Rhythm as Aesthetic Category (Part 1)

- Recherches
- Le rythme dans les sciences et les arts contemporains
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Let us turn now to the art history in the 19th century. As we already noticed, rhythm became a very important theoretical tool for aesthetics in German speaking countries, where it widely spread until WW1 and remained essential in a number of discussions during the first half of the 20th century. According to Hermann Russack, who is certainly quite trustworthy on this subject, it was introduced in German research by the first great German art historians, Karl Schnaase and Franz Kugler, as soon as the 1840s and 1850s (Russack, 1910, p. 7). It developed eventually with Gottfried Semper and, to a much more limited extent, the Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt. I will start with Schnaase's groundbreaking contribution.

Rhythm as Harmonious Arrangement (Schnaase - 1843-1850)

Karl Schnaase (1798-1875) was a German art historian and also a jurist. When he was a student, he attended the lectures of Hegel in Heidelberg and Berlin in 1817-1818. From 1843 to 1864, he published one of the first complete from the 19th century-viewpoint histories of art, *Geschichte der bildenden Künste - History of the Fine Arts*. Under Hegel's influence, he considered art history as aesthetically reflecting the development of the Human Spirit through the history of the various peoples *(Völker)* (vol. 1, p. IX-X) but Schnaase wanted to reintroduce in it a concern for form that was lacking in Hegel's account of art which gave the privilege to thought and subject matter.

Two volumes, the first on Indian, Babylonian, Persian, Phoenician, Jewish, and Egyptian art (vol. 1), the second, on Greek and Roman art (vol. 2), appeared in 1843; one on early Christian (until Carolingian times) and Islamic art in 1844 (vol. 3); two volumes on what Schnaase called the "Real Middle Ages" in 1850 (vol. 4.1) and 1854 (vol. 4.2); one on Gothic style in 1856 (vol. 5); one on the late Middle Ages in 1861 (vol. 6); and the last one on medieval Italian art in 1864 (vol. 7). The series on Middle Ages was simultaneously numbered from vol. 1 to 5.

As we will see, Schnaase used the term rhythm first in the traditional acceptation inspired by the spatial and mathematical Vitruvian-Albertian definition. As Russack rightly noted, it was then defined as "*rhythmische Anordnung* - rhythmic arrangement," or "*rhythmisches Verhältnis* - rhythmic relationship" (1910, p. 10) and implied "the necessary connection of all parts of a whole" (1910, p. 12), sometimes arranged according a common size unit (1910, p. 13).

In many instances, Schnaase also used it in a poetic sense partly as this term was traditionally understood in the first half of the 19th century as a succession of feet, partly in a quite innovative manner based on a concern for sound and rhyme. Surprisingly, he did not often mention the musical acceptation as succession of measure.

Lastly, Schnaase was probably one of the first to introduce into architecture a third use of the term rhythm defined, this time, as "*rhythmischer Wechsel* - rhythmic alternation," or "*rhythmische Wiederkehr* - rhythmic repetition" (1910, p. 10). This third use was in tune with the more modern emphasis on time, repetition, and regularity, although, due probably to a humanist education, he translated this new concept from poetry and music whithout ever mentioning

medicine.

A thorough survey of the occurrences of the terms "*Rhythmus* - rhythm," "*rhythmisch* - rhythmic," and "*Eurhythmie* - Eurhythmy" in Schnaase's *History of the Fine Arts* shows the slow penetration of the third acceptation into art history. I recorded in the following table the number of uses in "Vitruvian" sense (Vitr.), "Poetic-or-Musical" sense (Poe.-Mus.), and entirely new "Alternation-or-Repetition" sense (Alter.-Repeti.). The last column shows the ratio between new and Vitruvian uses (A-R/V). The latter undergoes a significant change around 1850. From 1843 to 1850, it remains below zero (except for 1844), the number of the newest uses is thus inferior to that of the traditional ones. Instead, from 1854 to 1864, the ratio becomes superior to zero: traditional uses then become less numerous than the new ones.

