

Rhythmanalysis Perspective for Mobile Places Studies

Ekaterina Fen

Centre for Fundamental Sociology, National Research University Higher School of Economics Moscow,
E-Mail: ekaterina.fen@gmail.com

Abstract

This article studies the idea of rhythm performance and perception as a tool for mobility places studies. Starting from the analysis of H. Lefebvre classification it introduces observer/actor dichotomy that allows to refer to marginal aspects in rhythmanalysis discussion, such as: mobility places, idea of atmosphere, dichotomy of rhythm/improvisation and applicability of rhythmanalysis to the bigger-scale territories. That allows broadening the limits of disciplinary field of “new urbanism”.

Keywords: rhythmanalysis, new urbanism, mobility places, method

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Introduction

The essay ‘Rhythmanalysis’ by Lefebvre first published in English in 2004 proved to be one of the stimulating resources for *new urbanism*. It aims to describe the phenomenality of everyday life and presupposes analysis of direct involvement in everydayness. As a result, much attention was paid to embodied practices of space perception. Being a resource for a wide variety of disciplines, such as sociology, anthropology, philosophy and architecture, rhythmanalysis is mostly used as a descriptive tool. This is partly explained by initial aims of the method, that provides tools for capturing an attitude, an orientation, a proclivity rather than perform positivistic or scientific approach. It falls on the side of impressionism and description, rather than systematic data collecting.¹ However, this leads to specific usage of rhythmanalysis as a research tool. For a decade the growing number of case-studies on urbanism were carried out, whereas, there is quite a few works on its potential as method of urban studies.²

This paper³ discusses researcher’s perspective as a key element of Lefebvre’s theory. Rhythm perception requires attentiveness and a certain amount of time and involvement of all senses: auditory, smell, visual and tactile. As Lefebvre puts it, rhythms are lived, so it is available for studying only as lived through, but to analyze them one should be out of them. Reading ‘Rhythmanalysis’ one may distinguish observer’s and actor’s perspective author uses (although not putting that directly) for describing experience of the city. To distinguish observer/actor perspective is crucial for understanding what researcher’s perspective is and, therefore, the entire ability to study different aspects of urban rhythms.

This paper starts from Lefebvian interpretation of the rhythm as an aspect of perception of different types of cityscapes. Then the classification of rhythms from performer’s perspective is provided and analysis of how observer/actor opposition works is given. Afterwards, the paper focuses on the new aspects of urban analysis that are available due to introduced dichotomy.

¹ Ben Highmore, *Cityscapes. Cultural Readings in the Material and Symbolic City*, Basingstoke 2005, 150.

² for one of the first fruitful attempts see Tim Edensor, *Geographies of Rhythm. Nature, Place, Mobilities and Bodies*, Farnham 2010, 1.

³ This study comprises research findings from the project ‘Phenomena of Order in Mobile Communications’ carried out within National Research University Higher School of Economics’ Academic Fund Program in 2012, grant TZ 67.

Rhythmanalysis for Mobility Places

One of the most ever cited quotation from Lefebvre's essay is on his observation of rhythms of Paris junction he sees from his window.⁴ He describes how initially chaotic sounds of city are organized into polyrhythmy of citizens daily activities. To Lefebvre, every place might be studied according to the temporal and rhythmical experience of the place. A sense of time is related and reflects specifics of urban place. This universality of rhythm as characteristic is crucial for the conception of new urbanism⁵ as it outlines the importance of analysis of open zones and mobility places.⁶ The latter is defined as crowded, shared by pedestrians and vehicles and often remains out of attention or sight for the everyday traveler. This happens because mobile places are not the aim of destination for the travelers; they just temporarily unite co-travelers, each of which has their own goals and destinations. As a rule, the places are constructed only for the purposes of passers-by.⁷ Being invisible, these places at the same time occupy a growing portion of modern cities, as places of home and work, leisure, shopping and different activities have become more distanced and it takes longer time to commute between. These tendencies lead to growing interest to mobilities places as subject-matter for urban researchers.⁸

The openness of mobility places differs from, for example, the openness of public spaces. The latter presupposes the possibility to stay at a place, to be with other either groups, or individuals, express oneself and share time or activities.⁹ In comparison, mobility places are open because of their neutrality and instructivity that is manifested in a system of road signs, street nameplates, directions to follow and sequences of procedures.¹⁰ The specific interactivity of the place means that an interaction with place itself

(e.g. reading road signs) is primal to social one. At the same time mobility presupposes coherence of actions for co-presenters who are performing routine operations and their ability to act here and now. Place in this case is a configuration of multiple trajectories, where movements of individuals, objects and ideas come together.¹¹ In this sense, mobility places are the one of embodied action rather than observation.¹²

