

**4 HOURS  
ORCHESTRATION OF TIMESPACE**

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Abstract. Our paper discusses what could be argued to be a significant void at the heart of Japanese cities: the temporal void of four hours which occurs between the last train of any day and the first train of the following one. The paper will discuss the twenty-four hour operation of city trains as a potential impetus for urban revitalization. In the disciplines of urban studies and planning, the frequently visited idea of the void is typically understood in primarily spatial terms. Empty spaces, gaps and fissures in the urban fabric or fragments of nature do frequently offer the potential for instigating new, often subversive, critical interventions into lived environments. However, in limiting attention to a notion of the void primarily perceived in a spatial discourse, we feel that a more significant and influential aspect of major Japanese cities—their temporal rhythms, which mutually constitute spatially activity—is problematically underplayed. Such a reconsideration of temporality and the city would accord with more recent debates regarding the impact of globalization and the temporal frameworks [linear vs multiple] used to understand the complex operations within and between world cities [Smith 2003]. Our paper begins with a discussion about the concept of urban voids in relation to the human-technology assemblage that is the commuter train system. We then offer a speculative framework that suggests how [redirecting] thinking about urban revitalization from the temporal through the social towards the physical city might provide innovative ways of rethinking contemporary city life.

## INTRODUCTION

If one attentively observes a crowd during peak times and especially if one listens to its rumour, one discerns flows in the apparent disorder and an order which is signalled by the rhythms: chance or predetermined encounters, hurried carryings or nonchalant meanderings of people going home to withdraw from the outside, or leaving their homes to make contact with the outside, business people and vacant people – so many elements which make up a polyrhythmy [...] Every rhythm implies the relation of a time with a space, a localized time, or if one wishes, a temporalised place. Rhythm is always linked to such and such a place, to its place, whether it be to the heart, the fluttering of the eyelids, the movements of the street, or the tempo of a waltz. This does not prevent it from being a time, that is an aspect of a movement and a becoming.

(Lefebvre 1996: 230)

Every twenty-four hours in Tokyo, around midnight, a familiar ritual is enacted. As train services discontinue for an approximately four hour period during the night, the city experiences a fundamental shift in its patterns of commuter circulations. The earliest indications of this larger transformation start indoors; a collective rustle begins in homes, offices and entertainment places and moves outward onto the streets. Some

must rush to finish their duties at work before leaving to quickly walk to the station while others have made the necessary calculations to allow them to first grab a quick meal at a restaurant nearby. At sites of urban activity and transit, a cyclic peak occurs in terms of the density of bodies as well as the intensity of their movements across city space. Next to station entrance gates, dotted streams of commuters hurry inwards while train employees use megaphones to shout out updates concerning which train is leaving in which direction and how many minutes are left before it goes. Couples intimately perform the parting moments of their date in the public eye on the busy stage of the station entrance.

The driving orientation for this flurry of activity and individuals, no matter their social differences, are Tokyo train timetables. These schedules unite the disparate inhabitants of the city by constructing temporary mobile collectivities defined by the particular line travelled by each. Whether sober or drunk at the time, nearly everyone in Tokyo knows the departure time for his or her last train, or can quickly summon the information via the swift pressing of a few buttons on their keitai. With minute precision the final stages of an evening are arranged so the last train can be caught. These individual micro-practices contribute to an assembled whole which cleaves the circadian cycle into two uneven but distinct segments.

On one side of the last train divide is the dominant, artificially stretched 'day' segment with its associations of work, everydayness, productivity, moral propriety, urban circulation, and routine; a complex orchestration of urban spaces and times. On the other side of the threshold is the equally complex but qualitatively different orchestrated experience of the night; the realm in the popular imagination of more marginal activities and urban experiences.<sup>11</sup> Such are the negative moral connotations of night, as supported by the lack of train services, it becomes a fuzzy absence and potentially transgressive event that punctures the completeness of the 'day'. This four hour void, that temporarily seems to halt or at least slow down the machinic rhythms and relentless drive of Tokyo, brings into play a host of liminal activities and places.

