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5 What is rhythmanalysis?

Conclusions

Notes towards a 'how to' guide: Doing rhythmanalysis over dinner

Writing a book has its own rhythms. It involves intense work and pauses. For me, the breaks include regular Friday night dinners at my local Italian restaurant – and discussions of where I am at in the writing. It's January 2018 and the readers' reports have come in. They are mostly positive and offer constructive suggestions for improvements. Their strongest criticisms are levelled at the conclusion. I sit and consider them with my partner. 'How would you do a rhythmanalysis of this place?', he asks. I can always be drawn on this question. As we talk, it strikes me that *La Cucina*¹ could be just the setting to finish this book.

In what follows, I talk through a possible dinner at *La Cucina* (composed of real elements but from different occasions) and use it to formulate questions for a flexible *working guide* to doing rhythmanalysis intended as 'enabling' or 'sensitizing' (following Willis and Trondman 2002: 394). I draw out how rhythmanalysis as a research strategy prompts the researcher to take particular directions. The account shows how it shares ground with what an ethnography of the life of this restaurant might attend to as well as how rhythm inflects such a study differently. In this worked example I outline the multiple ways researchers can orient themselves to be attuned to rhythm.

I'm excited now as the restaurant emerges in a new light. I've thought about this casually before but stopped short of appreciating the polyrhythmic complexity and interconnections of eating and cooking, socializing and serving made possible through repeated preparations and performances across the years. Restaurants 'provide a valuable experimental site to study space and time' not least given their 'rigid temporal and spatial pressures'

¹ A pseudonym.

(Demetry 2013: 577) and offer an opportunity for doing rhythmanalysis in an 'ordinary' space. Established twenty years ago, *La Cucina* is locally owned and popular. It presents itself as offering simple, tasty, traditional and authentic Italian cooking in a welcoming atmosphere at a reasonable (mid-range) price. Opening hours are fixed, with lunch from 12.00 pm to 3.00 pm and dinner from 6.00 pm to 10.00 pm with some variation at the weekend. As I sit there, I try to hold in mind the different temporal and spatial scales implied in the production of the sequence of food I will eat tonight. First questions might be: What is the reach of this subject in time and space (cf. Knowles 2014)? Where and when might a study of it take place?

We are always greeted warmly.² Then the question: 'Have you booked?' is both an injunction (you should have done) and an offer of latitude (we understand, we will try to make room for you anyway). The last time I made a reservation, I was told we had to choose between a 6.00 pm or 8.00 pm sitting. This is new; perhaps an effort to corral unruly consumers into slots that suit the rhythms of the kitchen and the management of the restaurant floor. And it inspires new questions: What different rhythms can be identified in the restaurant space? How do these rhythms relate to one another? Which positions (in time and space) and roles does the researcher need to adopt to grasp them?

I'm looking at the menu now and trying to settle on what to eat. The pizza here is good. The oven is close to the entrance so it's brought to mind as soon as we walk in, a sensory intervention in the rhythms of appetite. But it's Friday and my years in Italy have left their mark which means that the timing doesn't feel right as I learnt to think of Sunday night as pizza night. Not that anyone cares about this in Kent. In any case, I know I will struggle to digest it. My own bodily rhythms are not made for the heady combination of fat (cheese), gluten (dough) and acid (tomatoes). These thoughts make me aware of how different cultural practices and bodily rhythms underpin the dinner I will end up consuming. Put more generally: How is a meal shaped by cultural practices associated with time and place, custom and

² I started going to *La Cucina* as a lone diner several years ago when my house was being refurbished and the kitchen was out of use. The rhythms of Italian-style eating enabled me to 'territorialise time' over dinner and the impression of welcome from the staff gave me a 'feeling of belonging' which assured my repeat business (Lahad and May 2017: 1.3, 8.3).

biography? How do social and cultural rhythms make themselves felt? – or how are they resisted – at a bodily level?

Tonight we want to linger. Italian-style eating is generally a structured affair. We start with antipasti – one to share as we're hoping to make it through all four courses. *Calamari fritti*? Better in summer perhaps. Or we could go straight to a *primi* (first course)? I make a case for sharing *melanzane alla parmigiana*: the layers of aubergine, cheese and tomato are just the thing on a wet winter night. We might ask: What is the relevance of broader temporal patterns for action in the present? How in particular do seasonal rhythms shape decisions and actions?

