

Marginal time

How to slow down

Research work in design

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PREFACE

Do you really have time to read this abstract? Are you sure? Well, that's great because we are going to talk about time, free time, full time, and their constitutive rhythms. As a student, I often feel oppressed by the need to maximize my planning: I can't lose a minute because each one counts, and I feel guilty as soon as I take some time off or I'm not efficient enough. That's why I have decided to make this struggle, that I share with half of the French population¹, the starting point of my research in design.

**I wonder how, as a graphic designer,
I can alleviate the fear of losing time
and why the constant rush that results
from this fear is unsustainable?**

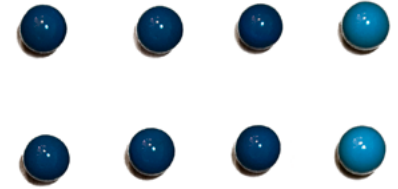
¹ A French study shows that 51% of the french population proclaim that the lack of time is a problem for them. (Godard, F., De Singly F. "Les Français et le temps des villes" , in *L'état de l'opinion*, Olivier Duhamel and Philippe Mechet, Sofres/Seuil, 2002)

INTRODUCTION

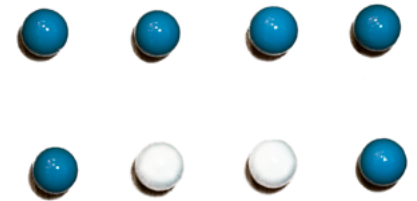
The first avenue I followed was our visual representations of time and the way they establish rhythms in our life. The graphic design issue takes place between the over-representation of fast rhythm and the under-representation of slow ones and how this imbalance increases the acceleration of our society and what we can call the time crisis. Then I wondered why slow rhythms are that important and why this imbalance can cause such trouble in our individual and collective identity. And finally, I project how, as a graphic designer, I may help fix this trouble by making us pay more attention to slow rhythm.

Come on and let's have a look at a different ways of appraising time, in order to cultivate a temporal well-being and initiate degrowth in our society.

01



**The acceleration statement
and its impacts over
representations of time**



The feeling of acceleration

The concept of acceleration has been theorized by Hartmut Rosa¹ as a construction upon which our society is constructed and that is related to its growth. It consists in an unrestrained rhythm that includes three dimensions: technical innovation, social change and rhythm of life. In this paper, we will focus on the latter and the alienation it provokes in our way of experiencing time.

But what is the link between graphic design and the acceleration of the rhythm of life?

The approach of the philosopher François Jullien² on this concept is particularly interesting because it focuses on the perception of the acceleration. For him, the acceleration we experience every day is filled by the feeling of acceleration, which means that, in addition to real technical and social acceleration, the fact that we only consider fast rhythms and short time projections makes us believe that this is the only rhythm our society knows. We are stuck in the alienation of fast rhythms because we do not pay attention to slow ones, everywhere around us. That is where graphic design can be involved, because the question of attention can be addressed by graphic design, especially through our representations.

1 H. Rosa (1965), *Accélération, une critique sociale du temps*, 2010.

2 F. Jullien (1951), *Leçon inaugurale de François Jullien, philosophe et sinologue*, France Culture [online], Forum *Le Monde Le Mans*, 29/07/2012.

That's why we can ask ourselves what are our time representations, and how did they affect our uses?

The representation of acceleration

Through time, we have developed several tools to calculate, indicate, schedule, share and anticipate time. One of our main ways of representing time, now, is the calendar and especially the Gregorian one ^{fig1}. Apart from some particularities, time is always represented similarly: linear, unchangeable and mostly jammed into squares and boxes that succeed each other. This representation of time is objective, as opposed to subjective one. That is a distinction we can link to Henri Bergson³ who divided the notion of Time into time versus duration. In his opinion, time is objective, mathematical and homogeneous. This is the time we use every day, when counting hours and minutes and that allows us all to share the same units of measurement. On the other hand, duration is subjective, elastic and deeply linked to our personal experiences, so its quality is not the same for everyone and at every moment of the day. Therefore and by studying their repetitive patterns, we can consider that our calendar only represents objective time, which allows our society to synchronize as a group, based on the same exact values. But its founding principles are based on the stars' movement and the different natural cycles that surround us. Each culture has made its calendar following tides, equinoxes and seasons to deter-