Vol.	Pub.	Period	Vitr.	Poe.-Mus.	Alter.-Repeti.	Ratio A.-R./V.
1	1843	Oriental Antiquity	1	2	0	0
2	1843	Greek and Roman Antiquity	4	1	2	0.5
3	1844	Early Christianity and Islam	0	5	3	-
4.1	1850	"Real Middle Ages"	17	1	11	0.65
4.2	1854	"Real Middle Ages"	9	0	14	1.56
5	1856	Gothic Style	8	0	9	1.12
6	1861	Late Middle Ages	3	0	6	2
7	1864	Medieval Italian Art	2	0	3	1.5

In addition to this general trend, this table shows a steady use of the Vitruvian acceptation, except in vol. 3 (Early Christianity and Islam) from which it is completely absent I will come back to this exception below. The latter reaches two maxima, as expected in the second volume dedicated to Greek and Roman Antiquity, and less expectedly in the fourth and fifth devoted to the "Real Middle Ages."

In order to better understand the implications of this spread, let us take as example the section in volume 4.1 where Schnaase compared the "rhythm of the ground plan" in early basilicas and in Romanesque and Gothic churches. According to him, the basilica's ground plan lacked "inner necessary connection."

> The basilica consisted of a three- or five-aisled long-house, a broad transept and an apse behind it, and thus contained the necessary divisions for the liturgical purposes and for the assembly of the great congregation. But these parts were arbitrarily joined to each other, without inner necessary connection *[ohne innern nothwendigen Zusammenhang]*. (*History of the Fine Arts*, vol.4.1, 1850, p. 127-128, my trans.)

Instead, the ground plan of later Romanesque churches was designed around a central square by addition of spaces

measured according a common standard.

> This [the inner necessary connection] required, above all, a central place, from which the external parts would radiate and in which they would meet. Therefore a square was assumed in the middle of the whole, the side of which determined the width of the central nave, the transept arms, and the choir space, and thus contained the standard of all the parts. (*History of the Fine Arts*, vol.4.1, 1850, p. 128, my trans.)

The choir, the transept, the nave, and the side aisles were all proportionate extensions of the central square a characteristic which, by the way, was later opposed to Wittkower's claim concerning the novelty of the design of S. Maria Novella church by Alberti in the 15th century.

> The choir was extended to give it both external and liturgical independence, however not by placing the apse directly on the central square, but by separating it by an antechamber of the same size. The church comprised a reiteration of the square in the central nave and a simple replication in each arm of the transept. Soon the distance between the pillars and the width of the side aisles, both of which had previously been unstable, were also regulated, and each determined to half the width of the central nave, so that the aisles now also consisted of squares [one quarter the size of the central ones], so that beside each square of the main nave there were on each side two squares, i.e. on both sides four, which together equaled the surface of the central one. This rhythmic relation was also indicated in the nave by the pillars, showing by their distance the width of the aisles, and at the same time on every third pillar the width of the main square, and thus of the central nave itself. Similarly, there was a rhythmic relation between the nave and the transept for, just as the nave connected its aisles through the central square, the latter again expanded through the transept out of the outer wall of the nave. (*History of the Fine Arts*, vol.4.1, 1850, p. 129, my trans.)

In Gothic churches, even if "the severity of those rhythmic relationships" was somehow soften "by subtle deviations," Schnaase found the same kind of proportionate structuring of space.

> In the Gothic style, those rhythmic relationships were found to be too severe and were softened by subtle deviations. But essentially, not only the shape of the cross, but also the given relation of the parts, persisted, and especially in certain earlier buildings it is emphasized with great strength and distinctness. (*History of the Fine Arts*, vol.4.1, 1850, p. 130, my trans.)

In short, the typically Romantic fondness for the Middle Ages, which motivated Schnaase, did not lead to the suppression of the Ancient-and-Renaissance concept of eurhythmy, which still supported a great number of comments and arguments.

