in this context as the audience. Using the first person documentary *The Edge of Dreaming* as a case study, the piece is written from a practitioner's perspective. The documentary was part of a PhD by practice, researching questions of creating room for the audience in a first person film exploring the subject of death. Story, neural studies on audience reception, documentary and symbolic cinema are discussed as the context for the central thesis: that audience involvement is required in both creation and reception of the film practice in order to create 'symbolic cinema'.

**Keywords:** documentary, audience, symbolic cinema, film practice, first person filming, observing consciousness, audience engagement, subconscious.

## **Background**

The documentary grew from three dreams I had. In the first I dreamt my horse asked me to film him as he was going to die. The dream woke me up and I went outside to find him dead. In the second dream I was told I was going to die that year. In the third I was shown how I would die. I set out to document the year, exploring the meaning of dreams, and the link between brain and body as my lungs began to fail.

## **Symbolic Cinema and Archetypes**

Michael Renov describes cinema as:

a window into another space, onto another subjectivity; it is also a mirror in which one sees the self projected, in minute and unflinching detail.<sup>1</sup>

As the year progressed, I noticed how the facts of my personal encounters with death, particularly the dreams, seemed archetypal. Marie-Louise Von Franz, often described as Jung's most important successor, states that

We cannot manipulate our dreams. They are, as it were, the voice of nature within us. The question therefore, is the manner in which nature, through dreams, prepares us for death. Since dreams depict a completely objective psychic 'nature event' uninfluenced by the wishes of the ego....it looks as if certain basic archetypal structures exist in the depths of the soul which regularly come to the fore during the process of dying.<sup>2</sup>

Editing documentary footage I filmed during the year I spent under a dreamed death sentence was protracted and transformative. I was (happily) married to a psychotherapist, and a mother of three children. I read Jung's description of *adumbratio*, the signals that alert the psyche to prepare for death. Bedbound with my lung capacity reduced to 60 %, I read Jung, until I became too scared to read more. Not only did my dreams contain iconic figures – the horse preparing for its own death, then dying; the father of my oldest child warning me that I would be dead within one year; my own death on the back of the horse; but the way they made me think about my life took on an archetypal structure. The heroine of the story, lucky in love, is warned of grave danger that will make her lose all she loves, and sets off on a quest to change the dream. Can she do it within the twelve months she has left? It sounds like a fiction film. But this story was a documentary, and my role as a trained observational filmmaker was to record as accurately as I could what was happening. I was aware that there was an inversion of the usual order of my director's intentions: instead of

my sifting the material to shape it into a story, the dreams were offering me a story that was shaping my experience and perhaps even my self.

There is a rich academic reflection synthesizing dream and cinema. Don Frederikson describes 'symbolic cinema' from a Jungian perspective. Frederikson defines Jung's concept of symbol in cinematic terms as an image bearing infinitely resonant meaning.<sup>3</sup> His analysis focuses on the meaning he finds in cinema, and was motivated by a desire to find a scholarly understanding that does justice to the "power of certain images" which he argues are insufficiently articulated by the semiotics of contemporary film studies. Frederiksen's key concept is built from Jung's distinction between sign and symbol: a sign is an 'expression that stands for a known thing' whereas a symbol remains more than its definition. He quotes Jung:

The symbol is alive only as long as it pregnant with meaning... Whether a thing is a symbol or not depends chiefly upon the attitude of the observing consciousness; for instance, on whether it regards a given fact not merely as such but also as an expression, for something unknown... There are undoubtedly products whose symbolic character does not depend merely on the attitude of the observing consciousness, but manifests itself spontaneously in the symbolic effect they would have on the observer. Such products are so constituted that they would lack any kind of meaning were not a symbolic one conceded to them.<sup>4</sup>

The definition of the cinematic image as symbol depends, therefore, on the observer's response. The same image could be a symbol for one person and a sign for another. If it is perceived as a symbol it is because it is "the best possible description or formulation of relatively unknown fact which is nonetheless known to exist or is postulated as existing" and is alive "only so long as it is pregnant with meaning". Frederiksen goes on to further define an image as symbolic only if it can be amplified to invoke the resonance the image has for the viewer, 'the feeling tone...and magic and meaning". This amplification can occur because some images link to Jung's notion of the 'objective psyche' or 'collective unconscious', defined by Frederiksen as "transpersonal factors that predate ego-consciousness itself". He goes on to explain:

When psychic expressions such as dreams, fantasies and works of art are in touch with the objective psyche they have fairly universal characteristics: they can exert an extraordinary fascination upon consciousness, but for reasons that transcend strictly personal associations... In the case of dreams and fantasies, they come from within us, but strike us as having a life of their own. When they occur, they do so spontaneously, outside the powers of the conscious will. They carry large amounts of energy and have an energising effect. These several

qualities of the symbol make our symbolic experiences numinous. And they indicate a psychic reality to which each person potentially has access, but which transcends the bounds of personal history.

Jung defined archetypes as the main source of the symbolic richness of certain images or stories. Archetypes are “an irrepresentable, unconscious, pre-existent form that seems to be part of the inherited structure of the psyche”

Film-makers have been aware of Jung’s concept of archetypes and its connection to the unconscious for decades. Bunuel writes of its attraction:

The essential element in any work of art is mystery, and generally this is lacking in film. A film is like an involuntary imitation of a dream...On the screen, as within the human being, the nocturnal voyage into the unconscious begins.... Cinema seems to have been invented to express the life of the subconscious, the roots of which penetrate poetry so deeply. Yet it is almost never used to do this.<sup>5</sup>

Can a documentary, especially a first person documentary committed to accurate observation, produce cinema which connects with the audience’s unconscious? If it does, then the images may be ‘symbolic’, using the term as described by Jung and Frederiksen.

The inclusion of the elements of the “unknown’ and ‘spontaneously manifesting’ in Jung’s definition of symbolic bring a tension to this endeavor. It may be that setting out consciously to create a piece of symbolic cinema is a contradiction in terms. This friction provided an intriguing challenge to the schedule and structuring of the filmed material. Creating symbolic cinema became an aim, but it is an aim that I had to let go, if I wanted to achieve it. Jung’s requirement that the definition of a symbol “depends chiefly upon the attitude of the observing consciousness” provided a way forward. There were several ‘observing consciousnesses’ involved in the filming: my own; the different family members, and the audience. I set out to involve the audience’s ‘observing consciousness’, their response to the documentary film of this year of my life, at every stage of editing.

There is a precedent combining dreams and the creation of meaning through a shared consciousness. It is described by Father Ragueneau, a Jesuit priest who gave the following account of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Iroquois Americans with whom he lived:

They have no divinity but the dream. They submit themselves to it and follow its order with the utmost exactness. Whatever they see themselves doing in dreams they believe they are absolutely obliged to execute at the earliest

possible moment. Iroquois would think themselves guilty of a great crime if they failed to obey a single dream.<sup>6</sup>

When they had a fearful dream, they would ask people in the community to enact it with them, keeping the energy flow of the dream, but substituting a less severe outcome. For instance, if they dreamt their legs were broken after an attack, their friends would simulate the attack but only bruise their legs. Tony Crisp describes it as closely related to the unconscious:

Father Ragueneau, in 1649, described the beliefs behind their so-called superstition as follows. 'In addition to the desires which we generally have that are free, or at least voluntary in us, and which arise from a previous knowledge of some goodness that we imagine to exist in the thing desired, the Hurons believe that our souls have other desires, which are, as it were, inborn and concealed. These, they say, come from the depths of the soul, not through any knowledge.

'Now they believe that our soul makes these desires known by means of dreams, which are its language. Accordingly, when these desires are accomplished, it is satisfied; but, on the contrary, if it be not granted what it desires, it becomes angry ... often it revolts against the body, causing various diseases, and even death....'

The Indian tribes mentioned often had a sort of social psychiatry in which dreamers were allowed to live out their hidden (unconscious) desires that were threatening health and well being.<sup>7</sup>

There are several parallels here that might relate to this paper's exploration of the audience in symbolic cinema. The Iroquois made the *private* mental experience of a dream *public* in two ways. First they told their peers. This could be seen as creating an audience. Then they went one step further, by involving their peers (their audience) in a carefully calibrated shift of the dream, to produce a better outcome. Their peers could be described as an audience actively involved in recreating the dream.