Rhythms Studied and Embodied: the Observer and the Actor Opposition

Studying mobility places puts in question perspective of the researcher. Earlier it was mentioned that rhythm is apprehended as combination of direct experience and reflection. To understand the difference let us turn again to Lefebvre's seminal example. He describes the junction in Paris as a place where everyday routines are performed: daily flows of people, walking patterns of schoolchildren, the rush hour of commuters, the strolling tourists.¹³ Later this list was prolonged almost endlessly by the number of repetitive daily urban activities. For example, Edensor adds enumeration by mentioning the surge of shoppers, the throngs of evening clubbers, the rituals of housework. Rhythms' temporal patterns are governed by the "openings and closing of shops, the flows of postal deliveries, bank deposits and coffee breaks",¹⁴ the schedules of public transport, pub hours and lighting up times, and the different rhythms of the day and night¹⁵ as well as seasonal and annual cycles, which bestow a temporal sense of place. How is it possible to study this endless variety? Tim Edensor, following Lefebvre's logic, offers rhythms classification based on the figure of the performer of the rhythm.¹⁶ He distinguishes four types of them.

⁴ Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: space, time, and everyday life*, London 2004, 27.

⁵ Ash Amin/Nigel Thrift, *Cities: Reimagining the Urban*, Cambridge 2002, 17.

⁶ For the mobility places further definition see Ash Amin/Nigel Thrift (see note 5).

⁷ Zygmund Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge 2000, 102.

⁸ Mimi Sheller/John Urry, *The new mobilities paradigm*, in: *Environment and Planning (A)* 38. 2006, 207-226.

⁹ Setha Low/Neil Smith, *The Politics of Public Space*, New York 2006.

¹⁰ Mark Auge, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, London 1995, 96.

¹¹ Doreen Massey, *Travelling Thoughts*, in: Stuart Hall/Paul Gilroy/Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), *Without Guarantees: In Honour of Stuart Hall*, London 2000, 225.

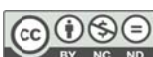
¹² Elisabeth Ströker, *Investigations in philosophy of Space*, Ohio 1987, 54-55.

¹³ Henri Lefebvre, (see note 4), 30.

¹⁴ Brandon Labelle, *Pump up the bass: rhythm, cars and auditory scaffolding*, in: *Senses and Society* 3(2). 2008, 192.

¹⁵ Sukhdev Sandhu, *Night Haunts: A Journey Through the London Night*, London 2007.

¹⁶ Tim Edensor, (see note 2), 4-6.



The first, the rhythms related to a shared timetable. They often presuppose normative aspects that are supported and promoted by officials and commercial enterprises. The second are bodily rhythms. Lefebvre foregrounds the body, emphasising that the rhythm analyst must draw on “his (sic) breathing, the circulation of his blood, the beatings of his heart and the delivery of his speech as landmarks”.¹⁷ In other words, the rhythm analyst must take his own body – “its respirations, pulses, circulations, assimilations”¹⁸ – as the measure of other rhythms. Third, the rhythms of mobility that are ceaselessly (re)constituted by flows and are never reified or bounded. Edensor distinguishes three senses in which the rhythms of mobility constitute place. He speaks of (a) place as characterized by the mobilities that course through it. There is a regulatory dimension through which the braiding of multiple mobile rhythms is organised, with traffic lights and other apparatus, speed limits, highway codes, laws, road layout, and the dissemination of good habits reproduce familiar disciplinary conventions. Patterns of mobile flow thus contribute to the spatio-temporal character of place, whether dynamic or placid, fast or slow, and this is best ascertained at a still point from which mobile flows of varying tempo, pace and regularity are apparent. Then he points out (b) sense of mobile place. Through commuting, a distinct embodied, material and sociable *dwelling-in-motion* emerges¹⁹ as place is experienced by the predictable passing of familiar fixtures under the same and different conditions of travel. And finally speaks of (c) the interior of a mobile vehicle or other form of transport as carrier of its own rhythms: the machinic pulses created by the engine and metronomic swish of windscreen wipers and indicators. The fruitful result for the researcher is that the repetitions of the machine’s sounds or vibrations create familiar and comfortable mobile environments that lull drivers and passengers into a state of kinaesthetic and tactile relaxation, forming the perception of the trip from within.

The fourth type of urban rhythms describes non-human phenomena of natural world. For Edensor, “non-human” refers to energies, flora and fauna, cycles of the moon and sun, and the millennial changes associated with climatic, geological and

geomorphological events. All the rhythmic patterns of possess deeply impact place and space. For example, oceanic affluxes structure the lives in all cities in marine regions.

