

# the guardian



The realm between consciousness and oblivion is a dangerous place ... Goshka Macuga's *Somnambulist* from *States of Mind* at the Wellcome Collection, London. Photograph: Wellcome Images

By Jonathan Jones

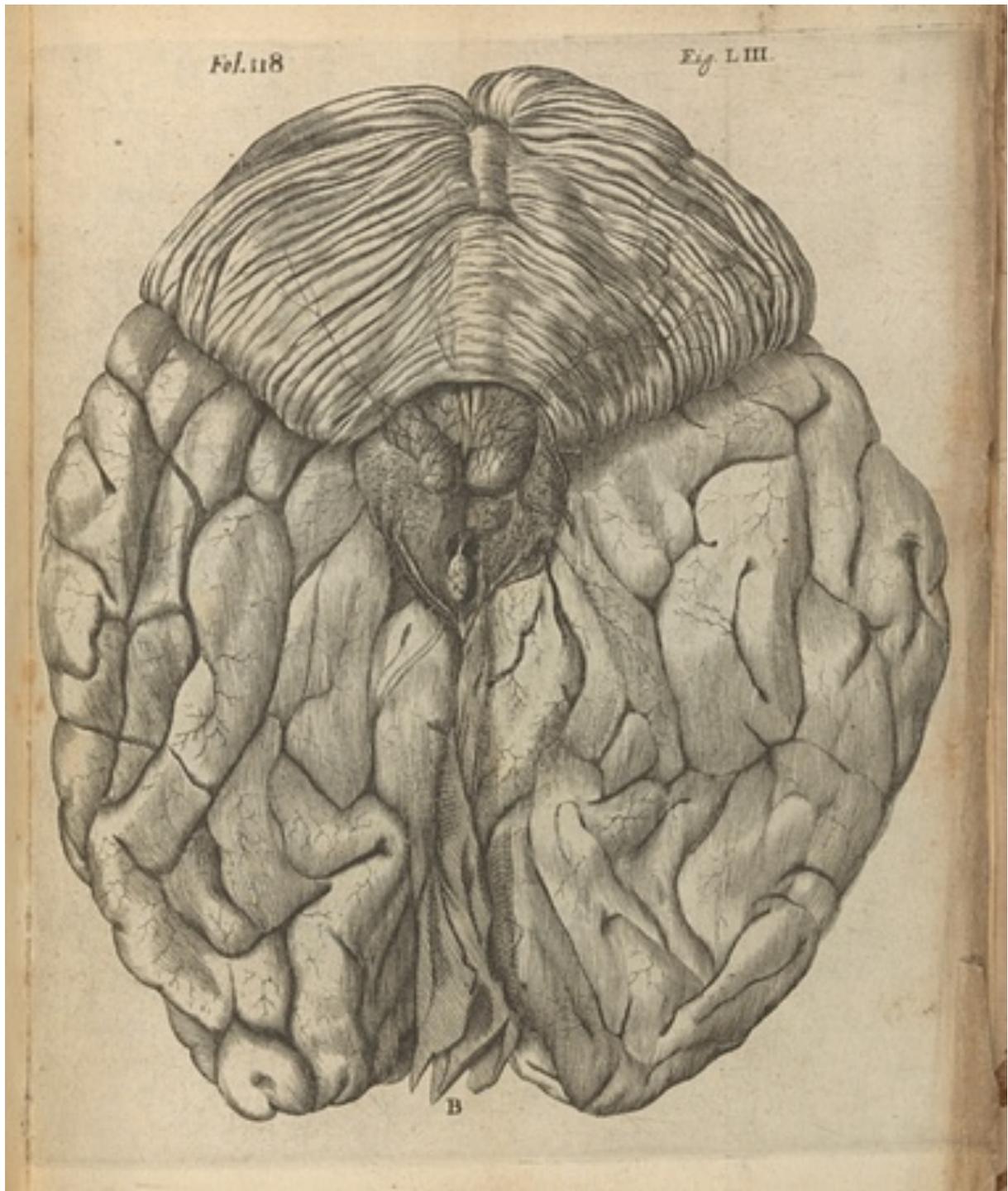
Wednesday 3 February 2016

They hover between worlds. One woman seems blissful, smiling with acceptance. Another looks terrified as her big eyes flicker and roll. Aya Ben Ron's film *Still Under Treatment* is a troubling and eerie study of patients being anaesthetised prior to surgery. Anaesthesia surely ranks with antibiotics as one of the pillars of modern medicine, allowing us to undergo surgery without knowing it. Yet the expressions of yielding and resistance on the faces of the seven patients in Ben Ron's film and the total oblivion that descends reveal how mysterious this moment is when something is nulled inside them, when they are "put to sleep".

