

# RHYTHMANALYSIS

Place, Mobility, Disruption and  
Performance

**Edited by** Dawn Lyon

RESEARCH IN  
URBAN SOCIOLOGY

**VOLUME 17**

# RHYTHMANALYSIS

# RESEARCH IN URBAN SOCIOLOGY

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# **RHYTHMANALYSIS: PLACE, MOBILITY, DISRUPTION AND PERFORMANCE**

EDITED BY

**DAWN LYON**

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Finally, I hope that readers enjoy this lively exploration of rhythm and find within it some novel ways of grasping everyday urban life.

Dawn Lyon  
30 April 2021.

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# INTRODUCTION: RHYTHM, RHYTHMANALYSIS AND URBAN LIFE

Dawn Lyon

## STARTING POINTS: GETTING INTO RHYTHM

I'm sitting on a train heading into London, lucky to get a window seat. It's a high-speed line and the green of the south east England countryside is a blur. This makes it hard to see the criss-crossing of tracks and roads, this infrastructure of commuting and economic development, that converge towards the city. I feel slightly nauseous if I look at something close to the line. Best to focus on the distance. The rhythms of train travel familiar to me from a childhood spent in the 1970s are my reference point, that 'chuggity-chug' motion of wheels on the track. Speed is relative, of course. Still, the singularity of the high-speed whoosh makes me want to hold my breath as the train tears into a tunnel under the River Thames and then bursts out into the capital. This is the part I like, as the rhythms of the city reveal themselves in turn. I notice the building sites of north east London, the flows or 'circuits' of capital and power that underpin the latest surge of construction. At Stratford International, the smooth turning of the escalators carries passengers from platforms carved deep into the ground up into the station and the nearby shopping centre – the rhythms of consumption are never far in the city. As the train pulls away again, I catch a glimpse of people grouped at bus stops or crossings, the rhythms of vehicles, diverse bodies and the fabric of the street intersecting with one another. After another stretch underground, we approach St Pancras and everything slows down. There's always a short wait ahead of the end of the line, a welcome pause. People meander along the canal path occasionally looking up at the new apartment blocks built within nineteenth century cast-iron gasholders, while longboats await repair and a small nature reserve is a hive of unseen activity against a backdrop of controversial regeneration. Suddenly we are in the station, this grand site of modernity. The train doors open and the crowd moves briefly en masse. Then the 'invisible ties' of the

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Rhythmanalysis

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journey are gone (Felder, 2020) as people shift into different rhythms and relations. I register the scattering of passengers and think how rhythm is both felt in the body and is out of sight, and I go on my way too. (I could stay in the station at this point, listening for the rhythms of the space, following George Revill (2013) or attending to atmosphere with Paul Simpson (2014) but perhaps I should move on.)

Urban life is inherently rhythmic. It is composed of movements in time and space, human and non-human comings and goings, synchronised calendars and chance encounters, objects and materials in place or in motion. It is shaped by the repetition of day and night and the changing light of the seasons and the mood of the weather, the algorithmic sequencing of information and communication technologies and the material infrastructures and flows of electricity, gas and water. Across its sights, sounds, colours and smells, the city is a sensory jumble. This book explores the rhythms of the city on the one hand and what it means to research urban life through the lens of rhythm on the other. The vignette of my train journey not only presents a particular itinerary into the city, its ecology and culture, connected to specific histories, urban policies, finance and current global positioning (as well as my own biography) but also shows that lived rhythms of all kinds animate the everyday life of the city. Some rhythms obscure others or they come in and out of view. They repeat and they deviate from one another. Whatever the configuration and complexity of a city and the mix of social, political, cultural and economic structures that run through it, this book seeks to demonstrate that the analysis of rhythm – or rhythmanalysis – offers a rich conceptual and methodological direction for urban sociology and the study of urban life more generally.