This classification of the rhythm includes a wide variety of things that might be temporally structured. It gives broad understanding of the rhythm initiation and performing. However, observer’s and actor’s perspectives are not differentiated. Why is it crucial to keep in mind that opposition? Let us revise the example of junction again. Suppose there are an observer and participant, both of whom can distinguish and enumerate rhythms, flows as well as institutional rules that regulates rhythms. However, for the observer, the rhythm inside the flow is not available for observation. For the actor, on contrary, this inner structure of flow is the dominant one. This flow structures his attention considering other participants in it and interpretation of other flows. For example, the driver might be focused on other cars, pedestrians and traffic lights, but determinant for his action will be the characteristics of the flow he belongs to. The other consequence is that identifying oneself with a flow structures the dominant perspective of space perception. The driver who goes slowly through the junction due to congestion might experience place as highly problematic and unsatisfactory, however pedestrians who just cross it and follow to the entrance of metro nearby would have a completely different perspective and understanding of a place.

Rhythm and Improvisation

This observation opens the floor for working with rhythm analysis as a tool for studying place-specific features or atmosphere of the place. These two notions are compared rarely, however have much in common. Ambiance or atmosphere of place is “the unity of the presence and the sense of an experienced reality. Atmospheres are apprehended only if one “enters” them, and cannot be fully grasped by concepts. Feeling them spontaneously homogenizes the subject’s mood and attunes it to the environment, even if one can to some extent maintain an inward distance from atmospheres and describe them”.²⁰ That means the same ability to combine involvement by ambiance and disinterested position for its de-

¹⁷ Henri Lefebvre, (see note 4), 21.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Mimi Sheller/John Urry (see note 9).

²⁰ Madalina Diaconu, Secondary Senses, in: Hans Rainer Sepp/Lester Embree (eds.), Handbook of Phenomenological Aesthetics, Dordrecht 2011.



scription as well as rhythm does. The other common feature is the history of notion development. Research on ambiances was initially centred on *precise* spaces – housing, junctions, commercial malls, museums and the like,²¹ later the focus was shifted to bigger-scaled spaces and specifically places in-between. That idea was for a long time doubted. As it was mentioned above, mobility places for a long time were considered to be empty, designed only to go through, to pass without any attention. For example, being in church makes available specific sort of atmosphere that is easy recognizable, perceived or imagined, making a step out of it and entering the busy street, atmosphere changes dramatically, however, it does not disappear.²² It means that identification of any place as such presupposes ability to see or ascribe its specific features.²³

The question is how to define the atmosphere of mobility places? Interestingly this is the aspect where notions of rhythm and atmosphere go together. The key feature of mobility places is movement and rhythm themselves. A mobile sense of place, as Wunderlich notes,²⁴ is shaped by the mode and style of travel. Consider how *purposive walking* differs from the rhythm of spontaneous *discursive walking*, as well as with the *conceptual*, critical walking mobilised by situationists and psychogeographers. For mobility places movement and its rhythm is sometimes the only available characteristics of the place. For instance, the atmosphere of Wall Street in New York is to great extent formed by enormous number of pedestrians moving in alignment in variety of flows. Therefore to perceive the atmosphere of the place one should follow one of the given rhythm.

Distinguishing observer/actor perspective gives possibility to study repetitive aspects and variations in rhythm. As “there is no identical absolute repetition indefinitely [...] there is always something new and unforeseen that introduces itself into the repetitive”,²⁵ improvisation is an inevitable element of rhythm-

analysis. Rhythm forms the background for it, provides audio and image textures.²⁶ For example, an audio texture is a set of repetitive sound elements, randomly organized, but in the same time it preserves a temporal and spectral coherence (rain, traffic, voices, doors clapping). Unforeseen elements, changes in the rhythm may be caused by outer circumstances or by improvisation of passer-by. The first allows to identify how power of norms and institutions is instantiated in non-reflexive, normative practices but also side-stepped, resisted and supplemented by other dimensions of everyday experience. The second means the possibility of invention and innovation through exploration, allows to conjuring up a personal world with its own atmosphere.

This is the other difference where observer/actor perspective matters. It indicates the ability to manipulate the rhythm. For the observer there are available the options of distinguishing, classification and pointing out the violations of rhythm, whereas for the actor it is possible also to manipulate with it, use it as a background for improvisation. Pedestrian might attune oneself with auditory rhythms both of surrounding sounds and musical rhythms of personal stereo, or simply tap melody. In each case the body obtain its *self-defined choreography* that generates “links, stoppages, bolts and rivets to the existing architecture of time and space”.²⁷ That opens for analysis new perspective of embodied perception and of considering rhythm as a sequence of repetition and improvisation.

The Self and the Other in Rhythm Perception

The study of improvisation from the actor’s perspective refers us to individual experience. The important note should be made is that observer/actor dichotomy should not be mixed with individual/intersubjective one. This question was formulated by Lefebvre as the problem of the rhythm of the self and of the Other. The latter presupposes the activities turned outward, towards the public, the rhythms of representation, more contained, more formalized, whereas the

²¹ Jacques Teller, Des ambiances au territoire [From ambiances to territories], in: Ambiances.net, Editon°2, 2008/09/25 <http://www.ambiances.net/index.php/fr/editos/51-des-ambiances-au-territoire> (Consulté le 23/02/2012).

