

Rhythm as *Rhuthmos* - Denis Diderot (1751-1777) - Part 2

jeudi 28 juillet 2016, par [Pascal Michon](#)

Sommaire

- [Rhythm in Poetry \(1751-1767\)](#)
- [Rhythm in Painting \(1759-1767\)](#)
- [The Artist's manner \(1761-1765\)](#)
- [Rhythm in Theater \(1773-1777\)](#)
- [Rhythm as Source of Individuat](#)

[Previous chapter](#)

Rhythm in Poetry (1751-1767)

Diderot was probably the first to focus on rhythm in poetry, while distinguishing it both from metric and musical models which existed since the Greek and Roman period. In the *Salon* of 1767, he explained that in poetry “rhythm counts for everything” (*le rythme est tout*), because rhythm causes a “prosodical magic” by a “particular choice of words,” “a certain distribution” of sounds both for timbre and quantity. This movement and the distribution of sounds are, he said, “similar” to the movements of “the ideas”, “the feelings”, “the passions” and even “the actions that one sets out to render”.

You’ve felt the beauty of the image, which is nothing. Rhythm counts for everything here ; it’s the prosodical magic of this corner of the picture that you’ll perhaps never feel. What then is rhythm, you ask me ? It is a particular choice of words, a certain distribution of syllables that are long or short, hard or soft, bland or pointed, light or heavy, slow or fast, plaintive or gay, a sequence of little onomatopoeias analogous to the ideas by which one is preoccupied, to the sensations one experiences and wants to excite, to the phenomena whose contingencies one wants to depict, to the passions one feels, and to the animal cry they provoke, to the nature, character, and movement of the actions one sets out to render. (*Salon de 1767*, IV, 732 – trans. John Goodman)

Rhythm is “the very image of the soul rendered by vocal inflection.” It paints acoustically the flow of thoughts and emotions.

It is the very image of the soul rendered by vocal inflection, successive nuances, transitions, a tone of utterance that speeds up, slows down, flashes brilliantly, effaces itself, is moderated in a hundred different ways. Listen to the painful, prolonged articulation of a sick person. They’ve both come face to face with true rhythm without realizing it. (*Salon de 1767*, IV, 733 – trans. John Goodman)

Thus rhythm for Diderot is not anymore a succession of strong and weak beats as in music, or long and short syllables as in ancient metric ; it is a synthetic prosodic operator that combines the “ideas” and “passions”, the sensations “that one experiences and wants to excite.” Moreover Diderot makes rhythm the main criterion of artistic value. A poet without rhythm, he says, “is almost not worth reading.”

Boileau searches for it and often finds it ; it seems to meet Racine halfway. Without this virtue a poet is almost not worth reading ; he’s colorless. (*Salon de 1767*, IV, 733 – trans. John Goodman)

This analysis, which arrives quite unexpectedly in a text devoted to painting, actually develops an idea already exposed some fifteen years earlier, in the *Letter on the Deaf-Mutes* (1751). In poetry, movement and distribution of sounds form what he calls a “hieroglyph” that, by combining the phonemes, syllables, words and periods, whether in their durations, their accents or their timbres, produces poetic “harmony.”

The term “hieroglyph” is selected by Diderot at least for two reasons : 1. Of course, to indicate the mysterious nature of this phenomenon – in the 18th century hieroglyphic writing had not been deciphered yet ; but also 2., since a hieroglyph is an image, to emphasize that all the elements that contribute to the artistic effect and which appear successively in the spoken chain, are in fact, in some way, related to each other by interactions that constitute a single expressive unit.

I would like to stress this point because it has a very significant impact on the concept of rhythm. If the main vehicle for poetic effect, the hieroglyph, that is to say the rhythm, can be compared to a picture, it is because much of the expressiveness of language baffles the semiotic model developed by philosophers since John Locke. This model claimed that the thought leans, when it develops, on signs that allow it both to replace things and to more precisely define its ideas. In this scheme, every thought is a succession of ideas manifested by a succession of signs. But such an analytical approach, if it can account for some kinds of speech, such as series of logical arguments, is powerless to explain what happens in poetry, which obviously involves essentially synthetic phenomena.

