Radical Disruption: Jonathan Crary's 24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep

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Artificial light, especially electric light, is often charged with disrupting natural sleep rhythms. However, when the first electric arc lamps were introduced to city streets in the 1880s, they needed their carbon rods changed nearly every day and, like the gas lamps before them, only reinforced a divide between day and night that predated any system of artificial illumination. This divide was preserved because the lights required daily maintenance and did not burn throughout the night. With the introduction of a reliable incandescent bulb, electric lights soon did not need this continual maintenance; they were operated by a mechanical, centralised process. By the 1890s, the widespread introduction of electric lights in major cities had begun to alter this divide, these natural rhythms.

In reality, however, the relationship between electric light and the body was far more complex. To begin with, what we might call natural rhythms are in fact biological processes informed by the body's relationship with its external environment. We tend to consider these rhythms as 'natural' because we don't see them as the product of human interference. This distinction between 'natural' and 'artificial' is in any case a false one, as it tends to assume that technologies that are less complex are less artificial and invasive, while technologies that are more complex must be more artificial and more invasive. Fortunately, scientific research on sleep helps cut through the cultural baggage it has accrued.

Though such patterns were observed early in human history, the circadian rhythm as we now understand it is a relatively recent development (the term itself dates from the 1960s). It was not until G.T.W. Patrick and J. Allen Gilbert's study of sleep deprivation of humans in 1896, in which they kept their subjects 'awake continuously for about 90 hours', that we understood how prolonged lack of sleep affected 'reaction-time, discrimination-time, motor ability, memory, and attention'. Patrick and Gilbert's discovery that 'sleep and waking performance oscillate' formed the basis for a new field of study: chronobiology. And yet their work was also part of a larger interest in the influence of new technologies on the human body and its biological processes. This is particularly evident when we turn to contemporary critical examinations of the relationship between technology and the body, the most influential of which are Anson Rabinbach's *The Human Motor* (1992) and Tim Armstrong's *Modernism, Technology and the Body* (1998). Both Rabinbach and

Armstrong suggest that interest in the body's relationship to technology related to a shift in the 'perception of the body' that took place in the nineteenth century.

All of this is important to know because Jonathan Crary begins his exploration of the effects of the 'culture of global capitalism' in *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (2014) with a series of anecdotes about sleep and the relationship between technology and the body. The first is about the U.S. Department of Defence's study of sparrows in order to learn how better to 'enable people to go without sleep and to function productively and efficiently'. Crary asks what is behind this desire to eliminate sleep. Do we assume that technological advances are positive and can change the body for the better, or do we question a trajectory that leads us to the eventual necessity of pharmaceutical developments such as Provigil?

In the second, Crary considers the tension between the individual and society where one's experience of the natural world is at stake. In the early 1990s, the Russian Federal Space Agency launched the Znamya project, an experimental chain of reflective satellites that would supply light and solar power in order to 'reduce energy costs for electric lighting'. Though initially conceived 'to provide illumination for industrial and natural resource exploitation in remote geographical areas with long polar nights', it was quickly expanded to 'include the possibility of supplying nighttime lighting for entire metropolitan areas'. When Znamya 2.5 failed in 1999 the project was abandoned. While the benefits to society of such an undertaking are evident, how great would the benefit have to be for any corporation or government to abrogate an individual's 'experience of the darkness of night and observe the stars'? This ambitious project is reminiscent of the *Colonne-Soleil* or 'Sun Tower' proposed by the French electrical engineers Amédée Sébillot and Jules Bourdais to commemorate the 1889 exhibition. While their proposal was ultimately unsuccessful (Gustave Eiffel was of course awarded the project) their tower belongs to the utopian ideal of a continuous day. As Wolfgang Schivelbusch argued in *Disenchanted Night* (1995), this ideal has 'transformed into the nightmare of light from which there was no escape'. We still may not be able to create the conditions for a continuous day, but for Crary such projects are a 'hyperbolic expression of an institutional intolerance for whatever obscures or prevents an instrumentalised and unending condition of visibility'. And yet, an individual may herself submit to such conditions, or find them imposed upon her, such as when convicted criminals are incarcerated.

