

# Peripheral Rhythmicities

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**Abstract :** *In this paper I want to propose, from the vantage point of an experimental artist/composer, perceptual strategies focusing on the often ephemeral and unobtrusive spatio-temporal rhythmicities that nevertheless contribute to the quality of life in a settlement. The main points of reference are R. Murray Schafer's concepts of "hi-fi and lo-fi soundscapes", which here become "hi-fi and lo-fi environments", i.e. are extended to include also non-sonic phenomena, and Torsten Hägerstrand's "Bounded region" as the object of observation. It is suggested that the possibility of perceiving spatio-temporal micro-rhythmicities in a neighborhood and of relating to them not only increases the aesthetic quality of the area, but may help inhabitants in 'tuning in' to each other. The paper concludes with a brief report on workshops dealing with collective explorations of event density and diversity and micro-rhythms in the small and 'forgotten' city-quarter of Stufels (Brixen), in South-Tyrol, inhabited not only by German- and Italian-speaking locals, but also by immigrants from Eastern Europe and Africa.*

## Lefebvre at the window

In the first page of chapter 3. of his *Rhythmanalysis*, "Seen from the Window" Henri Lefebvre writes that "... to grasp a rhythm it is necessary to have been *grasped* by it; one must *let oneself go*, give oneself over" [1]. We may interpret this passage as meaning that you have to be available and ready, in your mind, emotions and body, for entrainment. Probably Lefebvre was not acquainted with the term, but he certainly knew the experience [2].

In the social sciences, where it was introduced by Josef McGrath and Janice Kelly [3] and related areas, for instance for therapeutic applications [4], entrainment appears to be studied primarily in controlled and/or easily monitored contexts.

Here, on the contrary, we are concerned with the more subtle, usually subconscious and ephemeral forms of entrainment taking place not in more or less standard work situations of organizations – which have been the focus in most studies – or in the restricted patient / therapist relation, but in the spatially and socially peripheral situations where persons are not under the pressure of having to accomplish something and therefore may be readier "to let go", sometimes even without realizing it.

Furthermore here we exclude those situations in which entrainment is the collectively agreed upon

*raison d' être* of a recreational social event, such as a dance.

It is suggested that the forms of entrainment hinted at above are a so far rather overlooked, yet important factor for social cohesion and thus would deserve more attention. Being, as was already mentioned, of a volatile nature, they and the conditions in which they may take place need perhaps to be examined from new disciplinary vantage points.

## Density and Diversity

Im Sehen erfassen wir

das Skelett der Dinge,

im Hören ihren Puls

Erwin Straus [5]

The Canadian composer, R. Murray Schafer, founder of Soundscape Studies, introduced the terms “hi-fi soundscape” and “lo-fi soundscape” [6]. According to Schafer, hi-fi soundscapes are those in which there is a relatively low background noise, and therefore the individual sound events do not mask each other, we are able to follow sound events perceptually from onset to decay, we can easily locate the source of sound events, and we have an extended auditory range. In a lo-fi soundscape, on the contrary, we have an elevated level of background noise, sound events compete with each other (with the loudest ones obviously winning over the weaker ones), and we are able to hear only the sounds close to us and rarely their complete envelope.

Schafer himself and the, by now, numerous groups around the world devoted to the study of the characteristics of the sounds around us, have so far stressed mainly the superior aesthetic quality of hi-fi soundscapes and their beneficial effects on individual well-being and thus indicated them as a goal in urban planning and related fields for these reasons. Less emphasis has been put on considerations on how different kinds of soundscapes affect at least some aspects of the quality of social life in portions of settlements. Another researcher studying the sonic environment, in this case focusing on non-human species, Bernie Krause, has emphasized that diversity of events is also a relevant parameter of healthy sensory environments which enables the different species to find an appropriate niche for their various acoustic messages, niches that are more and more being filled by man-made noises [7].

