

Extrait du Rhuthmos

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Elements of Rhythmology - Preface

- Recherches

- Vers un nouveau paradigme scientifique ?
- Sur le concept de rythme - Nouvel article

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Rhuthmos

This text is the preface of a coming book

Let no one who is a geometer enter

When I first fantasized this book, I wanted to explore the rhythmic of our present world, i.e. the ways bodies, speeches and groups are flowing. By so doing, my aim was to develop a critique that would be more accurate than those based merely on class struggle, deconstruction of norms or politics of multitudes, and make, if possible, some ethical and political suggestions for present and future. My second objective was to give an account of some recent changes in social and human science. For at least two decades rhythm has been progressively used as conceptual tool and taken as a subject of investigation by a great number of disciplines. But I rapidly realized that either on the political or the epistemological level the issue of rhythm was too poorly known and that it needed to be approached with utmost care. A detour was necessary to shed some light on a very rich and complex matter.

If the rapid changes in our societies have made clearly many of our critical tools obsolete - the fading of the traditional working class, the generalization of individualization of norms by the neoliberalism, the emergence of new frightening state powers - it was not certain that rhythm theories were already articulate enough to compensate for sagging critiques and to propose some firm ethical and political alternatives. Furthermore, the epistemological change had visibly something to do with the recent transformations of the world - the new cycle in which capitalism has entered, the globalization of trade, production and consumption, the spreading of new communication technologies, the growing urbanization and the fluidization of our societies and daily lives - but it was still unclear if rhythm had already emerged as a new scientific paradigm, as structure, system, individual and deconstruction during the previous decades of the 20th century.

Before being able to achieve my goals, I needed to go quite far back in time and present the rhythm issue from angles that have completely been forgotten though they were essential to many of our predecessors. So I decided that I would start from scratch i.e. from the time when rhythm was not considered as a relevant theoretical subject outside of music, and meander down slowly to our times.

In the 17th century and the first half of the 18th century, rhythm was still mainly considered as a case for musicians. Nevertheless by the second half of the 18th century it explicitly became, for the first time since Antiquity, an issue pervading other arts and sciences and began also to be taken again into account for its ethical and political consequences.

The first thinker to fully and explicitly theorize rhythm outside of music is Denis Diderot who started his reflection on this matter around 1750 and continued to develop it until his death in 1784. Later on appeared in Germany a constellation of writers and thinkers who took the same direction between 1785 and 1804. It has become since a subject of reflection for art theory, philosophy, life sciences, medicine, economics, history, sociology, anthropology, architecture, urbanism and many other disciplines.

By so doing, those thinkers and writers extended to arts, but also to ethics and politics, sometimes knowing it sometimes not, some of the ideas developed in their ontology and epistemology by Spinoza and Leibniz during the previous century, when both tried to account for the new physics, launched previously by Copernicus in the 16th century and Galileo Galilei at the beginning of 17th century. By setting up brand new dynamic worldviews based on movement, mutation, transformation and their rules or organizations, Spinoza and Leibniz had themselves rediscovered some basic features of a very long tradition stemming out of pre-Platonic Greek thinkers as Heraclitus or Democritus, tradition that was lost for centuries due to the hegemony of Platonic and Aristotelian ways of thinking

in the West (Michon, 2015).

I don't want to frighten the reader: we will not go that far back. But one should be aware before reading this book: 1. that by reflecting on rhythm we inevitably get linked to a very old tradition of thinking that starts in the most remote period of Western culture, when the Greek word *rhuthmos* simply signified something like a "form that is not permanent" or better yet, a "way of flowing" (Benveniste, 1951) - in this sense, a rhythmology is always, at least partly, a *rhuthmology*; 2. that this tradition gives us tools that are much more convenient to deal with dynamic phenomena as art or ethics or politics, than the very narrow concept of rhythm that is today commonly taken for granted.

We will see that rhythm experienced subsequently numerous transformations. During the first decades of the 19th century, all discoveries made in the 18th century were challenged by biological, metrical and philosophical approaches that again reduced rhythm to its Platonic traditional definition. A new theoretical trend started that would eventually prove very influential until nowadays.

But from the 1850s, first artists then theorists put the *rhuthmos* back on the agenda and made it again, in spite of many difficulties and setbacks, a leading artistic, scientific, ethical and political subject which lasted until WW2. Then rhythm slowly disappeared from human science during the "Glorious Thirty", reemerged for a very brief moment at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s and recessed once again into oblivion until it was rediscovered at the end of the 1990s and brought to the spectacular blooming - as well as confusion - we are now witnessing.

This is the complicated story, made out of growth, disappearance, misunderstanding and fight, which I would like to tell, using some of my own research but also a bouquet of recent and brilliant academic investigations. Our knowledge of the history of rhythm is far from complete yet, some important moments are still missing or blurred, but we have now enough evidence to affirm that rhythm has been at least for the last two and half centuries a key issue for a variety of disciplines, though they were moments of eclipse, and that it has recently reappeared as a concept that could help us to understand, critique and oppose the new world we are now living in.

Before entering my subject I would like to stress a few more points. First, when I say "the rhythm issue disappeared or reemerged, etc.," I am not of course referring to music, since rhythm has always been an important feature for musicians. Moreover, today the latter usually recognize that rhythm must be differentiated from meter and they regularly emphasize its crucial importance in music. But the musical approach to rhythm, although it is certainly legitimate within its own sphere, does not help much when it is applied to other arts and more broadly to culture and society. Even when it is mainly concerned with change and variety, it still starts from measure and meter. Rhythm is most often conceived as "disparity," "delay" as Pablo Casals put it, "subtle give and take which never disturbs the flow," anyway as opposing but also maintaining the metronomic beat. 3. The reader trained in music will thus have to forget for a while his or her own common understanding in order to grasp the power of the alternative definition - rhythm as *rhuthmos* i.e. as way of flowing - I will try to slowly bring to light by going through numerous other contributions of the past and their artistic, ethical and political consequences.

The other points concern the span of the studies we will go through. We will look at arts, poetry, painting, theater, cabaret, and even some music. We will also indulge in social sciences like sociology, anthropology, and history, but also in philosophy, critical theory, and poetics. Specialists are usually unhappy with essays that cross the academic frontiers. Nothing does appeal to them in these endeavors that do not respect the common order of things and disciplines. To those critics, I would simply recall: 4. that reality is not split into independent segments, that there is continuity in it; but also 5. that rhythm theory or rhythmology is an emerging discipline, which has not much yet to lean on and pushes its way forward in an almost totally *incognita terra*.

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