“Physiologically it’s different from sleep – it’s dreamless”, explains Kevin Fong, a consultant anaesthetist at UCLH hospital in London. He says it’s more like “switching your consciousness off”. How that idea would have fascinated René Descartes, the man who famously said “I think therefore I am”. Aya Ben Ron’s film is showing [at the Wellcome Collection](#) in an exhibition called States of Mind, which begins with this great 17th-century scientist and philosopher’s illustration of a dissected brain, from his book *De Homine*, published in 1662. Descartes’ engraving shows the soft grey matter – a cauliflower crossed with a deflated balloon – cut open to reveal the pineal gland. He identified this precise place in the human brain as the exact spot where the mind or “soul” communicates with and controls the body.

For Descartes, we are actually two things, “a soul and a body. First I must describe the body on its own; then the soul, again on its own; and finally I must show how these two natures would have to be joined and united in order to constitute men who resemble us.” His belief that the mind is a separate thing from the body – often called “Cartesian dualism” – is an accurate description of what it feels like to be human. Call it mind, soul, or consciousness, but we feel as if there is something inside us that is not mere matter, that is aethereal and invisible and is the me writing this, the you reading it. [Consciousness](#) is everything.

The moment Aya Ben Ron’s anaesthesia film records is one that has gripped artists for centuries. It is the moment the mind dies, or the moment – if you prefer – the soul leaves the body. The sculptor Gianlorenzo Bernini, a contemporary of Descartes, portrayed a woman on her death bed. Like a patient going under anaesthetic, the Blessed Ludovica Albertoni falls back and closes her eyes, conscious right up to the moment her soul leaves her flesh. What has happened to her? Where does the conscious person go when the body dies? Hans Holbein ponders the same mystery in his painting *The Dead Christ in the Tomb*. A corpse with eyes wide open lies sealed in a rectangular box. His eyes are terrifying because there is no consciousness in them. They look without seeing. Can this body without a mind really be resurrected?



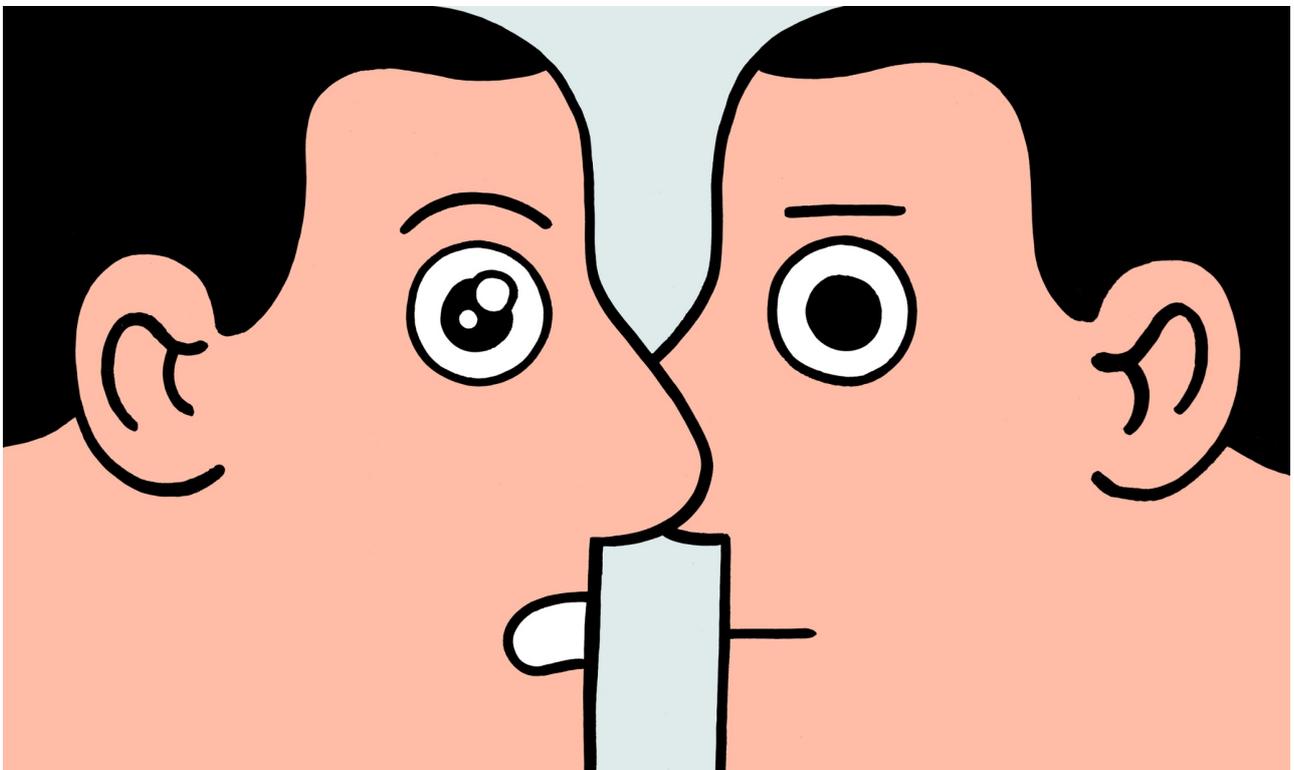
Descartes's engraving of the brain from his 1662 book *De Homine*, showing the pineal gland, where he believed the 'soul' was located. Photograph: Wellcome Images

