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Mean Time: seven ways to look at time through mobility

Resumo

This paper's idea was triggered by the exhibition "Cedric Price: Mean Time," presented at the Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montréal. Starting with the premise that mobility is a contingent (Till, 2009) act, this text looks at the different time(s) created by this contingency. The seven time(s) here considered are: Suspending Time, Free Time, Expanding Time, Distorting time, Folded Time, Loosing time, and Living time. Through specific "spatial stories" (de Certeau, 2002) each time is explained, in their features, unfolding how time-mobility shapes the way we create different appropriations of space, transmuting not only places, but also the relationship between *ourselves* and the *other*.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Time; spatial stories; everyday life

INTRODUCTION

The idea for this paper was triggered by the exhibition "Mean Time" (Price, 1999-2000). "Mean Time" looks for time through ordinary mobility (Habraken, 1998). Meantime, while I am here at the bus, in the train, inside this plane, finding my way to connect the spaces where my life unfolds, I inquire: what may we learn about time by looking at ordinary mobility? What time(s), even if not exclusive of mobility, could be seen more clearly from mobility's perspective? What do these ways of time teach us about living mobility?

I invite you to read this paper as an attempt to find the seven ways to look at time through mobility: lived time, change, linear time, suspending time, distorted time, compacted time, and still time. Direct *lived time* experience becomes the methodological approach in which each time is found. *Change* looks at one of the meanings of mobility, uncovering the unstable challenge of knowing it. *Linear time* explains the time conception that culturally prevails, from which mobility is one of its main concretizations. Then, I move to question what other time(s) lived time mobility reveals. I advance the possibility of *suspending time* with an example of the planned suspension of the Portuguese railway "Linha do Oeste"; of living in a *distorted time*, i.e., one that expands and contracts; and of living in a *compacted time*, at a planetary scale. Finally, still time reminds us that in the meantime we are still sentient beings.



Figure 1: "Mean Time" mesostic

LIVED TIME

It is 6.00 am, a Thursday in mid-April 2015. I drive from my home in Segade de Cá to Guimarães where I teach. I have plenty of time, the day is bright, and my lecture starts at 9.00 am. At 10.30 I am in front of my students apologizing for the delay. I could not help feeling embarrassed. What happened? Everything was moving normally until I arrived to VCI, specifically on Ponte do Freixo in Porto where the traffic was blocked. There was a car accident. For two hours, I sat there motionless. In hopelessness, I felt the contingency (Till, 2009, p. 45) of living mobility (author's research journal, 16th April 2015). Mean Time: seven ways to look at time through mobility



Figure 2: Lived time

Let us start with lived time: "the human experience of time is allpervasive, intimate, and immediate" (Fraser, 2003, p. xi). Lived time characterizes the methodological approach of this essay. Living mobility is a lived time experience (Till, 2009, p. 96), and lived time brings time to the ground, to the embeddedness of time in our life as an everyday experience. Thus, there is this first 'translation' of living mobility into lived time, inserting time into the 'living'. I glean seven ways to look at time through mobility from my own lived time experience. Thus, the seven times are triggered by personal research journal extracts, like the one I used in the beginning of the text to introduce this lived time.

In this way, lived time may become a *seeing time*. Michel Serres' claims "answers may come less from books that are read, recited (...) than from direct and often painful experience of the state of things" (1995, p. 168). You see something that might become something. From the ordinary experience may come the extraordinary in terms of understanding; sometimes revealing small things, seemingly unimportant, we were (past) not aware of, or never thought about. As Alison Smithson in *AS in DS: an eye*

on the road (1982, p. 17) also states: "everything is important as indicators and/or a 'fodder'; everything can be picked up and examined, turned over and thought freshly about to see if it will inform us directly of something we previously did not realise"¹.

