

REFUSE

KEYWORDS: resist, refuse-in-place, collectivity, support, rest, witness.

PROMPT:

15-minutes:

Lay down and close your eyes. Visualize yourself resting. Listen to the ambience around you. Feel the sun on your body. Smell the grass below you. Attune to the environment.

Now, think about your relationship to rest and sleep: your routines, patterns, history, needs. Allow your mind to wander and associate. A bell will ring indicating the time is up.

10-minutes:

- 1) Remain laying down. Take a photo of yourself with eyes closed. Be a witness to your own rest.
- 2) In a stream of consciousness, write words or phrases that came to mind in this time.

PROMPT:

15-minutes:

Lay down again if you are seated. Take time to look around the park at the other participants. Observe their distance, details, and repose. Close your eyes again and hold the group in your mind. A bell will ring indicating the time is up.

10-minutes:

- 1) Remain laying down. Take a photo of yourself with eyes closed. Be a witness to your own rest.
- 2) In a stream of consciousness, write words or phrases that came to mind in this time.

SUPPORT:

Jonathan Crary. 24/7: late capitalism and the ends of sleep
(London: Verso, 2013) 9-13, 125-128.

Jenny Odell, "Anatomy of Refusal." How to Do Nothing: Resisting
the Attention Economy (Brooklyn: Melville House Publishing,
2019), 68-69, 92-94.

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 unaging. 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. The absence of restraints on consuming is not simply temporal. We are long past an era in which mainly things were accumulated. Now our bodies and identities assimilate an ever-expanding surfeit of services, images, procedures, chemicals, to a toxic and often fatal threshold. The long-term survival of the individual is always dispensable if the alternative might even indirectly admit the possibility of interludes with no shopping or its promotion. In related ways, 24/7 is inseparable from environmental catastrophe in its declaration of permanent expenditure, of endless wastefulness for its sustenance, in its terminal disruption of the cycles and seasons on which ecological integrity depends.

In its profound uselessness and intrinsic passivity, with the incalculable losses it causes in production time, circulation, and consumption, sleep will always collide with the demands of a 24/7 universe. The huge portion of our lives that we spend asleep, freed from a morass of simulated needs, subsists as one of the great human affronts to the voraciousness of contemporary capitalism. Sleep is an uncompromising interruption of the theft of time from us by capitalism. Most of the seemingly irreducible necessities of human life—hunger, thirst, sexual desire, and recently the need for friendship—have been remade into commodified or financialized forms. Sleep poses the idea of a human need and interval of time that cannot be colonized and harnessed to a massive engine of profitability, and thus remains an incongruous anomaly and site of crisis in the global present. In spite of all the scientific research in this area, it frustrates and confounds any strategies to exploit or reshape it. The stunning, inconceivable reality is that nothing of value can be extracted from it.

It should be no surprise that there is an erosion of sleep now everywhere, given the immensity of what is at stake economically. Over the course of the twentieth century there were steady inroads made against the time of sleep—the average North American adult now sleeps approximately six and a half hours a 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. In the mid twentieth century the familiar adage that “we spend a third of our lives asleep” seemed to have an axiomatic certainty, a certainty that continues to be undermined. Sleep is a ubiquitous but unseen reminder of a premodernity that has never been fully exceeded, of the agri-

cultural universe which began vanishing 400 years ago. The scandal of sleep is the embeddedness in our lives of the rhythmic oscillations of solar light and darkness, activity and rest, of work and recuperation, that have been eradicated or neutralized elsewhere. Sleep of course has a dense history, as does anything presumed to be natural. It has never been something monolithic or identical, and over centuries and millennia it has assumed many variegated forms and patterns. In the 1930s Marcel Mauss included both sleeping and waking in his study of “Body Techniques,” in which he showed that aspects of seemingly instinctive behaviors were in fact learned in an immense variety of ways through imitation or education. Nonetheless, it can still be suggested that there were crucial features common to sleep in the vast diversity of premodern agrarian societies.

