

## Topologies of the City: Rhythms and Space in Mun Chee Yong's *9:30*

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### Abstract

We live in a world systematically split, like an orange, into time-space segments. Gauging the logic of such a system beyond its functional employment is the objective of this paper. The apparent disruption of the delicate relationship between physical distance and time, produced by new communication and transportation technologies have reshaped our understanding and experience of proximity and mobility.

This paper engages with Mun Chee Yong's *9:30* (2004). This will provide an arena for re-thinking the ways in which contemporary experience articulates time and space. Ours is neither a 'space of places,' nor a 'space of flows' (Castells). It moves neither to a singular universal beat, nor does it result in an immobilized network of instantaneous connections. Our spaces-times are composed of stoppages and flows; of hustle, bustle, and silences; encounters and estrangement; of corporeality and absence; of proximity, access and remoteness.

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"They say intensity is inversely proportional to the square of distance," reflects the protagonist of Mun Chee Yong's short-film *9:30* (2004). "I am in Los Angeles [she] is in Singapore, we are 14092.2 km apart. They say it is better to keep a safe distance. What is a

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safe distance?” he wonders as he lifts a payphone to call the woman he has travelled so far, and yet cannot manage, to escape. He has set his alarm to 6:30 pm Singapore time –or 9:30 am Singapore time, depending on where we decide to establish primary location. He knows that every morning at 9:30 am/6:30pm, the woman will be at her office in Singapore. He holds on, as do we all, to the many schedules, rhythms, and habits which rule his life and the lives of distant others. He lingers in a hostel in Hollywood Boulevard, his watch and his jetlagged body still set “on Singapore time.” Yes,” he admits to his lover over the phone, “I am still living in Singapore.”

In a world characterized by distanced relationships of interconnection, the ‘here’ and ‘now,’ the ‘distant’ and the ‘proximate,’ the ‘virtual’ and the ‘material,’ the ‘present’ and the ‘absent,’ the ‘local’ and the ‘global,’ fold into an ontology of location defined by multiple temporal orders of being and becoming which have profound implications for how we think of space, time, and place. For this reason, the XXIst century has seen a proliferation of theorists who develop ways of talking about space which hope to avoid falling back into a romanticized notion of place as the rooted, coherent, territorialized and necessarily bounded locus for identity-formation; rather seeking new ways of thinking of space and time in a way that permits new avenues for writing about globalization, and the relationships it creates – (Thrift and May 2001; Thrift, 2006; Massey, 2005; Amin 2002; Latour 2006). As Thrift points out, these approaches suggest “the possibility of a new a- wherenesses.” (Thrift 2006: 140) And, in doing so, I would add, a reconceptualization of time; leaving us all to wondering, what time is it there?

The purported disruption of the relationship between physical distance and time, produced by new communication and transportation technologies, along with the growing ease of travel and the expansion of migration patterns have, in many ways, reshaped our understanding and experience of what constitutes the ‘here and now’. In fact, the adoption of Universal Standard Time responded to the growing need for the spatiotemporal harmonization necessary to ensure the uninterrupted flow of goods, information, capital and people in an increasingly interconnected and ever-accelerating world. In this way, Time-zones purportedly provided a means by which time could be commodified and space could

be tamed. Space, in such a conception is imagined as a closed synchrony of relations –hence the allegations of depthlessness, instantaneity, and simultaneity, and homogenization which globalization will/have purportedly produce(d). Gauging the significance of such a system beyond its functional employment is the objective of my project.

