

Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep. The Prodigious Machine of Control. The 24/7 Digital Life. Edward Curtin

Daydreaming While Reading Jonathan Crary's 24/7

By [Edward Curtin](#)

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"Sleep that knits up the raveled sleeve of care, The death of each day's life, sore labor's bath, Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course, Chief nourisher in life's feast." - Shakespeare, Macbeth

People often laugh when I tell them that I go to sleep at 8:15 P.M. They laugh harder when I say it's been a lifetime habit, with unavoidable exceptions of course. And that I wake up long before dawn.

Not because I am a dairy farmer or a baker, but because I love to sleep and all the best things I have written have been written in my dreams and refined during reveries while walking or in the early morning when all is silent still and I am alone with my musings.

I have always felt that sleeping and being awake were a seamless whole, contrary to the go-getters' attitude that sleep and dreams are a waste of time, and I have been blessed with the ability to fall asleep as soon as I crawl into my crib and usually to remember my dreams in detail when I wake.

Jonathan Crary, the Meyer Schapiro Professor of Modern Art and Theory at Columbia University, agrees that sleep is profoundly important and under assault today. To enter his book, [*24/7, Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*](#), (which was first published in 2014) is for me to discover a kindred spirit, but also to enter a mind so capacious and profound that I wish to share his insights while I dream in words.

If what William Wordsworth (what a name!) wrote in 1802 was true then,

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;—
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!

What possibly could one say about today? That shopping or thinking about shopping – things or propaganda or the latest useless buzz – is all we know? That we have become completely insane, bamboozled by a capitalist techno-electronic madness that has not only seized our hearts but convinced our minds that it is good to spend our lives – our sleep and dreams and time and praxis – in tending to machines that destroy our souls night and day without interruption.

When fifty plus years ago the monk Thomas Merton wrote that “someday they will sell us the rain,” he could today add that the hard rain that Dylan sung of then has already fallen and they now need not sell us anything because we have eaten the bitter fruit of our own corruption. People say they want peace while they fill their nights and days with digital dreams, eliminating what Crary calls “fugitive anonymity” for the bait of 24/7 capitalist drug addiction and being “with it.” All the clichés have it that peace begins with “you,” yet you has become them or it, the tech-life 24/7. I hear Sinatra singing Cole Porter’s lyrics today as

Night and day, you are the one
Only you ‘neath the moon or under the sun
Whether near to me or far
It’s no matter, cell phone, where you are
I think of you day and night

And such love is reciprocated, of course, as the electronic machines help so many distracted and restless souls make it through the night. Sort of. Not the kind of help Kris Kristofferson sang about, but a fleshless flashing gizmo colder than a frozen heart.

It is well known that sleep disorders are widespread today with technologically produced sleep drugs (and now marijuana) used by vast numbers of people. Such drug-induced sleep, the flip side of the frenetic passivity that precedes and follows it, occurs within a larger 24/7 sleepless framework that Crary accurately notes happens “ . . . within the globalist neoliberal paradigm, [for] sleeping is for losers.”

Yet what’s to be won is never enunciated because the winners’ faces are always well-hidden as they execute the prodigious capitalist machine of control that creates docility and separation in people who find the machine life irresistible – even as it drains them of easy-going vitality and the joy of dawdling, even for an idle while. Doing nothing has become a crime.

Last night I stepped outside an hour after sunset and was startled by a massive full moon

eyeing me as it rose over the eastern hills. Here where I dwell there are no city or factory lights to block the moon and stars as they illuminate our nights. But most people are not so lucky, for what our ancestors once took for granted – that we are part of nature, part of the Tao – has been lost for so many as artificial lights, urbanization, and a 24/7 linguistic mind-control ideology block the thrill of being transfixed by the moon's loving gaze, an invitation to taste the sweetness of the north wind's cookie. Maybe the sight of her face might rattle the televised images lodged in people's "memories" of mechanical misbegotten men in ghost suits trampling her peaceful countenance.