Alison's diary gives a personal account of what she learned from her own mobility experience, underlining how significant this time is:

> This was her traveling on the bus, then about one-third of her life in **felt time**; the third somehow most in touch with what for her must be reality, traffic humming up filth between buildings. Whether it was good to look at or not. Fixed, barren facts. There, behind the window she was untouchable, she could think. (Smithson, 1972, p. 370)

Seeing time is also about the questions we are able to ask. In this sense, I would like to acknowledge Joana Vieira's research (2016) about the inconstancy of the in-between land-water of Ovar. Joana came up with her research idea through her ordinary travels on the N327. By looking through the car window she could see the dynamism, not only of the road appropriations, but also of the different ways people used the Gelfa's land. She felt absorbed by this dynamism. Since 2002 she had only seen that place from the car. On that moment, she decided to stop and go back to the place she had experienced in her childhood. She took this picture (Figure 3) and saw the embedded inconstancy of the place, which became the key-theme to develop her research. This example discloses how a lived time mobility experience may turn out to be a chance for further seeking: an act of recognition, of finding and understanding through change.

¹ Cf. Alison Smithson's book, *AS in DS, an eye on the road*. Alison invites us to understand the landscape from the point of view of motion in an account of her journey between her London office to her Wiltshire cottage. Alison uses her ordinary mobility to make a reflection on how mobility changes our relationship with places, with the way we see and understand them, as a means to learn how to make of architecture an action that integrates the challenge of thinking inside the complex mobility network we live in. By using several ways of expressing this 'seeing', written language, drawings, maps and photography, including drawings by her child, Alison takes us to what she sees and feels, to what she understands from this lived time experience, on the road.

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Figure 3: The key-theme of Joana's research – the inconstancy – revealed through her *in situ* picture [Ria de Aveiro]

CHANGE

It is 3 am. I am in the Luton Airport selecting quotes for the paper "Remoteness: Robin Hood Gardens" I am writing with my colleague Fernando. After so much detrimental judgment in favour of its demolition, we felt we needed to do something about this place. The written piece is our humble support. We were in Robin Hood Gardens in April 26, 2014. It was a very peaceful experience, to walk around, to sit on the mounds and talk with two boys who were there playing. But this was two days ago, now I wait for the flight to Reykjavik. I will meet my partner loaguim there. In the midst of rereading Alison Smithson's "The Violent Consumer: Or Waiting for the Goodies," I receive a message from loaguim "I had a car accident, ... I can't make the plane." I thought, he his playing with me. He wasn't. I decided not to depart. Now I needed to get out of the airport, but I had already passed through security. It seems like a one-way direction, after you move forward you can't move backwards without involving the security staff. This event was an unexpected change: fissured time is what we both felt. I moved around lost trying to find a place to sleep in central London. He was in Lisbon airport trying to buy a new flight. Finally, here we are in Iceland. Time decided to gather us in the place we should have met 24 hours earlier. We smile. (author's research journal, 28th April 2014).

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Figure 4: Change [Ofir]

Let us turn to William Blake whose saying that "as a man [human being] is, so he sees," (Blake, 1799/2008, p. 702) takes us on a journey of interconnection between what we are able to see and who we are. An action through which understanding springs. William Blake (1790-1793/2008, p. 37), notes we, as what we see, are not "fixed" entities if not "expect poison from the standing water".

Hence, we understand that what we are and what we see, are "changeable, inconstant, fickle," and this principle leads to the main meanings of "mobility"². "Mobility" connects with "time" through change. Heraclitus like William Blake, was a prominent representative of this understanding of time. In one of his well-known statements he refers to mobility: "You cannot step twice into the same river; for fresh waters are ever flowing in upon you" (Heraclitus fr. 41 quoted in Benjamin, 1968, p. 8). This assumption puts us in one uncomfortable position: if things and 'mobility' change endlessly, how can we capture anything in a written piece? All we write will be also unstable, incomplete, movable; if not, it will 'become poison', according to Blake.

² Mobility: early 15c., "capacity for motion," from Old French mobilité "changeableness, inconsistency, fickleness," Retrieved from http://www.etymonline.com/index. php?allowed_in_frame=o&search=mobility.