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4	18	19	20	21	22	23	24		
5	25	26	27	28	29	30	31		

3 H. Bergson (1859-1941), *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, 1889

mine its own activities and celebrations. Therefore, originally, calendars were tools that embodied the tight link between time, activities and space. But nowadays, thanks to many technical innovations and the desire to master everything, our activities have changed and moved further and further away from natural cycles while getting more and more homogeneous. And this is where the problem is: the way we represent time with grids is a consequence of our evolution, but also a cause of our numb imaginary. Each day is determined by a box that waits to be filled while timetables only consider the working hours. Free time, personal time and nighttime disappear, leaving all the space to the hours that must be devoted to work performance. As a consequence, time is cut into abstract pieces, disconnected from our actual complete day as a whole and without any consideration for the quality of moments, for the experience we have of those moments or the fact that two activities can overlap each other instead of regularly succeeding each other.

But are there other time representations that may embody the connection between human rhythms and their real interactions with the environment?



This particular link is obvious in Books of hours, and especially in the most famous one *Les Très riches Heures du duc de Berry*. ^{fig 2&3} Books of hours are medieval editorial tools for laypersons to follow catholic prayers through the day. They include a calendar which is often illustrated by a scenery for each month, so their interest lies in the particularly detailed

illustrations that represent the tasks completed by humans each month of the year. In *Les Très riches Heures du duc de Berry*, we can see lords and farmers going hunting, plowing or wine picking, depending on the season depicted. In medieval time, seasons were truly decisive for humans to organize their life and this influence was strongly represented in their calendar. Nowadays, seasons are no longer that influential: time is getting more and more homogeneous and so are our calendars. But we can assume that some of our habits are still linked to the moment of the day or the month. The early afternoon is suitable for an enjoyable nap while summer is preferable than winter to swim in the sea. Books of hours, in the way they introduce humans in action and the position of the cyclic calendar in the sky, establish the inextricable link between medieval temporalities, the movement of the stars and the environment at that time. The rhythm of life depicted in Books of hours is very different from the mathematical depiction of the current Gregorian calendar because it allows us to think of time as a progression of periods linked to our experience and gives us strong markers to realize the passage of time, instead of being subjected to it.

Because time is an abstract philosophical notion, representing it, through design, is essential to simplify its complexity, and, depending on how time will be represented in our tools, we will consider it differently. When we used to represent time as a cycle, our relation with it was deeply linked to seasons while today, as we are trying to master our environment and schedule, our representations do the same and increase our disconnection from natural cycles. Those representations create different

visual rhythms that influence our way of experiencing time. In order to follow the increasing value of time, seen as a resource that has to be exploited, we tend to live fast, adding up short experiments that are no longer connected to our environment's rhythm nor to our needs. Stuck in this movement, we do not take time to wonder whether we want to live fast or not. Yet, as biological human beings, we are full of different rhythms and transformations. A breaking point is created between our rhythm and the one initiated by the productive society. Indeed, the acceleration requires constant intense demands that our physical and mental rhythms cannot meet, and we have plenty of evidence of this rupture with the increasing number of burn-out cases in the world of work⁴. In this case, it could be interesting to show interest in slower rhythms, in order to focus again on the plurality of temporalities that do exist, instead of only giving credit to productive and harassing ones.

But how can slow rhythms contribute to soothing our relation to time, and how can graphic design try to represent them in order to make us pay attention to their existence?



fig 1 Gregorian calendar, 2021, image free of rights.



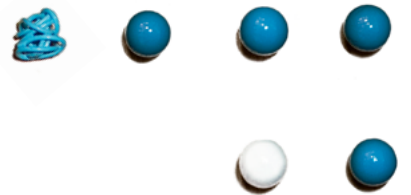
fig 2 & 3 Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry, Limbourg brothers, 1410. © Condé Museum, Chantilly, France. Month of February and July.