We may extend the hi-fi /lo-fi concepts also to non-acoustic, but time-based phenomena, in other words to the events in the perception range of an observer/listener and their rhythmic and/or a-rhythmic structure. It is obvious that, even if you let go, you will have great difficulties in grasping a rhythm (to paraphrase Lefebvre’s words), if you are exposed to the onslaught of a mass of different, conflicting and only partially distinguishable events. In order to let go, to tune in, to get entrained you need not only to be able to recognize the kind of event you are seeing, hearing, feeling; you need

to be able to follow its temporal structure, possibly for its whole duration.

In our visually-dominated civilization we have to a large extent forgotten the ability of “letting go”, of being ‘with’ the events. “Visual perception, and the models related to it, were at the centre of the cultural development in the West” as Barbanti writes [8]. The eye is satisfied with the information about what there is there, and usually is not patient enough to let go and tune in. When we listen, on the contrary, we inevitably take part in the temporal structure of events which the ear is also much better equipped to grasp than the eye. Straus very drastically characterizes the difference between the two sensory modalities when he asserts that through seeing we grasp the skeleton of things, through hearing their pulse.

In my workshops dealing with the sensory exploration of environments I therefore encourage the participants to learn to ‘listen – also - with the eyes’.

## The bounded region

As a geographer, accustomed to viewing the world in terms of landscapes, I am inclined to focus on how phenomena behave – irrespective of where their normal disciplinary home is taken to be – because they are closely coexisting in space and time. If one is choosing this latter perspective, the first step of a study is not to select a particular phenomenon and investigate it wherever it occurs; nor is it to set up an experiment and try to isolate some relations in a highly controlled situation. The first step is to *define a bounded region and then accept what is found in it (including what is entering and leaving while observation is going on) as the given universe*. [9].

The ‘bounded region’ model offers a new and, as I will try to show, promising approach for evaluating the quality of life in sections of settlements. Usually that quality is assessed on the basis of the things that are there, various facilities (such as schools, pharmacies, etc.), efficient local transport, and so on. Hägerstrand, on the contrary, makes us look at, and listen to, the phenomena that ‘are coexisting closely in space and time.’ For the purpose of this paper we may identify ‘bounded region’ with the momentary perception range of an observer.

The extension of the spatial ‘window’, or perception range, depends on the size and disposition of the static spatial elements there.

Regarding the temporal ‘window’ things are a bit more complicated. We may consider the temporal characteristics of this window from the angle of the ‘when?’, the ‘how often?’, and the ‘for how long?’ The appropriate choice of the temporal loci (the ‘when?’ of our observation) may let us perceive, for instance, local circadian periodicities that are characteristic for the area and if these periodicities are not cancelled out by phenomena that follow other *Zeitgeber*, such as the onslaught of tourists who have, obviously, their very own schedules.

If we take an analytical look at this ‘coexisting’ we find that it may take many forms and have quite different durations. While buildings, say a coffee shop and a bank, usually coexist in space (and time)

for decades, if not more, the sounds of the steps of a person passing by slowly, and the intermittent appearances of a woman at a window will coexist in space and time only for a few minutes and probably never again in the same way. A sensitive observer, ready to “let go”, then may detect (or subjectively construct) temporal/rhythmic, but also visual/sonic/spatial interactions/correspondences/contrasts between the observed phenomena. As was discussed before, obviously you need a hi-fi environment to be able to observe and appreciate these coexistences.

I believe that for residents and visitors to be able to ‘let go’ and tune in, consciously or not, in these peripheral rhythmicities, not only allows them to participate more directly, but without an intentional effort, to the life of the area but it may also lower conflict potentials. This may sound like an audacious, if not straightforward utopian thesis, but perhaps the following short report about Stufels will make it appear somewhat less utopian.

## Stufels

This is not a formal case study, but a description of a short series of workshops that triggered some ideas about the theme of the conference.

Over the years I have led numerous workshops and seminars on the graphic representation of the spatio-temporal distribution of events. In some of them we adopted a more ‘objective’, quantitative approach, as in the study of different locations in a peripheral city quarter of Florence. The study was an assignment to architecture students and mainly intended to get them acquainted with the representation technique borrowed, with modifications, from the one developed by the time geographers of Lund. Thanks to the study we discovered, for instance, that a quite unattractive little square in the area was actually remarkably much used by the residents and was an important crossing point in their spatio-temporal patterns [[10](#)].