By the mid seventeenth century, sleep became loosened from the stable position it had occupied in now obsolete Aristotelian and Renaissance frameworks. Its incompatibility with modern notions of productivity and rationality began to be identified, and Descartes, Hume, and Locke were only a few of the philosophers who disparaged sleep for its irrelevance to the operation of the mind or the pursuit of knowledge. It became devalued in the face of a privileging of consciousness and volition, of notions of utility, objectivity, and self-interested agency. For Locke, sleep was a regrettable if unavoidable interruption of God’s intended priorities for human beings: to be industrious and rational. In the very first paragraph of Hume’s *Treatise on Human Nature*, sleep is lumped together with fever and madness as examples of the obstacles to knowledge. By the mid nineteenth century, the asymmetrical relation between sleep and waking began to be conceptualized in hierarchical models in which sleep was understood as a regression to a lower and more primitive mode in which supposedly higher and more complex brain activity was inhibited. Schopenhauer is one of the rare thinkers who turned this hierarchy against itself and proposed that only in sleep could we locate “the true kernel” of human existence.

In many ways the uncertain status of sleep has to be understood in relation to the particular dynamic of modernity which

has invalidated any organization of reality into binary complementarities. The homogenizing force of capitalism is incompatible with any inherent structure of differentiation: sacred-profane, carnival-workday, nature-culture, machine-organism, and so on. Thus any persisting notions of sleep as somehow natural are rendered unacceptable. Of course, people will continue to sleep, and even sprawling megacities will still have nocturnal intervals of relative quiescence.

Nonetheless, sleep is now an experience cut loose from notions of necessity or nature. Instead, like so much else, it is conceptualized as a variable but managed function that can only be defined instrumentally and physiologically. Recent research has shown that the number of people who wake themselves up once or more at night to check their messages or data is growing exponentially. One seemingly inconsequential but prevalent linguistic figure is the machine-based designation of “sleep mode.” The notion of an apparatus in a state of low-power readiness remakes the larger sense of sleep into simply a deferred or diminished condition of operability and access. It supersedes an off/on logic, so that nothing is ever fundamentally “off” and there is never an actual state of rest.

As I indicated earlier, sleep is one of the few remaining experiences where, knowingly or not, we abandon ourselves to the care of others. As solitary and private as sleep may seem, it is not yet severed from an interhuman tracery of mutual support

and trust, however damaged many of these links may be. It is also a periodic release from individuation—a nightly unraveling of the loosely woven tangle of the shallow subjectivities one inhabits and manages by day. In the depersonalization of slumber, the sleeper inhabits a world in common, a shared enactment of withdrawal from the calamitous nullity and waste of 24/7 praxis. However, for all the ways in which sleep is unexploitable and unassimilable, it is hardly an enclave outside the existing global order. Sleep has always been porous, suffused with the flows of waking activity, though today it is more unshielded than ever from assaults that corrode and diminish it. In spite of these degradations, sleep is the recurrence in our lives of a waiting, of a pause. It affirms the necessity of postponement, and the deferred retrieval or recommencement of whatever has been postponed. Sleep is a remission, a release from the “constant continuity” of all the threads in which one is enmeshed while waking. It seems too obvious to state that sleep requires periodic disengagement from networks and devices in order to enter a state of inactivity and uselessness. It is a form of time that leads us elsewhere than to the things we own or are told we need.

In my account, modern sleep includes the interval before sleep—the lying awake in quasi-darkness, waiting indefinitely for the desired loss of consciousness. During this suspended time, there is a recovery of perceptual capacities that are disabled or disregarded during the day. Involuntarily, one reclaims a sensitivity or responsiveness to both internal and external sensations within a non-metric duration. One hears sounds of traffic, a dog barking, the hum of a white-noise machine, police sirens, heat pipes clanking, or feels the quick twitching of one’s limbs, the pounding of blood in one’s temples, and sees the granular fluctuations of retinal luminosity with one’s eyes shut. One follows an uneven succession of groundless points of temporary focus and shifting alertness, as well as the wavering onset of hypnagogic events. Sleep coincides with the metabolizing of what is ingested by day: drugs, alcohol, all the detritus from interfacing with illuminated screens; but also the flood of anxieties, fears, doubts, longings, imaginings of failure or the big score. This is the monotony of sleep and sleeplessness, night after night. In its repetition and unconcealment, it is one of the unvanquishable remnants of the everyday.