One can see that in the examples given by Diderot. In a speech a hieroglyph may be a way to “mimic” by the variations in speed, those of the action which is described. This can also be a way to “paint” an “image” through the play of accents, assonances – i.e. repetition of vowel sounds to create internal rhyming – alliterations – repetition of the first consonant in a series of multiple words – paronomasia – expressions where the sounds are repeated as in the famous “I like Ike” or in the not less beautiful “I scream for ice cream” – generally speaking through sound echoes. In all cases, the poetic hieroglyph transcends the orderly succession of signs of the spoken line, and that is why it is often presented by Diderot like a figure which suddenly displays and sets the meaning or the feeling of a text. He “mimes” or “paints” therefore not only an action or some pictures but the whole movement of thought. It is like a “painting” – he probably would have said a “film” should he have known the cinema – of the moving spirit.

Anyway, such simultaneity is neither final nor figural, it must be seen as permanent and dynamic. The hieroglyph is co-present in the succession of moments in the spoken chain. It is an active

organization principle, both elemental and organic, which defines the character of a poetic text and its signifying elements. Diderot can thus consider a poem both as a “web of hieroglyphs accumulated one after the other” and as a single dynamic hieroglyph, “a spirit that gives motion and life to every syllable,” that brings them all together.

There is in the discourse of the poet a spirit that gives motion and life to every syllable. What is this spirit ? I have sometimes felt its presence ; but all that I know about it is, that it is it that causes things to be said all at once ; that in the very moment they are grasped by the understanding, the soul is moved by them, the imagination sees them, and the ear hears them ; and that the discourse is not merely an enchainment of energetic terms that reveal the thought with force and elevation, but is even more a web of hieroglyphs accumulated one after the other and painting the thought. (*Lettre sur les sourds et muets à l'usage de ceux qui entendent & qui parlent*, 1751)

Thus the poetic hieroglyph reveals a property of language : language is not limited to linearly articulated logical statements but simultaneously supports both the ideas and emotions, the concepts and affects, by linking them to each other by the signifiers with which they are associated. Moreover, it rises directly, without any calculation, in the sensitive soul, that is to say, ultimately in the body, which it represents as a simultaneous and mobile sound representation. Finally, it has an effect on readers or viewers which is not performed through their reason but through their sensitivity, that is to say once again through their bodies. And that is why, Diderot made it, in the *Salon* of 1767, an essential criterion of poetic value. A poem – but one could say the same for any other artistic expression – which doesn't have its own rhythm has very little interest.

To summarize : the hieroglyph or the poetic rhythm works as a network of interactions between the elements of the spoken or written chain, which by bypassing its linearity, 1. creates a kind of cross motivation of the elements ; 2. helps to account for the moving painting which is, at every moment, our inner life, whether rational or emotional ; 3. produces intense pragmatic effects whether on the interlocutor(s) or the speaker ; 4. represents an essential criterion of artistic value : that which has no rhythm has no value.

Rhythm in Painting (1759-1767)

Diderot did not pursue his reflection on the poetic hieroglyph but we will see it re-emerge in Germany, a few decades later, especially with Goethe who, as one knows, greatly appreciated his predecessor, and with Moritz, Schiller, Wilhelm Schlegel and Hölderlin. We'll get back to that later. However, from 1759 and for nearly a quarter of a century, Diderot was interested in fine arts, especially painting. But the *Salons* he wrote during this period, almost every two years, allowed him to extend his first intuitions about rhythm through a reflection on the “Beautiful”, the criteria of Beauty, and on the “manner” (*la manière*), the unique way that each painter performs his works. This approach will allow him to give substance to his claim that that which has no rhythm has no value.

Diderot's aesthetic theory is quite complex. I only keep the elements that concern our subject. Diderot starts from the idea – which was already implicit in his theory of hieroglyph and rhythm – it is not the direct perception of the object that gives us an artistic pleasure but the apperception of

the “relations” (*rappports*) that organize the perceived object, whether through hearing, vision, taste, smell or touch.