The last train does not necessarily, of course, mark a sudden and unequivocal cessation of urban activity for those who do and don't ride it. Following that last train ride and one's exit from the station a whole range of services are on offer: taxis, food stands, convenience shops and internet cafes and more continue to function and compete for the customer surge heralded by the last trains. Nevertheless, as we will explore and argue in this paper, the cessation of the trains can be seen as producing a temporal and spatial void, a boundary or threshold that is central to understanding the lived experience and urban imaginaries of Tokyo inhabitants. That imaginary guides conceptions of what is possible (and when) in the city, while also both producing and constraining an assemblage of rituals and everyday routines.

In this paper we seek to explore the character and effects of that approximately four hour 'void'—not so much in terms of what it 'contains', but in terms of what urban possibilities and understandings it brings into being in relation to the wider sociospatial realities that constitute the urban experience of Tokyo. What are the multiple vested interests at stake here in what we describe below as the 'timespace' brought into being by the presence of this void?

## **THE VOID, REVITALISATION AND EVERYDAY CONCERNS**

Framing Tokyo's four hour cessation of train services as a 'void' in many ways invites a functionalist response to this issue. That is, what might happen if the void were to be removed and trains were to run twenty-four hours? Who would be affected—or, how would 'the city' be affected—if this tempero-spatial void was to be filled and the trains were to run around the clock? Would it assist in the revitalization of aspects of Tokyo urban life, its economy, particular areas of urban activity? These types of questions and ways of thinking about the revitalization of particular cities, and/or specific urban areas within them, became popular in urban studies and city marketing in the 1990s in debates about the notion of (and trend towards) the '24 hour city' (see Kreitzman 1999; Smith 2003). For the most part these were 'top-down' questions; that is, they were

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1. As Schivelbusch (1995: 81) puts it in his study of the industrialization of light in 19th century European cities: 'Nightfall brings forces very different from those that rule the day. In the symbols and myths of most cultures, night is chaos, the realm of dreams, teeming with ghosts and demons as the oceans teem with fish and sea monsters'. Also see Schför (1998).

motivated by larger public and private institutions with specific interests in the operations of 'the city', its comparative and competitive edge in a global economy that doesn't ever go to sleep.

In writing this paper, however, we were concerned not only with political and economic 'meta' analyses but were also interested in a 'bottom-up' approach, that is, with the perspectives of 'ordinary users' of the city. While not intended to be an exhaustive nor scientifically rigorous survey of such views, in this section of the paper we refer to responses from both 'familiar' sources, friends, colleagues and city residents with which we discussed the concept of a 24 hour train service as well as other sources such as online forums <sup>(2)</sup>. Our concern is to offer up 'anecdotal insights' into the perceptions of ordinary urbanites about the role the train system plays in the wider social, economic and other networks that bind the city together.

In our discussions with Tokyoites about a 24 hour train service, environmental concerns figured highly. Firstly, for a significant number of residents living adjacent or close to tracks, noise and vibrations—though currently regulated to some degree—would certainly become a bigger problem. Secondly, it is perceived by commuters themselves that the economic feasibility for train companies of such a change would be questionable. For instance, there would be the issue of increased labour costs due to the higher wage rates generally payable during this time of the night. And would there be enough demand and tickets purchased to justify such extra costs? At the same time, certain types of maintenance that must be carried out at night in order to minimize regular running hour problems would now become a serious issue. The increased traffic and stress on rolling stock and the track infrastructure might also be an economic disincentive. Thirdly, in terms of those businesses dependent on the traffic generated by the rail system, there might be a swing to some types of large-scale businesses—for instance, those located at the already popular entertainment districts at major rail junctions, and a subsequent decline in popularity and profitability of those small local businesses who depend in some senses on customers being 'captive' in their home districts during certain periods. And for other competing transport businesses, such as taxis, which benefit from the void, running the trains continuously might cut into their share of the available market and so on.

Another frequently mentioned concern around filling the train void related to its role in delineating a protected space outside of work. For example, we can recognize a tendency in Tokyoites to see the '4 hours' as a bulwark against the erosion of particular rights; especially those linked to working time. For many, the last train is the point when they simply have to leave their place of employment. To open up a 24-hour service might be seen to be leading to an increase in the already exacting demands of Japanese working life and a culture of long hours. Relatedly, the removal of the 4 hour void might also disrupt those often brief moments of social proximity shared by various family members.