LINEAR TIME

It is already night. I am in the train going to Coimbra, coming from Porto. This is the time line I am moving now, in which other lines move. I look around and see a woman reviewing students' papers. I realized by the symbol at the top of the paper that, she also teaches at the University of Minho. I did not talk with her. On the other bench a young couple sit in silence. On the bench in front of me an old couple talk about their health problems. They are worried. The carriage is full. I focus on replying to emails. This mean time is very useful to come up to date with delayed work. Each human being here may be seen as a time line. They gathered in this time train for about one hour. Afterward, each time line will follow its own particular path. There is a huge chance these time lines will not cross again. I arrived in Coimbra. Finally, at home wrapped in the tenderness of a hug. (author's research journal, 13th November 2014).



Figure 5: Linear Time [London]

There is a resemblance between writing and moving. This piece of paper on which I write at this moment in time, may be seen has a space for motion, where imprinted words are steps taking me somewhere different from where I started; in this journey between *here* and *there* lives the *distance*. There is also a *now* and a *then*; the *now* of the introduction (departure) and the *then* of the conclusion (arrival); in-between lives *duration*. In this simple way, we have already handpicked two correlated key themes to discuss mobility, *space* and *time*, in this case, linear time.

Lived time mobility confirms our idea of time as a "linear progression measured by the clock and calendar" (Whitrow, 1972/2003, p. 1). We map our travel by the days and time clock of the journey. *Train at 7 am*; flight from *Madrid to Porto*, 7 *November 2011*; *we arrive in 1h 10 min*. Whitrow also helps us to find an important relationship for our topic of inquiring: the synchrony and dependence between linear time and mobility.

The linear concept was fostered by the mercantile class and the rise of money economy. For as long as power was concentrated in the ownership of land, time was felt to be plentiful and was associated with the unchanging cycle of the soil. But with the circulation of money the emphasis was on mobility. (Whitrow, 1972/2003, p. 9)

Moreover, moving in space confirms this idea that time is as sequential as motion itself. Image after image we see space changing in front of us, and with it our mind translates it into a linear sequential time. The image I just saw becomes the past of what had been the future. Furthermore, looking at figure 6 we have the contradictory vision that mobility is a succession of static moments in time, leading us to question: how can mobility be the result of the sum of static moments?



Figure 6: The contradictory vision of mobility as a succession of static moments [Traveling in London DLR]

Linear time is so embedded in our culture that it becomes the way we see the world and ourselves in the world, mobility included. But this is far from being true as Whitrow explains:

> not only primitive races have only extremely vague ideas about clocks and calendars but most civilizations, prior to our own of the last two or three hundred years, have tended to regard time as essentially cyclic in nature. In the light of history, our conception of time is as exceptional as our rejection of magic. (Whitrow, 1972/2003, p. 1)

Linear time is a construction that not only tends to reduce time to measurement, but it also tends to control all the spheres of our life, lived time mobility included, becoming a challenge to unveil other time(s).

SUSPENDING TIME

After taking two trains, one from Porto to Coimbra, followed by one from Coimbra to Bifurcação de Lares' station, I find myself in the interface station where Ramal de Alfarelos connects Linha do Norte (the main railway line of Portugal between Lisbon and Porto) and Linha do Oeste. Here I will catch the last train that will ultimately take me to Valado dos Frades, my final destination. I am waiting alone in a closed station in the middle of cornfields in the lowlands of Mondego's river. When I finally enter the third train coming from Figueira da Foz (the terminal North of Linha do Oeste), I encounter a totally unexpected situation. The train is full of people, gathered for a common goal: to collectively fight for the maintenance of this railway line under an ongoing public threat for its suspension. After the initial surprise, since I expected to find an almost empty train given the recurrent news that this railway line lacked users, I felt I was in the midst of a unique encounter. In a conversation with the last head of the train station of São Martinho do Porto, he told me about the complicated situation facing the railroad: the lack of maintenance of the infrastructure; the need for renewal, namely the electrification of the railway, which would allow for the modernization of trains, with consequent improvement on the comfort and quality of the service; the growth of subsidiary companies, increasing exponentially the expenses, namely making contracts with external maintenance companies; the desynchronization between train timetables and the

