

Time and tide wait for no one

Description

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â??Rhythm is one of the most fundamental formal means of composition in classical music, poetry, and architecture,â?• according to architectural lore. Think of colonnades, window placement, stacked office floors, fence posts and pilons. Repetition provides a tool of spatial organization. This much is obvious.



Is it ***repetition*** that animates peopleâ??s lives, or ***rhythm***? In his book *Rhythmanalysis*, philosopher Henri Lefebvre says ***repetition*** is a mechanical process. As a neo-Marxist he was bound to tilt his assertion towards the political. Capitalist machinery operates repetitively, as it treats everything the same. On the other hand thereâ??s the more organic phenomenon of ***rhythm***, which takes account of the vagaries of context, involving variation, and even memory.

Same versus different

Lefebvre offers the example of the rhythm of the waves on the sea, which is more than a mere repetition â?? as it involves counter movements and complex overlays of movement. The sea moves according to a range of contextual factors such as the shape and materials of the shore, the tides, and weather conditions â?? and of course the pull of the sun and moon.



The body too operates rhythmically, as its movement depends on the bodyâ??s size, shape, strength, condition, and context. Rhythm is a bit like repetition, but with modification. Every stroke need not be exactly the same.

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Alternatively, we could think of repetition as a diminished and reduced kind of rhythm. For Lefebvre, notions of *difference* are more important than *sameness*, and rhythm foregrounds *difference*.

A few years ago I visited Le Corbusierâ??s UnitÃ© dâ??habitation in Marseilles. Itâ??s a modernist prototype of industrial-scale housing, and as such falls within Lefebvreâ??s idea of mechanistically ordered repetition.

But like all good moderns, Le Corbusier had an eye on the organic â?? and the â??naturalâ?• order of things. The large plinth at the entrance to the UnitÃ© has cast within it a diagram of two half circles positioned along a horizon line, one the inverted form of the other, and with two lesser semicircles at either end. As I recall the diagram is above head height and difficult to photograph.

The diagram shows the rhythms of the twenty-four-hour day, showing the sky and earth, and the rising and setting sun, apparently in recognition of the way human habitation is grounded in the diurnal cycles. (Thereâ??s a better casting at his UnitÃ© scheme at Firminy-Vert, but Iâ??ve not been there



Tilts

It seems that variation throughout the days and seasons is crucial for life to exist. Paleontologists say that life could not have started or developed were it not for the planetary tilts, pull of the moon, and orbits that provide daily and seasonal cycles of light, temperature, and tides.

Organisms, which is to say life, seem to require variations, and periodic oscillations between stress and comfort, which create the interstitial zones where life takes root. Variation is born of rhythm, of oscillations between conditions, and the oscillations in turn are enabled by irregularities, tilts, and eccentricities.

I visited Lindisfarne last weekend, the site of the first Christian community in England. You have to time your visit to match the ebb and flow of the tides, which can vary by as much as an hour and a half from one day to the next.

The overlaying of clock time over the natural cycle of the tides renders suitably strange and unfamiliar the visit of the average tourist or pilgrim. The car bound visitor needs to regulate their journey according to a variable schedule, and thereâ??s even a hint of danger. ***Tilting*** provides a good metaphor to accompany rhythm. Itâ??s about looking awry. The OED again: â??Away from the straight (position or direction); to one side, obliquely; unevenly, crookedly, askew.â?•

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Notes

- The opening quote is from a book by Tzonis and Lefaivre (not to be confused with Henri Lefebvre).
- The first image is of the pedestrian causeway at Cramond Island, near Edinburgh. The last image is the causeway at Lindisfarne.
- Le Corbusierâ??s diurnal cycle at Marseilles is difficult to photograph as itâ??s on the top of the plinth above head height.
- I explored the theme of rhythm in Coyne, Richard. 2010. *The Tuning of Place: Sociable Spaces and Pervasive Digital Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- The OED provides a long entry for â??tiding,â?• which means simply something that happens. An early meaning suggests something that happens regularly, as a custom or habit. A good or glad tiding is of course simply good news, good event, good habit.

- For a discussion of habits see blog post A nation addicted to smartphones. Also see Obliquitous computing.

Bibliography

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1. Nature

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Tags

1. architecture
2. Le Corbusier
3. repetition
4. rhythm

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