If, as May and Thrift point out, the introduction of uniform public time constituted one of the most important temporal –and I would add spatial –adjustments of the modern era; the introduction of uniform universal time has redefined the ways in which we conceive of the ‘here’ and the ‘elsewhere,’ of the ‘local’ and the ‘global.’ Certainly, time-zones provide a new grammar through which to speak the world. Time-zones provide a structure of concatenations and relationships which serve to articulate contemporary urban experience. This has an impact on the ways in which we inhabit and appropriating our world; the way we ‘locate’ ourselves within it, and the way we articulate a way of *being* in the world.<sup>2</sup>

As any map does, a globe depicted as divided up into time-zones illustrates a way of conceiving and articulating the spatiotemporal realm. Time here is defined in terms of territorial coordinate, and space is defined in terms of standard time –regional, local, global. As in a traditional map, Los Angeles is *here*; Singapore is *there*. This, as Massey (2005) observes, is an imagination of space as surface, in which places are clearly demarcated and bounded; each cleanly set within its own time-zone in a billiard-ball world. Time-zones, after all, are clearly demarcated regions.

In this sense it could be argued that the time-zone map depicts and articulates predominant views regarding the implications and outcomes of globalization processes. There is a tendency in urbanization and globalization literatures to assume that communication and transportation technology -by radically intensifying the possibilities for human interaction across existing geographical and political divides (see Harvey 1989; Kern 1983) -provides the foundation for a world where distance can be overcome to the point of simultaneity, space offers itself up to the point of ubiquity, and the pace of contemporary

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<sup>2</sup> These transformations have produced extensive theory regarding the spatiotemporal logic and experience of late-capitalist urban space. The jostling crowds, the pedestrians –flâneurs, or blasé –the reification of official time, the hustle and bustle, and the degree of alienation, of acceleration and overload to which the urban dweller was thought to be constantly subjected are some of the most popular and recurrent themes in these discourses.

urban life speeds up to the point of an eventual instantaneity. Much of this literature has been imbued with a deep-set feeling of loss and nostalgia for the perceived disappearance of a world of interpersonal intimacy and local rootedness. For this reason, contemporary spatiotemporal configurations are seen as profoundly disruptive of traditional notions of time and space –and thus, of the tenets upon which such notions such as *place*, *history* and *identity* rest. Amin (2012) writes, “the anxiety of cohesion appears as a lament of lost heritage, weak social ties, waning local commitment and disappearing cultural homogeneity.” (Amin, 2012: Loc. 285).

This vision thinks the process of globalization as a closed synchrony of relations –a completely and instantaneously interconnected world. Space here is conceived as it would be on a time-zone map –space, not only as surface, but as the opposite of to time. (See Massey 2005) The modernist singular grand narrative is replaced by the imaginary of a closed network of interconnections –a replacement of a single time with no time. Such an account of globalization is underwritten by a notion of uniform time where “process” is expressed as a teleological, linear and self-contained plot, in which all rhythms are gathered up into an intelligible whole and subsumed to the reified uniform time of capitalism.<sup>3</sup> All these arguments, as Doreen Massey’s exhaustive analysis contends, assume the traditional territorially-bounded notion of place. No juxtapositions are possible, no coevalness. The near and the far, the side-by-side, the here and there, the accessible and the inaccessible, are all carefully defined and categorized.

The assumptions upon which these arguments are founded do not allow for the existence of singularity, or multiplicity within and between spatiotemporal configurations. In this sense, I argue, these approaches elude some of the most interesting issues regarding the dynamics of mobility, socialization and identity-formation produced by contemporary

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<sup>3</sup> Even in the early writings of Simmel, the reification of social time –which is equated with clock time –was seen as directly related to urban expansion that, in turn, resulted in that twentieth century spatiotemporal creation known as “the city.” Like Simmel, Winslow, and countless others, a great deal of cultural criticism has tended to concentrate on the reification of standard time as the fundamental system of order for modern life. (See Kern, 2003) On the other hand, Globalization processes too are posited as a single temporal linearity, which leads to a completely and instantaneously interconnected closed synchrony of relations –the time of homogeneous, synchronic time, the time of time-zones. As Massey (2005) points out, the shift from modernity and postmodernity is commonly posited as one from one history (progressive and teleological) to no histories (synchronic and depthlessness) where, as Osborn argues, synchrony is a-temporality (Osborn, 1995: 27).

spatiotemporal constructs. Reworking notion of space, time, and thus *place*, serves as an apt means of “repopulate[ing] cities, only too often stripped bare by the rush to produce theoretical order.” (Amin and Thrift, 2002: 4)

Certainly, as Massey vehemently argues, there is a long history of thinking space and time in this way. Yet, no more is the map the territory, as are time-keeping systems time. As all paradigms, time-zones can serve both to confirm and to challenge the assumptions upon which they are based. The ways in which we employ our conceptualizations of space and time in countless ways define how we engage with the world. They are a fundamental means through which we order the world, articulate our position within it, and in relations to others.