4 In "Introduction to special issue on burnout and health", *Psychology and Health*, 2001

02



**Why are slow rhythms
essential to own our time?**



Fast and slow rhythms

First, let's define what we mean here, by fast or slow rhythms. Fast rhythms are successive, short, and do not target long-term. They are useful to be competitive and reactive when confronted with events, but they are prospective, so the present has no real place in them because it is skipped to prepare the future. Contrary to rapid rhythms, slow rhythms are disconnected from competition and are not considered as efficient. They enhance the value of a moment as qualitative and not quantitative, and are made of processes and long-term transformations. According to the French philosopher François Jullien¹, observing slow rhythms can help prevent brutal proceedings, and consider events as a whole rather than only for their end. It is also a way of living the present. But fast or slow rhythms cannot exist by themselves, because they are relative notions that only exist by comparison to one another. What we can perceive as slow can be really fast for another organism, or even for our earlier self. Therefore, it is only our well-being that is going to be a relevant measurement. Besides, as everything in life, our rhythms need to be well-balanced, depending on the needs of each individual. Therefore, if the way we are representing time hides a part of its reality – its slow rhythms – it erases it from our imagination and uses too.

1 Ibid page 12.

But why are those slow rhythms that important in our appropriation of temporality?

The fertility of slow rhythms

The philosopher Gaston Bachelard² partly answered this question through the notion of *daydream*. For him, daydreaming can only take place in times that are free of injunctions. Times that, because they are not meant to be effective, can be slow. In those specific times, we can grow our imagination, that precedes any innovative intention. For him, imagination is a mirror that reflects our relation to the world. In that way, if we do not take time to cultivate our imagination, we do not observe our relation to the world, and so, we live a life disconnected from our real needs. Furthermore, we do not create distinctive ambitions or ideas and remain stuck in the alienation. In this way, imagination, which takes unfolds in slow, sleepy and contemplative times, is absolutely necessary to shift the acceleration paradigm. Similarly, the French philosopher Thierry Paquot recommends the subversive value of sleep in his book *Art of the Siesta: A Book About Stealing Moments of Repose*³, as well as the art critic Jonathan Crary in *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*⁴, that presents sleep as a protest against the capitalism of time. Indeed, this particular time of our day, because it depends on our individual biological clock, is deeply linked to our experience

2 G. Bachelard (1884- 1962), *The Poetics of Reverie*, 1960.

3 T. paquot (1952), *Art of the Siesta: A Book About Stealing Moments of Repose*, 2005.

4 J. Crary (1951), *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, 2013.

of life and of ourselves. Because of its vital necessity, and even if market forces try to reduce it more and more, sleep is a time still preserved from the alienating productivity, and so, constitutes a means of resistance against it. But apart from this dissenting attitude, what is truly interesting is that sleep is one of the few times we can still manage on our own in the alienation we are living. It is a remnant of our power upon our own temporalities, and it can be fecund for us to regain our autonomy and self-confidence. But time of inactivity, like sleep or daydream, because they are not judged as efficient, are not valued, which explains why they are not to be found among our design tools. Just like the natural cycles we mentioned earlier, because slow rhythms are not productive and predictable enough, they do not correspond anymore to our work society, which explains why we tend to erase them from our representations.

That is why we may wonder what place such unproductive times can have in modern society, and whether slow rhythms can be blended with our day-to-day activities?

Talvera: space and time margin

The sociologist and professor Bernard Eme approaches this role of unproductive time in his paper “Postures assignées, usages revendiqués de la talvera”⁵, in which he makes a comparison between slow rhythms, which are marginal from the

5 B. Eme, "Postures assignées, usages revendiqués de la Talvera", *Journal des anthropologues*, special issue, 2011.



market's point of view, and the concept of *talvera*. *Talvera* is an ancient French term that refers to a non-cultivated path around the field to leave some space for the oxen. [fig 4&5](#) He compares it to the free time and space needed in university research to make it possible for innovative results to emerge. In both cases, the main subject – the field or the research subject – needs non-productive space-time to mature. Because the space-time of the talvera is free of injunctions, many new uses have emerged from it, like the place where farmers would talk, have lunch or to take a nap under a tree. It was an area linked to the field and apart from it too, like a place of transition. In the same way, free space-time is essential for the research area to digress, to have a look into other research fields and, above all, to think out of the box.

