

The Art of Medicine

Insomnia: A Brief Cultural History

'I cannot sleep,' the Russian poet Alexander Pushkin wrote in his 'Lines Written at Night during Insomnia' (1830), 'Only the monotonous running of the clock / Sounds around me.' Almost all of us, at one time or another, will have experienced the dreary desperation of insomnia, when a racing mind renders a restful night impossible. 'The anxiety of the sleeping night,' Pushkin continues in his attempt to capture this intolerable dynamic, 'The mouse-like scampering of life...' This 'scampering' of daily life into the time set aside for rest has been reported for hundreds of years, but it is particularly pertinent to review the cultural history of sleeplessness from the present-day perspective, in which it is common in developed societies to take our daily lives (our electronic devices) to bed with us.

For many people insomnia is a temporary situation triggered by acute physical illness or psychological stress; but for some it is a more permanent condition. Chronic insomnia affects an estimated 10% of adults in the Western world and is associated with impaired quality of life, depression and anxiety. Insomnia is a clinical diagnosis, based on subjective self-report by patients. Interestingly, though, overnight electroencephalography (EEG) brain recordings have demonstrated that some patients with insomnia underestimate the amount they sleep, which might in fact be within normal limits. These misremembered periods of wakefulness may rather reflect hyper-awareness of fragmented sleep, a phenomenon captured by EEG in the form of frequent transitions between the brainwaves that reflect different sleep depths. This phenomenon of 'paradoxical' insomnia with normal sleep durations emphasises the limitations of a purely biological approach to insomnia.

Although insomnia *does* have a partly biological basis, as a disorder of hyperarousal, it is also fundamentally shaped by prevailing cultural and historical conditions. It is particularly illuminating, in the context of the Western World, to compare the centuries immediately prior to the industrial revolution (16th-18th centuries) to the industrial and post-industrial period (19th-21st centuries). In the few remaining pre-industrial equatorial societies, the prevalence of chronic insomnia is just 1-2%; indeed, within these communities there might not even be a word to signify involuntary sleeplessness. Meanwhile in post-industrial societies, in which insomnia is commonly reported, it is far more prevalent in older adults who are fully conditioned by socio-cultural norms, than in children. This implies that social factors have a determining influence on apparently 'natural' patterns of sleep and sleeplessness. For this reason, insomnia can be illuminated by studies that are both multi-disciplinary and historically informed. In this article, we begin by sketching some of the historical contexts for sleep practices, in order to argue that sleep was central to the culture of everyday life in pre-industrial times in ways that it is not today. Then we briefly discuss historical attitudes towards sleeplessness, pointing to the emergence of the 'insomniac' as both a pathological type and a social archetype.

The mainstay of modern treatment of insomnia is the practice of 'good sleep hygiene' – a bedtime routine which regularises sleep. Yet such treatment is usually sought only *after* sleep difficulties have arisen and become engrained. This state of affairs contrasts with pre-industrial epochs, before artificial lighting and central heating had been invented, when regular rise-times were the norm because they enabled people to take advantage both of the availability of natural light and higher daytime temperatures. As the historian Sasha Handley has shown, many people in pre-industrial England differed from most of us today in that they made elaborate, often ritualised preparations for sleep. They cultivated a series of 'cultural, sensory and environmental cues', including 'familiar sounds, visions, smells and tactile sensations', in order to induce drowsiness. Night-time sleep was for example carefully optimised through the regulation of food and drinks in the daytime; through

the use of soporific herbal remedies such as henbane, lavender, lettuce and mandrake root; and through evening rituals of spiritual contemplation. Sleep was celebrated in the pre-industrial period as a sensory phenomenon, then, one that restored both body and spirit after the labours and travails of the day. Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, in the early seventeenth century, emotes with anguished longing when he characterises it as 'sore labour's bath, / Balm of hurt minds', and as 'Chief nourisher in life's feast'. In the homes of the middle and upper classes, in particular, bedroom textiles were often luxurious and highly personalised, and they would be repeatedly darned so that they lasted for generations. Continuity, familiarity and safety, rather than any form of novelty, were thus the cornerstone of the peaceful bedroom environment.