These anecdotal perspectives then suggest a largely negative response to the notion of a 24 hour city. In discussing these issues, however, our concern is not so much with building a case for or against a continuous train service. Rather in this paper we are interested in the way these anecdotes are indicators of the degree to which the train timetable with its dualistic, 'running/not running' structure impacts on the life of the city and the mental perceptions of its inhabitants. Our aim, then is to theorise the ways in which the void plays a crucial role in the production to the urban and social imaginary of Tokyo and its inhabitants.

## **JAPANESE RAIL URBANISM AND THE TOKYO IMAGINARY**

Railways, as they did elsewhere for European modernities, have played an integral role in the constitution of Japanese modernity and its associated forms of everyday life. Already in the early decades of the twentieth century, according to James A. Fujii (1999), when private railway companies in Japan intensely colonized metropolitan space, daily use of railways [stations and cars] "proved to be a form of subjection to a social space defined by the logic of capital." These railways, he adds, "dramatically redefined the way time and

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2. See, for example, 'Hatena:Question', <http://q.hatena.ne.jp/1132572767>, an open discussion forum which includes a discussion in late 2005 around the question, 'naze tonai no JR dake demo 24 jikan unten shinai no deska?' [why is it that within the city JR is not providing 24 hour train service ] and <http://www.seibu-group.co.jp/kawara/special/sp121.html> which is more concerned with railway maintenance issues.

space were experienced by urban Japanese, and in displacing agrarian rhythms with the iterative repetition of railway commuting, the private run commuter rail—one part of a larger nexus of residential development, amusement center construction, electricity provision, and many other rail company efforts to integrate people into new orders of daily living—served not only the instrumental function of transportation, but also a Lefebvrian space of cultural production.”(108).

As Fujii (1997:12) has also previously noted, ‘the railway stamped Japan’s experience of modern urban life as no other single innovation has done’ The centrality of rail commuter system to Tokyo today is apparent in 2001 census figures (Toei/drawn from Institution of Transportation Policy Studies) which show that within the metropolitan transportation area (defined as within a fifty kilometer radius of Tokyo Station), an average of approximately

24.2 million commuter train journeys are made per day. However, it is not just that the rail transport system is used by a high proportion of the population and is extraordinarily efficient; it is also historically crucial to the distinctive urban form of Tokyo and other sizeable Japanese cities.

The rail system is central to its inhabitants and visitors in terms of their cognitive mapping of the sprawling metropolis. Even more ‘central’ to Tokyo than the Imperial Palace—as a spatial figure for the centre of Tokyo—is the JR Yamanote loop line. Similarly, the patterns of urban structure and forms that establish themselves around the nodes of major and minor stations also highlight the historical influence of rail on the city’s form.

However, if the urban imaginaries of Tokyo inhabitants are strongly informed by the spatial arrangements of the rail system then its temporal dimensions must also provide sources of meaning in their understanding of ‘the city’, its rules and possibilities, its structures and meanings. The next section draws on recent work by Thrift and May (2001) that outlines a theoretical conceptualization that might successfully draw together analytical approaches to both space and time when examining this void.

### **TIMESPACE AND THE VOIDE**

To consider the cessation of Tokyo commuter train services for approximately four hours each night would appear to privilege an understanding of the void framed in primarily temporal terms. This runs against the grain of the commonsense understanding of this term that dominates urban studies and planning, in which the void is typically understood as a spatial phenomenon. For instance, the Imperial Palace located in Chiyoda ward at the centre of Tokyo, for Roland Barthes (1982:30) was an example of Japanese difference in having an ‘empty’ centre, ‘both forbidden and indifferent’<sup>3</sup>. This centre separates its royal residents and those who circle it on their way to work, in terms of the lack of knowledge the latter may possess about the former. It also operates as a glaring void in terms of the potential economic redevelopment of its prime land. Empty spaces in the urban fabric—as well as being sites for the instigation of new, often subversive, critical interventions into lived environments—also offer insights into the dynamics of capitalist urban renewal (in which spaces characterised as ‘empty’ can in fact be reconceived as productive in terms of mechanisms of land value); However, in limiting attention to a notion of the void primarily perceived in a spatial discourse, we feel that a more significant and influential aspect of major Japanese cities—their temporal rhythms, which mutually constitute spatial practices and sites—is problematically underplayed.