The point of departure of this edited collection is the contribution of the philosopher, literary critic, sociologist and urban studies scholar Henri Lefebvre and his collaborator (and wife) Catherine Régulier to ‘rhythm thinking’ (Crespi & Manghani, 2020). Together they developed the concept of rhythmanalysis as both a tool and object of analysis (Elden, 2004). *Éléments de rythmanalyse: introduction à la connaissance des rythmes* was published in French in 1992 in the year following Lefebvre’s death, under his name despite including two essays that were co-authored with Régulier (1985/2004a, 1986/2004b) (more on that later). This work built on an earlier notion of rhythmanalysis which distinguished between material, biological and psychological rhythms. It was proposed by the Portuguese philosopher Lúcio Alberto Pinheiro dos Santos (1889–1950) in his 1931 book, *Ritmanálise* which has since been lost. Lefebvre and Régulier took inspiration from French philosopher Gaston Bachelard’s (1884–1962) (1936/2000) discussion of the concept until, in their own work, the rhythmanalytical project ‘emerges bit by bit from the shadows’ (Lefebvre, 1992/2004, p. 9).

In *Rhythmanalysis*, Lefebvre and Régulier argue that the monotonous, quantified ‘linear’ time of capitalism is eclipsing the ‘cyclical’ time of nature, the seasons and the body. Capitalism’s colonisation of different spheres of life, notably through consumption, meant that it had come to dominate what Lefebvre called ‘la vie quotidienne’ or everyday life (1947/1961/1981/2014). Lefebvre used the term everyday life to talk about the extent to which capitalism

had ‘invaded’ even ‘crushed’ routine practices in all spheres of cultural and social life, especially in the city as leisure and rest – as well as work – became subject to the same spatiotemporal logics of capitalist accumulation. If Lefebvre overstates the elision of linear time with capitalism (Simpson, 2008), there is no need to think of them in oppositional or dualistic terms. Indeed, cyclical and linear rhythms are nevertheless always in tension, interfering or interacting with one another, resulting in ‘compromises’ or ‘disturbances’ (Lefebvre, 2004, p. 8). For rhythm to arise, there needs to be ‘difference’ as well as repetition. On its own, repetition is an unchanging sameness as in ‘the fall of a drop of water, the blows of a hammer, the noise of an engine and so on’ (Lefebvre & Régulier, 1985/2004a, p. 76). Difference is what makes rhythm possible as ‘something new and unforeseen that introduces itself into the repetitive’ (Lefebvre, 2004, p. 6). And in these ‘cracks’ there is also the potential for social transformation. Perhaps part of the appeal of rhythmanalysis for understanding urban life lies in its dual recognition of both the ordering impulses of capitalism and the liveliness of the city and the possibility of tuning into this polyrhythmic composition to use it as a ‘generative and creative force’ (Smith & Hetherington, 2013, p. 6).

The publication of *Rhythmanalysis* is often thought of as completing Lefebvre’s hitherto three-volume *Critique of Everyday Life*, explicitly bringing temporality into his scholarship concerned with space and politics. However, although rhythm is often treated as a temporal concept, for Lefebvre and Régulier, it captures how space and time fold together. The impact of the book in the Anglophone academy was only really felt following its translation as *Rhythmanalysis, Space, Time and Everyday Life* into English in 2004, which has reinvigorated interest in Lefebvre, giving him something of an ‘afterlife’ (Elden, 2006). The story now appears to have come full circle in the republication of the original book in French in 2019, retitled as *Éléments de rythmanalyse et autres essais sur les temporalités* (along with renewed attention to Lefebvre’s work in France more generally (Le Roulleu, 2021)).