Was I doing a similar thing with this film? Going through the experience of facing my own imminent death, and sharing it with the community by making a film about it? Michael Harner, anthropologist and shaman, wrote:

Big dreams are to be taken as literal messages, not to be analysed for hidden symbolism. For example, if you have a big dream that you are injured in n

automobile accident, that is a warning for you from the guardian spirit that such an accident will occur.

You may not be able to prevent it, but you can enact it symbolically by yourself or with a friend in a very minor way and may thereby prevent its serious occurrence ... recreate the dream in a simple, harmless way, and get it over with. This is a technique once known to some tribes in north-eastern and western North America.<sup>8</sup>

The 17<sup>th</sup> century Iroquois enactments have been described as the beginnings of gestalt therapy. Tracy Marks explains:

The dreamwork of the Iroquois was not only an early precursor of the dreamwork and analysis of Freud and Jung; it is very similar to the approach to dream interpretation used today by many psychologists trained in Freudian, Jungian and gestalt dream techniques.<sup>9</sup>

The role of community evokes the possible beginnings of symbolic audience engagement. In the Iroquois example of a dream experienced by the chief, Cornplanter, the interpretation of the dream is only discovered through the involvement of the community – the 'audience' is making the meaning:

One example is that of Chief Cornplanter of the Seneca Iroquois. He had a dream that he did not quite understand, so he asked members of his community for interpretation. One such interpreter told Cornplanter that his name was now Onono and he was to give up his position as chief. Chief Cornplanter was convinced this was the correct interpretation and handed his tomahawk and wampum to a friend, thus making him chief. It is said that Cornplanter never regretted his decision, feeling it restored harmony with the Great Spirit.<sup>10</sup>

This is a genuinely interactive creation of meaning. The protagonist takes a private mental experience and asks for an interpretation, which he then identified as valid, and acted upon. This example provides a useful context to interpret the interaction with the audience invited during the test screenings which were held with different audiences during the editing of *The Edge of Dreaming*.

Niels Pagh Andersen, one of Denmark's most influential film editors<sup>11</sup>, describes editing the first rough cut of a documentary as the equivalent of the third draft of scripting a fiction film. It is at this stage that decisions are made over what should be put in the film, the manifest content, and also how they should be structured, which produces the latent

content. By opening *The Edge of Dreaming* to audiences at a rough cut stage, I was encouraging the audience to actively participate in its meaning. Although they could have no input into its *manifest* content - an accurate account of what actually happened to me during the year of filming - I was offering the audience a role in creating meaning of the film through its *latent* content, an interpretation of what was happening.



Edinburgh film Guild test screening 2008

### **Test Screenings**

I held several test screenings to different audiences during 2008 and 2009, mostly through the Edinburgh Film Guild, cinema lovers, more accustomed to fiction than documentaries. The first rough cut was shown to an audience who did not know me. Ling Lee, as editor, introduced the film and I stayed in the projection room until the end. I had gone to considerable lengths to ensure that ideas about death were deeply embodied in experience, and were not presented as information. The outcome was surprising. One woman had found the film very moving and was in tears when I arrived after the screening. “What an amazing story, she said, “so moving. But, can I ask you, was any of it based on your real life?” I was shocked that she could interpret the documentary as something staged, and explained that the whole film was documentary, authentic; none of the sequences were faked or rehearsed. ‘But it’s such a strong *story*’, she said. ‘When I saw the kids I thought it was real’ – at this point I pressed play on the tape recorder, and she continued:



**Transcript screening Filmhouse Guild Cinema Nov 2008**

**Audience member:** .....and I went back to thinking it was fictional again; but you've just blown that out of the water.

**Amy:** Did anybody else think it was fiction?

**Second Audience member:** Yes. I think the whole sequence as well was very well done. I was asking questions: am I watching reality? Is that a dead horse? Because the way you led up to it I thought was very effective. And then I thought it must be a fiction there. And there was some very profound questions about whether its fiction or reality we're watching, which led me neatly into the emotional dream. *I had been told by Ling it was a documentary*, and after the questions started whizzing around after about five minutes, I thought, '*No, this is a very effective piece of storytelling*'. (italics inserted)

Such feedback is challenging on many levels. It may suggest that stories are so powerful they over-ride other major considerations – like whether the events on screen really happened or not. It also seems that the audience need to know whether it is documentary or fiction that they are watching. – otherwise they spend 'five minutes with questions whizzing around their heads'. Are these two approaches incompatible for the audience? (less so for the film-maker – there are many examples of cross-over and hybrid forms mixing fiction and documentary). In this case, when audience members picked up on what they decided was a 'story, they switched into a mode where the completion of the story, the closure to the narrative, became an overwhelming necessity. This audience associated documentary with facts and being given information. When they perceived it was being told as a story they repositioned their attention.

