

## **Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep by Jonathan Crary: Sleep is a standing affront to capitalism**

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**When hungry digital companies measure success in "eyeballs" is sleep the last remaining zone of dissidence, of anti-productivity and even of solidarity?**



Waking life: Francisco Goya's *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*. Credit: Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris, France/Archives Charmet/The Bridgeman Art Library.

**24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep** Jonathan Crary *Verso*, 144pp, £9.99

When I close my laptop, it goes to sleep. It's a curiously domestic metaphor but it also implies that sleep in humans and other animals is just a kind of low-power standby mode. (Do computers dream of electric sleep?) Last year, Apple announced a twist on this idea: a new feature for the Mac operating system called "Power Nap". Using Power Nap, your computer can do important things even while asleep, receiving updates and performing backups.

The name Power Nap comes from the term describing the thrusting executive's purported ability to catch a restorative forty winks in 20 minutes but the functioning of Apple's feature symbolically implies a yet more ultra-modern and frankly inhuman aspiration: to be "productive" even while dozing. It is the uncanny technological embodiment of the dream most blatantly sold to us by those work-from-home scams online, which promise that you can "make money even while you sleep".

Sleep, indeed, is a standing affront to capitalism. That is the argument of Jonathan Crary's provocative and fascinating essay, which takes "24/7" as a spectral umbrella term for round-the-clock consumption and production in today's world. The human power nap is a macho response to what Crary notes is the alarming shrinkage of sleep in modernity. "The average North American adult now sleeps approximately six and a half hours a night," he observes, which is "an erosion from eight hours a generation ago" and "ten hours in the early 20th century".

Back in 1996, Stanley Coren's book *Sleep Thieves* blamed insufficient rest for industrial disasters such as the Chernobyl meltdown. Crary is worried about the encroachment on sleep because it represents one of the last remaining zones of dissidence, of anti-productivity and even of solidarity. Isn't it quite disgusting that, as he notices, public benches are now deliberately engineered to prevent human beings from sleeping on them?

While Apple-branded machines that take working Power Naps are figured as a more efficient species of people, people themselves are increasingly represented as apparatuses to be acted on by machines. Take the popular internet parlance of getting "eyeballs", which means reaching an audience. "The term 'eyeballs' for the site of control," Crary writes, "repositions human vision as a motor activity that can be subjected to external direction or stimuli . . . The eye is dislodged from the realm of optics and made into an intermediary element of a circuit whose end result is always a motor response of the body to electronic solicitation."

You can't get more "eyeballs" if the people to whose brains the eyeballs are physically connected are asleep. Hence the interest – currently military; before long surely commercial, too – in removing our need for sleep with drugs or other modifications. Then we would be more like efficient machines, able to "interact" with (or labour among) electronic media all day and all night. (It is strange, once you think about it, that the phrase "He's a machine" is now supposed to be a compliment in the sporting arena and the workplace.)

Crary's denunciation of the 24/7 world's saturation in web-enabled media results in some splendid formulations – such as when he argues that activists who organise on the internet "voluntarily kettle themselves in cyberspace, where state surveillance, sabotage and manipulation are far easier than in lived communities".

It also tempts him into some portentous exaggeration. He claims, for instance, that "wireless technologies" have accomplished an "annihilation of the singularity of place and event". (Radical thinkers often seem to take pleasure in noticing some putative extreme violence in cultural change.)

There is an unfortunate passage arguing that our age has universally dulled everyone's faculties – except, implicitly, those of the percipient critic: "24/7 is part of an immense incapacitation of visual experience," Crary declares. "The contingency and variability of the visible world are no longer accessible." Really, to no one? What's more, he writes: "Contrary to many claims, there is an ongoing diminution of mental and perceptual capabilities rather than their expansion or modulation." To this sentence is appended no footnote offering evidence.

Despite such rhetorical surfeit, Crary's book is, on the whole, a humane and bracingly splenetic counterblast, with a lot of interesting micro-theses along the way. (Forget the heavy breathing of the celebrants of gadgets and networks; according to Crary, "the most important techniques invented in the last 150 years" are "the various systems for the management and control of human beings".)

Into the baleful realm of 24/7 he draws, too, the diagnostic inflation of the pharmaceutical industry (always "discovering" new mental disorders for which it solicitously offers new pills), the pseudo-mandatory self-fashioning of social media and what he sardonically calls "the absolute abdication of responsibility for living" represented by all those bestselling "bucket-list" books that instruct us on "the 1,000 movies to see before we die".

For him, the antidote to all of that is sleep and also its cousin daydream or “reverie”. At the end of the book, Crary waxes poetic about this and laments that few people these days besides New Agers are interested in their dreams. Crary complains that films such as *The Matrix* portray societies of sleepers as inert and duped and so work as propaganda for 24/7. So, too, he argues, do films such as *Inception*, in portraying dreams as, in essence, like movies: in theory, commodifiable and “sharable”.

After finishing this book, I had a dystopian nightmare. One day, through clever magnetic stimulation of the brain, it might be possible to insert adverts into our dreams. You could even volunteer to have them interpolated into your sleeping life in exchange for money. (“My dream last night was sponsored by Facebook and Walkers Crisps.”) If that day ever comes, we won’t be safe anywhere – even in the arms of Morpheus.

*Steven Poole’s most recent book is “You Aren’t What You Eat” (Union Books, £7.99)*

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