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everyday life needs of served population. (author's research journal, 14th June 2012)



Figure 7: Suspending Time [Linha do Oeste, São Martinho Railway Station]

This Kairos moment, unveiled the long story of planned suspension, hidden below the official discourse regarding this railway service. It is a railroad not only suffering from underinvestment and lack of maintenance but weakened by timetables that do not match the needs of the users. But what is the basis for the detractors' argument for suspension? Ironically, a lack of users. By suspending time, human beings are being conditioned in their living mobility, with consequences far beyond this physical infrastructure and its occupied space. How long will this infrastructure operate, even if in a compromised state? We cannot know, but as Sarah Wigglesworth claims we need to preserve and improve the worthy things we have (Wigglesworth, quoted in Hopkirk & Klettner, 2011) rather than obliterating them.

Whereas linear time moves forward supported by the idea of progress, suspending time seems to move backwards: "I am convinced that the future is lost somewhere in the dumps of the non-historical past" (Smithson, 1967, p. 74).

DISTORTED TIME

Today I dreamt I was in São Paulo with my friend Julia. I went by train, such a strange dream, and the train arrived in 10 min. Returning to real time I realised the impossibility of such an event. I am in Kolimbari, Crete. I came for Cidália F. Silva

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the 2013 Triennial Conference of the ISST. The conference has ended. It is noon and time to return home: it took two coaches to arrive to Heraklion airport, one flight to Malpensa, another from Bergamo airport to Porto, in-between, around midnight, I took two more coaches, one from Malpensa to Milan Central station, another from this station to Bergamo airport. In the midst of my travels a Carabinieri tried to convince me that the only way to arrive from Malpensa to Bergamo was by taxi. In Rethymno I had time to lay down on the grass and rest. A day has passed, it is noon and I am entering my home in Porto. (author's research journal, 8th July 2013).



Figure 8: Distorted Time [Maps of Barcelona, Lisbon, Madrid, London and New York, with a hand Drawing "Transmutações" by Fernando Ferreira, Daniel D. Pereira, Daniel Macedo e Sara Ferreira and a bridge over Ceira's valley]

Contemporaneous mobility is a question of time not comprised of physical distance, and we all know this. Is important to acknowledge that time and space contract or expand depending on the (non-) existent mobility network. The distance fades away to be replaced by the time duration of the journey. Though this has increased with the spatial asymmetries that contemporaneous mobility causes on territorial (dis-)connections, measuring space with time is not new:

> the first medieval maps included only the rectilinear marking out of itineraries (performative indications chiefly concerning pilgrimages), along with the stops one was to make (cities which one was to pass through, spend the night in, pray at, etc.) and distances calculated in hours or in days; that is, in terms of the time it would take to cover them on foot. (Kimble, 1938 quoted in De Certeau, 2002, p. 77)

What is radically new is the disproportional and inconstant relationship between space and time brought about by the speed of motion and by the infrastructural systems of support. Whereas, walking has a constant relationship of approximately 5-6 km/h, in contemporaneous mobility we could be talking about supersonic velocity (over 1469 km/h), or a very slow motion in an urban centre. We are enmeshed in non-metrical relationships made concrete by contemporaneous mobility.

Furthermore, space may or may not be connected and this clearly reveals the distortion of equal relationship and value of space, increasing the imbalances between places and people's lived time:

I am walking the French Way with my friend Barbara; we met a local man outside a village. He was there handing out candies to pilgrims. Because the Way no longer passes through his village, it was how he let us know that the road infrastructure of the Way, in this specific part (although we witness the same in other places), had been changed by the politicians. (author's research journal, 17th July 2012).

Villages thrive, or villages suffer with such changes on the Camino de Santiago. The same happens in other urban areas around the world. The act had a disrupting effect on this man's village, with consequences not only impacting the physical structure (e.g., the abandonment of buildings), but also the inhabitants' income.

In sum, the shifting technology of mobility distorted the traditional correlation between space and time, between *distance* and *duration*. The speed we move in space depends on the infrastructures and technological apparatus available, and of course the economic resources that human beings either have or have not to use them. Distorted time encompasses the

changeable dance of expansion-contraction, and this resonates in us. Into our lived time, into our felt time. Time trades with space for distortion, as in our inner rhythms which take us to the next way of time: compacted time.