Rhythm as Arabesque and Rhyme (Schnaase - 1844)

The second noticeable phenomenon which manifests itself in our occurrence table is a sizeable use of the term rhythm

according to its poetic and, to a lesser extent, musical sense, which reaches its maximum in the volume dedicated to Islamic and early Christian-Germanic arts published in 1844, before surprisingly disappearing in those published between 1854 and 1864, to the apparent benefit of the third sense. Let us see if we can account for these changes.

Schnaase's account of Islamic art was organized according a repeated change of scale. First, he saw in the Arab city skyline a typical form, springing from the deepest part of the people's mind, and translating into architecture and urban design a "melancholic rhythm of eternal recurrence," a "monotonous movement with slight rising and lowering," sometimes interrupted by a "sudden upswing without mediating transition" of a minaret.

> We can already perceive in the superficial views of their cities a common character of the Oriental-Mohammedan architecture. In addition to the flat roofs, the uniformity of which is lifted rather than interrupted by low domes, like those of a field of molehills, the thin minarets stand in greater or lesser numbers, like slender sticks, standing out in the pure eastern sky. In this picture we already have the basic character of oriental architecture: monotonous movement *[einförmige Fortbewegung]* with slight rising and lowering *[Heben und Senken]*, then sudden upswing without mediating transition, this contrast being weakened by frequent repetition and participating in the melancholic rhythm of eternal recurrence *[in den melancholischen Rhythmus ewiger Wiederkehr]*. (*History of the Fine Arts*, vol. 3, 1844, p. 329-330, my trans.)

A few pages below, Schnaase noticed that in the buildings themselves, successions of columns and arches were often used but without any common "measure," i.e. without Vitruvian eurhythmy.

> Here, especially in the open court, which is essential to Southern and Oriental privacy, columns and arches are to be found. Both are [yet] of very different kinds; it is impossible to think of certain orders of columns, of established relations between the individual parts; they alternate without [common] measure *[sie wechseln ohne Maass]*. (*History of the Fine Arts*, vol. 3, 1844, p. 330, my trans.)

However, this lack of eurhythmy was far, in Schnaase's opinion, from implying a lack of beauty. On the contrary, it opened unto a new aesthetic freedom which found its highest expression in the entirely novel rhythm of the ornamental arabesque covering the walls overhanging pillars and columns which, one more hint of the indifference towards the Ancient norm of eurhythmy, happened to be "undivided by architectural elements."

> Over the pillars and arches then rises a high wall, undivided by any architectural elements, but which is lavishly covered with more or less protruding or recessing ornaments made of stucco or painted. These *arabesques*, as they have been called because of their refinement by the Arabs, never consist of imitations of natural objects; they only occasionally remind of plant forms, never of animals, and in most cases they show only highly artificial and tasteful entanglements of straight or curved lines or bands. (*History of the Fine Arts*, vol. 3, 1844, p. 330, my trans.)

The intricate patterns and interlaced lines of the *arabesque*, with their supple oscillations and endless repetition were just as the arabesques in conversation or fairy-tales, Schnaase added another "genial" expression of the Arab

mind.

> There is scarcely any greater harmony *[Uebereinstimmung]* than that of the arabesques in the conversations by which the wandering Arabs shorten the hours of rest, the rich and the women the voluptuous boredom of the harem. The charming, fantastic fairy-tale, with its astounding wonders and unexplained relationships, forms the basis; it is the most genial expression of this spirit, which derives from the deepest nature of the people. (*History of the Fine Arts*, vol. 3, 1844, p. 447, my trans.)

Finally, Arabic poetry provided with its particular use of *rhyme* what probably was the finest rhythmic form directly springing from the people's mind. As its urban, architectural, and ornamental counterparts, the early Arabic poetry embodied supple rhythms based on repetition but excluding in any event any mechanical regularity. It made the language flow in "artificial fountains of bizarre and surprising shapes" yet moving "between these obstacles with admirable ease and grace."