As Jon May and Nigel Thrift (2001:1) have noted, much urban, social and cultural theory of the past two decades has been characterized by an unhelpful dualism around the foundational categories of space and time. This dualism has witnessed each category individually reified in critical analyses (in the form, for instance, of the much heralded ‘spatial turn’, but also in work on time) across disciplines ranging from architecture to geography and cultural studies. Such an approach, they argue, fails to produce a conceptual framework that might begin to account for the ‘multiplicity of space-times’<sup>(3)</sup> that have been a fundamental feature of modernity. Their response to this conceptual deficit is to elaborate a critical notion of ‘TimeSpace’. We would also like to take up this conceptual framework in considering the void that occurs during the daily,

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3. This characterisation, while still generative in terms of our discussion, has since been extended as well as critiqued (see, for example, Hendry’s (1993:104-109) commentary on the ‘spatial wrapping’ of the Palace).

cyclic break in Tokyo train services.

Most crucially, May and Thrift (2001:3) identify four inter-related domains of social practice that are crucial to such a framework and which we will employ here as a starting point for our own analysis. Whilst the domains inevitably overlap, their separation into four for analytic purposes provides us with insights into the timespaces of the Tokyo train commuter system and the affordances it provides city institutions and inhabitants.

### **Timetables and rhythms**

These include our sense of time and being as it is produced in relation to the 'natural universe, ranging from the diurnal cycle to the rhythms of the seasons, the rhythms of the body to the turning of the tides' (2001: 3). As they note, the degree to which different societies and cultures remains connected to these rhythms varies considerably (and historically). In relation to contemporary Tokyo (and to some degree Japanese) life we could say that the diurnal cycle, which relates back to the body's necessity for periodic rests, is still a powerful determinant in the decision to have a time signified as being for the purpose of recuperation. This imperative is spatialised in Tokyo through the large numbers of workers making their daily commute between sites of work in the city and the outlying 'dormitory suburbs'. We thus understand these timetables as shaping senses of being in the city as the city is in turn also shaped by the bodily rituals of its inhabitants.

### **Systems of social discipline**

The operation of the train service void inscribes everyday life in Japan in the form of a doubling. It registers both the demands of the city [capitalistic, machinic etc] on the one hand and personal frames and customs of reference on the other. As we have seen earlier, this doubling represents the meeting point between 'day' and 'night', 'work' and 'rest' or even 'authorized' and 'independent' sets of practices. Doubling also can be seen as serving as a balance, where work time can only be produced via the construction of its other – family or leisure time. As well here, the 'other' produced by the void is also potentially a site of resistance, in the manner suggested by Michel de Certeau's notion of institutional strategies versus user tactics. However as the void is constructed and controlled by the logic of the train service and its timetables [an exemplary technology of capitalism], it could be argued that individual users can only enact forms of resistance within that given framework.

### **Instruments and devices**

Thrift and May (referring to Adam 1992) also discuss those technologies that are 'devised to either mark the passage of time or work to alter our conception as to the nature and direction of its duration and passing' (4). Within the Tokyo context, the keitai (mobile telephone) is for commuters the most crucial contemporary device, central among various technologies for spatial manipulation and remediation of existing urban technologies such as the train. As well as replacing the functionality of the watch for many, the keitai also more substantively integrates the user in to 'rail time' through its instantaneous internet access to schedules (and to programs that will advise the next available train and best connections). The increasing integration and use of location-aware services through the keitai (eg, Licoppe and Inada 2006), make it the essential timespace device efficiently articulating Tokyoites to the structured flows of the city while also enabling users to negotiate the void. For instance, it allows a connectivity extending beyond the last train which might otherwise separate unities like the dating couple; these individuals now continue to text/email back and forward as they disperse themselves to different sectors of Tokyo's vast urban territory.