COMPACTED TIME

I arrived at the Bergamo airport at 3 am. I see every bench, corner and area of the floor as a possible 'bed'. There is no spot, no protected site behind commercial advertising that shows anybody laying down trying to sleep or only having a little bit of rest. A sense of homelessness takes over me. It is as if I am moving in a picture where the planet has decided to sleep. A land mass of people compacts into this point: time trades with space for convergence. (author's research journal, 7th July 2013).



Figure 9: Compacted Time [time trades with space for convergence]

Seeing this situation clearly illustrated the lack of correspondence between the needs of those human beings and the space configuration. We ask: Why does this happen? Is it a problem of space or of erroneous appropriation? How can this airport's spatial configuration be adapted to receive such a number of tired people coming from different parts of the world? The ordinary encompasses very common necessities and these start with the basic ones: the ones that come from our own body, heart, spirit, and mind. I also thought that maybe home is everywhere: a large planetary home: where large scale becomes small and small scale becomes large.

In fact, if we consider that home is in each of our bodies, then we start to see *homing time* as a constant that moves with us wherever we go: the planet becomes our home. In this sense lived time questions the dichotomies: between private and public, between interior and exterior, between being at home and being out, between large and small. All these factors blur when we observe the ordinary needs shown by lived time mobility. The *why does this happen*, seems to rest on the confrontation between human rhythms and rhythms established by the aircraft companies. Twenty-first century human beings make their "home into a global laboratory in which they experiment with time-compactness in the life of persons, nations and cultures" (Fraser, 2003, p. xi).

Compacted time is rooted in the cultural time change that linear time brought in the fourteenth century, creating the feeling that time "is slipping away continually" (Whitrow, 1972/2003, p. 9). Culturally this represented a major shift: slow making was replaced by the culture of speed³. And this has been radicalized until today.

"Mobility" means also "activity, speed"⁴. Thus, mobility embodies perfectly this social change and pressure for speed. Speed, as we know is one of the most important criteria for technological innovation in mobility. Faith in linear time progress gives us the sensation of continuous improvement of mobility, namely the infrastructures, systems and technology. It seems that every day there are *new* ways to displace ourselves in space that are *faster*, and *better*. More cars, faster trains, more and speedier flights. A good example is the proposal of supersonic flights. Although the technology has existed for 50 years, it seems only now to have become efficient for ordinary flights. With the first flight planned for late 2017, XB-1 "Baby Boom" is being researched as a speed plane that flies at supersonic velocity, braking the barrier of sound; the distance between New York and London will be 3 hours, 15 minutes, the company advertises⁵.

We have been given this promise recurrently, that speed in mobility will grant human beings with more *free time*. Is this really the case? It seems evident by looking at our ordinary experience that the answer is no. At the service of a culture where speed is the criteria for a productive successful society and human being, mobility is called to be part of this and give answers to increase the available speed. Paradoxically, it seems that the more technology creates speedier connections the more time slips away from us. We run and run, we have resources to take less time to arrive from one place to another, but the feeling of not having time seems stronger than ever. We do not even need to move to be in an indeterminate number of planetary places condensed in one instant; nevertheless, time fades into a hole of

³ See Whitrow's explanation on the replacement of painting a *fresco* by a *secco*, due to cultural pressure for speed (Whitrow, 1972/2003, p. 10).

⁴ From Latin *mobilitatem* (nominative *mobilitas*) "activity, speed". Retrieved from http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=o&search=mobility

⁵ Retrieved from http://boomsupersonic.com

time-compactness, compressing our own time, no matter the good intentions proclaiming the contrary, the constant promise of more free time.

Furthermore, as I referred previously to the experience of walking the French Way (July-August 2012), I felt the synchrony between my own rhythm and that of nature; the interconnection was deep: a dance with the sun, the rain, the day and the night, in harmony with my own inner-body rhythms. Yet in the Bergamo airport I saw the artificial rhythms independent from the natural rhythms of nature and of people. *Day, night*? These do not exist in this compacted time. Everything is blurred into a mass of time indifference.

