

# Being in traffic: A rhythmanalysis of capitalist everyday life

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More than just an economic system, capitalism is intimately close to us, especially on the roads where we daily commute. Imagine you and your friend are out on a weekend stroll. The two of you are lost in an interesting conversation about each other's lives when, suddenly, a wave of traffic approaches and the roar of a delivery truck drowns out what  
5 your friend is saying. Slightly embarrassed about not being able to hear an important detail of the story, you beckon, 'sorry, I didn't quite catch what you were saying earlier. It's the traffic.' You wag your finger to point at the source of the disturbance that is no longer there. Yet its residue lingers among a sonic atmosphere that blends not only the noise of vehicles, but of a musical street performance, the hollering of cafe staff about a  
10 flat white order, and the continuous footsteps of *homo economicus* in their global value chains.

These are the sounds of urban economic activities. The bumptious engine of the truck that superimposes on your conversation does not appear out of nowhere. It is a reflection of a specific process: getting products to retail stores where they will be put on display  
15 for consumption. This whole auditory process operates on a normalised disregard for its environment and on an egotistical intent to jam through the business-to-business chorus. It is not just a random sonic fragment. For Henri Lefebvre, it is the rhythm of capitalism itself.

Lefebvre argues that by tuning into the rhythm, we can learn something about the  
20 way space is produced in capitalism. He calls this method 'rhythmanalysis', building on Marx's critical analysis of capitalism. Already in Marx, the creation of the traffic as a destruction of space by time to accelerate the flow of goods is mentioned.<sup>1</sup> Faster distribution means more profit. But his analysis relegates space to a passive dimension that is subject to the whims of capitalist production. Lefebvre brings our attention away  
25 from conceiving 'things in space' to that of the actual 'production of space' itself.<sup>2</sup> Space

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1. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* (London: Penguin Books with New Left Review, 1973; repr. Marxists Internet Archive, 2015), 449.

2. Andy Merrifield, 'Henri Lefebvre: A socialist in space', in Mike Crang and Nigel Thrift (eds), *Thinking Space* (Critical Geographies; London: Routledge, 2000), 167–82 at 172.

is shaped by the productive logic as much as it shapes the socioeconomic relations that reinforce this logic. Another influence on Lefebvre's musing about rhythms is Nietzsche, who highlighted the *Augenblick*, the instantaneous moment captured at the present as opposed to the Bergsonian focus on *durée* (duration) that emphasises continuous temporal and spatial flow devoid of any rupture.<sup>3</sup>

To explain further, it is helpful to point out how rhythmanalysis as a fieldwork method has been taken up by geographers to interrogate how certain aspects of socio-cultural life are organised. Monica Degen, for instance, vividly recounts her study of the El Raval neighbourhood in Catalonia. At the red-light district, the contradictions between cultural and commercial sites are juxtaposed.<sup>4</sup> Degen's research highlights the immediate and intimate moment that is often overlooked by a focus on large-scale trends or statistical analyses. By paying attention to the way a newly built contemporary art museum quickly gets overrun by local habitus, from people walking their dogs leaving poo on the floor, children appropriating it as a playground, to the homeless with their makeshift shelters, Degen emphasises the conflict between a modernist privileging of the visual represented by the architectural smoothness of the building and the sensory engagement of the locals who imprint upon it their particular sounds and smells.

Rhythmanalysts, in other words, throw themselves into the environment where their subjects of inquiry are constituted, recognising in themselves the perceptive instruments with which they detect how and why certain patterns manifest and repeat. To understand rhythms, Lefebvre underscores, 'one must let oneself go, give oneself over, abandon oneself to its duration.'<sup>5</sup> To walk through Sydney's Inner West and CBD is to set foot on paths delimited and made vivid only in those areas where cars, trucks and vans cannot travel. Even indoors, the whooshing sound of vehicles refuses to be kept out. To exist in a capitalist city, in other words, is to exist as a being-in-traffic.

In his analysis of the development of London's traffic during the interwar period, Richard Hornsey traces the birth of the pedestrian to the resignation of walking beings to the rhythms of automobiles.<sup>6</sup> While the invention of the road is particularly crucial for the maintenance of any civilisational order even before the advent of capitalism, with the dawn of modernity, roads were reimagined in width, surface, and distance. The creation of the boulevard invited the unprecedented scale and speed of horse carriages into, as poet Charles Baudelaire at the time observed, 'a moving chaos, with death galloping ... from

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3. Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, trans. Stuart Elden and Gerald Moore, with an introduction by Stuart Elden (London: Continuum, 2004), x.