When it is outside of me, I call *beauty*, everything that possesses within itself what will awaken within my understanding the idea of relations ; and *beauty* in relation to me, all which awakens that idea. [...] I am not demanding that one who sees a piece of architecture is capable of knowing what even the architect could even miss, but more in the case as one number is to another, or that someone who is listening to a concert knows more than the musician as to one sound is to another sound in its relations of two is to four or that four is to five. It is sufficient that he perceives and feels that the parts of this architecture and that the sounds of this piece of music have relations, either between themselves or with other objects. (*Encyclopédie - Article « BEAU »*, 1752)

This implies that we are not sensitive to all kinds of artistic objects and that we appreciate only those endowed with internal “*rappports*” familiar enough to be felt by us, but whose organization has also a singular quality. Artistic judgment thus presupposes simultaneously a subjective part, determined by the sensitivity and incorporated memory of the one who judges, and an objective part, which depends on the artistic quality of the object itself.

I skip the subjective part that pertains, in addition to sensitivity, that is to say, to the nerve fibers that run through the body, to bodily experience, to the received education, to which Diderot sometimes adds age and political regime. In general, it is the sensible experience and its incorporation which brings about taste, and which acts without the intervention of consciousness as a kind of “tact,” of “instinct,” of “spirit of the thing,” or of “natural flavor”. This faculty is by no means innate ; it is the product of countless experiences we have made since we were born, so it is partly socially and culturally determined.

The objective part, in turn, is defined mainly according to the traditional criterion of *mimesis*. For any art, except of course for architecture but also dance, beautiful is that which imitates the represented object, which reveals its truth :

The beauty is nothing but the truth, raised by possible, but rare and wonderful circumstances. (*Pensées détachées sur la peinture*, IV, 1054)

Diderot for example praises, following the tradition, the perfect illusion produced by Chardin’s paintings :

There are many small pictures by Chardin at the Salon, almost all of them depicting fruit with the accoutrements for a meal. This is nature itself. The objects stand out from the canvas and they are so real that my eyes are fooled by them. (*Salon de 1763*, trans. John Goodman)

However, Diderot does not draw from this traditional dualism the same conclusions as his contemporaries. First, he introduces, at the level of the object itself, as he did for poetry with the hieroglyph, systemic and dynamic considerations that oppose analytical and most common static criteria. Against those who advocate the imitation element by element of ancient beauty – a “beautiful hand” and a “beautiful ear” and a “beautiful arm” taken from different ancient examples – he emphasizes the need for a good “composition” of the representation. This is the set of “relations” (*rappports*) specific to its composition that provides the aesthetic quality to a picture.

A well composed picture [*tableau*] is a whole contained within a single point of view, in which the [various] parts work together to one end and form by their mutual correspondence a unity as real as that of the members of the body of an animal ; so that the piece of painting made up of a large number of figures thrown at random on to the canvas, with neither proportion, intelligence nor unity, no more deserves to be called a *true composition* than scattered studies of legs, nose and eyes on the same cartoon deserve to be called a *portrait* or even a *human figure*. (*Encyclopédie - Article « COMPOSITION », IV, 120*)

It must exist in the picture a kind of “unity” which includes the variety of items that appear in it, but which doesn’t prevent them to exist by themselves. Such a unity is often manifested in what Diderot calls “a connecting line”, which virtually joins together the various elements of the picture and offers the viewer an opportunity to actualize it. And as in the case of poetry, these harmonic relations earn their emotional and intellectual strength from the tensions that run through them. Diderot compares to suggest this idea, pictorial composition with theatrical staging. Certainly, it is not enough that it be linked by the sheer presence on the same canvas or on the same stage, but a dramatic tension, a set of power relations, must run through the canvas or the stage.

From which it becomes necessary for the painter to alter the natural state and to reduce it to an artificial state : and why should it be any different on stage ? If it is, what an art is declamation ! When everyone is a master of his role, there is almost nothing done. One must place the figures together, to draw them closer or spread them apart, to isolate or group them together and produce a succession of pictures, all composed in such a way that it is great and true. In which way would the painter not be of service to the actor and the actor to the painter ? (*De la poésie dramatique*, IV, 1342)

Secondly, he takes up the cause of an empiricist definition of Beauty and opposes to its deduction according to philosophical principles, which he considered non-existent, an induction based on the history of art and the plurality of works. Certainly there is for each work a “model” but this model is not its essence, nor its phenomenon in itself. It is not simply a matter of imitation of nature which is sometimes very ugly. The artist must instead correct it and free his art from a too systematic application of representative standard :