Compacted time concreteness is also visible through *real time* news. The news claims to be presented at the same time events are happening. No gap of time in-between. It enters our homes; it mixes into our everyday routines, with our present time. We have witnessed this with such an intensity, especially in the last weeks of July 2016. There was no week/day without a new attack (terrorist or not): France, Germany, USA, Iraq. Our disquietude leads us to ask *what real time is this one*? Imprisoned in the cultural use of technological apparatus, this real time resembles lava from a volcano transforming our inner-time into ashes and saturating it with so much violence, hatred, meanness, annulling our space of understanding. As Susan Sontag argues:

The so-called stories that we are told on television satisfy our appetite for anecdote, and offer us mutually cancelling models of understanding. (This is reinforced by the practice of punctuating television narratives by advertising.) They implicitly affirm the idea that all information is potentially relevant (or 'interesting'), that all stories are endless — or if they do stop, it is not because they have come to an end, but rather that they have been upstaged by a fresher or more lurid or eccentric story. (Sontag, 2005, p. 14)

Maybe it is time to start rethinking how we can build strategies to reclaim real time as a practice of being present, not seemingly absent so many times in alienation..., vanishing into a melting pot of contagious fear and resentment against one another. Alison Smithson's words (1974, p. 277) seem more relevant than ever: "resentment becomes a lengthening pole between them and us; (...) Resentment calls up mass movements, more systems take command... pressure groups thrive in unidentified resentment... gangs form in the void where the community ought to be and is wanting."

Perhaps all we need is a drop of simple real time as expressed by Kerouack: "I came to a point where I needed solitude (...), I just wanted to lie in the grass and look at the clouds" (Kerouack, 1960/1988, p. 118).

STILL TIME

There is a road (EN 17) I see from my balcony. She (it seems rather alive to me) runs parallel to the river Ceira, in this profound valley surrounded by mountains, where we are. In-between the road and the river, a very fertile soil is humanized into luscious agricultural fields. In winter, they flood. In spring, they flourish. Here linear time gives to cy**clical time** the main place, in a beautiful dance between human activities and the natural time. I watch it every day. I watch the cars moving on it, and I ask, "where are they going?". I keep still, just looking. My baby sleeps on my body. Over the last three months I can't keep track of chronological time, I say repeatedly. Today, I finally understood why: it fades away to be replaced by **biological time**. My baby paces the rhythms of our life: we certainly are still sentient beings. And time is now still. (author's research journal, 24th July 2016)



Figure 10: Still time [our lived time view]

IN CONCLUSION

Through "Mean Time" we are able to see that lived time mobility unfolds in particular stories:

In Modern Athens, the vehicles of mass transportation are called *metaphorai*. To go to work or to come home, one takes a "metaphor" – a bus or a train. Stories could also take this noble name: every day, they traverse and organize places; they select and link them together; they make sentences and itineraries out of them. (De Certeau, 2002, p. 72)

Michel de Certeau calls them spatial stories. But "time turns metaphors into things" (Smithson, 1967, p. 74). Thus, I prefer to call them time stories. Even the language reveals this: for example, the word 'journey', meaning "travel of the day", implies time, in this case the duration of a day; time measures our displacements, as I mentioned previously.

Nonetheless, whenever we move (even when we move through the virtual space but are physically still) we build a particular time experience that is not limited to measurement but unfolds throughout non-metrical relationships explained in this paper. They reveal a particular time submergence where every journey is a time story that interconnects many times, like the seven ones suggested. From them, seven other ways of time surfaced: seeing time, felt time, homing time, free time, real time, cyclical time, and biological time. Fourteen, a coincident number with Cedric Price's quoted exhibition.

MOBILITY SEEING TIME REAL TIME HOMING TIME FELT TIME CYCLICAL TIME FREE TIME BIOLOGICAL TIME

Figure 11: The surfaced "Mean Time" mesostic

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