

*Rhythmss: a snake eating its tail*

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"When lives are lived and hence mixed together, they distinguish themselves badly from one another. Noise, chaotic, has no rhythm... However, to grasp a rhythm it is necessary to have been grasped by it..." *Éléments de rythmanalyse* (1992, 2004 translation), Henri Lefebvre.

"In Southend, you can do just what you like. And we like going up and down and around and round." *Sunshine on Sea* (1959), Pike Films for Southend-on-Sea Publicity Committee.

When I walk down Southend high street, I do not feel like part of the surroundings. I am detached, bouncing between shops with minimal interactions (except for those with the really nice lady at Holland & Barrett). The high street, while imbued with my childhood memories of McDonald's and things which have since been replaced, now feels alienated. Alienating. Sometimes from a window table at Molo Lounge I can "observe" people and frame them in a lazy urban photography way. But while this is an attempt to connect with the town, it is also a remove. Clearly I do not consider myself a part of the high street's "story" - this is always out of reach.

The voices of "S for Southend" echo this issue between each other, oscillating between nostalgia for the high street's bustling eras and misgivings for what it has become. The high street is slipping away from us. While our connections to the town are no doubt personal and subjective, there is a baseline to our collective memory. Could this be a proposition?

The film's sound design sets a pace, steady waves fluctuating from the fizz of sea to electronic distortions. This provides the thread for the participating speakers, their voices flowing from the top of the high street to the bottom. It's immersive: our eyes and ears layered over with a multitude of public and secret histories, shrouding us. The drone footage immerses us further, drawing in hidden graffiti and forgotten facades: dimensions otherwise excluded from the general shopper's experience. Watching the film, we become a duality: both observer and vessel.

Now and then someone gives us a glance or a lingering frown. At that time their focus had obviously been upon Aaron Shrimpton walking past Clintons with a steadicam. But translated into the film, this sudden reminder of our presence pushes us out of the immersion. Whose eye is this?

Of course, my decided detachment from the high street is not only false (for anyone can characterise me from the window seat at Molo Lounge), it is also not within my control. For womxn, the experience of space is precarious. I become violently embodied when a man shouts at me from his car. My body tingles with awareness at night and often during daylight. The red hot reminder of sexual assault vibrates from the closeness of strangers.

Space also slips from the control of disabled people; their conditional ability to move around the space as they'd like, the expense of required transport. The same could be said for the experience of racism, homophobia and transphobia in the public domain. Bodies are permeable to other bodies. Space changes thus, both ejecting us and pulling us, into circular forces of violence.



Henri Lefebvre, a key Marxist theorist of social space, developed the idea of everyday life possessing a rhythm, concentrated on two principles: cyclical and linear. Against these thrum all other variants such as social codes and rituals, fictions (secret or public), and relations of the self and other. Importantly, to think of everyday life as possessing a rhythm suggests the presence of repetition, and an inherent order to things.

The participants of "S for Southend" were asked to imagine a pattern or a symbol they felt represented the high street. The resulting abstractions appear embossed over the footage, at times becoming part of the environment. Overall they fall into three interpretations: linear lines and forms, circles and spirals, and isolated shapes, with jagged lines like teeth to suggest buildings and domains, paving slabs, bureaucracies and histories.

The high street is more directly represented in the linear drawings: parallel lines suggesting its shape, at one point resembling an egg timer. The footage emphasises this familiar linearity, following the high street as it would be experienced by those travelling in to shop, to meet friends, to visit Adventure Island or the beach. A straight progression, the pedestrian's relation to the space changes: blinkered at either side by shops, the acoustic dip of the railway bridge, the duet of cars and the green man's beep, the sporadic seagull cacophonies, and then - finally - the sea, where the horizon expands and the high street ends. Travelling back up the high street in the opposite direction signifies leaving, going home, the end of the day. Not a back and forth but a forth and back, a rhythm like the waves of the sea.

So if the circular patterns also resemble a rhythm, what is it?

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"In historical time, what is the role of history in the forms of memory, recollections, narratives? Are there not alternatives to memory and forgetting; periods where the past returns - and periods where the past effaces itself?" *Éléments de rythmanalyse* (1992, 2004 translation), Henri Lefebvre.

The participants' feelings shift towards the end of the film, when asked how they would envision the high street in a hundred years' time. Disillusionment shifts into vague hope: support for independent spaces, initiatives centred on sustainability and equality. From these composite voices it is clear that, while the future feels uncertain, the high street remains important to many: an epicentre for community and change.

Perhaps it is difficult to imagine the high street in a hundred years' time because we only have the existing patterns to guide us, our understanding of how it operates today undergirded by the hum of arcades. Not that this buzz is always audible (especially in the silence of lockdown), but the sea and its cultural attributes makes the metric of the high street's evolution, setting the beat to a rhythm of recessions, phone shops and weird budget clothing stores. Rise and fall, growth and decline. This suggests a continuation of how things exist now.

But when the high street can be so significantly shaped by our personal narratives, can we take ownership of this rhythm?

While Lefebvre's rhythms were location-specific, perhaps the cycle of growth and decline we are experiencing is not confined to the high street itself - instead a tone pulsating throughout Western ecologies. The structures around which we manoeuvre are planned, after all, and the high street is subject to practices of urban planning and social resources. Those sketches of jagged spaces and isolated shapes suggest the beat of these social codes, fictions and histories; Lefebvre's miscellaneous rhythms.

Perhaps, with the so-called "death of the high street", we are looping into a new period of growth, the sustenance of something else. With death comes birth. We know that we do not need more Costa Coffees to fill the spaces where other brands once stood. Despite the social anxiety which propels my dissociation, the high street undeniably remains a place we come to meet, to interact, to see and to be. Perhaps this is the death of the high street as we know it: to be reborn not as a nucleus of commerce but of community. For civic initiatives to be focused upon accessibility, embodying us not through danger but through empowerment, accommodation and sureness. For the high street not to be a drain but a life force.

We are all subject to these rhythms. In the downbeat of decline, the crescendo to the peak is sure. Let's grasp it.

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