In the meantime, the field has been growing. Rhythm is making a ‘return’ following its popularity in the early twentieth century (Henriques, Tianen, & Väliaho, 2014, p. 3). The recent publication of Paola Crespi and Sunil Manghani’s edited collection *Rhythm and Critique: Technics, Modalities, Practices* and Vincent Barletta’s *Rhythm: Form & Dispossession*, both in 2020, demonstrate the ‘capacity’ of rhythm as a subject of study, a tool of critique, an object of analysis and a site of imaginative thinking across different disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. Both books include fascinating and instructive genealogies of the idea of rhythm which explore the long-standing tensions between rhythm as flow and as measure. For Barletta, rhythm is

...a powerful force that holds us in place and shapes the foundations upon which we and our world ultimately rest. Rhythm speaks, one might say, (to) the very conditions of our being in the world. (Barletta, 2020, p. xviii)

In *Rhythm and Critique*, Pascal Michon (2020) explores rhythm as a new kind of paradigm, an alternative to structure or system in the humanities and social sciences. His *Elements of Rhythmology* (2017–2019) and his *Rhuthmos* website

([www.rhuthmos.eu](http://www.rhuthmos.eu)) (where all his work is available) are a huge contribution to the ‘emerging field’ of ‘rhythm studies’ (Crespi & Manghani, 2020, p. 4).

Rhythmanalysis has had greatest impact in urban sociology, urban studies, geography and the field of mobilities studies. But it has been taken up beyond these areas, including in dance and performance studies – a field already profoundly concerned with rhythm – (Morris, 2017), education (Alhadeff-Jones, 2017; Vostal, 2016), fiction (Christiansen & Gebauer, 2019), poetry (Glaser & Culler, 2019), theology (Eikelboom, 2018), work and organisation (Cahit Agar & Manolchev, 2020; Snyder, 2016), consumption (Southerton, 2020) and algorithmic technologies (Coletta & Kitchin, 2017). Whilst the concept of rhythmanalysis was developed with reference to cities in the global North in the twentieth century, it also resonates beyond these contexts in time and space to grasp the dynamism and diversity of ‘small’ (Ocejo, Kosta, & Mann, 2020) and ‘ordinary’ (Robinson, 2006) cities, and further research in these contexts might lead to the reformulation of rhythmanalysis (see Cook, 2015; Kern, 2015; Meij, Haartsen, & Meijering, 2021; Stasik, 2017). The insights into AbdouMaliq Simone’s (2018) work on practices of *living with* the urban in the global south have already brought into view the ‘rhythms of endurance’ and resourcefulness that exist in African and Asian cities.

## WORKING WITH RHYTHM TO ‘GRASP’ URBAN LIFE

If rhythm is making waves, the opening statement by Thierry Paquot (2019, p. 151) in the Postface of the new French edition nevertheless claims that rhythmanalysis still does not have the intellectual recognition it deserves. In their introduction to a special issue of *The Sociological Review* on ‘Urban Rhythms’ published in 2013, Rob Smith and Kevin Hetherington argue that ‘a critical consideration of rhythm allows for an understanding of the contemporary urban era that distinguishes it from those of the past’ (2013, p. 5). Yet they comment that the ‘mobilities turn’ rather than rhythm per se has had the greatest impact in urban studies (2013, p. 11). Perhaps this is now changing.

The impact of the global coronavirus pandemic since 2020 has generated renewed recognition of the significance of rhythm in everyday life at different scales, from concerns about the future of city centres (e.g., Nathan & Overman, 2020) to the impact of disruption to sleep during lockdown living (e.g., Mandelkorn et al., 2021; see also Rinkart, 2020). Cities across the globe have witnessed huge changes to the pulse of urban life. At times, the rhythms of commuting have slowed or disappeared entirely and urban spaces dominated by office blocks have been emptied out as large numbers of people worked from home. At the same time, hospitals, always important nodes in cross-cutting urban rhythms, have been sites of the intensification of the rhythms of work and care, evident in queues of ambulances on adjoining streets and the marks left by personal protective equipment on the faces and flesh of medical staff. In some places, images of roaming wildlife in city centres under curfew have captured people’s attention as both as being ‘out of place’ and for signalling changes in the mixing of human and non-human across day and night. Elsewhere, geographies

of everyday life have shrunk as people in densely populated slum areas have been obliged to stay inside (Eiril, 2020). All the while, new rhythms and routines have taken shape via digital connections.

