

Extrait du Rhuthmos

<https://rhuthmos.eu/spip.php?article2707>

Conclusion - Elements of Rhythmology - Vol. 4

- Recherches

- Vers un nouveau paradigme scientifique ?

- Vers un nouveau paradigme scientifique ? - Nouvel article

Date de mise en ligne : Monday 1 February 2021



Rhuthmos

[Previous chapter](#)

Over the past fifteen years rhythm has become the object of increasing attention in social science and cultural studies, both as a subject of research and as a tool. The number of papers and books devoted to rhythmanalysis has increased exponentially, even if one excludes studies more specifically devoted to music. A fairly broad intellectual movement is taking place, which most certainly corresponds to needs motivated by the transformations of the world that we have witnessed at the beginning of the 21st century. However, this success was not accompanied by a corresponding rhythmological reflection. The theory of rhythm remains very little developed. Rhythm receives a large number of meanings which are not always compatible and which often simply resume with the old Platonic metric tradition. The purpose of this book was to provide researchers with some basics of what we might call a "modern rhythmology" in the ethical sense that Foucault gives to the term modernity more suited to our fluid world and our critical needs. It advocates, of course, a fairly specific philosophical perspective, which I know might meet with some resistance, but I would be happy enough if it could just help the readers find the resources they need.

1. Against the common vision that describes a sudden shift in the 1970s in social science and cultural studies from systemism and structuralism to individualism, poststructuralism and postmodernism, our investigation has revealed the appearance in the French intellectual firmament, for a short period of time, of a constellation of thinkers interested in rhythm. At the end of the three decades following WW2, which had been dominated by holistic paradigms, and just before the rise of new individualist, deconstructionist or postmodern paradigms, which would dominate the following period, there was a kind of imperceptible conjunction of stars outlining a possible alternative approach to science, art and philosophy. Building such an alternative was a challenging concern for most important thinkers of the time. Lefebvre, Foucault, Benveniste, Barthes, Serres, Morin, Deleuze, Guattari and Meschonnic, all fought against the old world but also for a renewed perspective that would avoid the pitfall of the pure and simple inversion of the past paradigms into a plainly individualist critique, or that of their mere deconstruction, or that of their alleged dissolution into an ironic eclecticism. In order to complete this investigation, we will have to look, in the next volumes, into *A Thousand Plateaus* as well as *Critique of Rhythm*, but we can already draw some interesting conclusions.

1.1 Our analysis has shown that despite noticeable differences in approach, these thinkers shared even Lefebvre, who was certainly the less consistent on that matter a common anti-metric perspective, which broke resolutely with the metric paradigm whose extraordinary diffusion during the 19th and early 20th century has been thoroughly documented in Volume 3. As a matter of fact, the same hostility towards meter motivated the opposition by Lefebvre to the invasion of everyday life by "linear rhythms," the critique developed by Foucault of the domestication of the individuals by power metrics, that of the reduction of the language flow to a succession of discrete signs by Benveniste, that of the suppression of the idiorrhhythmic lifestyles and of the control of bodies and souls by monastic rules highlighted by Barthes, that of the discredit, denounced by Serres, cast on the ancient physics and mathematics based on flows, deviations, vortices and infinitesimal calculus, in favor of a kind of science based on Euclidean geometry and rational arithmetic, and, finally, that of the classical deterministic concept of science based on law and regularity to the benefit of a novel concept including the notions of disorder, loop and emergence by Morin.

1.2 We have seen that this anti-metric perspective spread very rapidly in multiple directions. While penetrating social science and political philosophy, it reached language theory and cultural studies, then natural sciences and technology. Rhythmanalysis, which, with Lefebvre and Foucault, was mainly concerned, so to speak, by the "metrization" of society, individual and time, transformed, with Benveniste and Barthes, into a theory and a study of the ways of flowing of language, subjectivity and self, and finally, with Serres and Morin, into a vast theory and description of the ways of flowing of nature, machines and information.

1.3 We also noticed that the theoretical tools used by these different approaches experienced a remarkable improvement. There has been a clear shift, which we can legitimately call a "rhythmological turn," from studies mainly

focused on *meter* (Lefebvre, Foucault) towards studies based on a much broader concept involving, explicitly or implicitly, a *rhuthmic* perspective (Benveniste, Barthes, Serres, Morin). The discovery of the concept of *rhuthmos* is due to Benveniste, who was the first to clearly differentiate it from the *metron*, but we owe the first thoughtful use, outside its original philological context, to Barthes who began, for the very first time, to use it in anthropological, ethical and political reflection. The same year, Serres explicitly referred to Benveniste's contribution, partly denying its sufficient accuracy, but using it extensively in his description of ancient physics. Morin did not explicitly mention the concept of *rhuthmos* but he was clearly aware of the links between his findings concerning the latest scientific and technological discoveries and the ancient *rhuthmic* physics revealed by Serres at the very same time.