In other workshops the focus is on the subjective perception of the events in the observed “bounded region” [[11](#)]. This was the approach adopted for Stufels.

Stufels is a small historical quarter in the town of Brixen/Bressanone in South Tyrol, it is quiet and attractive. For some reasons it has been left out of the ‘development’ of the rest of the town, although you have only to cross a small bridge to reach it from the busy town centre filled with souvenir shops and the like where tourism booms all year round. It is rather cheap to live in Stufels, and so some immigrant families came to stay here. A group of local residents felt that the quarter did not deserve the oblivion, and succeeded in convincing the town’s administration to do something about it and in this context I was invited to hold my workshops on spatio-temporal observations.

The workshops had the following format: after a short introduction about the theoretical aspects (more or less what you have read above) and the instructions regarding the practical side, i.e. the succession of tasks, the participants wander briefly around until they find a place which they consider appropriate for their observations. At an agreed upon signal the observation period begins, usually of 3-4 minutes. Afterwards we gather again in the meeting place, participants are asked to draw a graphic ‘score’ of their observations. Obviously these graphs are not the main outcome of the workshops, but the task of having to organize mentally their perceptions in a form that would allow them to represent them graphically imposed a kind of discipline on the participants that would not have been there had they only been asked to give verbal accounts. The main result were the

comments and reflections about the quality of the neighborhood as it presented itself through the observation of the visual and acoustic events in their perception range and their spatio-temporal distribution.

In Stufels, as in other similar occasions, it was surprising to see that the participants, in a given observation period, would choose, in spite of the scarcity of events, different 'items' to be represented in the score. In the discussions there was an agreement that the quietness and low event density could result in a particular attractiveness for visitors who are sensitive to such qualities.

But the point that is mainly of interest in the context of this paper is that being able to listen to and watch the steps of a passer-by or to follow, through the windows of a nearby house, the cadence in the conversation of a mother with her child in a language unknown to you, brought about a feeling of belonging, be it only for some minutes, a kind of contact which would be difficult to create otherwise. Of course, to become entrained requires a certain time and a certain proximity in frequency, duration, speed and envelopes between the (potentially) entraining events and the (potentially) entrainable observers. You cannot "let go" in fractions of a second. Therefore it is easier to get entrained by the steps of a passer-by than by a car rushing past you at high speed. Likewise you are readier to get entrained by the 'human' articulation of a mother's conversation with her child with its pauses and varying envelopes than by the monotone, almost envelope-less and uninterrupted verbal utterances of a speaker in the media.

In some respects this work on neighborhoods is close to the researches and reflections on urban rhythms by Filipa Matos Wunderlich who has worked extensively on what she calls "place-temporality" [12]. But while Wunderlich is focusing on clearly identifiable, to some extent measurable and recurring elements that characterize a place, in my work I am more interested in the elements that may happen, or not, but create what could be called an atmosphere (in a way close to how Gernot Böhme uses the term [13]), or a context fraught with certain potentialities, but not others.

## **Conclusions**

I myself come from a bi-lingual area with a long record of political and cultural conflicts between the two groups, conflicts that have always been seasoned with a rich repertoire of outspoken or implicit prejudices, to a large extent originating in inappropriate ways of perceiving 'the others'. And I know very well that it can be hard to "let go" and grasp those sometimes alien rhythmicities.

Another obstacle consists in the predominance of lo-fi environments in present-day towns and cities, where often enough one has a hard time even to tune into one's own rhythms. Events are perceived only in fragments, their rhythmicities are not allowed to emerge, so toward what can you possibly let yourself go?

There is an increasing concern about noise pollution and efforts are being made in creating what is called "quiet areas" [14]. Now, quietness is certainly a social bonum of undeniable value, but I want to argue that it is equally urgent to find/establish and protect bounded regions with a hi-fi environment where, as I have tried to show, it is possible to become entrained to otherwise less acceptable rhythmicities.