Crary troubles this last point in his third anecdote, where he looks at the use of sleep deprivation as a part of the torture regime used to interrogate Mohammed al-Qahtani. He has been detained at Camp Bright Lights, one of the many black sites (Crary calls them 'dark sites') used by Americans to detain unlawful

enemy combatants since 2002. His treatment has been well-documented in the official log kept by the U. S. Government and likely inspired the interrogations of Ammar in the film *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012). Mohamedou Ould Slahi described similar and equally condemnable treatment in his memoir, Guantánamo Diary, recently serialised in *The Guardian*. But the Americans are not the first to use sleep deprivation for such purposes. Crary points to Stalin's use of such techniques, but there is also a literary precedent. In George Orwell's *Nineteenth Eighty-Four*, when Winston Smith is taken to the sinister 'place where there is no darkness' hidden within the Ministry of Love, Big Brother's superintendence over his body, and the extirpation of his self, are the natural consequences of an authoritarian, surveillance society. In any case, as Crary goes on to argue, we do not need an institution or group to deprive us of sleep: we will do it ourselves.

This is an idea that Crary develops over the course of the first two chapters, detailing the consequences of the 'incursion of the non-time of 24/7 into every aspect of social and personal life', in particular in the context of a pervasive consumer culture. Crary finds that the 'acceleration of novelty production is a disabling of collective memory, and it means that the evaporation of historical knowledge no longer has to be implemented from the top down.' The way in which we communicate and access information has, perhaps irreparably, 'ensure[d] the systematic erasure of the past as part of the fantasmatic construction of the present.' One is again reminded of Orwell and the Ministry of Truth, where the 'facts' of the past are altered at the point of its inception, and individuals become complicit in the destabilisation of their own history.

The third chapter is devoted to an exploration of the nexus between labour, capitalism, technology and modernity. It is here that Crary is at his most revolutionary. He proposes that we reconsider modernity as a 'hybrid and dissonant experience of living intermittently within modernized spaces and speeds, and yet simultaneously inhabiting the remnants of pre-capitalist life-worlds, whether social or natural.' He also proposes that our insatiable desire to consume information is inherently linked to an ever-advancing consumerism. We have adopted 'the idea of a continuous interface', that is, 'a relatively unbroken engagement with illuminated screens of diverse kinds that unremittingly demand interest or response'. Like any addictive behaviour, consumption is self-perpetuating to the point of self-destruction.

The superintendence of technology over an individual and her body is thus often self-administered. This is evident when we consider how we learn to self-distract. According to research performed by Gloria Mark at the University of California, Irvine, interruptions to workflows can be incredibly unproductive. Not only does it take an average of 23 minutes to return to work after each interruption, but interruption occurs at a rate allowing for only 11 minutes of

work between each one. Over time, the body gets used to such disruptions and will begin to self-disrupt: to check for new e-mail or updates to social media pages mid-task, even mid-thought. For Tristan Harris, speaking recently at the Oxford Internet Institute, the solution to this behaviour might well be a distraction-free function that would allow individuals to isolate themselves from the steady flow of disruptions for set periods of time. While such a function sounds promising, one wonders, as Crary often does, whether more technology is the best way forward.

The fourth chapter is devoted primarily to dreaming, In a few nimble pages, Crary traces the 'multiplicity of dream experiences' in Western culture: from Aristotle, who wondered whether dreams were 'imaginative, sensory, or merely physiological processes', to Freud, who relegated dreams to 'a cordoned-off area of primitive irrationality', to Philip K. Dick's dystopic 'experience of reification' in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* and its cinematic adaptation, *Blade Runner*. Crary also considers the reciprocity between the waking and dreaming self, between the individual and the communal. He rightly points out that, today, the majority of us do not make the most of our dreams, increasingly unable to distinguish them from the ersatz dreams that appear to us in HD and HDRI.