This concept is particularly interesting in graphic design, because it establishes a visual link with the idea of margin. In publishing, managing a margin is a constraint of the printing process and of the handling of editorial objects. It spares a white frame that helps our gaze focus on the main text and it is also often used to write annotations and remarks [fig 6-9](#), at different stages of the writing or reading process. This comparison between the talvera and the margin creates a direct link between space, time and surface. Actually, as graphic designers and especially in printing medias, we have to express projects on limited surfaces, like sheets of paper or book's pages. This way, we can think of margins and talveras as particular space-time resources expressed in a limited surface, which is interesting from an environmentally responsible point of view. The second interest of this concept is that it

situates slow rhythms, that are marginal from the market system, in those talveras. Therefore, this idea of a central subject and its surrounding or interstitial margins starts creating a pattern that can be used by graphic design as a representation of slow and marginal times. In addition, the relationship with the cultivation domain also creates a re-connection with the idea of biological rhythms⁶, and ideas like fallow periods, that contribute to the growth of self-consciousness.

That is why graphic design can use this figure of the margin to situate those subjective and unproductive times, that are not directly part of our society's temporal organization. Margins are space-times and surfaces to take a step back and grow our own rhythm of life. This way, the graphic designer's role could be to create time tools that highlight those ignored times, in order to make them visible and insist on the possibilities of using them, instead of only increasing the acceleration.

But which design tools can draw a link between slow rhythms and our rhythms of life?

6 Ibid page 13.



fig 4 Schematic representation of the *talvera*
© Soline Hardy



fig 5 Representation of the *talvera*,
Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry, 1410.
© Condé Museum, Chantilly, France. Month of mars.



fig 6 Marginalia, *The Rothschild Canticles*, Yale's Library.

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fig 7 Marginalia, *Heure à l'usage de Metz*, 1588 Public library of Metz.

© Image free of rights

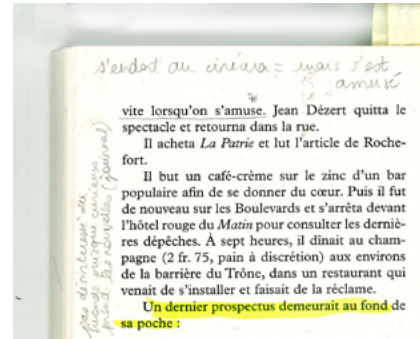


fig 8 Annotations in the margin, *Les dimanches de Jean Dézert*, Jean de La Ville de Mirmont © Manon Taillard

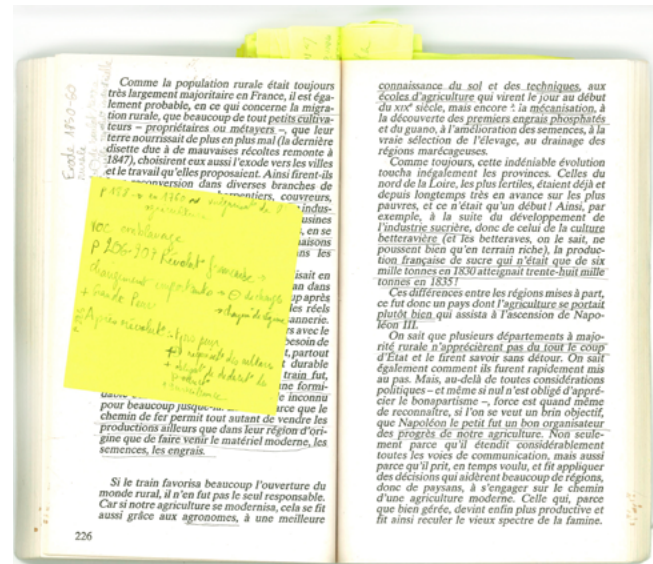


fig 9 Annotations in margin, *Histoire des paysans de France*, Claude Michelet © Alice François

03



**How can design draw a link
between slow times and slowing
down the life rythm?**

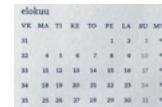
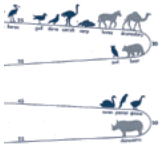


Design tools to represent slow rhythms

So we want to represent slow rhythms in order to make people realize that there are alternative options to acceleration, and that slowness is everywhere around us and is essential for us to grow our time independence. Thus, different design paths seem to meet this ambition.