This ‘surfacing’ of rhythm in everyday life is powerful; it makes apparent what is sometimes, difficult to grasp, the ‘haunting’ and thereby elusive quality of rhythm (Crespi & Manghani, 2020, p. 16). Rhythm feels relevant as people articulate connections between the taken-for-granted rhythms of life before COVID and the dissembled patterns of work, care and social contact during the pandemic. Perhaps rhythmanalysis is an effective tool for making sense of the present pandemic moment, and urban life more generally, in part because it can be used as a middle-range concept (Stewart, 2014, p. 551), an attunement that connects the intimate to the global. Thinking with rhythm illuminates the ordinary details of everyday life *and* the distant forces that shape them (Amin & Thrift, 2002, 2017). It stimulates working across these scales, bringing the macro and the micro into a conversation of sorts, body and economy alongside one another.

Lefebvre’s influence on contemporary understanding of the city is extensive – although the concept of the city and its symbolic or material boundaries are by no means settled – and his attention to process rather than form in urban life remains hugely significant (Leary-Ohwin & McCarthy, 2019). His conceptualisation of space as a triad has inspired numerous studies which contrast official ‘representational spaces’ with the lived ‘spaces of representation’. They further explore how space is produced through the conceived and the lived in interaction with routines of ‘spatial practice’. Geographer and urban theorist, Ed Soja, brought attention to Lefebvre’s spatial triad in his development of ‘third space’ (1996) as one which includes both real and imagined spaces. Lefebvre’s highly influential formulation of the ‘right to the city’ emphasises collective power to change the process of urbanisation, to remake the city and the self in the process. These ideas which were originally published in 1968 as *Le Droit à la Ville* (published in English in *Writings on Cities* in 1968/1995) chime with geographer David Harvey’s thinking in *Social Justice and the City* (1973) on the importance of a specifically urban revolution and Harvey was also key in disseminating Lefebvre’s ideas in the Anglo-American academy (Harvey, 1991; Merrifield, 2006, p. 102). More recently, Lefebvre’s work has stimulated debates about ‘planetary urbanisation’ (Brenner & Schmid, 2015) which recognises the relevance of urbanisation across a global scale and the presence of the urban in spaces often assumed to be separate and distanced from the city.

However, the contribution of Lefebvre is widely associated with questions of urban political economy rather than the lived experience of the urban. Indeed, Farrington (2021) argues that there has been an overemphasis on the political-economic dimensions of Lefebvre’s work that deal with capital and state power – notably in how it has been popularised by the geographer David Harvey (although see Leary-Ohwin & McCarthy, 2019 for more in-depth discussion) – at the expense of a more embodied and intimate knowledge of rhythm, space and the everyday. Interesting, in their 2019 publication of *The Routledge Handbook of Henri Lefebvre, The City and Urban Society*, Leary-Ohwin and McCarthy situate

sensory approaches to understanding urban life and rhythm analysis within their conceptualisation of a ‘third wave’ of Lefebvrian scholarship which includes empirical studies of cities, largely inspired by *The Production of Space*, rather than as a separate strand of work. (Leary-Ohwin and McCarthy’s first and second waves are theoretical and biographical, respectively, the fourth combining theory and empirical research.) There is already a considerable literature that uses rhythm analysis to offer ‘situational knowledge about the complexities and potentialities of space as it is experienced in real time’ (Farrington, 2021, p. 939). [Monica Degen’s \*Sensing Cities\* \(2008\)](#) is a key reference here in which she explores urban regeneration in Barcelona and Manchester as a social, economic and political process and a profoundly sensory experience.