²² Alexander Filippov, Sociology of space (in Russian), Moscow 2007, 200-201.

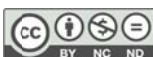
²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Filipa Matos Wunderlich, Walking and Rhythmicity: Sencing the Urban Space in Journal of Urban Design 13(1). 2007, 37-38.

²⁵ Henri Lefebvre, (see note 3), 6.

²⁶ see Ben hadj salem, Mohsen, Le signal sonore et ses textures: une contribution à la caractérisation des ambiances urbaines [The sound signal textures: a contribution to characterize urban atmospheres]. Ambiances.net, Editon°22, 2009/10/23 <http://www.ambiances.net/index.php/fr/editos/121-le-signal-sonore-et-ses-textures-une-contribution-a-la-caracterisation-des-ambiances-urbaines> (Consulté le 24/02/2012).

²⁷ Brandon Labelle, (see note 15), 190.



rhythms of the self are associated to deeply inscribed regularities, organization of time towards private life, more silent and intimate conscious forms. The self and the Other are not cut off from each other. Their distinction is close to phenomenological differentiation of natural attitude and reflective position of subject. That means that both actor and observer might take individual or intersubjective perspective of experiencing the outer environment. What is important for rhythmanalysis is how individually perceived spatial qualities, sensations and habits are organized in social time of quotidian regularities. Doing so, it becomes a useful tool for explorations of everyday temporal structures and processes that (re)produce connections between individuals and the social.

Places and Territories

At the beginning there was stated that rhythm as temporal characteristic becomes a universal tool to explore different cityscapes. The question is how the place itself is defined? Whether the junction in Paris, Lefebvre refers to in his book, is limited by traffic lights or extended to a number of cars waiting their turn to keep on moving, or is limited by observer's visual field, or of his field of attention (e.g. governed by some event). The question of definition of what place is has long and various traditions of argumentation in phenomenology of space perception.²⁸ In the course of this work what is important is that rhythmanalysis gives possibility to speak of definition of the place in mobile perspective. It introduces the conception of place as essentially dynamic, part of the multiplicity of flows that emanate from, pass through and centre upon place, and contribute to its situated dynamics. That means that places as part of infinitely complex spatial networks.²⁹ For rhythmanalysis it poses the question of its applicability for a larger scales. For example, to speak of territorial rhythms. Initially rhythmanalysis deals with research of place with precise borders e.g. squares, public zones, road junctions, railway stations. Later it addressed the characteristics of urban spaces like urban blocks, places, large housing units. These infrastruc-

tures are characterised by a hybrid status, between public spaces and communication networks. What characterizes them is the homogeneous rhythm for the whole territory. For instance urban park will obtain the same rhythmicity of the whole territory. And feeling of being-in-the-park will be the same in every corner. Some authors go further, as Wunderlich³⁰ notes, the whole cities may be described by rhythmical activities. They may be perceived as fast or slow. Fast cities may be represented as complex, busy, agitated, and their everyday social life portrayed as repetitive, accelerated and homogenized. In contrast, slow cities might be conceived as quiet and ordered, their everyday life patterned and distinct. This shift of the perspective means changing the object of analysis, its growth from the scale of place to city-scale. To study how rhythms of different places form the entire city rhythm and set it perception and apprehension is an interesting task for further studies.

Conclusion

Rhythmanalysis was considered to be in the list of one of the most effective tools for new urbanism. It offers temporally-structured and embodied view on everyday city life. At the same time it allows to study urban realms (such as mobility places) that for a long time were out of researchers' attention. Trying to understand what rhythmanalysis as a method looks like, I turn to discussion of researcher's perspective and how its interpretation by Lefebvre opens the new spheres of everydayness for analysis, especially for studying non-material aspects of the rhythm, such as atmosphere, repetition and improvisation. However, article deals with theoretical insights that form the fruitful background for an urban analysis.

²⁸ For detailed description see: Edward Casey, *Getting Back Into Place: Towards a Renewed Understanding of the Place-world*, Bloomington 1993.

²⁹ Doreen Massey, *The Conceptualization of Place*, in: Doreen Massey/Pat Jess (eds.), *A Place in the World? Places, Cultures and Globalization*, London 1995.

³⁰ Filipa Matos Wunderlich, *The Aesthetics of Place-temporality in Everyday Urban Space: the Case of Fitzroy Square*, in: Tim Edensor (ed.), *Geographies of Rhythm. Nature, Place, Mobilities and Bodies*, Farnham-Surrey 2010, 45.