The first main design axis we can identify is the use of comparison in order to highlight the relative forms of time, instead of representing it in one unique homogeneous form. This relativity of time is expressed in Otto Neurath's poster *How Long Do Animals Live?*¹ and its crushed lifeline that compares different animals' life expectancy. In my own design practice, I have tried to reuse this notion of comparison, by establishing tools with units of measurement different from the usual ones – like the blossoming of a wild tulip or the speed of a snail – to express slowness. This exercise was a way to change time markers and therefore push users to think about how we usually count time. But it was also an attempt to highlight slow biological rhythms that can extract us from the constant speed of urban life. Indeed, the fact that we are caught in the rush of the city does not mean that there are no other forms of time that deploy themselves elsewhere.

The second design path to highlight slow rhythms is to show the process of time passing. This is something we introduced earlier with François Jullien's point of view¹, and that is also resorted to by Siren Elise Wilhelmsen in her *365 Knitting*



*Clock*¹, which knits a wool scarf as the time of a year goes by. This clock both explores time with a long-term objective and creates a tangible form of its flow, in the present. It marks a rupture with our interest for short and brief events and, this way, slows our everyday life.

Finally, the third avenue of design we can consider is more active than the first two ones, because it is about directly deconstructing the main forms of time used nowadays. We cannot reproach calendars and datebooks for their lack of subjectivity, because this is not their design function. But the fact that they are part of our only tools to represent time, shapes our imaginary in their only objectiveness. That is why it seems essential to deconstruct the different shapes involved in them in order to convey a different sort of time, slower and more subjective, to build new representations. This deconstruction of norms is something proposed by the datebook *Munsuntai*, made by several Finnish students in 2008. Indeed, this particular agenda, because it offers a week with eight days, breaks the usual weekly rhythm, and so, disturbs our habits and gets us to reconsider temporal norms and our own relation to rhythm. This datebook breaks the daily boxes to open a margin; the eighth day. The deconstruction is expressed by graphic design through a complex grid, that gives an impression of continuous change, far from the straight pattern of usual datebooks. But what is the point of this eighth day? What is it made for? Is it for working or relaxing? In fact, the use of this marginal and imaginary day is not given by the datebook, the user has to imagine it. The aim is to mark a rupture with the productive time that we are submitted to all week long.

1 Ibidem page 12.

But the problem is that leaving a free page in a society submitted by productivity injunctions, instead of creating freedom, may generate stressful anticipation of how to fill this white page. Therefore, the eighth day of this calendar may quickly become a new injunction of productivity, just as we saw during the first lock-down: free-time became a time that needed to be made profitable, and so, had to fit in the acceleration as well as working time.

So how can design make those slow rhythms visible for us to appreciate their existence? How can it offer us the possibility of exploring those free times, without finally submitting them to efficiency injunctions, as well as productive times?

Does representing time urge one to master it?

This is the paradox faced by the entire task of making slow and marginal times visible, because wanting to represent and make those discrete times visible implies the risk they might become productive themselves. That is why only creating margin and blank spaces is not enough to break the temporal alienation. As a graphic designer, and because I am aiming to change uses and imaginaries about time, I have to be careful and anticipate the future uses of any medium I may create, in order to bypass productive injunctions. That is why I like to see the conception of graphic tools and their utilization by people as a four-handed creation. My role is to develop adaptable medias, but also to orientate their understanding, to allow people to slow down their lives.