The 24/7 digital life, essential to neo-liberal financialized capitalism with its day and night markets and infrastructure that allow for continuous consumption and work – total availability – is the culmination of a long process that began with the invention of artificial lighting that allowed the English cotton mills to run 24/7. Crary brilliantly illustrates this point through the 1782 painting, *Arkwright's Cotton Mills by Night*, by the British artist James Derby. This painting shows the windows of the massive mills lit like pin-points in the rural night, watched over by a full moon that illuminates the sky. Incongruous time indeed! He writes, "The artificial lighting of the factories announces the rationalized deployment of an abstract relation between time and work, severed from the cyclical temporalities of lunar and solar movements." This radical break from the traditional relation between time and work and the earth was later noted by Karl Marx as essential to the advance of capitalism since it disconnected the laboring individual from all interdependent connections to family, community, etc. while reorienting people's feelings for time. The English art critic John Berger, who knew that time with its corollary to place was a key to understanding so much history, put it this way: "Every ruling minority needs to numb and, if possible, to kill the time-sense of those it exploits. This is the authoritarian secret of all methods of imprisonment."

Dreaming of imprisonment, I just remembered that although it seems like a delusion from so far away and long ago, I once worked in a factory by day with its huge blast furnaces, in a NYC Police precinct jail on the 4-12 P.M. shift, and all-night as a nightwatchman. All good lessons in how American society works, although I hated them all and labored simply for the pay. But each in its own way taught me about imprisonment, especially the watchman's job, since it involved a jolting sense of time and staying awake all night and sleeping by day. I was always exhausted and felt I was violating my deepest nature.

Sleep deprivation is a central component of the torturers' methods, as so many victims of the U.S. war machine have learned. And the Pentagon (DARPA) has spent vast sums trying to create a sleepless soldier who can go at least seven days without sleep. As Crary notes: ". . . scientists in various labs are conducting experimental trials of sleeplessness techniques, including neurochemicals, gene therapy, and transcranial magnetic stimulation." The war against sleep is being waged on many fronts by well-armed maniacs intent on controlling human beings for nefarious ends. To control sleep is to control time is to confound minds, which is the goal.

Ovid, the most sensual of Roman poets, would be shocked, I imagine, to learn that Morpheus, the god of sleep and dreams from his *Metamorphoses*, would be attacked so relentlessly by today's madmen who never heard of his poetry. My mind drifts to my college days translating Ovid under a weeping willow. "My cause is better: no-one can claim that I ever took up arms against you," he wrote and I read. These words come back to me as I

muse on the arms taken today against sleep, but I'm not sure if it's Ovid or Bob Dylan's lyrics in his song *Workingman's Blues #2* (from the album *Modern Times*) that fly to mind, for Dylan also sings "No-one can ever claim/ That I took up arms against you."

Poor Morpheus, so many people in these modern times yearn for your arms but instead of that balm, they toss and turn in a time out of mind and out of sleep.

Crary tells us that the amount of sleep the average North American adult gets has gone from ten hours in the early twentieth century to eight hours a generation ago to six-and-a-half today. And although people will always have to sleep, I think we can expect further reductions. To say it is a form of torture is probably an exaggeration, but not by much. He writes:

Behind the vacuity of the catchphrase, 24/7 is a static redundancy that disavows its relation to the rhythmic and periodic textures of human life. . . . A 24/7 environment has the semblance of a social world, but it is actually a non-social model of machinic performance and a suspension of living that does not disclose the human cost required to sustain its effectiveness. . . . 24/7 is a time of indifference, against which the fragility of human life is increasingly inadequate and within which sleep has no necessity or inevitability. In relation to labor, it renders plausible, even normal, the idea of working without pause, without limits. It is aligned with what is inanimate, inert, or unageing. As an advertising exhortation it decrees the absoluteness of availability, and hence the ceaselessness of needs and their incitement, but also their perpetual non-fulfillment.

