

## THE SLEEP OF REASON

Arkadiusz Półtorak in conversation with Matthew Fuller

Matthew Fuller, Professor of Cultural Studies at Goldsmiths (University of London), has gained international recognition thanks to his lively writings on media culture such as *Evil Media* (co-authored with with Andrew Goffey) or *Media Ecologies: Materialist Energies in Art and Technoculture*. Each of Fuller's books reveals his wide scope of interests and peculiar sensitivity to political resonances of art, science, technology or even everyday matters. In his newest book *How to Sleep: The Art, Biology and Culture of Unconsciousness* the British theorist attends to the cultural history of sleep and discusses the layered interdependencies of human physiology, media systems, cultural practices and regimes of power. In the following interview – taken during the conference “Against the Slow Cancellation of the Future” (15-16 June 2017) at Goldsmiths' Centre for Cultural Studies (recently merged with the department of Media and Communications) – the author reveals the motivation behind his research on sleep and offers a broader reflection on capacities and significance of critical media studies.

**Arkadiusz Półtorak: In your new book, *How to Sleep: The Art, Biology and Culture of Unconsciousness*, you aim to discuss sleeping as “a complex vital phenomenon”. Remarkably, it was not very long ago that another renowned expert in media studies, Jonathan Crary, issued his own book on a related subject. Why is the background in media studies such a great point of departure for debating such crucial philosophical categories as life – or attending to phenomena that allow to redefine their understanding?**

Matthew Fuller: There are different genealogies of writing about media. There are, for instance, science-based, more or less quantitative approaches, which remain focused on the classical categories of sociology. Their interest is mainly in how the categories in questions are represented and manufactured in the “classical” forms of media such as newspapers, television or radio, and how they become reconstituted in the internet. There are also other tendencies within media research that are more philosophical and more cultural-theoretical. They have different aims and rely on a different understanding of media. The crucial part of this approach is the emphasis on mediation understood as cultural practice as well as an experimental and artistic ground.

The more cultural-theoretical or philosophical approaches tend to see things such as newspapers, television and radio as important aspects of media but they do not treat them as simple consolidations of existing sociological categories. Instead, they emphasize the substantial influence that such systems exert on society. The focus is on how media produce different forms of knowledge and experience, different forms of the social – and the social might be perceived, in a way, as a “side effect” of the media at work. Systems of mediation might become, then, a more general field of inquiry. If we accept that all media translate experience – or even that, like a camera, they translate “deep”, molecular aspects of physical reality into accessible forms of experience such as symbols – then we need to attend to very wide systems of interconnected processes. Though the transformation into signs is just one example. It is quite appealing to go beyond this level, which is easily achieved while treating the human body as an important site of mediation. Here, the translation processes involve touch, the nervous sensation of taste, hormonal interactions etc. This is one of the grounds by which one can widen the understanding of media.

**Why was it tempting for you to treat the human body as a site of mediation from the perspective of a sleeping body?**

What it allows for is to recognize the complexity of processes that we tend to think of as very simple. The fundamental operating rule of my inquiry is always to look at the ways in which things that we take for granted are multi-dimensional. I also find it crucial to acknowledge that the way we understand and describe the world changes the way we experience it in turn. In this respect, practices far from academic research provide some enriching lessons. The latter principle is fundamental for spiritual practices, where the specific mode of observation of a given object entails an altered mode of experience – one moves in and out of multiple degrees of comprehension. This kind of approach is also fundamental to art – the act of watching is contingent on complex interactions between the painting instrument, the surface of the canvas and the viewers themselves.

**The book’s subtitle hints that the reader might face a wide overview of cultural analyses as well as transdisciplinary interrogations. What prompted you to bring arts and scientific discourse together in *How to Sleep*?**

One of the things the book looks at is how different representations of sleep allow to understand it as a productive force. Sleep is often seen as a sign of passivity, of the inert body or the body becoming an object. Though if we consider the scientific accounts of sleep, we can understand it as a result of complex interactions between somatic processes such as the circadian system or the homeostatic system. Their interactions produce the capacity to sleep in a human body. While dreaming, this body is also continually interacting with the wider world: the forces of tides, the presence or

non-presence of light and – to a certain extent – with economy. By the way, Jonathan Crary’s book *24/7* is an excellent account of the way that contemporary forms of capitalism restructure sleep. If one is to be constantly available to work, this changes the relationship between sleep and other forms of life.

As I mentioned, scientific discourse challenges the assumption that sleep equals inertness on the somatic – or even molecular – level. In my book I highlighted art as another field of inquiry because it also provides compelling representations of sleep as a productive state. This productivity, though, is not always qualified as beneficial or entirely conscious.

