[Review of: J. Crary (2014) 24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep]

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book reviews


Jonathan Crary, the genealogist of the spectacle, has written a little book that is markedly different in style from its predecessors Techniques of the Observer (1990) and Suspensions of Perception (2001) while expanding and reorienting their focus on perception and attention towards what is in many ways its antithesis: sleep. This book is a diagnosis of contemporary capitalism and how it captures and restructures human subjectivity, with a special focus on lived time, relevant for anybody working in the field of humanities and social sciences. The main thesis is easily summarized: sleeping time is non-productive time, making sleep the sworn enemy of capitalism. Crary here links up with a rich tradition in Western Marxism, arguing capitalism does not stop at subsuming working time through the wage relationship, but has the tendency to incorporate ever more spheres of life into its networks of surplus value generation. Sleep, in Crary’s account, is that irreducible aspect of human existence that resists the demands of a 24/7 capitalism that requires us to be always ‘on’, available for the demands of the employer and the market. Hence the remarkable – but unreferenced – statistic that ‘the average North American adult now sleeps approximately six and a half hours at night, an erosion from eight hours a generation ago, and (hard as it is to believe) down from ten hours in the early twentieth century’ (p. 11).

Crary uses the figure of sleep to diagnose 24/7 culture. It is an erudite and minute exploration that ranges from military research into migrating birds that do not sleep for several days, drones in Afghanistan and Yemen that constantly monitor the battlefield, a reading of Arkwright’s Cotton Mills by Night as a description of capitalism’s tendency to enforce ‘homogenization of time and a conceptualization of uninterrupted process that override natural and social constraints’ (p. 64), to an analysis of television as the first mediatic dispositif that introduced disciplinary techniques in the heart of the home. Media and communication technologies play a crucial role in Crary’s analysis, and he dedicates many pages to different technologies as ways to capture and compartmentalize human attention, with some scathing remarks on the revolutionary potential of social media for collective action, echoing Jodi Dean (2009).1

One point of critique. If Crary is an erudite and gifted diagnostician of the maladies of capitalism, he does remain short on the remedy. After reading the essay, the reader is left with a feeling of helplessness vis-a-vis the all-encompassing powers of 24/7, which is an odd affect given the book’s occasional approving nod towards more activist stances, like the Tiqqun collective. Similarly, I am not convinced that the ‘imaginings of a future without capitalism begin as dreams of sleep’ (p. 128). Writing this review in the midst of a student occupation at the University of Amsterdam, a movement that in many ways embodies the ideals of collective action that drive this book, I cannot but notice how little sleep these courageous students
desire – and get. To them, sleep does not seem the adequate metaphor that drives their collective action.

Note

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As Godfrey Baldacchino reminds us, an island is a 'geographically finite, total, discrete, sharply precise physical entity which accentuates clear and holistic notions of location and identity'. A recurrent theme in contemporary Island Studies scholarship is to argue that such apparent bounded simplicity lends the figure of the island to all sorts of reductive characterisations. In the works of Homer, Shakespeare, Defoe, Donne, Swift, More, Orwell, Huxley, Deleuze and many others, islands are frequently condensed to tropes of utopia and dystopia, heaven and hell, known and unknown, past and future, and island laboratory. Thus, if a much repeated line in islands scholarship is that Western culture 'not only thinks about islands, but thinks with islands', another repeated theme is how to work through this intertwining of island metaphors, imaginations and realities.

One way to engage the perennial question of 'what is an island?' – as Stephen Royle does in this exemplary book – is to explore how islands are understood through different academic disciplines, media and the arts. As the first ever appointed 'Professor of Island Geography', Royle is armed with decades of field notes. Across the different chapters he deftly examines how islands are: defined (chapter 1); characterised (chapter 2); understood in mythology, religion and customary practices (chapter 3); reduced to laboratories (chapter 4); and understood in literature (chapter 5), visual arts, film, television, radio (chapter 6), and popular culture and tourism (chapter 7). The book does not stand out for these themes alone – as they are familiar among islands scholarship – but it is notable for the accessible and readable manner in which these themes are presented.

*Islands* forms part of Reaktion Books’ *Earth series*, and it was commissioned to trace 'the historical significance and cultural history of natural phenomenon'. Other books in the series include *Desert*, *Waterfall*, *Earthquake*, *Fire*, *Flood*, *Moon*, *Tsunami* and *Air*.

Fulfilling its remit, Royle’s book has a pace and conveys an excitement about islands that allows him to rapidly move through a range of contemporary debates in islands scholarship, such as whether an island is still an island if it is linked to the mainland and about how islands have been reduced to laboratories in science, military activities, linguistics and anthropology. As a Caribbean island scholar, I was particularly drawn to chapter 6 on the visual arts – and, indeed, the book as a whole is notable for the large number of illustrations (there seems to be one on every second page!). Here, Royle, like Derek Walcott, devotes space to reflecting on the nature of light and the associated atmospheres of islands, providing a particularly fascinating discussion of Gauguin. Personally, I would have liked to see more included on archipelagos, but despite this I found *Islands* to be an extremely enjoyable and fruitful read. The book is relevant for lay people, students and scholars alike, and Royle’s vivid writing style and