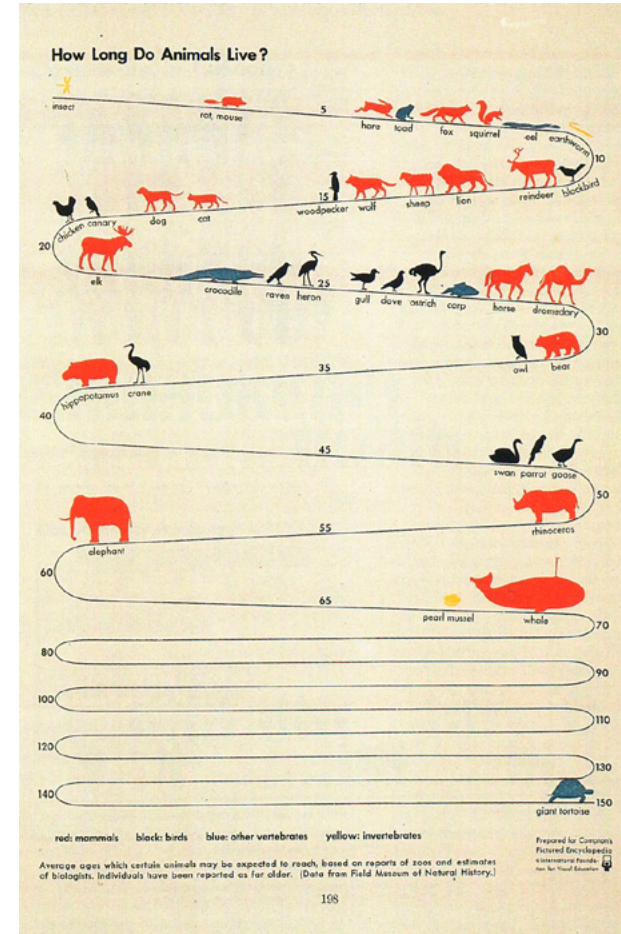


fig 10 How Long Do Animals Live ?, 1939
Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Compton
© Otto Neurath, Gerd Arntz



fig 11 *Lazy calendar*, 2020
Month of April
© Soline Hardy



fig 12 *Lazy calendar*, 2020
Month of May
© Soline Hardy

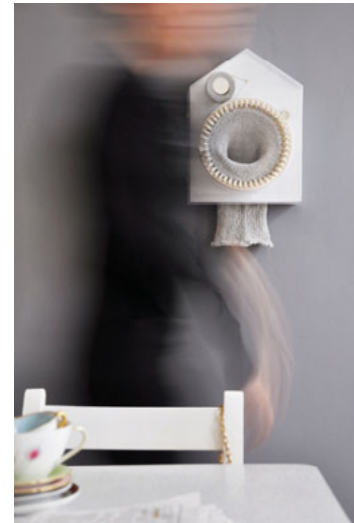


fig 13-15 *365 Knitting Clock*, 2010,
36 x 15 x 50 cm, bois, laine, acrylique.
© Siren Elise Wilhelmsen

CONCLUSION

Thereby, the feeling of time acceleration is a complex phenomenon increased by our day-to-day time representations that urge us to make each minute profitable. To slow down rhythms of life, graphic design will have to make marginal space-time – which can be slower than usual ones – visible; these are fecund to reflect on our life temporality. But, as we saw, the graphic designer has to be careful and make sure that the tools he creates will not pressurize people into anticipating their time even more. That is why, because I am looking forward to appeasing the relation of people with their time, and because I definitely do not want them to master it, I will focus on their relation to the present. Indeed, undertaking to focus on the present may soften the anticipation of the future and let people observe what is happening instead of urging them to do something. That is why one of the graphic avenues we drew previously – the use of comparison – seems to perfectly meet fit this aim of allowing one to step back. Because comparisons are a way of experiencing time as plural, they are a sort of way out to escape the dead end of acceleration. This way, my design project will focus on the parallel representations of urban and biological times – like in gardens – in order to offer stressed city dwellers the opportunity to examine slow processes that also are part of their world, even if they are not right in front of their eyes. Ideally, this project will be a tool for everyone to choose the different rhythms they want to compare, because, once again, speed or slowness are relative experiences for each of us.



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35	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	∞

fig 16-18 *Munsuntai*, 2007
© Anna Salmisalo, Anne Yli-Ikkelä, Antti Ahtiluoto, Maija Putaansuu, Sara Pihlaja, Liisa Aarsingin, Milja Kaukonieni



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