William Blake, in an illustration to Robert Blair's poem *The Grave* that is displayed in the *States of Mind* show next to Descartes' brain, answers with a resounding yes. As a male corpse lies forsaken on a slab, a pale form rises out of it – the soul set free. She is feminine. To Blake, the gulf between our consciousness or soul and the fleshy vehicle we walk around in is so vast that

spirit and body can be pictured as opposite in gender.

Blake's vision reveals how hard it is for us to imagine the end of consciousness. The me that is thinking this appears to me so sovereign, so intricate that it seems impossible to ever switch me off permanently. And, in fact, there are many states between waking and coma, conditions in which the mind is asleep yet conscious. Henry Fuseli's hideous 1781 drawing *The Nightmare* is one of the great images of such states in art. Fuseli created this infernal vision of a demonic being that squats on the chest of a woman who lies helpless in death-like sleep, just when the Gothic novel was seizing hold of 18th-century imaginations.

Yet Emily Sargent, the curator of *States of Mind*, sees this still-shocking image as having more to do with medicine than Gothic fiction. Fuseli, the exhibition shows, was friendly with doctors who were doing pioneering research on the nature of sleep. *The Nightmare*, Sargent argues, is actually a scientific illustration of sleep paralysis, when the normal paralysis that keeps us from harming ourselves in our sleep fails to disengage as we awake: "Regaining consciousness, the person finds they cannot move and may feel a crushing sensation in their chest."



In an opposite sleep disorder, the neural circuits that should paralyse the sleeping brain don't fire. In a terrifying medical video shot in a sleep laboratory, a man

acts out his recurring dream of being attacked and having to fight for his life. He thrashes about and punches the bed in his sleep. He had to tie himself to the bed for years to stop himself attacking his wife in his sleep. In another frightening exhibit, newspaper articles tell the recent story of a Manchester man who killed his father while sleepwalking.

The realm between consciousness and oblivion is a dangerous place. It is a state in which we can be manipulated. Goshka Macuga has created a spooky mannequin of the Somnambulist from the 1922 German film [The Cabinet of Dr Caligari](#). In this masterpiece of horror, a sleepwalker is controlled by a sinister magus and made to do evil without knowing it. Macuga's Somnambulist is as dead-looking as Holbein's Christ. Like a clay golem, Macuga's inert figure looks as if it's waiting to be controlled by some evil scientist.

So is the sovereign consciousness that Descartes thought so free and so capable of reason really in control at all? Are we all somnambulists, our conscious selves mere patchworks of sensory information and memory that are full of holes and lesions? A work by Shona Illingworth documents the experiences of Claire, a woman whose damaged brain does not retain memories. One way Claire copes with her amnesia is to have an automatic camera hung around her neck that constantly takes pictures of her day from her point of view: sometimes one of these pictures can trigger a memory. It's eerie looking at photographs of a trip to St Kilda: arran sweaters, mountains, dark water all held in a prosthetic memory bank.



An infernal vision ... The Nightmare by Henry Fuseli from 1781 may have been a depiction of sleep paralysis

To live without memory is still to be alive. Yet the final frontier of consciousness, where only advanced scientific research can go, lies beyond the mind as we know it. The people Aya Ben Ron films going under anaesthetic will wake up. Many coma victims do not. Some will open their eyes but be completely unresponsive – the brain so damaged that the patient is in a “persistent vegetative state.” Only the brain stem still works; the mind – according to most neurologists – has gone. So what are the flashes of light in an experiment shown here that seem to show reactions to questions in the brains of such people?

Descartes would say that a body without a functioning mind is no longer human. Yet we know – from our own sleeping – that consciousness is the greatest enigma there is. One of the most compelling exhibits in this exhibition is a collection of notes and models by Francis Crick, who along with James Watson discovered the structure of DNA. This great scientist of our age spent much of his later life

trying to discover the neurological basis of consciousness. He didn't even get close.

**States of Mind** is at the Wellcome Collection, London from 4 February-16 October