This phrase 'repositioned their attention' deserves a little expansion. The phrase is used metaphorically, but scientists explain that it describes a physical process in our brains.

Lakoff and Johnson state that:

Neural Mapping is not an abstract, metaphoric process. It is an observable, physical process that creates metaphoric structures and thinking in the mind. The maps are physical links: neural circuitry linking neural clusters called nodes. The domains are highly structured neural ensembles in different regions of the brain.<sup>12</sup>

Our brain has a physical divide between left and right hemispheres, with millions of connective fibres allowing neural activity to pass from one side to the other. Recent studies

by Selim Zeki amongst others have shown how specific areas are activated when looking at aesthetically pleasing objects.<sup>13</sup> Would it be possible to show whether the ‘repositioning of attention’ the audience described has a biological correlative? In a recent intriguing paper comparing participant’s experience reading favourite poetry and factual prose, clinical neuroscientist Adam Zeman used fMRI brain-imaging to distinguish the brain areas aroused by reading different texts:

The emotional timbre of the passages was parametrically related to activity in predominantly right sided brain regions including right thalamus, right cingulate gyrus, right insula, left precentral gyrus and bilateral cerebellum, regions similar to those previously linked to the emotional response to music. (Zeman/Milton/Smith/Rylance:2010)

Zeman concluded that ‘the emotional response to literature shares common ground with the response to music and suggests that regions of the right hemisphere are selectively activated by poetry’. Zeman’s work, and the study he cites by Blood and Zatorre<sup>14</sup>, point out that the brain uses different parts of the brain to process different kinds of experience. Habitual or expected cognitive demands, for instance, are processed in different areas to emotional or pleasurable experiences.

Research seems to indicate that audiences have different expectations of stories and documentaries. Through Docspace, a research project on documentary exhibition, I had carried out qualitative research into documentary audiences across the Netherlands, Spain, the UK and Austria in 2006. I held focus groups to define what audiences wanted from the cinema experience, and whether documentaries could meet their expectations. Several discussions defined documentary as something burdensome: ‘sometimes I think, I am not going to put myself through this experience’ ... ‘When you hear the word documentary, the first thing that does come into your head is a fairly serious political, informative kind of thing.’ People described wanting ‘to relax when they go to a film and not to have to learn anything.’<sup>15</sup>

As a director whose research aim required that the audience go on my journey with me, I was looking for the response the audience associate with story. Following Zeman and Zeki, I could go even further, and describe my ambitions for the audience in terms of what I wanted to activate in their brain states. From a non-neurological point of view, I wanted them to begin by engaging the rational, problem-solving elements of their brain, and, as the film continued, realise that they would not be able to comprehend or effect ‘the problem’ with their rational selves, and, accompanying my journey in the documentary, descend into their unconscious, or, archetypally, the underworld, in order to make change.

After the first test screening already mentioned, I held three further public test screenings to around 30 to 40 people, each with slightly different audiences. This was not a scientific comparison, as I screened different cuts to each audience, using the screening to evolve my directorial approach and to judge whether the ideas were getting across. Following the audience who did not know me and were not documentary enthusiasts, I then screened to an audience that I knew personally to be interested in the subject matter. After these cinema screenings, I then showed cuts to individuals and to small groups of up to six.

In the first screening, the audience diverged widely about the role of the shamanic journey in the film. Those inclined to spiritual beliefs loved it, and those more sceptical found it a step too far and switched off. As a result, I re-positioned the shamanic journey as a logical next step after meeting the main scientist, Mark Solms. I also increased the scepticism I expressed in the voice over at the start of the film. This allowed the sceptics to sustain their interest in the film.