### **Texts**

This fourth dimension of social practices of time refers to those texts which narrate specific understandings of time in order to 'regulate that which we would codify' (Thrift and May: 5). For Thrift and May, the Book of Hours provides an historical example of such a regulatory text in relation to early modern western cities: a system of time organized around church ritual and prayer. In terms of the contemporary Tokyo train system, the train timetable can similarly be seen as a codifying text. However we might also consider other 'texts' as playing an informal regulatory role here, such as the wealth of accumulated stories about the train system itself—the collection of urban legends or mythologies that have built over the years and now form part of the collective shared imaginary of the city. Such stories are practiced along the daily pathway of individuals; they

are communicated and circulated through word of mouth, as well as through their reiterations in newspaper stories, films, literature and Internet-based sites [e.g. blogs, forums]. A relevant example is Seicho Matsumoto's contemporary classic mystery tale, 'Points and Lines' [first published by Kodansha in 1970]. In this slice of Japanese culture and everyday life, a Tokyo based detective skillfully navigates, 'reads' and connects stations, lines and timetables in order to solve a political, double murder case. The narrative reveals the intense involvement of governmental authority in the lives of individuals and in the private sector; as well as the different roles that the railway system plays when used by different interests. Such texts can be seen to supplement as well as challenge official accounts and definitions of train travel.

## CONCLUSION:

### FOUR HYPHOTHESES ABOUT TOKYO TRAIN TIMESPACE AND THE VOID

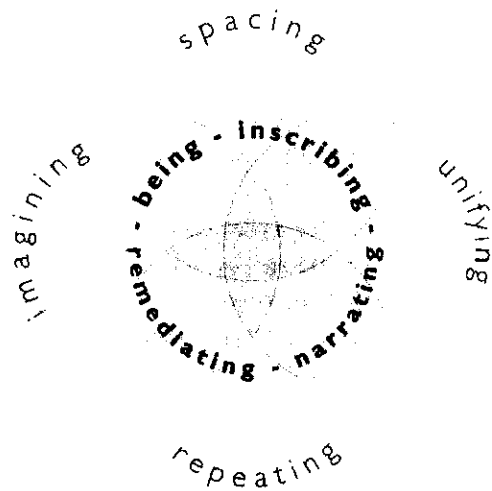


Figure 1.

Our analysis of the Tokyo void leads us to posit four hypotheses around the core notions of 'Spacing,' 'Repeating,' 'Imagining,' and 'Unifying'. Each hypothesis is graphically represented in the diagram above as spheres of timespace orchestrated through the timespace operations of 'Being,' 'Inscribing,' 'Remediating,' and 'Narrating'.

#### Spacing

The void contributes to the organization of individual and collective life through its spatialisation of urban activities from the outset - it is not simply an unproductive emptiness that must be filled.

Revitalisation of many sorts can come from reshaping the void; however the revitalization that might occur will not just inform the void but the greater urban whole to which it belongs.

#### Repeating

The void is part of an urban everyday in which repetition figures as a key ontological element.

The void inscribes a multiplicity of dualisms (work/leisure etc) that form the basis of urban being and which are marked by cyclic activities and performances. This repetition should be seen as always in process, always an opportunity. Reshaping the void boundaries while altering the pattern of repetitions would not necessarily diminish the possibility of revitalization via contingencies.

#### Imagining

The void is not a blank space on a map of city life, but a vital component in the structuring of the distinct individual socio-spatial mental imaginaries and everyday narratives that produce 'Tokyo'.

Imagining the city, in this sense, demonstrates the enmeshing of everyday uses of timespace with its narrative representations.

## Unifying

While by the train timetable defines the start and finish points of daily itineraries in the city, the actual practices of Tokyoites challenges the linear constructions of daily timespace as defined by the railway system. Users are adept at remediating and manipulating the constraints of the void thresholds so that they serve other purposes besides being mutually dependent markers of starting and finishing.

Cities in general, as well as particular places within them, become more vivid and tangible for us at sites of liminality that reveal them as having more than one face. The void we have discussed above is one such place as it reveals city life to us in one of its most marked expressions of liminality, the nightly cessation of commuter train travel. At the threshold to/from this void we witness a "spatialization of time and temporalization of space" (Harootunian 2000:114) essential to the deepest structures of the city.

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