The collections by [Edensor \(2010\)](#) and [Smith and Hetherington \(2013\)](#) show the insight and interest of working with rhythm and rhythm analysis as a lens and practice for comprehending contemporary urban life. A rhythm analysis of the city involves ‘an attention to the everyday entanglements of motion of bodies and objects, space and time which both shape and emerge from the urban quotidian’ ([Smith & Hetherington, 2013](#), p. 11). While doing rhythm analysis includes identifying rhythms that might be hidden from view, it offers much more than this. It involves thinking with rhythm as a critical concept and practice to trace how rhythm produces urban experience – and may be used to achieve social change at different scales. As such, rhythm can contribute to and complicate broader debates and challenges to the framing of the social, cultural and economic life of cities. It was already present in classical urban sociology. For Georg Simmel (1858–1918), in his famous essay on the ‘Metropolis and Mental Life’ written at the beginning of the twentieth century, the incessant change of the city creates an unbearable and unsettling intensity to the rhythm and atmosphere of urban space despite the attractions of its freedoms ([Simmel, 1903/2002](#)). It is one that it is possible to learn and adapt to – a process Lefebvre would later call ‘dressage’, a kind of bodily entrainment arising from the necessity ‘to bend oneself (to be bent) to its [the city’s] ways’ from which habit takes hold as ‘dressage fills the place of the unforeseen’ ([Lefebvre, 2004](#), pp. 39–40). For Simmel, a ‘blasé’ attitude of indifference is necessary to cope; a calculative stance against the rationality of capitalism and the coldness of clock time – Lefebvre’s ‘linear time’. In what feels like a prescient reflection in the light of the coronavirus pandemic and its loosening of a collective temporal infrastructure, Simmel wonders what might happen: ‘If all the watches in Berlin suddenly went wrong in different ways even only as much as an hour...’ (1903/2002, p. 13).

Today, the urban (and the social more generally) is often cast in terms of speed and acceleration ([Rosa, 2005/2013](#)). Against this tendency, Sarah Sharma has argued that lived time or temporality rather than speed offers greater ‘insight into the politics of time and space ushered in by global capitalism’ and can ‘make visible the entangled and uneven politics of temporality’ (2014, pp. 4–6). If the ‘complexity of lived time is absent’ from analyses that focus on the general acceleration of everyday life, Sharma’s own work shows how time and bodies are ‘differentially valued and made productive for capital’ in the everyday life of the city (2014, p. 14; see also [Wajzman & Dodd, 2017](#)). For instance, she discusses

how taxi drivers ‘recalibrate’ their bodies to maintain the time of others (Wajcman & Dodd, 2017, p. 20) and feel the effects of their work as ‘cab lag’ (akin to jet lag). Furthermore, their ‘temporal labour’ means they are working ‘within a temporal infrastructure whilst being cast outside of it’ (Wajcman & Dodd, 2017, p. 57). Interestingly, neither Sharma’s book *In the Meantime* (2014) nor Judy Wajcman and Nigel Dodd’s *The Sociology of Speed* (2017) pays direct attention to rhythmanalysis, at least in name – although there is common ground in Sharma’s notion of temporality and rhythm as discussed here. Furthermore, rhythm’s recognition of the ebb and flow of the everyday adds nuance to narratives of ‘suspended time’ or an ‘extended present’ (Nowotny, 1996) against their flattening tendencies. The ‘vocabulary’ of rhythmanalysis elucidates the spatio-temporal intricacies of lived experience and offers a means to explore and critique the social (Lyon, 2019). This may be especially important in relation to how we come to make sense of the experience of ‘lockdown’ during, in Lefebvre’s terms, the present ‘moment’ of the pandemic and the imagined possibilities of different everyday rhythms into the future. Indeed, I hope this collection will be illuminating for students and established scholars trying to make sense of the impact of the pandemic across different fields of research and who may be drawn to rhythmanalysis to do so.

## THE POSSIBILITIES OF RHYTHMANALYSIS

In the preceding section, I make the case for rhythm as valuable tool for understanding urban life. I briefly situate rhythmanalysis in relation to Lefebvre’s urban scholarship more generally and make connections to current research about time, the city and modernity. In this section, I consider rhythmanalysis in more detail. First, I give greater context to its development. I then discuss the ways it has been interpreted and deployed within and beyond urban research. I identify five ‘possibilities’ of rhythmanalysis. Following on from this, in the next section, I outline the scope and contributions of this book to further developing rhythmanalysis.