Next up are mushroom ravioli. There's a backstory to this dish that takes my mind in another direction. True or not, the tale is told that the ravioli are handmade by somebody's grandmother, evoking a world of slow food and traditional (if stereotyped) practices. Still, this raises another question and one which has a different reach: What are the rhythms, practices and norms that underpin the production of the food emerging from the kitchen? I'm hungry tonight (all the more so in the interests of this imagined research) so opt for a *secondo* (main course). There's recognition that diners might not make it this far so we haven't ordered this course in advance. We pause to consider the menu once again and the earlier interaction is repeated. At this point I wonder: What are the possible (multiple but limited) rhythms of consumption in the restaurant? What do these imply for the management of the restaurant space in and through time, and the organization of work more generally? How do they shape different patterns of interaction between customers, staff and kitchen workers?

Perhaps it's time to look at the situation from a different point of view. In his collection of essays on *The Mind at Work*, Mike Rose interviews his mother about her experience of waitressing. She gives an extraordinarily rich account of the polyrhythmic complexity of waiting on tables – if not formally expressed in those terms. Rose is curious about how as a waitress, his mother (confusingly, also called Rose!) displays her ability to 'think on her feet' (2004: 2). It suggests a grasp of the mood, pace and rhythm of each table and the restaurant space as a whole as something that is felt or sensed and quickly understood. Looking around me at *La Cucina*, it is clear that the job requires attention and agility in decision-making and action. Thinking on one's feet implies no opportunity for reflection. Rhythm informs and inhabits the invisible and tacit skill of this work. We might ask: What are the competing rhythms that underpin the work of 'waiting'? How are they

absorbed into the body? And in what ways can these be accessed directly or indirectly by the rhythmanalyst?

'Thinking on her feet' is no metaphor for the work of the waitress. Her 'bodily skill' (Rose 2004: 8) is apparent in her reactions because she has grasped the rhythm of her work through practice. Learning arises initially through watching others. That's evident in *La Cucina*. A group of staff – men and women, mainly Sicilian – can be seen to watch and wait. They are agitated with the bodily tension of anticipation and then they are off, darting to this table or that, swivelling back as another customer calls, moving quickly to the kitchen for a late request. They are mostly on the move and never doing just a single task. *Coordination* is central to their work which is closely connected to rhythm (King and de Rond 2011). The demands of restaurant service are not only for *synchronization* at a single moment in time (e.g. meals served to the same together together) but for *succession* through time. The sequence, pace and timing of tasks as a set of coordinated activities produce the rhythm of what is a collective social performance. Waiting staff use their bodies to tune into the multitude of competing rhythms that permeate restaurant spaces. The rhythmanalyst might do the same, literally undertaking waiting work to grasp its demands and tensions across the mind and body.

Anticipation, concentration and memory remain essential to keeping things ticking over smoothly in a restaurant but there are tensions. Waiting staff work to the linear time of the clock while diners consume according to the cyclical rhythms of their meals, the nature of the occasion and their own propensities for eating quickly or at a leisurely pace. The time pressure of the worker must be experienced as the relaxation of the customer. Or perhaps the diner is in a rush and anxious to get through a meal and this is counter to the rhythmic norms of the kitchen and the service. What instances of arrhythmia can be found in restaurant settings? How can different configurations of rhythms be characterized, especially between the front and back stage of the restaurant?³

There's an explicit division of labour at *La Cucina*. Waiting staff bring menus and take drinks orders but food is the domain of the managers (one per shift on a weekday, two at the weekend). They set the pace and direct

³ The study of waiting work has a long history. Erving Goffman developed his ideas of front and back stage in part through his observations of waiting staff in the Shetland Hotel (1959: 120, 169).

staff to tables they sense need attention, choreographing this collective performance in time and space. It's possible to observe them using their 'skilled vision' (Grasseni 2004) and other senses to tune into and manage the atmosphere and conduct the work. This offers the rhythm analyst an opportunity for observation and a basis for asking questions of them. This setup also conveys that the managers are responsible for ensuring customers are kept happy and unusually perhaps they appear to perform a large share of the emotional labour of the dining experience, at least that perceived by the customer. How then do the managers act to ward off the arrhythmic threat of complaint for the affective atmosphere of the restaurant? How does this impact on their own working rhythms and those of the other restaurant workers from floor to kitchen?

There is usually a 'peak period' in the course of the evening when there's a heightened atmosphere of conviviality, fluid interactions and tempting food emerging at just the right moment (or not). Our food arrives as we are ready for it – the rhythm is smooth and steady tonight. There is enormous judgement and skill that underlie this pacing. What is going on behind the closed doors of the kitchen to make this happen? Gary Fine's *Kitchens* based on ethnographies of the social and institutional worlds of restaurant kitchens can shed some light on this (and I am indebted to him here). He asks: 'How is synchronization achieved? What organizational procedures promote this competence?' (1996: 61).

