...
Every 24 hours in Tokyo, around midnight, a familiar ritual is enacted. As train services cease for a period of approximately four hours 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 bars, and moves outward onto the streets. Some must rush to finish their work duties 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 nearby restaurant. 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, as 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 perform the intimate parting moments of their date in the public eye on the crowded stage of the station entrance.

The stimulus for this flurry of activity, movement of people and individuals, no matter their social differences, are Tokyo’s 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, nearly everyone in Tokyo knows the departure time for his or her last train, or can quickly summon the information by pressing a few buttons on their keitai (mobile telephone). 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 distinct though uneven segments.

On one side of the last train divide is the dominant, artificially stretched “day,” with its associations of work, everydayness, productivity, moral propriety, urban circulation, and routine. On the other side of the threshold is the equally complex but qualitatively different experience of the night: in the popular imagination, a realm of more marginal activities and urban experiences. The negative moral connotations of night, symbolically acknowledged in the city by the lack of train services, help distinguish this time and space as a potentially transgressive event, one that punctures the completeness of the “day.” This void between 1am and 5am, which 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, of course, does not necessarily 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, mobile food stands, convenience shops, clubs, and more continue to function and compete for the customer surge heralded by the last trains. It is also the time for the recovery of the city’s stressed infrastructure, with temporary construction sites springing up and quickly disappearing just before the diurnal rhythm resumes. Nonetheless, 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’s 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 what follows, we seek to explore the character and effects of that approximately four-hour night 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 socio-spatial realities that constitute the urban experience of Tokyo. What are the multiple vested interests at stake here that we describe as the “timespace” of this nocturnal void?

**POLITICS OF THE VOID 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 ran 24 hours? Who would be affected—or how would “the city” be affected—if this spatio-temporal void was to be filled and the trains were to run around the clock? Would it assist in the revitalization of particular cities, and/or specific urban areas within them, become popular in urban studies and city marketing in the 1990s, in debates about the notion of (and trend towards) the “24-hour city.” For the most part, these were “top-down” questions; that is, they were 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 Tokyo these issues had also been discussed but became more prominent on the urban agenda in the early 2010s, with efforts to reposition Tokyo amongst the preeminent global cities following a slip in annual rankings of the city’s livability.

There is currently a noticeable pressure on the Tokyo railway void, in the form of local, national, and international efforts to capitalize upon and normalize the night economy. For instance, in 2013 night buses were introduced between Tokyo’s traffic hub Shibuya and business centre Roppongi Hills, in an effort by then-governor Naoki Ichinose, whose vision was to transform Tokyo into a “24-hour city.” However, due to a recalibration of costs and dismal low demand, this isolated experiment was discontinued only one year later. Since 2014 there have been gradual attempts in the “rival” city of Nagoya to extend train operations further into the late night and early morning, but here problems also emerged when trying to alter long-established spatio-temporal practices. Internationally, the London Underground began a 24-hour weekend service on five lines in 2015, and with that joined other major cities in the world that now run similar extended services. London is an important touchstone for Tokyo, given its hosting of the 2012 Olympics and attendant urban regeneration, and given the latter’s aspirations to host that same event in 2020.

However, we are concerned not only with political and economic meta-analyses, but also the “bottom-up” implications, and the perspectives of ordinary users of the city. Not intending to offer an exhaustive or scientifically rigorous survey of such views, in this section we present some anecdotal insights into the perceptions of ordinary urbanites about the role the train system plays in the wider social and economic networks that bind the city.

In public debates about a 24-hour train service, environmental concerns figure prominently. First, for residents living close to tracks, noise and vibrations—though currently regulated—would become an even bigger problem. Second, the additional service would be an economic burden for train companies. For instance, there would be increased labour costs due to higher wages paid at night. And would there be enough demand to justify such extra costs? At the same time, certain types of maintenance, which must be carried out at night in order to minimize problems during the busy regular running hours, would no longer be possible. The increased traffic and stress on rolling stock and the track infrastructure might also be an economic disincentive. Third, businesses dependent on the traffic generated by the rail system would also be affected.