1.4 In its greatest extension, this movement covered a period beginning in 1966, with the reissue of Benveniste's essay on the notion of rhythm, and lasting until the publication in 1982 of *A Thousand Plateaus et Critique of Rhythm*. However, one is struck by the quality and number of contributions published between 1974 and 1977, especially during this last year with Barthes, Serres and Morin each contributing a major work.

1.5 On the basis of these conclusions, we can safely say that the 1970s witnessed the remarkable emergence of an entirely new scientific and philosophical perspective, which resolutely broke with the past, be it the latest holistic scientific models or the more general and more ancient metric paradigm, and tried simultaneously to ward off in advance the main weaknesses of the new tools that finally emerged over the following decade. In the next volume, we will see how this movement reached a kind of climax in the early 1980s with Deleuze & Guattari's and Meschonnic's opposite but solidary contributions.

2. The originality of this critical position, the strength and rapidity of its expansion, and the sophistication of its conceptual elaboration, should have made this emerging perspective a whole new scientific and philosophical paradigm. But we know that it did not happen.

2.1 The rhythmic constellation disappeared from the heavens as quickly it got there. Some more works using the concept of rhythm and even sometimes elaborating on it were published by Deleuze, Meschonnic or Lefebvre, however rhythm never became an inspiring concept shared by a large number of scientists and thinkers. The celestial conjunction of stars did not turn into a concrete and effective intellectual network. Individual, difference and eclecticism then became the three paradigms seemingly opposed but in fact interdependent which would dominate the next two decades.

2.2 At the end of the 1990s and in the early 2000s, rhythm began to gain attention again. The number of works addressing the question or using the concept as a tool started to grow with a noticeable acceleration in the 2010s. Now that the individualist, differentialist and eclectic paradigms have partly receded, the time for a re-emergence and better integration of a rhythmic perspective may have arrived. The concept of rhythm, especially taken in the sense of *rhuthmos*, indeed seems much more adequate and critical of the fluid world we entered at the end of the 1990s than the previous ones. These had been developed in the 1980s as theoretical war machines against the previous holistic perspectives but had quickly become, some enthusiastically, others more indirectly, akin to the fast-rising neoliberal worldview.

3. Such a movement will only be truly successful, however, if it manages to overcome some of the weaknesses of the 1970s constellation. If we are to take these contributions to our own account and adapt them to our world, then we must understand the main reasons for which, despite the individual successes they have been able to meet individually, they have failed to collectively change the intellectual landscape of their time and to effectively oppose the other paradigms that have finally imposed themselves.

3.1 Most obvious among these is the absence of direct confrontation or debate among the various members of the constellation. Although they belonged to the same intellectual milieu, sometimes knew each other quite well, shared

the same point of view on politics and especially on the revolt of 1968, and sometimes worked in the same academic institutions, the rhythm never became a subject clearly thematized and discussed for itself among them. This is certainly one of the first thing that could be improved nowadays, despite the rareness of academic institutions interested in rhythm and the spectacular lack of "transdisciplinarity" that characterizes the academic world today.

3.2 The specialization demanded by modern academic standards certainly prevented the communication between the various disciplines involved in the rhythmic constellation. There was and still is a sort of regrettable iron curtain which almost hermetically separates social, linguistic and cultural studies, on the one hand, and natural sciences and mathematics, on the other. Even thinkers who daringly crushed and crossed the limits between the two blocs, such as Serres, Morin, or Deleuze and Guattari, struggled to reach to the other edge. This is the second challenge we will face and not the easiest to overcome.

3.3 Another reason, of which we have now ample proof, is a mixture of ignorance, limited knowledge and contempt for Benveniste's contribution concerning the notion of rhythm and, more broadly, concerning his own theory of language by many members of the rhythmic constellation. While Barthes and Meschonnic fully recognized its importance, most of the participants simply ignored it like Lefebvre, Foucault or Morin, mocked it like Serres, or severely underestimated it like Deleuze and Guattari. But without Benveniste's analysis of the notion of rhythm and without the theory of language that prolonged it, it was very difficult to make sense of the rhythmological turn taking place. The need to overcome the metric paradigm was clearly felt everywhere, but most lacked an alternative concept that could help them support their claim. This will be the third challenge we will have to meet.