Here it is most clear that *24/7* is an extension of Crary's previous studies, which undertook to understand the rise of visual culture in the nineteenth century and the development of perception in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His explanation that in the nineteenth century, revolutions in media (e.g., photography, the kaleidoscope, the phenakistoscope, the zoetrope, cinema, and audio recording) 'transformed the very possibility of "visionary" experience' is one he first explored in *Techniques of the Observer* (1990), and *Suspensions of Perception* (2000). Unlike Crary's first two books, both of which were published by MIT Press and are highly academic in nature, *24/7* has been marketed as a more popular work – despite his penchant for Jamesian phraseology. This is perhaps because the nature of Crary's topic itself has broader appeal.

Importantly, Crary eschews making more judgments about the adverse effects of *24/7*, instead proposing connections and allowing readers to draw conclusions for themselves. 24/7 is neither good nor bad. It is ineluctable. This leads us to the paradox at the centre of Crary's argument. If, as he contends, '[s]leep is an uncompromising interruption of the theft of time from us by capitalism' and if our sleep is increasingly interrupted or self-disrupted, what defence do we have against capitalism and its insidious mechanisms? What resistance can we mount against its invasiveness?

There are some who will argue that with the destruction of privacy, and the

integration of technology and the body, will come an increase in accountability on the part of governments and corporations, as well as benefits to the individual who will profit from better, more personalised service. But for others, this seems incredibly optimistic. It is naive to say that technology can and will be egalitarian. History, and literary imaginings of the future, have shown us otherwise. It is equally true that modes of resistance can often leave one feeling paranoid and isolated. In the 1960s, resistance took the form of the realisation that 'happiness could be unrelated to ownership, to acquiring products, or to individual status, and could instead emerge directly out of the shared life and action of groups'. Though the final sequence of the series finale of the critically-acclaimed and zeitgeist-friendly *Mad Men* might suggest otherwise, where the hippie idyll is subverted into the capitalist dream of 'Hilltop' – the real world Coca-Cola's memorable advert from 1971.

Unfortunately, since the 1980s, a counter-revolution has continually eroded this realisation. Think of austerity, for example, and you get two completely contradictory visions: on the one hand, post-war rationing and working towards a common cause – the founding of the venerable yet ailing NHS, for example – and on the other, the disparity between tax breaks for the 1% and budget (or benefit) cuts for the rest. In the latter scenario, not only does it become harder to work together or to help others, but the '[p]ossibilties of non-monadic or communal life are rendered unthinkable'. As Crary says, '[o]ne of the main forms of control over the last thirty years has been to ensure there are no visible alternatives to privatized patterns of living.' How bleak.

And yet, there is hope. In the last part of the book, Crary turns to Jean-Paul Sartre to develop a theoretical model for resistance. In the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Sartre outlines the concept of the 'practico-inert' to account for the forces that keep the individual 'inert' in society, and 'seriality', which is the manifestation of this powerlessness. While Sartre acknowledges that 'seriality' is ubiquitous, he points to ways in which we can develop resistance to it. The most important of which, articulated by Deleuze and Guattari in their reading of Sartre, is simply a 'perceptual act—a non-habitual mode of looking.' In this way, one might 'discern, in a moment charged with embitteredness or anger, a condition of commonality and interdependence', a condition which, in turn, could lead to the realisation that 'what one wants most can never be achieved individually.' But where does social networking and media fit into Sartre's model? Crary is ambivalent, concluding that '[a]ll the 24/7 electronic interfacing, all the mass immersion at a micrological level in contemporary technological culture, might easily be said to constitute a new negative unity of passivity and alterity.'

In the end, Crary returns to the idea of sleep as a place where the individual might safeguard the self against the outside world. Though we may

increasingly dream of full inboxes and unending listicles, we should strive to hold sleep 'as a radical interruption, as a refusal of the unsparing weight of our global present, of sleep which, at the most mundane level of everyday experience, can always rehearse the outlines of what more consequential renewals and beginnings may be.'

References

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