Large-scale businesses—for instance, those located at the already popular entertainment districts at major rail junctions might stay open later, resulting in a decline in popularity and profitability of those small local businesses who depend on customers being “captive” in their home districts during certain periods. Finally, for taxis and other competing transport businesses that benefit from the void, running the trains continuously might significantly reduce their profits.

Another frequently expressed concern about filling the train void is its role in delineating a protected space outside of work. There is, for example, a strong tendency to see these four hours as a last 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 round-the-clock service has the potential to lengthen the already exceptionally long Japanese work day. Accordingly, the removal of the four-hour void might further infringe upon private domestic life and its relationships, often already secondary to work life.
All these concerns, 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, we are interested in the ways these concerns are indicators of the degree to which the train timetable, with its dualistic “running/not running” structure impacts the life of the city and the mental perceptions of its inhabitants. Our aim is to theorize the ways in which the void plays a crucial role in the production of the urban and social imaginary of Tokyo and its residents.

**JAPANESE RAIL URBANISM AND THE TOKYO IMAGINARY**

Railways have played an integral role in the constitution of Japanese modernity and its associated forms of everyday life, as they did elsewhere for European modernities. Already in the early decades of the twentieth century, according to James A. Fujii, when private railway companies intensely colonized metropolitan space, daily use of railways “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 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 as a Lefebvrian space of cultural production.

Indeed, as Fujii previously argued, “the railway stamped Japan’s experience of modern urban life as no other single innovation has done.” Furthermore, Nakamura has suggested that Japan’s new train system not only colonized urban space from the late nineteenth century on, but also profoundly changed the time consciousness of the country, as the train schedule quickly led to the spread of a fixed time and incorporation into Coordinated Universal Time. It replaced the pre-modern variable-day, hour-long, traditional calendar of the Edo Period, which divided each 24-hour cycle into day and night and then partitioned each of these into six equal parts, called kokku. Thus the cycle consisted of twelve unequal temporal sections: six daytime units from local sunrise to local sunset, and six nighttime units from sunset to sunrise. Since the length of days and nights varies over the seasons, the lengths of the partitioned time units changed accordingly with daylight hours: longer in summer and shorter in winter.

The centrality of the rail commuter system to Tokyo today is apparent in 2016 census figures, which show that within the metropolitan transportation area (defined as within a fifty kilometre radius of Tokyo Station), an average of approximately 63.5 million commuter train journeys are made daily with the Japan Railway (JR) companies, other private railway companies, and subway companies. 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 has become central to its inhabitants’ and visitors’ cognitive maps of the sprawling metropolis. Even more significant to Tokyo than the Imperial Palace in Chiyoda—spatial figure for the centre of Tokyo—is the JR Yamanote loop line. The patterns of urban form and activity that have established themselves around the nodes of major and minor stations also highlight Roland Barthes’ historical influence of rail on the city’s form. This pattern typically consists of a central railway station acting as a hub to a cluster of retail areas, amusement quarters, business office blocks, and a love hotel district, surrounded by a peripheral belt of residential apartment housing. In many cases the large corporations owning and running the railway lines have also developed major retail complexes that are physically part of the station complex, often with a flagship department store as a hub. The urban form surrounding major stations is also intimately related to the idea of the sakuraba, or place where crowds and excitement come together. As Waley notes, the sakuraba has been difficult for urban historians to precisely define, as it encompasses spaces and specific activities but also, for some, a strong sense of passing time. The department stores of large suburban railway and land development corporations like Hankyu, Tokyu, or Seibu, in turn, have played a central role in the development of Japan’s legendarily differentiated and highly refined consumer culture.

If the urban imaginaries of Tokyo’s residents are strongly informed by the spatial arrangements of the rail system, then its temporal dimensions must also provide sources of meaning for these inhabitants’ understanding of the “city,” its rules and possibilities, its structures and meanings.