3.3 It is true that a series of unfortunate events have made it difficult to recognize Benveniste's ideas for their true worth. Despite a brief and surprising moment of celebrity in 1968 (Malkiel, 1980), Benveniste remained a *célèbre inconnu*. The following year, he suffered a stroke which prevented him from defending and further developing the two collections of essays on general linguistics published in 1966 and 1974. Then he passed away in 1976. For his part, Barthes died accidentally in 1980 and his first lecture at the Collège de France was not published until 2002. Meschonnic himself was a sort of hermit, working in isolation, having rare connections with his peers, and little interested in passing on to a younger generation. Unlike Foucault, Serres, Morin or Deleuze and Guattari, who quickly gained international recognition, Benveniste and Meschonnic have remained largely unknown, even in France, and very few of their books have been translated into foreign languages.

4. The impact of this regrettable combination of lack of debate, narrow specialization, ignorance, contempt and unfortunate events should not be underestimated. It certainly explains much of the failure of the rhythmic constellation to transform into a true paradigmatic network. However, we must certainly take into account another deeper reason, which is important to us because it could hinder our own efforts, if we are not careful enough to understand it correctly.

4.1 During our investigation, we have regularly observed the difficulty met by a certain number of anti-metric thinkers to take into consideration the activity of language and its artistic expression. Linguistics and poetics have been often poorly considered and sometimes entirely ignored (Deleuze and Guattari, Serres, Morin). Benveniste, in particular, as we saw, has been as famous as he has been overlooked. It is true that, on the other hand, we saw and will see again in the next volume, that the anti-metric thinkers interested in language and literature were not very open towards social and natural science either (Benveniste, Barthes, Meschonnic).

4.2 However, this symmetry between the two views is only apparent. If we look at the long history of the relationship between the thinkers developing their critique of the Platonic metric paradigm from the Democritean physical perspective, and those who developed it from the Aristotelian poetic perspective, we see that it has often been complicated and even conflictual (see Vol. 1 and 2). But there have also been remarkable endeavors like those of Diderot, Goethe and Nietzsche, which attempted to fully combine the two, of course within the limits of the knowledge

available at the time. Now, if we compare them to the thinkers involved in a comparable move in the 1970s, namely Serres, Morin, and Deleuze & Guattari, we see that there has been a sort of regrettable change in priority. While 18th and 19th-century thinkers started from their practice and knowledge of language and literature and strove to bridge the divide with natural science and mathematics while retaining the primacy of language, in the 20th century, the movement was exactly the opposite. Due to the extraordinary development of the natural sciences and mathematics since the 1850s, the anti-metric thinkers started from the latter and expanded their views towards language and literature, while keeping the first place to nature. But, the result of this second move was rather unbalanced and unsatisfactory: while anti-metric thinkers of the first wave did not underestimate nature, the thinkers of the second one unduly downplayed the role of language.

4.3 Therefore, my hypothesis is that the gap between the two main *rhuthmic* paradigms we have to deal with won't be bridged unless we give language again the primacy that it has been unjustifiably stripped of. We must stop considering that Culture or Nature should come first, whether through a culturalist worldview (based either on *die Sprache* as a collection and transmitter of meaning as in Gadamer, or on *la Langue* as a differential structure as in Derrida, or on any other basis), or through a naturalistic worldview (as in Serres, Morin, or Deleuze & Guattari), or even through a limited historical anthropology (be it dialectical or hermeneutical as in Lefebvre or Ricoeur) associating Culture and Nature through a debatable concept of History. The solution to this problem is to rebalance and overcome both naturalism and culturalism by strongly promoting the concern for language as an activity, which was actually one of the main contribution of thinkers such as Humboldt, Saussure and Benveniste, who have been unfairly marginalized from the 1970s.

4.4 In other words, if rhythmology, and therefore rhythmanalysis, are to definitively overcome the Platonic metric paradigm which constantly hinders their efforts, and develop the use of the concept of *rhuthmos* as it should be, they must agree to submit both nature, and culture, and history to the primacy of language and to the radical historicity that this guarantees to human beings. Only such a theoretical move will allow the two anti-Platonic traditions to truly communicate and develop a broader *rhuthmic* perspective spanning from nature to culture, which could then, as a matter of fact, easily incorporate a certain number of remarkable ideas concerning the "plasticity" of history that we found in Foucault, the "generativity" and "event-ness" of time that we found in Serres and Morin, or the "rhizomatic logic" of duration, which we will soon find, in Deleuze and Guattari. History, time and duration will thus be placed within the framework of the *language* in which they will take on their full meaning. Only by affirming the paradoxical point of view of the *semantic activity*, both transcendent and immanent to human beings, can we overcome the difficulties we face today and lay the foundations for a fully developed *rhuthmic paradigm*.