Because in any poetic production there’s an element of deception, and because this deception, whose limits are not and never will be fixed, allows art the liberty of deviations endorsed by some and proscribed by others ? [...] the sun of the painter is not that of the universe and never can be. (*Salon de 1767*, trans. John Goodman)

The artist actually follows an internal model that the ancients refined gradually, “over time, through a slow and timid journey, a long and painful groping around.” This model, like personal taste, is “the result of an infinity of successive observations” that, little by little, allowed it to develop. It therefore does not depend on the world of ideas and is quite simply the production of artists who have managed to rise

up to the true ideal model of beauty, to the true line ; true line, ideal model of beauty that existed nowhere but in the head of Agasia, Raphael, Poussin, Puget, Pigalle, Falconet. (*Salon de 1767*).

Finally Diderot argues that any art of certain value, any beauty, has moral and political qualities. In general, beautiful and admirable means “strong”, “fit to self-preservation”, it means something that does not violate “human morality” and that is “good” for human kind. Beauty is on the side of what André Breton would later call the “ascendant sign” of literature. Despicable and ugly – for example Boucher’s paintings (*Salon de 1765*, IV, 308-309) – is anything that on the contrary “perverts man”, drags him down, following its “descendant sign” (*Pensées détachées sur la peinture*, IV, 1051).

This man only takes the brush to show me tits and buttocks. I am glad to see some, but I do not want that somebody show them to me. (*Salon de 1765*, IV, 312)

Any art, like theater from which Diderot developed this idea, must always be a pedagogy of virtue.

Far from pairing, according to the egotist and individualistic aesthetics emerging at the time, sensitive pleasure and contemplation of truth, Diderot combines with sensitivity and body memory, the dynamic composition of works, historically built criteria of judgment, and ethical and political norms. He offers a theory of judgment and value which is decidedly empiricist but which rejects any skepticism and relativism. He thus gives a historical and political materialist content to his statement defining artistic value by *rhythmicity*. A work is beautiful because it is well rhythmized, but such quality is not defined in a purely musical or metric way. It has no relation with pure Platonic ideas, with rational or mathematical order, as in the Golden ratio theories. The rhythm spills out of the artist’s body and penetrates the viewer’s, the reader’s or the listener’s. The rhythm unfurls as a dynamic organization of the work and manifests its ethical and political values.

The Artist’s manner (1761-1765)

Now, what about the artist and his or her role in the production of rhythm ? Is there any relation between beauty, the ethical and political dimension of the artwork and his or her own artistic commitment ?

Because of the dominance of the model of representation, to which Diderot partly adheres, the 18th century mainly raises, as we have seen, the question of quality of the art work in terms of fidelity to the subject. Whatever its type – religious painting, history, landscape, genre painting, portrait, still life – a painting is beautiful and successfully accomplished if it represents the “thing itself” i.e. in Platonic version its deep truth or, in sensualist version, as it presents itself to us. Therefore, the picture shouldn’t sneak in between the viewer and the subject, and should instead function as a fully

transparent optical instrument that allows to contemplate the former in its purest essence or in its full phenomenal appearance. Now, if the pictorial representation is nothing but a more or less faithful reproduction of the Real, then what status should be granted to the singularity of the artist, to what is commonly called his “*manière*” ? Due to its characteristics, “*la manière*” may distract the viewer’s attention and introduce a blameworthy distortion of the subject.

Instructed by his assiduous visits to the Salon, Diderot defends the opposite position. He argues that the uniqueness of a painter’s “*manière*” – but that is the same for any other art, poetry or dance – does not preclude access to the general and truth. It is even the opposite :

He [Chardin] has no style (*manière*) ; No, I’m wrong, he has one of his own ; but since he has a style (*manière*) of his own, there should be some circumstances where he goes wrong, but there aren’t. (*Salon de 1765*, IV, 349)

Imitation is often better achieved when “*la manière*” is truly unique, even if it seems both harsh and neglected :

He makes always very faithful imitation of nature, with the craft (*faire*) of his own ; a craft (*faire*) that is rude and gross. (*Salon de 1761*, IV, 218)

Certainly, the older he gets, the more Chardin tends to simple sketching :

For quite a long time now this painter has not finished anything. He doesn’t go to a lot of trouble. He works as a man of quality who has talent, ease and content himself to sketch his ideas in four brushstrokes. (*Salon de 1761*, IV, 218)