Each order starts a new rhythm for the chef and staff need to be in synch within and beyond the confines of the kitchen itself. Although digital ordering is now commonplace with menu choices sent directly from the table, at *La Cucina* waiting staff write down orders and take these to the threshold of the kitchen, if not any further. Chefs then assess the timing of the multiple tasks facing them.⁴ Since they are usually catering for groups, specific combinations of dishes must converge from different trajectories of preparation to be ready to serve together. If inexperienced chefs rely on clock-time, their seasoned counterparts have incorporated a more embodied sense of 'timing' which shapes the rhythm of their work.

⁴ The temporal reach of the preparation of meals started much earlier when orders for ingredients were placed, and on the day itself in the partial preparation of dishes on the menu. Chef biographies (a genre in itself) and reality TV programmes give a sense of what this is like. It's first thing in the morning and Anthony Bourdain, still in bed, recounts: 'I'm thinking triage – sorting in my head what gets done first, and by whom, and what gets left until later' (2000: 183).

In addition the food itself has temporal properties (as well as spatial requirements) which means there is a shorter or longer 'temporal window' in which to make different dishes. Duration can be 'squeezed' or 'stretched' through adjusting the tempo or speed at which food is prepared. Still, as one of Fine's interviewee's comments, a piece of fresh fish is no longer that if it's 'wrecked' through overcooking (Fine 1996: 73–4, 78–9). Since the kitchen is noisy from the combination of voices and the material clatter of pans and plates, it's hard to directly perceive rhythm with the senses (ibid.: 65). The rhythmanalyst must find other means: analysing a single dish perhaps, retracing how it was made after the event through narrative accounts as well as in situ observation.

There are several dimensions of temporal and spatial adjustment or 'recalibration' (Sharma 2014) necessary in restaurant work. Kitchen staff must calibrate their actions in relation to the temporal bodily demands of customers who must in turn accept the norms of and pacing of food preparation as a social practice and the spatio-temporal properties of their menu choices (the prevalent 'please allow an extra 15 minutes for chocolate fondant pudding' for instance). Waiting staff must tune into the rhythms of the kitchen to do their own work; and they may simultaneously pressure chefs and cooks to sustain the rhythms of the tables they are serving. What then are the 'micro-politics of temporal coordination' (Sharma 2014: 7) and the power relations at play in getting a plate to the table? How do different regimes of power shape the experience of time and space for restaurant workers and customers? The rhythms or discordances of talk between different restaurant workers might also be illuminating here – notably as kitchens are famed for strong language and emotional intensity (Demetry 2013; Fine 1996) – and offer rich data for rhythmanalysts.

In her observation of a restaurant kitchen, at first Daphne Demetry 'was perplexed where to stand' and this alerted her to the challenges and practices of bodily accommodation and coordination in such a space. Eventually she found that being on the move and working informally allowed her to be caught up in the flow of movement and feel the rhythms of kitchen work with her own body (2013: 584). She also noticed the contrasting ways in which different chefs positioned themselves to orchestrate the flow and rhythm of work. Similarly, Fine explored how the physical environment of the kitchen affects what cooks do. Despite discipline in the organization of work, there was corporeal 'friction' among

kitchen workers who ‘frequently bumped into each other’ (1996: 80–7). Further, the frustrations of having to work with poor quality equipment were widely discussed as chefs experience everyday accidents such as cuts and burns that result from the spatio-temporal pressures of the job. What, we might ask, does the restaurant environment do to workers’ bodies? How do they experience the demands of being on their feet in relation to the body’s rhythms of activity and rest? How does kitchen work as a collective activity engender its own rhythms (cf. the boat race discussed by King and de Rond 2011)?

We’re onto dessert now which is simpler than the previous courses as most of the traditional options – *tiramisu*, *panna cotta*, *gelato* – have been prepared ahead of time. It’s getting late. There’s always a moment when we realize the restaurant has been winding down and we have only just noticed (cf. Billingsgate fish market discussed in Chapter 3). The heat of the pizza oven that steamed up the windows earlier has left trickles of cold condensation in its wake. I also start to see that the restaurant decor has faded in places, hinting at other rhythms of maintenance and repair.

The rituals of settling the bill and saying goodnight are the final moments in the rhythm of the dinner and we step outside. As we walk along the street, I am struck by all this brief discussion has not considered. Who were the people eating in the restaurant and how did they come to be there? What are the macro connections in space and time – both proximate and distant – that make possible having dinner here tonight? I am now wondering about ordering and the scale of anticipation required for different kinds of food stuffs and menu changes over time. And more broadly still, about the cultural and sensory appeal of Italian cuisine in the UK and the circulation of people, products and practices that sustain it. When I walk past the restaurant in the afternoon on other days, I notice the preparation that is being done when the ‘closed’ sign is up. I think about the intersection of the different rhythms of chefs and cooks, kitchen and waiting staff, delivery people, cleaners and customers. And so on.