One of the many reasons human cultures have long associated sleep with death is that they each demonstrate the continuity of the world in our absence. However, the only temporary absence of the sleeper always contains a bond to a future, to a possibility of renewal and hence of freedom. It is an interval into which glimpses of an un-lived life, of a postponed life, can edge faintly into awareness. The nightly hope for the insensible state of deep sleep is at the same time an anticipation of an awakening that could hold something unforeseen. In Europe after 1815, during several decades of counter-revolution, reversals, and derailments of hope, there were artists and poets who intuited that sleep was not necessarily an evasion or escape from history. Shelley and Courbet, for example, are two who understood that sleep was another form of historical time—that its withdrawal and apparent passivity also encompassed the unrest and

inquietude of becoming that was essential to the nascence of a more just and egalitarian future. Now, in the twenty-first century, the disquiet of sleep has a more troubling relation to the future. Located somewhere on the border between the social and the natural, sleep ensures the presence in the world of the phasic and cyclical patterns essential to life and incompatible with capitalism. Sleep’s anomalous persistence has to be understood in relation to the ongoing destruction of the processes that sustain existence on the planet. Because capitalism cannot limit itself, the notion of preservation or conservation is a systemic impossibility. Against this background, the restorative inertness of sleep counters the deathliness of all the accumulation, financialization, and waste that have devastated anything once held in common. Now there is actually only one dream, superseding all others: it is of a shared world whose fate is not terminal, a world without billionaires, which has a future other than barbarism or the post-human, and in which history can take on other forms than reified nightmares of catastrophe. It is possible that—in many different places, in many disparate states, including reverie or daydream—the imaginings of a future without capitalism begin as dreams of sleep. These would be intimations of 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 might be.

In the eighteenth century, Jean-Baptiste le Rond d'Alembert wrote that "[e]very age . . . needs a Diogenes."¹⁵ I would agree. We need a Diogenes not just for entertainment, nor just to show that there are alternatives, but because stories like his contribute to our vocabulary of refusal even centuries later. When we hear about Diogenes blowing off Alexander the Great, it's hard not to laugh and think, "Fuck yeah!" Although most people aren't likely to do something so extreme, the story provides a locus for our wish to do so.

But beyond showing that refusal is possible—highlighting the “cracks” in the crushingly habitual—Diogenes also has much to teach us about *how* to refuse. It's important to note that, faced with the unrelenting hypocrisy of society, Diogenes did not flee to the mountains (like some philosophers) or kill himself (like still other philosophers). In other words, he neither assimilated to nor fully exited society; instead he lived in the midst of it, in a permanent state of refusal. As Navia describes it, he felt it was his duty to stand as a living refusal in a backward world:

[Diogenes] opted for remaining in the world for the express purpose of challenging its customs and practices, its laws and conventions, by his words and, more so, by his action. Practicing his extreme brand of Cynicism, then, he stood as a veritable refutation of the world and, as the Gospel would say of Saint John the Baptist, as “a voice crying in the wilderness” (Matt. 3:3).¹⁶

So to a question like “Will you or will you not participate as asked?” Diogenes would have answered something else entirely: “I will participate, but not as asked,” or, “I will stay, but I will be your gadfly.” This answer (or non-answer) is something I think of as producing what I'll call a “third space”—an almost magical exit to another frame of reference. For someone who cannot otherwise live with the terms of her society, the third space can provide an important if unexpected harbor.

TO TRY TO imagine what the “third space” would actually look like in the attention economy, I’ll turn back to Diogenes, or rather the school of Cynicism he inspired. In sharp contrast to the modern meaning of the word *cynicism*, the Greek Cynics were earnestly invested in waking up the populace from a general stupor. They imagined this stupor as something called *typhos*, a word that also connotes fog, smoke, and storms—as in the word *typhoon* or *tai fung* in Cantonese, meaning “a great wind.”⁶³

A generation after Diogenes, a pupil of his named Crates wrote of an imaginary island called Pera (named after the leather wallet that Cynics counted among their few possessions) that is “surrounded but not affected” by this storm of confusion:

*Pera, so name we an island, girt around by the sea of Illusion,
Glorious, fertile, and fair land unpolluted by evil.
Here no trafficking knave makes fast his ships in the harbor,
Here no tempter ensues the unwary with venal allurements.
Onions and leeks and figs and crusts of bread are its produce.
Never in turmoil of battle do warriors strive to possess it,
Here there is respite and peace from the struggle for riches and honor.*⁶⁴

Navia reminds us that the island is obviously more “an ideal state of mind than an actual place,” and that inhabitants of Pera, “contemplat[ing] the immensity of that ‘wine-colored sea of fog’ that surrounds their home,” spend their lives trying to bring others who are lost in *typhos* to their shore through the practice of philosophy. In other words, reaching Pera requires nothing more and nothing less than *voluntate, studio, disciplina*.

Civil disobedience in the attention economy means withdrawing attention. But doing that by loudly quitting Facebook and then tweeting about it is the same mistake as thinking that the imaginary Pera is a real island that we can reach by boat. A real withdrawal of attention happens first and foremost in the mind. What is needed, then, is not a “once-and-for-all” type of quitting but ongoing training: the ability not just to withdraw attention, but to invest it somewhere else, to enlarge and proliferate it, to improve its acuity. We need to be able to think across different time scales when the mediascape would have us think in twenty-four-hour (or shorter) cycles, to pause for consideration when clickbait would have us click, to risk unpopularity by searching for context when our Facebook feed is an outpouring of unchecked outrage and scapegoating, to closely study the ways that media and advertising play upon our emotions, to understand the algorithmic versions of ourselves that such forces have learned to manipulate, and to know when we are being guilted, threatened, and gaslighted into reactions that come not from will and reflection but from fear and anxiety. I am less interested in a mass exodus from Facebook and Twitter than I am in a mass movement of attention: what happens when people regain control over their attention and begin to direct it again, together.

Occupying the “third space” within the attention economy is important not just because, as I’ve argued, individual attention forms the basis for collective attention and thus for meaningful refusal of all kinds. It is also important because in a time of shrinking margins, when not only students but everyone else has “put the pedal to the metal,” and cannot afford other kinds of refusal, *attention may be the last resource we have left to withdraw*. In a cycle where both financially driven platforms and overall precarity close down the space of attention—the very attention needed to resist this onslaught, which then pushes further—it may be only in the space of our own minds that some of us can begin to pull apart the links.

In *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, Jonathan Crary describes sleep as the last vestige of humanity that capitalism cannot appropriate (thus explaining its many assaults on sleep).⁶⁵ The cultivation of different forms of attention has a similar character, since the true nature of attention is often hidden. What the attention economy takes for granted is the quality of attention, because like all modern capitalist systems, it imagines its currency as uniform and interchangeable. “Units” of attention are assumed undifferentiated and uncritical. To give a particularly bleak yet useful example, if I’m forced to watch an ad, the company doesn’t necessarily know *how* I am watching the ad. I may indeed be watching it very carefully, but like a practitioner of aikido who seeks to better understand her enemy—or for that matter, like Thomas Merton observing the corruption of the world from his hermitage. My “participation” may be disingenuous, like Diogenes rolling his barrel industriously up and down the hill to appear productive. As a precursor to action, these drills and formations of attention within the mind represent a primary space of volition. Tehching Hsieh referred to these kinds of tactics when, speaking of the year he spent in a cage, he said that nonetheless his “mind was not in jail.”⁶⁶

Of course, attention has its own margins. As I noted earlier, there is a significant portion of people for whom the project of day-to-day survival leaves no attention for anything else; that’s part of the vicious cycle too. This is why it’s even more important for anyone who *does* have a margin—even the tiniest one—to put it to use in opening up margins further down the line. Tiny spaces can open up small spaces, small spaces can open bigger spaces. If you can afford to pay a different kind of attention, you should.

But besides showing us a possible way out of a bind, the process of training one’s own attention has something else to recommend it. If it’s attention (deciding what to pay attention to) that makes our reality, regaining control of it can also mean the discovery of new worlds and new ways of moving through them. As I’ll show in the next chapter, this process enriches not only our capacity to resist, but even more simply, our access to the one life we are given. It can open doors where we didn’t see any, creating landscapes in new dimensions that we can eventually inhabit with others. In so doing, we not only remake the world but are ourselves remade.