In other words, 24/7 is a form of linguistic mind control tied to cell phones, computers, and the digital life of the Internet whose purpose is to convince people that sleep and the human body is somehow unnatural and the future lies with people accepting their marriage to machines in a disenchanted and transhuman world. It is a lie, of course, for if that is a future people accept, there will be no future, just a desert. "Deleuze and Guattari went to the point of comparing the order-word [24/7] to a 'death sentence,'" writes Crary. Such an order-word or imperative is similar in this respect to the term "9/11" which was coined to send an instant message that emergencies will now be endless so we will have to monitor you forevermore. Keep your cell phone ready. Be on your toes, stay alert, the terrorists come at all hours – keep awake!

Crary makes a profoundly important point at a time when there is much justifiable focus on propaganda and the lies of governments and the media. This is the power of habit involved in the acceptance of the naturalness of various devices – today, electronic screens that are omnipresent – that we semi-automatically accept as normal. He says,

"In this sense, they are part of larger strategies of power in which the aim is not mass-deception, but rather states of neutralization and inactivation, in which one is dispossessed of time. But even within habitual repetitions there remains a thread of hope – a knowingly false hope – that one more click or touch might open onto something to redeem the overwhelming monotony in which one is immersed. One of the forms of disempowerment within 24/7 environments is the incapacitation of daydream or any mode of absent-minded introspection that would otherwise occur in intervals of slow or vacant time."

This is part of a modern process of psychological reductionism and a changed understanding of the nature of wishes that have excluded dreaming and daydreaming from any connection

to a traditional magico-theological framework. Science and especially the neuro-sciences have reduced all life to what is empirically provable, attenuating life and the creation of art in the service of human life. Crary uses Jean Paul Sartre's inelegant but insightful neologism, "practico-inert," to explain people's inability to see the nature of the social worlds they are part of with any clarity. "The practico-inert was thus Sartre's way [in *Critique of Dialectical Reason*] of designating the sedimented, institutional everyday world constituted out of human energy but manifested as the immense accumulation of routine passive activity."

To repeat, this frenetic passivity serves to obscure the negative historical reality of life in a 24/7 electronic spectacle that is advertised as amazingly empowering but is the reverse.

For direct experience has fallen on hard times as life today has come to be mediated through electronic gadgets. Surprises must be googled in advance or photographed to prove their reality. Living is never easy, not in the summertime or any other season. Tension, inattention, exhaustion, and constant busyness are the order of the day. This should be self-evident but isn't. People feel it but can't see it.

Commenting on the dying art of storytelling, Walter Benjamin, in an essay called "The Storyteller," said the following about people's ability to listen and remember stories that they can integrate into their own experience so they can pass them on:

This process of assimilation, which takes place in depth, requires a state of relaxation, which is becoming rarer and rarer [written in 1936]. If sleep is the apogee of physical relaxation, boredom is the apogee of mental relaxation. Boredom is the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience. A rustling in the leaves drives him away. His nesting places – the activities that are intimately associated with boredom – are already extinct in the cities and are declining in the country as well. With this the gift of listening is lost and the community of listeners disappears. [my emphasis]

We have gone beyond rustling in the bushes to a cacophonous electronic world that makes one deaf to all else. That it will come crashing down around our ears is hard to imagine, but it will. It already has in the damage that it's done.

Once upon a time . . . well, I will spare you. It might just seem like the dream of a ridiculous man, or something Dostoevsky would write, not your normal story or even daydream.

So read Jonathan Crary's brilliant, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* and its sequel, *Scorched Earth: Beyond the Digital Age to a Post-Capitalist World*. They will get you to think about your sleep habits and whether or not you are ever turned off and tuned out but just sometimes only in "sleep mode."

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Edward Curtin is a prominent author, researcher and sociologist based in Western Massachusetts. He is a Research Associate of the Centre for Research on Globalization (CRG).

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