Of course, sleeplessness still occurred in the pre-industrial era (because of its partly biological basis). Indeed, it is possible that it was institutionalised and normalised in terms of 'watchfulness'. The historian Roger Ekirch has uncovered frequent references in the diaries and literature of the time to what he calls 'biphasic sleep', 'with individuals waking sometime after midnight' between two distinct periods of rest, that appears to have been viewed neutrally, i.e. not as a marker of insomnia. But sleeplessness is nonetheless likely to have been more transient in pre-industrial society, where sleep and the sleep environment were regularised. This contrasts with many twenty-first century bedrooms in advanced capitalist societies, where smartphones, tablets and televisions are often present, providing unhelpful opportunities for stimulation when we retire to sleep. Today, indeed, thanks to various economic, social and technological developments, there is no clear distinction between the day and the night. And, as Jonathan Crary has recently argued, the internet technology to which we have become addicted, as a culture, facilitates online identities that 'subsist 24/7, sleeplessly, continuously' and enable us both to produce and consume after-hours.

While sleep was prioritised in pre-industrial epochs, due to the obvious desirability of a restorative night's rest, from classical times *long* sleep durations were inconsistent with sophistication. Plato, for example, dictated that citizens should sleep less than slaves, on the grounds that sleep is dead time when it is impossible to conduct business. In *Henry IV, Part 2*, first performed in 1600, Shakespeare's king imagines sleep residing among his 'poorest subjects', who lie on 'uneasy pallets', rather than in 'the perfum'd chambers of the great'. A full night's rest is a luxury that the king cannot afford because of his unique political responsibility: 'Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.' Sleep, then, is for the hoi polloi. During the industrial period, for its part, some Romantic poets associated being awake rather than asleep at night with an intellectual creativity, a freedom of the imagination, that implied a refusal of the economics and politics of industrial society. For William Blake, for instance, the night functioned paradoxically as a site of enlightenment; and walking restlessly at night, while ordinary people were fast asleep, became a symbolic means of challenging the deadly rationalism of the everyday, diurnal world of industrial production that he abhorred. A couple of centuries on, there is probably less counter-cultural prestige associated with involuntary sleeplessness. In Dana Gioia's poem 'Insomnia' (1986), to give an example, the narrator lies awake listening to the banal sound of the 'mortgaged walls shifting in discomfort'. Here, the poet's imagination is tethered to the dreary daytime responsibilities that make most people's everyday lives a struggle. Uneasy lies the head forced to devise excuses for the bank.

One development that helped reframe the concept of the poor sleeper from an important person of business, as envisaged by Plato and Shakespeare, to a product of everyday nervous stimulation, is the emergence of the term 'Insomniac' – as a noun rather than merely as an adjective – in the late 19th Century. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the noun first appeared in print in Alexander Morison's article on 'Sleep and Sleeplessness' in the *Lancet* in 1908. A London-based physician, Morison observed almost in passing that, 'a given insomniac in more or less easy circumstances', cannot be expected 'suddenly to assume a Spartan mode of life' in attempting to cure his sleeplessness. Here is the insomniac, whom Morison also identifies as a 'neurotic

insomniac', as a social and psychological archetype. In fact, the term 'insomniac' had been in use for at least a couple of decades by the time Morison used it in the *Lancet*. For example, it appeared as the title of a short story printed in the British satirical journal *Fun*, a rival to *Punch*, in 1888. 'We tell the story of the Insomniac in order that it may encourage those who believe insomnia incurable to hope...', it begins. The sketch is full of satirical references to contemporary cures for sleeplessness, which include the insomniac pushing marbles across the floor with his nose: 'this method is said, by causing a flow of blood to the cerebral regions, to induce a subsequent and still more pronounced reactionary movement of the vital fluid, by which It quits the brain and suffuses the subcuticle cellules of the great toes.' In the end, the insomniac overcomes his condition by working night shifts on the railway, a routine that infallibly makes him fall asleep at precisely the moments he is supposed to remain fully awake. By implication, the sleeplessness of this insomniac is contextual and has become psychologically associated with lying in bed, because sleep quickly overtakes him during his nocturnal work shifts.

Overall, we argue that while sleep and wakefulness are well-defined neurophysiologically from birth, as a switch towards particular brainwave patterns, this contrasts with the subjectivity of the sleeping or sleepless body in which these states can be either under- or over-appreciated. In order to represent this tension visually, and provide a 'talking point' for engagement work with adolescents and adults, we collaborated with artist Andrew Carnie who created artworks which embedded representations of sleep brainwaves within depictions of the supine body. We have been using these materials across patient- and public-engagement activities, and within academic forums, to stimulate debate around our key argument: that both sleep and sleeplessness cannot be fully understood outside of the specific historical and cultural contexts in which they are experienced. Perhaps we could learn from the pre-industrial past, with its sleep-embracing rituals, and neutral acceptance of transient sleeplessness, in order to combat the insomnia of the current generation.