Indeed, the same system which depicts a world systematically split, like an orange, into time-space segments; may also serve as a salutary reminder of the coeval multiplicity of the world –it’s constitutive multiplicity of rhythms held together in a radical contemporaneity which together may constitute the ‘now.’ A world of time-zones, is also a world where on a Monday morning, we can talk to people who are still enjoying their Sunday evening; a system where airplane travel can steal away or add hours to our days and calendars. Indeed, such a system was instituted in order to organize and name a world where a growing number of coeval time-spaces interacted in a multitude of ways.

In *Rhythmanalysis*, Lefebvre pointed out that the “urban figure” exists within a multitude of spatiotemporal rhythms and paces. Urban experience can be thought of, not in terms of a single tempo –be this the metronomic beat of the clock or of the ‘computerized timetable’ “that exposes itself instantaneously,” as Virilio would have it (Virilio, 1997: 383) –but as a collection of different rhythms. Mike Crang suggests, “it may be we need to refigure the idea of the urban not as a singular abstract temporality but as the site where multiple temporalities collide.” (2001: 189) The world too, time-zones remind us, is a collection of different rhythms. Holding on to an appreciation of a world where some are waking, while others are getting ready for bed; holding on to the different private and public schedules through which we organize our lives; and recognizing that many of these schedules may

come from afar –hence the need for time-zones -means redefining our conception of space, place, and time.

The film's narrative time resists any sort of homogeneous linear temporality. Mun Chee Yong's film begins with the piercing and familiar sound of an alarm clock –the universal sound of waking, and the signal of the beginning of the day. It is however night-time in Los Angeles. The dusky light throughout the film contrasts with the rituals of waking, of breakfast and, in many instances of dialogue throughout the film -The man calls the woman 'at 9:30' because he knows, as he states, that she must be at her desk at "that time in the morning." And yet, in Los Angeles it is 6:30pm –perhaps, he isn't really sure; he hasn't changed the time on his clock yet. The precision and enumeration of temporal and spatial measurements, so persistent throughout the film, cannot hold on to a stable notion of 'being here-now' -we do not really know what time it is –or rather, the film holds within it multiple and coeval times; distance and intensity collapse into each other.

To travel not only requires, as Doreen Massey points out, "joining up with, somehow linking into, the collection of interwoven stories of which that place is made," but of holding on to the on-going stories of the places left behind; we are all part of the continuous process of making and breaking links which are all constituents, of ourselves, of the places you leave behind and the places you arrive at. To travel is a "picking up the threads and weaving them into a more or less coherent feeling of being 'here,' 'now' [...] Movement, and the making of relations, take/make time." (2005: 119) Let us return to the man standing in the middle of Hollywood Boulevard; his jet lagged body still holding on to his habitual rhythms of sleeping, waking and eating. He is aware that Singapore does not remain still in his absence. The woman he escaped from continues to live and go about her routines. The weather in Los Angeles is different from Singapore he tells the woman over the phone. What is the news today over there? He asks her. Singapore is not a still place on a map. This is a world that neither moves to a singular universal beat, nor results in an immobilized network of instantaneous connections; rather, it is a world of multiple, coeval and transversal temporal scales and frames which make up the experience of "here" and "now."