There was a sizable contingent in the second audience who wanted to make the link between my lungs and the land more obvious. They 'got it' as an allusion and an allegory, but wanted it expanded. This was in direct opposition to the television commissioners who wanted me to drop this aspect of the story. Finally, I sought to balance both demands by writing a link that explained what happened during the shamanic journey in terms of the chemical constituents that human beings share with the earth. I had been pushed by both the audience and the commissioners to clarify the meaning of this sequence, until I was able to articulate something I had not even realized I had known. Michelle Citron talks about autobiographical film-making as something that:

gives voice to my unconscious, allowing me to have a dialogue between that which I know, and that which I don't even know that I know.<sup>16</sup>

My involvement with audiences pushed me to go deeper into my unconscious to provide a response to the questions the audiences had asked of me. These screenings were beginning to articulate a consensus of interpretation that demanded I go beyond my own individual areas of expertise – whether of my own experience or of film-making. I was making myself available to an increasingly articulate consensus from the audience that took what it needed from the film, and asked me to highlight certain aspects and clarify others. As a storyteller, I was actively shaped by the audience's demands.

I found this process stimulating and informative. I did not accede to all the requests that came from the audience. In particular I chose not to make a film to 'show what could be done to combat the desecration of the earth'. I enjoyed the editorial freedom to listen, evaluate, develop, reject or incorporate suggestions from the audience. I found the flow of information from the audiences something I could work with, as useful an input as sound

files or animations. I wanted to structure the film as a journey for the audience, to which they would bring their own experiences and background. This commonality indicated that I was working at the level of the collective unconscious, where the content of certain shots, and the sound, might be recognized on a symbolic level. Once the film was completed, I wanted to explore this connection with the audience further.

Brian Dunnigan describes the interplay between teller and audience:

The oral storyteller suspends time; in the immediacy of his presence and the improvised interplay of teller and audience the story is alive, immediate and eternal; through developing patterns of meaning and catharsis the listener is released from time and his human self.<sup>17</sup>

Cinema has become a central storytelling medium of our time. Powerful images and sound compress time through editing: sequences that could not be shown during the last 60,000 years (except in our dreams) have, for the last 100 years, been increasingly ubiquitous on our television, computer and cinema screens. The rapidity of the change is breathtaking, and it is likely that cinema will continue to develop as the pre-eminent 'storytelling' of our age.

However, in one aspect cinematic story telling has lost power. It is not live. Its' stories are no longer created by an individual in front of an audience. Cinema is pixillations projected by light, and when the end credits roll, the audience is left alone. The storyteller has left the room. There is no longer a person to engage with their response to the film, or, perhaps even more importantly, to engage with what the film has evoked in them. I wanted to create the live quality of interaction between storyteller and audience.

Instead of cinema-going as an essentially passive and private experience, my aim was to bring back what has been lost as storytelling has become mechanized. This meant creating a space where the audience could interact with the themes of the film in the context of their own life, beyond a Q & A or a discussion. I wanted to bring the audience to an experiential understanding that at least gave them a hint of what I had gone through in the shamanic journey. This engagement with the finished film would be a development of the test screenings' audience interaction. I hoped to explore the themes of the film in a community newly-minted from the particular audience, in that place and on that night. As the film itself is structured by a movement from the conscious to the unconscious workings of the brain, so the workshop required participants to access their own subconscious processes.

### **Audience Workshops**

I designed a series of exercises for a post-screening audience workshop of around 12 people. It worked best if this took place the day after the screening, as this gave people time

to digest the film and their own response to it. The workshop demanded participation, focus and attention from the audience, and that they interact with each other. Exercised were designed to elicit responses that are not always available to the conscious brain, but that play a role in how events are experienced. The aim was to encourage the audience to have access to parts of their brain that they do not normally have access to, and to bring this to focus on a particular area in their life.



Workshop after screening, 2011

The workshops have been held in Greece, Macedonia, Israel, Iceland and Eire, the UK and the US. Participants have ranged from primarily young film auteurs (Iceland) to the Oncology Department of a Barcelona Hospital.