But this change, in fact, is far from being negative because by surrendering easy effects obtained by over polishing and perfect outlining, Chardin achieves a higher level of expression, which requires only from the viewer a bit of participation. The latter has to find, by moving the eyes and the body, the right distance, which will allow the painter’s “craft” to reach full expression :

Chardin is different. He has in common with the jerky style (*la manière heurtée*) that close to it almost no one knows what it is, and that as the distance grows the object appears, and ends up being that of nature itself. (*Salon de 1765*, IV, 349)

Two years before, Diderot writes :

Come close, and everything becomes confused, flattens out and vanishes ; move back, and

everything takes shape once again (*se crée*) and recomposes itself (*se reproduit*). (*Salon de 1763*, V, 265)

Thus, what appears to his contemporaries as a paradox or a contradiction seems to Diderot perfectly consistent : the “*manière*”, this “special way that every painter follows when he designs, composes, expresses, colors,” is certainly always particular to one painter, but it does not prevent access to “real ideal model of beauty” – at least, we have seen, as the artists have gradually developed it. Art is a human experience – and perhaps one of the most significant in this respect – which gives birth, creates, brings about both singular and collectively admissible, unique and yet appreciable by all “*manières*”.

Thus we must add a new dimension to the rhythm issue : it not only refers to the dynamic composition of art works, to criteria of judgment built historically, and to humanist ethical and political values. It also involves an artist’s commitment to his work which is manifested in the way he crafts it, a way which is immediately recognizable. A work without rhythm has no value. But from the perspective of artistic production, the rhythm appears when the artist has managed to get a “*manière*” of his own. The “*manière*” is thus the first ethical and political commitment of an artist.

Rhythm in Theater (1773-1777)

The reflection on theater, which is found in later writings published posthumously, abandons in turn the question of the author and is primarily concerned with those of the actor and the audience. In the *Paradox of the Actor* (written between 1773 and 1777 and published in 1830) Diderot reflects on what makes a “*manière*” of acting, saying a text and moving one’s body, reach sublime with certain actors or actresses.

As we know, the actor “who is himself” (*qui est lui*), the one who plays according to his emotion, who is carried away by “his diaphragm,” does not know what he is doing. If he may succeed in some of his performances, he cannot find on the long run the right “*manière*” to animate his role and he is destined most of the time to poorly perform it. His playing is “uneven”, it lacks “unity”, it is “alternately strong and weak, hot and cold, flat and sublime” (*Paradoxe sur le comédien*, IV, 1380). In short he sins by being too irregular, one could say he lacks rhythm.

Conversely, the good actor is not himself when he plays. He does not play by the “soul” ; he has an “iron head”. As he is capable of duplicity and detachment, he can hold several dialogues concurrently ; he can also dominate his role without leaving his sensitive ego dominate. La Clairon, for example, can be every night a great Agrippina – in Racine’s *Britannicus* – because she feels nothing of what her body expresses, because she can make it play at will the entire range of expression of feelings :

In this moment, she is twofold : the little Clairon and the great Agrippina. (*Paradoxe sur le comédien*, IV, 1382)

As she herself stressed in her memoirs, a great actress relies on her craft and her accumulated

knowledge to free herself from herself :

How much study does one have first to do in order to stop to be oneself ? (*Mémoires*, Paris, Buisson, an VII - 1799)

By playing by “reflection” and “memory”, the actor will “imitate” as perfectly as possible “human nature” and show the real in all its “truth.”

What matters is that the role be built, that is to say, led from start to finish and every night in the same way ; in other words, that the flow of words, gestures, face and body expressions takes a rhythm that is both specific and reproducible. There lies the real “paradox of the actor” : how to reproduce in ever new conditions body movements and discourse organization that produce always the same effects on the audience ? How to give a “rhythm” to a role ?

The good actor, as a good poet or a good painter, is not subjugated by his emotions, he is not under the control of the peripheral nervous system ; but he actively exercises his sensitivity, that is to say works through its central nervous system – here Diderot is very close to the conception that will be later developed, for poetry, in the wake of Edgar Poe, by Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Valéry. He works simultaneously with different parts of his Self.