4. Monica Degen, 'Consuming urban rhythms: Let's Ravalejar', in Tim Edensor (ed.), *Geographies of Rhythm: Nature, Place, Mobilities and Bodies* (London: Routledge, 2010), 21–31. DOI: [10.4324/9781315584430](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315584430).

5. Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 27.

6. Richard Hornsey, 'He who thinks, in modern traffic, is lost: Automation and the pedestrian rhythms of interwar London', in Tim Edensor (ed.), *Geographies of Rhythm: Nature, Place, Mobilities and Bodies* (London: Routledge, 2010), 99–112. DOI: [10.4324/9781315584430](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315584430).

every side.<sup>7</sup> But even then, there was still the possibility of walking around the carriages and struggling with the confusing disorder to assert the will to an identity. When the auto-  
 60 machines came into the scene and started racking up fatalities, the state had to step in and introduced new terms of engagement that have seen walkers confined to the footpaths.

That is where we are now. Being attentive to traffic noise, one hears more than the rapid whirr of wheels on the roads, but one's own participation in the song of labour that is instrumentally abundant and vocally ambitious. One's own body gears towards the  
 65 workplace, becoming one with the dictates of work: fighting the urge to sleep, betraying the brain signal that exhaustion is kicking in. Gestures and voice must be adjusted to fit one's role as an employer or employee, manager or managed.

According to Lefebvre, the flow of the everyday life is made up of cyclical and linear patterns. Cyclical because it follows the repetition of day and night, the change of seasons.  
 70 And linear as it drones on and on, like the constant banging of a hammer. Cyclical forces are natural, to be reckoned with, whereas linear rhythms are social, borne out of human practices. The traffic is the imposition of a linear pattern on the cyclical motion of a day's work. The route from one's house to the workplace is guaranteed by the state that ensures clearly designated street names, the collective participation in traffic laws including  
 75 a bureaucracy that guarantees driving skills, as well as the monotonous blinking of traffic lights, from red, yellow, green, to green, yellow, red.

The stability of the traffic constitutes, for Lefebvre, a polyrhythmic assemblage that includes all cyclical and linear rhythms relevant to sustaining capitalism through the maximisation of urban movement that carries out production, distribution and consumption.  
 80 When it works as it should, the assemblage remains in a state of health, or eurhythmia, like a fit body that contains enough energy to keep on moving, grinding. But when it destabilises, the flow becomes arrhythmic, sick and diseased. An accident would traumatically put an end to a commuter's linear journey, only to summon up the ambulance's siren. The road might be temporarily blocked, but the traffic rhythm, the rhythm of everyday cap-  
 85 italism, has already accounted for interruptions with the planned coordination of various state apparatuses—from the police to the paramedics—snapping into action to maintain the temporal reality of working hours.

It is difficult to deviate having once settled into a rhythm, especially when one's economic security depends on showing up to work on time. Which is why blocking traffic to  
 90 raise awareness on climate change has never been a popular move. As optically callous to the concerns of working people as it may appear, these activists understand that the mundanity and consistency of traffic is the principal cause of climate inaction. Having grasped how cyclical rhythms are being radically restructured by the climate crisis, they reclaim the roads in a desperate effort to confront the steady stream of business as usual

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7. Marshall Berman, *All that is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London: Penguin Books, 1988), 156.

95 with the urgent message of now: 'can't you see how the traffic's normative banality is a  
rhythm of slow and indirect planetary death, being gradually choked in carbon dioxide?  
Get out of it while we're not yet at the point of no return.'

But once again, the police siren blares, the cries of discontent muffled, and the health of  
traffic is restored. As the consequence of disrupting the M25 motorway in London, five Just  
100 Stop Oil campaigners were recently sentenced to harsh prison sentences of between four and  
five years.<sup>8</sup> The message from this controversial ruling is clear: the spatial production and  
reproduction of the roads as an integral conduit for the distribution of goods and services  
must be maintained by punitive institutions. As ruthless and persistent as rhythms are,  
they are always subject to change. When the arrhythmia or sickness becomes apparent  
105 from within the assemblage—resulting from significant climate disasters that send shock  
waves all over the global economy, bringing states into a crisis mode—opportunities become  
available for alternative rhythms to assert themselves.

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