**TIMESPACES AND THE VOID**

This section draws on work done by Jon May and Ngai, Thrift, which outlines a theoretical conceptualization that might successfully draw together analytical approaches to both space and time when examining this void. Considering the cessation of Tokyo commuter train services for approximately four hours each day, a void is to employ a primarily temporal understanding of the city. This runs against the grain of the common-sense use of the word “void” that dominates urban studies and planning, in which it is often treated as a merely spatial phenomenon. Likewise, the urban semiotician Roland Barthes has famously characterized the void in Tokyo in spatial terms. Tokyo’s Imperial Palace was for him an example of Japanese difference, as it represented an “empty” centre, “both forbidden and indifferent.” That centre separates its royal residents and those who circle it on their way to work through the lack of knowledge the latter possess about the former. It also operates as a void in the potential economic redevelopment of the downtown core. Empty spaces in the urban fabric, as well as being sites for the instigation of new, often subversive, critical interventions into urban life, then, also offer insights into the dynamics of capitalist urban renewal in which spaces characterized as “empty” can in fact be reconceived as productive, through mechanisms of land-value maximization. However, in limiting attention to a primarily spatial notion of the void, we contend 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 May and Thrift 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 seen each category 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 account for the “multiplicity of space-times” that have been a fundamental feature of modernity. Their response to this conceptual deficit is to elaborate a critical notion of “TimeSpace.” We take up this generative framework in considering the void that occurs during the daily, cyclic break in Tokyo train services.

Most crucially, May and Thrift identify four interrelated domains of social practice that are essential to such a framework and which we will employ here in our analysis.
A different example of this can be witnessed in the strong demands of a culture of long working hours, where social events are delicately “space[d] out” into the little time that remains in between the end of work and the cessation of train services. The standard (social, academic, private) event has emerged with a fixed length of two hours and is, if continued, renewed as another two–hour event that often takes place at a different location. These rigid time increments allow people to leave without painful questions asked. As we have seen earlier, this doubling also represents the meeting point between “day” and “night,” “work” and “rest,” or even “authorized” and “independent” sets of practices; it can be seen as generating a balance, where work time can only be produced via the construction of its other—family or leisure time.

iii) Instruments and devices

May and Thrift also discuss those technologies that are “devised to either mark the passage of time, or to alter the nature and direction of its duration and passing.”20 Within the Tokyo context, the keitai (mobile telephone) is for commuters the most crucial contemporary device, central among various technologies for the remediation of older urban technologies such as the watch and the train schedule. As well as replacing and assuming the functionality of the watch, the keitai substantively integrates the user into “rail time” through its instantaneous internet access to programs that advise users about the next available train and best connections, coupled with maps of the wider train and bus system, and plans of stations with the locations of nearest exits, elevators, and escalators. The far-reaching integration and use of location–aware services through the keitai also make it a space–manipulating device that efficiently articulates Tokyoites into the structured flows of the city, while also enabling them to negate any anxiety resulting from the sense of rhythm disruption created by this particular void.21 It allows for a temporal and spatial connectivity extending beyond the train and bus system, the timetable can similarly be seen as codifying a text. However, we might also consider other “texts” as elaborating the codification of train timespace, such as the wealth of accumulated stories about the rail system itself—the collection of urban legends or mythologies that have built up over the years and now form part of the collective shared imaginary of the city. Such stories are practiced along individuals’ daily pathways; they are communicated and circulated by word of mouth, as well as through their reiterations in newspaper stories, films, literature, and websites (blogs, forums). A relevant example is Seicho Matsumoto’s contemporary classic mystery tale, Points and Lines, published in 1970. In this slice of Japanese culture and everyday life, a Tokyo-based detective skillfully navigates “read[ing] 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, disentangle, and challenge the official inscriptions and definitions of train travel.
transformed over time and depend on forms of creativity.

As our epigraph from Lefebvre suggests, there is a complex urban “polyrhythm” at work here, and his identification of “urban rhythms” as a generative framework through which time and space in the city might be analyzed has assisted us in examining the relationships between night and day, trains and no trains, and urban time and space. The discussion has showed that the void is part of an urban everyday in which repetition figures as a key ontological element. While the train timetable defines the start and end points of daily itineraries in the city, the actual practices of Tokyoites challenges the linear constructions of daily time and space. The discussion has showed that the void is part of an urban everyday in which repetition figures as a key ontological element. While the train timetable defines the start and end points of daily itineraries in the city, the actual practices of Tokyoites challenges the linear constructions of daily time and space.


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