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## Footnotes

- [1] Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*. London: Continuum 2004.
- [2] Entrainment has different meanings. Here it is used as pertaining to the semantic line going from physics (the pendulums studied by Huygens, which, although having slightly different frequencies became synchronized when hung from a common beam) to chronobiology (it occurs when rhythmic physiological or behavioral events match their period and phase to that of an environmental oscillation), to the social sciences.
- [3] Joseph E. Mc Grath & Janice R. Kelly *Time and Human Interaction. Toward a Social Psychology of Time*. New York: The Guildford Press 1986. Joseph E. McGrath (ed) *The Social Psychology of Time. New Perspectives*. Newbury Park: Sage Publications 1988.
- [4] Thaut MH, Kenneyon GP, Schauer ML, McIntosh GC "The connection between rhythmicity and brain function." *IEEE Eng Med Biol Mag*. 1999 Mar-Apr;18(2):101-8.
- [5] Erwin Straus *Vom Sinn der Sinne. Ein Beitrag zur Grundlegung der Psychologie*. Berlin: Springer 1956(2) , p. 398. (Through vision we grasp the skeleton of things, through listening their pulse).
- [6] R. Murray Schafer *Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*. Rochester ,Vt.: Destiny Books 1993/1994. See also <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/world-soundscape-project/> After some debate now we distinguish between "acoustic environment" which consists of the acoustic data that may be measured by technical devices also in the absence of a listener and thus convey purely quantitative results, and "soundscape" which is the sonic landscape which a listener constructs at a given moment with the sonic phenomena around him/her, according to his/her social and cultural background, personal preferences and idiosyncrasies and perceptual strategies. Therefore, while a given acoustic environment will remain substantially the same even when measured by different machines, soundscapes may vary greatly between different persons according to the fore-mentioned factors. See Albert Mayr ."Deux écologies pour les basses fréquences," *Sonorités* nr. 7, 2012, 33-46.
- [7] Bernie Krause *The Great Animal Orchestra. Finding the Origin of Music in the World's Wild Places*. New York: Little, Brown & Co. 2012.
- [8] Roberto Barbanti, Crisi e persistenza del modello retinico occidentale. Elementi per la definizione di un nuovo paradigma acustico. In A. Mayr (ed) *Musica e suoni dell'ambiente*. Bologna: CLUEB 2001, 41-69. (tr. mine)
- [9] Torsten Hägerstrand, Time Geography: Focus on the Corporeality of Man, Society, and Environment. In *The Science and Praxis of Complexity*. Tokyo: The United Nations University. 1985, 193-216.
- [10] See Albert Mayr .'Analisi spazio-temporale della zona del Terzolle' (with Marcello Archetti e Giorgio Pizziolo) in M. Archetti et al (a cura di) *Il centro storico di Perugia - percezione e mobilità*. Protagon, Perugia 1991, 117-154.
- [11] See Albert Mayr & Antonella Radicchi "Intermezzo: Time Walk" in D. Henckel et al (eds)

*Space-Time Design of the Public City*. Springer, Dordrecht 2013, 87-96.

[12] Filipa Matos Wunderlich “ Symphonies of Urban Places: Urban Rhythms as Traces of Time in Space. A Study of ‘Urban Rhythms’ ” [http://www.eki.ee/km/place/pdf/kp6\\_07\\_wunderlich.pdf](http://www.eki.ee/km/place/pdf/kp6_07_wunderlich.pdf); “The Aesthetics of Place-temporality in Everyday Urban Space: The Case of Fitzroy Square” In Tim Edensor (ed) *Geographies of Rhythm- Nature, Place, Mobility and Bodies*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd. 2010, 45-58.

[13] Gernot Böhme *Atmosphäre: Essays zur neuen Ästhetik*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1995.

[14] See, for instance, EEA (European Environment Agency) *Good practice guide on quiet areas*. Technical Report 4/2014.