Contrary to the claim of traditional aesthetics, it is not the soul of the actor which is the principle of unity of the acting but the acting itself, which, if conducted with art, that is to say with rhythm, or if it conveys the actor’s “manière”, creates the impression of a specific soul. Thus the “character” is the product of a construction, of a measured, combined, orderly organization, which is voluntarily but not explicitly reflected. Relying on his “judgment”, his “taste”, hours of “painful study,” his “experience” and his “memory tenacity”, the good comedian knows not only how to give a unique rhythm to each of his roles, but he is also able to reproduce it identically during each performance, that is to say to give to it a rhythm in time.

Rhythm as Source of Individuation and Subjectivation

As the “operation” that allows the living to maintain and to distinguish itself, the “hieroglyph”, the “manière” and the “role” include notions of “relations” (*rapports*), of interplay of parts in the whole, of internal tensions. They are anthropological and historical analogs of the principles of individuation in the living, that I have not mentioned but are at the foundation of Diderot’s philosophy and aesthetics (Michon, 2015). But while in the living this “interplay” and these “tensions” concern the elements of the body, especially the organs and the network of nerve fibers, and are underpinned by natural identity provided by the molecular crowd, in art they concern the relations between the signifying elements of the painting, the play or the poem, whose arbitrary closure defines the unity.

Moreover, whereas in the living the “drives” (in French *tendances*, in Latin *conatus*) that accompany this operation are seen as simply guiding the individual in his interaction with his environment, in art they involve an eruptive logic that transforms the current order of things and opens up, for the

environment as well as for the individual, a different future. Thus the aim of the art critic is no longer as for the philosopher to describe the internal operation of an individual more or less fitting into the overall operation of nature, but to show how art in general, but also any poem, any painting, any show or, to speak in modern terms, any performance – if it has some quality and value – introduces into the human history something unexpected, unpredictable, unknown, and makes it different from a simple reproduction.

In his reflection on rhythm, Diderot proceeds from an ontological questioning about how each singularity is endowed with a certain *continuity*, to another, artistic, ethical and political one, this time targeting the production by each singularity of *discontinuities*. Simultaneously, however, unlike living beings who are always in conflict often resulting in reduction of power or death, works of art are beyond confliction – none clears or supersedes previous works – and carry with them an irrepressible *life force*. Thus these singular powers that in a way are causes of discontinuities, are also just as much, but on an ethical and political higher level, causes of continuity. As the “crowds of molecules”, they bring about a sort of “team spirit” (*esprit de corps*) but at the cultural level.

To put it in rhythmological terms, the “hieroglyph”, the “manière” and the “role” are forms of *individuation* that are at the same time forms of *subjectivity*, in that they allow an individual to free himself or herself in this or that sphere of existence and to become an agent, but also in that these forms have themselves a certain capacity for action, which will continue in the future and so create, in a potentially infinite way, some “commons”. A poem, a painting or a performance of some value are dynamic signifying systems, which have an individuality and simultaneously constitute subjective eruptive powers, which may be actualized by other individuals without any limitations. So they are simultaneously *individuals*, *subjects* and *trans-subjects*.

The pleasure or sometimes the intense displeasure caused by a poem, a painting or a performance is the result of the passing through us, often without our knowledge, of such a *trans-subject*, that is to say a *signifying rhythmic system* which provides us with its *intrinsic strength*. Reaching this kind of very special subjectivity can start with the pleasure that is felt, especially when trying to identify valuable works, it can also go back and forth between the work and the Self as in hermeneutical *modus operandi*, but it should anyway never stop at these first approaches. We must reach back from the work operation to its hieroglyphic explosive drive, which is what can be indefinitely re-actualized in the future by countless readers, viewers, listeners, bringing to each one of them an upheaval in his or her life, a power to go ahead and this bit of pleasure that accompanies most often one and the other. In short, we must recognize one global dynamic organization, a rhythm, a “manière” that can disturb, empower and charm, first the one in which it appears and eventually in any other human being.

Knowledge of rhythms in their singularity is possible. It can be reached through a discursive explanation of the pleasure felt when reading or listening to a poem, observing a painting or attending a live performance. But each time, we will have to recognize, what in rhythmic organization of the visual and sound stream produces a subjective effect (*effet de sujet*), which launches this particular individuation in the field of that which is sharable i.e. common. The very nature of a rhythm has to be understood as its poetic value, which is also ethical and political.

[Next chapter](#)