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Further reading

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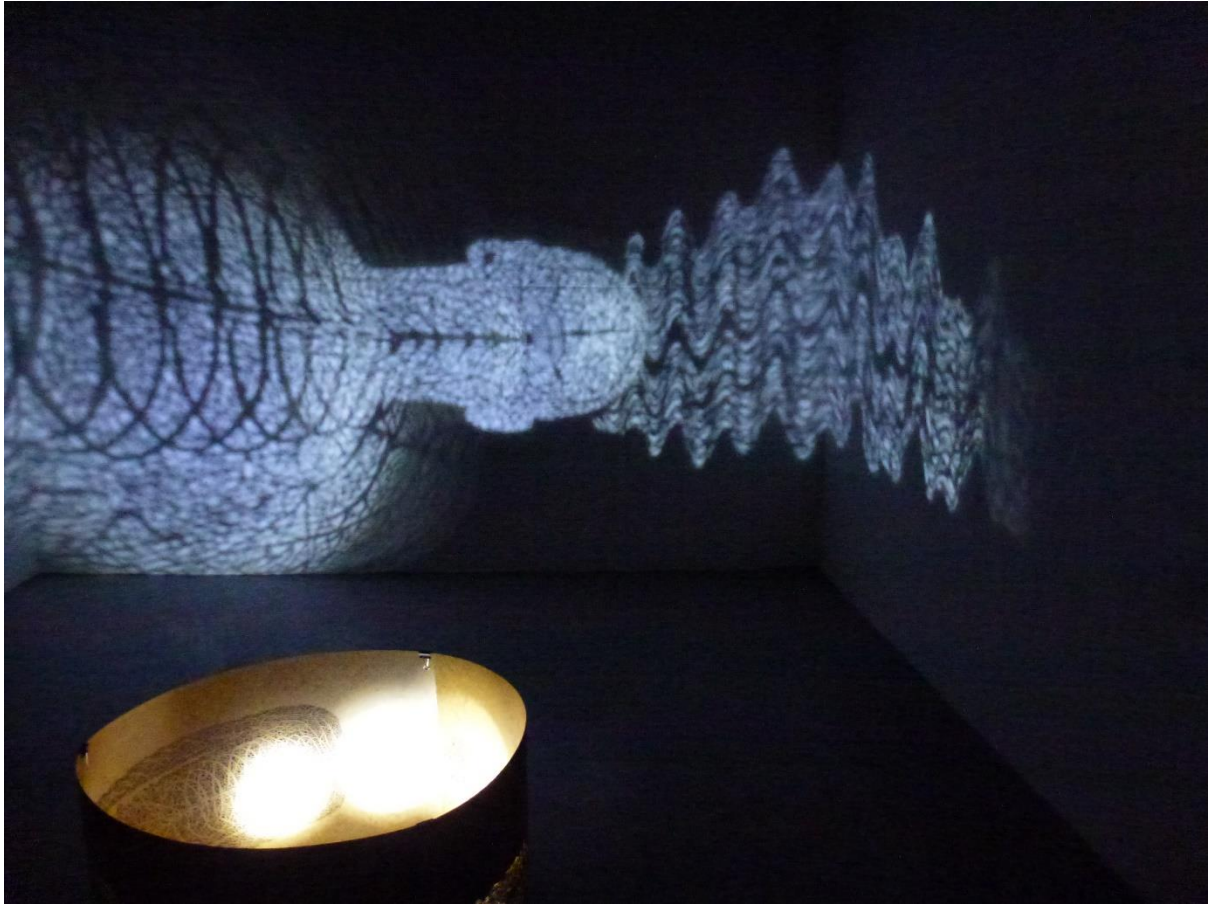
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In this piece by the artist Andrew Carnie he used EEG brainwaves as a motif for representing the 'dusk of the brain'. The image alludes to the cyclical nature of wakefulness and sleep, both at the microscale of EEG and the macroscale of hours and days, which he evoked by revolving light shone through a series of wave patterns onto the wall of an installation space.