For Lefebvre, the present is made up of multiple rhythms. The trap of the present is that which “gives itself as presence and seeks the effects of presences” (2004: 23). It is a simulacra, presences converted into a *this*, which displays itself. It is the thing devoid of its rhythms and relations; nothing is fixed –there are only presences. The body too is a container of various rhythms. Rhythms, Lefebvre (2004) states, are the music of the city; they *are* the city. Looking through a window in Paris, Lefebvre observes the comings and goings, the multiplicity of speeds and movements and trajectories, ‘to this inexorable rhythm’ he writes, “... are superimposed other, less intense, slower rhythms ... Then, around 9:30,” coincidentally, “according to a schedule which hardly ever varies ....the arrival of shoppers, closely followed by tourists’ (2004: 221).

“Your voice is so clear,” the man tells the woman over the phone, “it’s like you are in the next room.” And then he holds up the phone so she can hear a group of Japanese tourists passing by. She is 14092.2 away. Claus, a Berliner meets in the hotel, and with whom he watches porno, stands 1.5 meters away, they are ‘strangers,’ the man clarifies. The voices of tourists travel through the phone and become part of the diagetic soundtrack of Singapore – they link up and become one of the city’s many sounds and rhythms. How many times are folded into a place, how many places are folded into a moment? How many, indeed, are folded into this ‘here’? Rhythms are not only that which can be easily observed, they are also that which “present themselves without being present” (2004: 223) -the voices of Japanese tourists seeping through the phone into the diagetic soundtrack of Singapore, for example; or the jet lagged body of tourists. In this sense, urban experience can be thought of not in terms of a single tempo, but as a collection of different rhythms –the metronomic beat of reified time, circadian rhythm, the rhythm of digestion, of sleep, of waking, of waiting, the rituals of life, and the many other rhythms that make up the ‘here’ and ‘now.

“‘Conquering’ distance,” Massey incisively points out, “in no way annihilates space, but it does raise new issues around the configuration of multiplicity and difference.” (2005: 95). Mobility here, can in no way be thought of as the crossing of the distance between a ‘here’ and a ‘there.’ As Allen writes, it “enables those physically distant in space and time to be, somewhat paradoxically, both absent and present. The use of real-time technologies to

create a simultaneous presence in a diversity of settings is, for instance, just one way in which relations of presence and absence may be reconfigured so that the gap between 'here and there' is bridged relationally, and distance itself is no longer understood simply as a metric." (2011: 13)

Bruno Latour and Michel Serres (1995) rethink the near/far binary through a topological approach explained through the metaphor of a crumpled handkerchief, folded and put in our pocket. While the surface of a flattened handkerchief is similar to the familiar cartographic geometries of 'distance' and 'proximity,' when folded, the fabric weaves together new relationships of contact –here propinquity and distance does not entail access or relationality. (Allen, 2011) In this sense, a topological world would define distance and proximity in non-metric terms, rather focusing on the way in which relationships create distance and proximity between human and non-human entities. (Latour, 2005) A topological approach, defines the 'here' and 'now' as a conjuncture of events far and proximate in time and space. Place, for both Massey and Latour, is not bounded, it stretches relationally.

Propinquity, John Urry argues, is characterized both by "intensely thick co-present interaction," and ...fast flowing webs and networks stretched corporeally, virtually and imaginatively across distances." (2000: 140) Therefore, Urry contends, subjectivity, defined as the unity of body and purpose, becomes an aggregate of trajectories, which are themselves part of numerous networks. Rather than things as pre-given discrete entities, there is a recognition of the continuous becoming that is in the nature of their being. The 'here and now' is thus comprised of the meeting up of distinct trajectories. It is this weaving together which provides "a more or less coherent feeling of being 'here', 'now'." For me, "others will weave together different stories." (Massey, 2005: 119). "'Here' is an intertwining of histories in which the spatiality of those histories (their then as well as their here) is inescapably entangled. The interconnections themselves are part of the construction of identity." (Massey 2005: 139). The 'here and now,' then, is nothing more or less than what we make of the encounter of trajectories, forming particular configurations and conjunctures.