The workshop took for granted that change in brain processing is possible, but was not a therapeutic group. I outlined the latest studies on the links between experience, thought and brain cells and neural pathways, making connections between the science of the brain and inner experience at both the level of the individual and Jung's collective conscious. I asked people to work in pairs, providing various techniques which would replace verbal thinking with visual imagery, aiming to stimulate different parts of their brain cortex. It was hard to describe to audiences in advance, and their own descriptions after the event are interesting: one of the Spanish respondents said:

Your workshop felt very organic, and very respectful. What I mean by organic is that we moved from one thing to another freely, knowing that at the end there is a certain picture forming...The different parts are connected but there is a

jump, an emotional and rational jump that the participants need to make from one to the other. And it is respectful because you propose and trust that we will make these connections, find them for ourselves in our own experience. I felt like if you took us to a room with several doors, and explained what kind of world we would find if we cross one of them, to then tell us there are shortcuts in between these worlds, just pick a door, walk in and find them - in the end all makes a whole.<sup>18</sup>

The workshop was a space that could be used differently depending on the needs of the participants.

From the UK, feedback focused on the creation of community, and the liberation of using words to express private experiences.

I found the workshop profoundly moving. She enabled a group of strangers to share their experiences, to engage with their shadow, and to create a healing experience through deep listening and imaginative telling. I had no idea I was going to learn how to work with words for wellbeing, but that was my experience.<sup>19</sup>



Workshop, Chicago 2011

Also from the UK, one correspondent noted the continuation of audience involvement from the film to the workshop:

Because of the spaciousness in the film, the poetry in the images, I found myself more and more drawn into the film. There was space for me.

In an odd way I was perhaps even more aware than usual that I was watching a screen. The screen was playing out something about me. I was drawn into a participatory role, actively witnessing and engaging with themes and issues that are both universal and deeply mine.

Not only was there a film that had a big effect just by watching it, but by having a talk and 2hr workshop the next day, I was able to ground my engagement. I had a very profound experience in the workshop. Two days on, I am still in the midst of transformation. Some of the answers I and others in the audience found and expressed in an open forum made this experience a completely different paradigm of cinema.<sup>20</sup>

Picking up on this participant's response, I wondered if this film and its audience workshop were an example of symbolic cinema, and as such, could constitute a 'different paradigm of cinema?' Was this a way for the classically passive audience reception to become more engaged, increasing the power and potential of cinema as an art form? Could the artistry of a film extend to include an intervention that articulated the audience's experience?





## Summary

This paper has taken as a case study a feature documentary as it created itself, shot by shot, edit by edit, screening by screening, characterized by a rich audience involvement. As with the Iroquois Indians, the audience was asked to be a sounding board to the unfolding story, and the meaning of the story was co-created with their involvement. This involvement was developed in a series of post-screening workshops created from the director's own research. The theoretical concomitant of this practice is that of symbolic cinema, a phrase defined by Frederikson so that he could describe the attraction of the 'feeling tone, the magic' of cinema, based on Jung's observations of the 'observing consciousness' and the symbols that are expressed as we tap into the reservoir of the archetypes of the collective unconscious.

To return to that beautifully expressed complaint from Bunuel:

Cinema seems to have been invented to express the life of the subconscious, the roots of which penetrate poetry so deeply. Yet it is almost never used to do this.<sup>21</sup>

The feature documentary *The Edge of Dreaming*, and the workshops that extend the audiences' involvement on both conscious and unconscious levels, are an attempt to meet Bunuel's challenge.

## Biographical note:

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## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Michael Renov, *The Subject of Documentary*, p.155
- <sup>2</sup> Marie-Louise Von Franz, *On Dreams and Death: A Jungian Interpretation*, vii
- <sup>3</sup> Don Frederikson, in *Jung & Film*, ed Hauke and Alister, p. 17-18.
- <sup>4</sup> C G Jung, *The Collected Works*, Vol 6, paras 814–818, 847.
- <sup>5</sup> A. Kyrou, *Luis Bunuel: An Introduction*, p.109 - 111
- <sup>6</sup> Iroquois, as mentioned in Wallace "Dreams and Wishes of the Soul: A Type of Psychoanalytic Theory Among the Seventeenth Century Iroquois".
- <sup>7</sup> Tony Crisp, *Dream Dictionary: An A to Z Guide to Understanding Your Unconscious Mind*, <http://dreamhawk.com/dream-encyclopedia/iroquoian-dream-cult/>
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