**Speaking of benefits, your interest lies – for instance – in how sleep becomes militarized as a social phenomenon. But you are also interested in sleep as a metaphor of subjectivity and experience. These lines of argument are not really divergent, though. To the contrary, they seem to interlock and strengthen each other...**

There is a tendency to think that subjects only exist when one remains awake. This assumption – however misleading – has brought forth many compelling representations of sleep in modern culture. Take the classic work by Francisco Goya, *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*. This image operates within a twofold logic. The title implies that when we neglect to think – or, in other words, when we fail to remain awake – we produce maniacal figures, monsters, the figures of horror. But, at the same time, it is worth attention that in Goya’s phrase it is not really us but the reason itself that is dreaming. It produces monstrosities through its over-application.

The trope of sleeping reason provides an important vantage point into modernity. For instance, one can think of the way in which the industrial imagination produced the Holocaust. Although it is possibly the worst thing that humans have ever done, it remains fundamentally an application of ordering procedures and knowledge that were assumed to bring forth enlightenment. The dual image of sleep and of reason in Goya’s piece sets a possibility for thinking about how sleep is itself incorporated into the kind of ruling logic that has failed dramatically in attempts to engender peace and “awake alertness”. Instead, it has produced wars and other monstrosities.

**The notion of media systems’ inextricable connection to the military forms of governance has already become a part of “theoretical common sense”. Though how much do these military genealogies actually tell us about the way media operate?**

I think that there is a sense in which that notion is overplayed. Within critical theory there are responses to technology which allow people not to think about it seriously – simply because they can say “oh, but it all comes from the military”. They imagine that the realm of technology is homogenous and always verges to “the side

of the bad”. This is not to say that these positions have no value or attraction – yet at times they do allow critical theory to avoid the requirement to think. They stop us from thinking about the ways in which the military imagination of technology is actually heterogenic. It has many different directives. If you take the imaginary of the AK 47, for instance, it is much different to the imaginary of the Trident system. Both are equipments for killing but they are governed by different logics. Neither of them is particularly beneficial but it is important to recognize their different constitutions.

**You mentioned that critique sometimes wants to make things easier and slides into non-thinking. But is it safe to yield to the widespread suggestions that instead of perpetuating critique we should really get down to producing affirmative visions of new realities? In other ways, to what extent can we neglect the intimate link between criticism and propositional, apotropaic thinking?**

I think it is important not to oversimplify what we mean by critique. Though I do think that the mode of thought that simply yields complaints is being perfected in the Western academy. There is a mass-industrialized form of resentment that produces enormous, highly scholarly manifestations. In some ways, these are quite admirable works but they also neglect the actual capacity of critical thought. There is a missed opportunity at stake – but there are also ways in which these conditions are possibly changing. Some scholars have recognized that the ability to analyze structural forms of social realities is something that allows us to think in a design sense. If we can discern the ways in which reality forming devices operate, we become capable of inventing many different kinds of sensibilities. In this way, critical faculties can become productive and critical discourse can share the vocation of arts.

### **How come?**

The latter have always provided novel logics and drives that produce realities. We need to reestablish that relation between invention and critical thought. It is already very much in the air in a number of fields.

**One danger, though, is the interference between such articulations of propositional thought and the neoliberal policy of prioritizing applied knowledge over general fields of inquiry. It seems to jeopardize the very presence of the humanities at contemporary universities.**

Mind that it is not only happening to the humanities. It has also happened to mathematics. Already in the forties we had a very tense debate about the status of the so-called “pure maths” and the incorporation of mathematics into British imperialism and the structures of war-making...

**Then, don't we still need – and let me phrase it as a provocation – the autonomy that people involved in the humanities cared about so much in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, trying to prove the legitimacy of their disciplines?**

The idea that the humanities rely on a certain “non-utility” as the ground of their autonomy is a valuable one in some respect – but it also has rather grave consequences. I think that this debate is covered quite interestingly in the recent book written by Stephan Collini (*What Are Universities For?*), who discusses its historical development throughout the last century or so.

It could even be drawn back to Nietzsche who rejected applied forms of knowledge and proposed that knowledge has a grander task. I myself think it is interesting to investigate the patterns of interference between traditions that emphasize application and autonomy. We could, for instance, look at the Bauhaus as one of the crucial entry points into the twentieth century and trace how its inheritance moved into contemporary art and design schools as a form of direct experimental practice. The capacity of working with materials can also be articulated in terms of thinking of ideas-as-materials and I believe that this transposition is particularly worth reconsidering nowadays. Once we single out a certain set of methods derived from art practices, we can apply them to the general topics we are working on in the “humanities at large”. It might be critical reflection, historical reevaluation or a form of inquiry, all of which are fundamentally based on the investigation into the nature of what it means to be a human; into the fundamental orderings of meaning in our lives.