Albeit incomplete, this worked example shows how rhythmanalysis is powerful for tracing connections between the micro-rhythms of one meal and the spatial and temporal patterning of restaurant work and the industry more generally. It enables us to explore rhythms within rhythms and identify different interlocking configurations of rhythm. By bringing the often taken-for-granted spatial and temporal dimensions of the social

world to the fore in an interconnected way, rhythmanalysis makes possible different forms of analysis and critique of everyday life as the examples in this book have revealed. The centrality of time and place in this approach generates new understandings of social life as it unfolds, cutting across different scales.

Final remarks

This book has explored some possibilities of working with rhythm and I hope that readers can now more readily imagine what rhythmanalysis offers them in understanding their own everyday lives and the worlds they research. While rhythm remains 'both evasive and porous' (Morris 2017: 7), the book has sought to counter the sense that however present, it is difficult to discern and isolate. It has set out some means by which we may grasp the simultaneous entanglement of various rhythms (Lefebvre and Régulier 2004a: 77) which threaten to disappear when considered too closely. It has shown how and when rhythmanalysis can be used as an approach to document, analyse and understand the complexity of time and space and everyday life in capitalist society. 'Sooner or later', Lefebvre states, 'the analytic operation simultaneously discovers the multiplicity of rhythms and the uniqueness of particular rhythms' (2004: 16). And it has demonstrated the practice of rhythmanalysis as both 'practico-sensory and intellectual'; conceptual and corporeal (McCormack 2013: 42).

For Lefebvre, rhythm is not a place or a thing but an interaction; it is energies in flux arising from a relationship between space and time. The social world and social practices are composed of rhythms which combine different forms of linear or cyclical patterns and repetitions with novelty and difference (1991: 206). Lefebvre's body of work was a critique of capitalism and any application to other social, economic and political systems needs to be carefully considered. That said, rhythmanalysis can be used to heighten awareness of the radically uneven power relations of globalization (Alvarez 2007: 70). Furthermore, if rhythm is a 'process through which subjectivities are managed' (Henriques, Tienan and Väliaho 2014: 15), might thinking with rhythm open the way to new temporal practices, to conceiving of new ways of living, working and being in the world? Elaine Stratford's *Geographies, Mobilities, and Rhythms over the Life-Course* explores 'how life's potential and our capacity to flourish are wrapped up in varied rhythms, mobilities and geographies' (2015: 11). And

James Evans (2010) spells out the urgent need to develop new rhythms to live by in relation to the changing ecological context of the twenty-first century and the dominant linear conceptions of time which inhibit our capacity for anticipation.

At the same time, we need to guard against the ominous potential of rhythmanalysis and the captivating appeal of rhythm itself. If in traditional soldiering practices, the drill leads to the 'euphoric fellow feeling' of 'muscular bonding'⁵ (McNeill 1997: 2) it also contributes to the creation of strong armies and the exercise of violence and destruction, while the deployment of military drones in the twenty-first century using rhythmanalysis is more sinister still (Henriques, Tianen and Väliäho 2014: 16). In everyday life, 24/7 surveillance and discipline on the street, online and on the body (through wearable technologies) augment the reach of governing through rhythm (Davies 2018). However, the solidarity and community that emerge through the rhythms of cooperation (King and de Rond 2011) have progressive potential, and arrhythmia – literally being 'out of step' with the dominant regime – may offer a spacetime of resistance (Davies 2018).

Finally, notwithstanding the challenges of accessing research funding and the politics of knowledge production, the present day is an exciting time to be developing methods which help researchers arrive at nuanced understandings of social, political and cultural life (Back 2012). The title of Shaw, DeLyser and Crang's (2015) article, 'Limited by Imagination Alone', suggests and promotes space for researchers to explore and create and a tremendous range of innovative and experimental methods have been devised and employed in recent years across and beyond the social sciences (Dowling, Lloyd and Suchet-Pearsohn 2017). *What is Rhythmanalysis?* seeks to contribute to this effort. Rhythmanalysis as envisaged by Lefebvre and developed by others is not a single off-the-shelf method that can be utilized in a technical manner. And this text does not offer a prescriptive set of instructions that can be applied regardless of context and research questions. Rhythmanalysis is more of an 'inventive' (Lury and Wakeford 2012) approach or a source for inventive thinking (McCormack 2013: 73) which brings together a versatile set of techniques for their capacity to address specific questions related to the spacetimes of the everyday. As Kullman and Palludan write, 'one of the

⁵ This is similar to the conscious kinaesthetic awareness of dance discussed in Chapter 1.

appeals of rhythmanalysis is its incomplete and open-ended character that makes the approach combinable with various styles of thinking and researching' (2011: 349). This book is both a resource to stimulate further interest and imagination in doing rhythmanalysis and a call to researchers to experiment with the different practices and possibilities rhythmanalysis proposes.