The conjuncture of rhythms which expand far beyond the city is not limited to the jet

lagged traveller, it belongs also, to the woman at the other side of the phone, and it belongs to Singapore as much, but in its own configuration, as to Los Angeles. Being jet lagged after all, is an ailment, a bodily alteration that eventually will be adjusted. In the film, Claus defines jet lag as a problem that can be fixed once we are free from the singular, homogeneous beat of clock-time. He also used to have a problem with jet lag he explains. "But now I have no problems," he says, "I don't even own a watch. I don't need the time. I mean, yes, of course, if I need to take a train or a bus, or something, but then I can always ask someone what time it is." The public schedules of the city, after all, are only some of its many rhythms.

Massey argues that there is no static or fixed space, rather space is the dimension of the social –space as the sphere of coexisting heterogeneity in which multiple and distinct trajectories and stories cohabit (Massey, 2005: 9). Space is always under construction, never closed. The urban fabric is conceived as an open-ended, multi-trajectory network, composed as much of coincidence and connections, as of loose ends, disconnections, and elements of randomness. "All these relations," she points out, produce and are produced by, "layer upon layer of different sets of linkages, both local and to the wider world." (Massey 1994: 156). Place is unfixed, it is always becoming.<sup>4</sup> Amin and Thrift point out that this is more than recognition of multiplicity, it is a

"recognition that urban life is the irreducible product of mixture. Further, this mixture increasingly takes place at a distance, so challenging conventional notions of place. Even face-to-face contact increasingly involves a vast penumbra of distanced interactions [...]. These mixed spatialities necessitate a 'transnational urbanism', an appreciation of cities as 'sites of transnational connections', moving on from a prevailing modernist urbanism in which 'global' and 'local' social processes have been framed in binary opposition [...]" (Amin and Thrift, 2002: 3).

The rhythms of the city are far too stretched out, far too folded over, to be theorized as a whole. Rather, for Amin and Thrift, similarly to Massey, the city is a *mélange* of disjointed trajectories, "a place of near and far connections, a concatenation of rhythms; always edging in new directions. This" they argue, "is the aspect of cities that needs to be captured and explained" (2002: 8)

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<sup>4</sup> (For similar approaches see, Amin and Thrift, 2002; Urry, 2000; Latour, 2005)

The varied approaches I have mentioned throughout this paper serve as means of rethinking and challenging traditional notions of space and time. Rather than boundaries, writes Thrift, these approaches reconfigure space as “porous to a greater or lesser degree. For example, bodies caught in freeze-frame might look like envelopes but, truth to tell, they are leaky bags of water, constantly sloughing off pieces of themselves.” (2006: 140-141) Space is never static, never stable, always in motion. The flat cinematic screen is also neither surface, nor static. It contains what it shows and what it hides; it’s temporality and space is made up of an encounter of ‘here’ and ‘there’, which is always, itself, multiple. In Mun chee’s film, Singapore is never ‘shown’, nor can we hear the voice of the woman on the other side of the phone. And yet, Singapore is there. The camera in Mun Chee Yong’s film does not dwell on the enormity of the city, it avoids panoramic shots, the extent through which relations of distance and propinquity overlap, rather, are shown through extreme close shots of the protagonist. The camera focuses on quotidian moments –waking, eating walking; it follows the activities of everyday life making the body unfold into multiple rhythms and relations.

Walter Benjamin drew attention to how new media, particularly film, radically altered our perceptions. For example, he points out how a familiar routine can be viewed differently with the inclusions of techniques such as slow motion and the close-up. “By close-ups of the things around us,” Benjamin writes,

by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring common place milieus under the ingenious guidance of the camera, the film, on the one hand, extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; on the other hand, it manages to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action. [...] The enlargement of a snapshot does not simply render more precise what in any case was visible, though unclear: it reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject. (1968: 236)

This is more than just noticing what was once missed. The pan and zoom, the close-up and slow motion, video, and pictures reveal not only micro-movements, but interrogates, reveals, and expands habitual perceptions of “being in the world.” The variety of ingestions, mergers and symbioses through which this representation of space is constructed, its many temporalities, produces a plural and dynamic space –unfixed and in constant becoming.

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