> Even poetry follows this form. From an early age, it uses rhyme, the play of recurrent sound harmony, but handles it in a peculiar way, in which it sometimes introduces, as a surprise, into the unbounded speech, a mere accidental element; sometimes makes the same word constantly return while changing its meaning; sometimes develops in all sorts of artistry. [...] [The poetry] does not flow like a full stream from its natural source, but springs in artificial fountains of bizarre and surprising shapes. In its own way, however, Arab poetry is unsurpassable; it moves between these obstacles with admirable ease and grace. (*History of the Fine Arts*, vol. 3, 1844, p. 447-448, my trans.)

Schnaase found in Arab poetic rhythm the same blend of recurrence, slight inflections, and sudden changes, as in the skyline of the Arab city and the invasive use of arabesque in building as well as craft ornamentation. All of them sprang from a deep "musical sense" which gave a prominent role to "the pleasure of relationships, of recurrence, of rhythmic and harmonic interlacing."

> The use of rhyme seems to indicate a musical sense of the [Arab] mind, and many other peculiarities in the art of Mohammedan art might lead us to suppose that they must have particularly favored music. [...] In the arabesques and in the sound plays of the rhyme there is so much that is related to music; the pleasure of relationships, of recurrence, of rhythmic and harmonic interlacing. Music was probably designated as the beauty of change, and the same name can be used for those plays with rime and design. (*History of the Fine Arts*, vol. 3, 1844, p. 448, my trans.)

In the last chapter of his book ("*Die Richtung der karolingischen Kunst* - The Direction of the Carolingian Art"), Schnaase compared the Islamic art with that of the early Germanic peoples. Since both were expressions of a general movement of spiritualization of the human cultures, analogous rhythmic forms could also be found in early Germanic peoples' art. Although the Ancient Germans did not erect steady buildings and did not use either rhyme but alliteration (vol. 3, p. 540), they massively used the arabesque in their ornaments and jewels if in a more naturalistic and â€œarchitecturalâ€• manner different from the abstract and purely decorative fashion of the Arabs.

> The Germanic arabesque differs from the Moorish. One feels that it is not the last nor the highest, not only because, although it is true and pure arabesque, [...] the lines frequently and, increasingly over time, transform into vegetal and above all animal forms. The main reason is its earnest tendency to form masses and oppositions according to a strict geometric regulation of straight or curved lines, in one word, according to an architectural direction. (*History of the Fine Arts*, vol. 3, 1844, p. 537, my trans.)

Due to this "architectural" trend, the new freedom gained by Germanic poetry was different from that which made the particular charm of Arabic prosody and tales, and which Schnaase, inspired by the Orientalist trend of his time, fantasized as delicately and deliciously "arbitrary."

> In the case of the Arabs, the same game of delicate arbitrariness prevails in the rhyme as in the arabesque. In the Christian-Germanic peoples, at least gradually, not yet in this early period, and with many variations and transitions, rhymed poetry becomes more restrained. (*History of the Fine Arts*, vol. 3, 1844, p. 547, my trans.)

During the Carolingian times Schnaase cited Otfrid von Weißenburg's *Gospel harmony* composed in rhyming couplets (ca. 790-875) both rhyme and arabesque spread in Germanic art, indicating "an inner connection of the rhyme and the arabesque," i.e. a common spiritual movement in the people's mind.

> Thus, in the Germanic world, the rhyme, the formal principle of the new and future poetry, appears at about the same time as the first impulses towards a new formal principle for the visual arts, the arabesque. Both appear in a similar manner, unnoticed and undemanding, along with the deliberate imitation of ancient models; the rhyme in the German verses intended for the people, along with the Latin poetry in hexameters and Sapphic feet for the learned poets, the arabesque along with the Ancient or Byzantine forms of architecture and higher fine arts. We may therefore presume an inner connection of the rhyme and the arabesque, not a direct one, though, but through the feeling which produced them both. (*History of the Fine Arts*, vol. 3, 1844, p. 542-543, my trans.)

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