The idea of rhythmanalysis starts to emerge in Lefebvre’s writings in ‘The Theory of Moments’ in the second volume of *Critique of Everyday Life*, originally published in 1961: ‘We will look closely at results of interactions between cyclic rhythms and linear (discontinuous or continuous) time scales in the everyday’ to propose ‘a rhythmology or a sociological “rhythmanalysis”’ (2014, p. 526). The following decade, in *The Production of Space*, published in French in 1974, he suggests that ‘it is possible to envision a sort of “rhythm analysis” which would address itself to the concrete reality of rhythms’, in which the body is central (1991, p. 205). This is further developed in a short section on ‘Space and Time’ in Volume Three of *Critique of Everyday Life* originally published in 1981 where he proposes ‘a new science’, situated ‘at the juxtaposition of the physical, the physiological and the social, at the heart of daily life’ (2014, p. 802) – an evident debt to Pinheiro dos Santos (McCormack, 2013, p. 42).

Living from 1901 to 1991, Henri Lefebvre witnessed the social changes of the twentieth century first-hand. He spent his early years in south west France, steeped in the cyclical rhythms of agrarian life and ‘natural’ time and was shocked by the fragmentation and alienation of the industrialised consumerist society he saw taking shape in France, notably in the construction new town of Moux near to his familial home of Navarrenx. Being a young philosopher meant being engaged in politics – in theory with Marx and in practice with the French Communist Party – and all the major avant-garde movements of the time, from Surrealism to Situationism. It was much later in his life at the age of 60 that he took up a formal position in the academy, first at Strasbourg and then Nanterre (Merrifield, 2006). The role of Catherine Régulier in the development of rhythmanalysis is unclear. She married Lefebvre in 1978 at the age of 21 and the timing of the publication of the two essays on rhythmanalysis which were jointly authored by Lefebvre and Régulier (1985/2004a, 1986/2004b) suggests her contribution was fundamental: ‘Le projet rythmanalytique’ was first published in 1985 and ‘Essai de rythmanalyse des villes méditerranéennes’ in 1986. They had previously worked together, in particular on a book that took the form of a dialogue between them: *La révolution n’est pas ce qu’elle était* (1978) (Merrifield, 2004). However, in the republication of *Eléments de Rhythmalyse* in French in 2019, there is an acknowledgement which thanks Catherine Régulier for her cooperation and trust in the republication project but evidently led to no overall change in authorship of the original idea.

If Lefebvre defines rhythmanalysis as ‘a method and a theory’ (2004, p. 16) with an ambition ‘to found a new science, a new field of knowledge: the analysis of rhythms’, in practice, it follows the follows the ‘more philosophical method’ (Merrifield, 2004, pp. 3–5) albeit one that is intertwined with historical examples and empirical observations, most famously from his Parisian balcony but also in the exploration of Mediterranean cities he undertakes with Régulier. The vocabulary of rhythmanalysis the book offers is powerful. *Eurhythmia* refers to smoothly combined rhythms which can also take the form of *isorhythmia* when they are perfectly in tune such as in the ‘remarkable’ coordination of an orchestra ‘under the direction of the conductor’s baton’ (Merrifield, 2004, p. 68). Discordance is captured by *arrhythmia*. Each of these terms refers to relations between rhythms as ‘The everyday reveals itself to be a *polyrhythmia* from the first listening’ (Merrifield, 2004, p. 16, emphasis added). However, rhythmanalysis has exceeded the directions Lefebvre and Régulier’s set out as researchers have worked with it across different fields and registers.

The history of rhythm is an object of enquiry in its own right. For instance, in Vincent Barletta’s book, *Rhythm, Form & Dispossession* (2020), the discussion pivots on three key moments that allow him to explore the history of rhythm ‘as an object of critical enquiry’ (Barletta, 2020, p. xiii). In much research, there is a tendency to position rhythm as a ‘*subject of investigation*’ or an *object of analysis* (Crespi & Manghani, 2020, pp. 6–7) to identify and trace particular rhythms. This first strand of work deliberately disentangles specific rhythms from their polyrhythmic constellations to explore what they do, in the city, on the street or in the household. To take an example, in their analysis of the Berlin marathon,