

Henri Lefebvre's Rhythmanalysis of Everyday Life and Space - Part 2

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Sommaire

- [The Recent Transformation of Rhythmanalysis into an Observation Technique](#)
- [Plato under Heraclitus' guise](#)
- [Klages under Marx's guise](#)
- [Lefebvre under Bachelard's guise](#)

[Previous chapter](#)

The Recent Transformation of Rhythmanalysis into an Observation Technique

As we can see, a significant number of elements of *rhythmanalysis* had already been outlined in the 1970s. This should be emphasized because it provides a better understanding of its strengths but also of its weaknesses. But before looking into Lefebvre's last book published posthumously in 1992, we need to consider its transformation into a sheer empirical method that has accompanied its recent success.

As a matter of fact, a [rapid survey](#) realized at the end of 2019 has shown that the three most often quoted parts of the book are chapter 2: "The Rhythmanalyst. A Provisionary Portrait," in which Lefebvre sketched the portrait of the ideal practitioner of rhythmanalysis who "listens to the world" (p. 19), "calls on all his senses" (p. 21), and is particularly attentive "to his body" which "serves him as metronome" to grasp the rhythms of society (pp. 19, 20, 67); chapter 3: "Seen from the Window," in which he described what he saw and heard from one of the windows of his apartment on Rue Rambuteau facing Pompidou Cultural Center in Paris; and the introduction of the 1986 "Attempt at the Rhythmanalysis of Mediterranean Cities" in which he emphasized the experiential dimension of rhythmanalysis.

Externality is necessary; and yet in order to grasp a rhythm one must have been grasped by it, have given or abandoned oneself "inwardly" to the time that it rhythmmed. (*Rhythmanalysis: Space, time and everyday life*, 1992, trans. S. Elden & G. Moore, 2004, p. 88)

He particularly insisted on hearing.

[The rhythmanalyst] is always "listening out," but he does not only hear words, discourses, noises and sounds; he is capable of listening to a house, a street, a town as one listens to a symphony, an opera. [...] The rhythmanalyst thus knows how to listen to a square, a market, an avenue. (*Rhythmanalysis: Space, time and everyday life*, 1992, trans. S. Elden & G. Moore, 2004, pp. 87-89)

However, he explained that he used the French word *entendre* in its double sense, which introduced the

power of reflection into experience.

Attentive to time (to tempo) and consequently to repetitions and likewise to differences in time, [...] he does not only observe human activities, he also hears [*entend*] (in the double sense of the word: noticing and understanding) the temporalities in which these activities unfold. (*Rhythmanalysis: Space, time and everyday life*, 1992, trans. S. Elden & G. Moore, 2004, p. 88)

The rest of the book, comprising chapter 4 on “Dressage,” in which he described the techniques for training animals and human beings but also their limits (pp. 41-43); chapter 5 on the rhythmic power of “Media,” which “tend to efface dialogue” (p. 48); chapter 6 on Capitalism’s “Manipulations of Time”; more surprisingly chapter 7 on “Music and Rhythms”; and even the largest part of “Attempt at the Rhythmanalysis of Mediterranean Cities,” which presented a meditation on the dialectic between the rhythms imposed by the state and those emerging from the organized citizens, all these chapters have attracted much less attention from recent scholarship.

This preference has naturally something to do with the fact that Lefebvre provided in the three most renowned chapters an innovative phenomenological approach to rhythmic phenomena, that was easily reusable by sociologists, ethnographers, geographers, city planners, and even artists. His technical suggestions have thus allowed a great number of beautiful descriptions of our contemporary life, but we are nevertheless entitled to wonder why the other side of Lefebvre’s rhythmanalysis, its critical side, is delicately left aside in most of these empirical studies. Why is it often that difficult to bridge sheer description and social critique?

Yet, as announced in the very first page of the book, Lefebvre’s rhythmanalytical program aimed at developing “a critique of the thing and of the process of *thingification* (of *reification*) in modern thought.” It was “led in the name of becoming, of movement, of mobility in general” (2004, p. 3). In other words, it was clearly thought of as a reactualization of Lefebvre’s brand of Marxist critique of the alienation of everyday life and space in modern capitalist societies and cities. Only rhythm could reintroduce harmony and fluidity in our life and thought and make us again in touch with experience.

The thesis I would like to defend now holds that Lefebvre’s last book shows that he had a right intuition of the power of the rhythm concept to address the problems of modern societies, but lacked the theoretical means to transform rhythmanalysis into a method sufficiently robust to maintain its critical sharpness and thus meet the terms of his own legitimate program. This lack of conceptual means resulted in a series of ambiguous theoretical positions that at least partly, because the common rejection of Marxism must also be taken into account, explains the difficulties and limitations met by recent rhythmanalysts and their choice to remain as much as possible close to the facts at the expense of a critique of our societies.

Plato under Heraclitus’ guise

The first problem concerns two fundamental presuppositions which are at the very basis of Lefebvre’s brand of rhythmanalysis. On the one hand, Lefebvre claimed, rightly in my opinion, that rhythmanalysis must recognize the fact that event, difference, singular happening are ontologically equivalent to repetition, or return of the same. Time’s fabric is a direct result of the dialectic, or the interaction, between repetition and difference. Difference always arises in repetition but it cannot arise without it [1].

Absolute repetition is only a fiction of logical and mathematical thought [...] not only does repetition not exclude differences, it also give birth to them, it **produces** them. Sooner or later it encounters the

event that arrives or rather arises in relation to the sequence or series produced repetitively. In other words: **difference** [...] “Differences induced or produced by repetitions constitute [the fabric] [*la trame* - the weft] of time.” (*Rhythmanalysis: Space, time and everyday life*, 1992, trans. S. Elden & G. Moore, 2004, pp. 7-8, my mod.)

But, on the other hand, Lefebvre described rhythm itself according to the traditional metric model which had become dominant in Western culture in the second half of the 19th century (see Michon, 2018b, 2019). The rhythm implies, he claimed, repetition, return, cycle, and measure—both in musical and mathematical senses.

No rhythm without repetition in time and space, without *reprises*, without returns, in short without **measure** [*mesure*]. (*Rhythmanalysis: Space, time and everyday life*, 1992, trans. S. Elden & G. Moore, 2004, p. 6)

Rhythm seems natural, spontaneous, with no law other than its unfurling. Yet rhythm, [which is] always [specific] (music, poetry, dance, gymnastics, work, etc.)[,] always implies a measure. Everywhere where there is rhythm, there is *measure*, which is to say law, calculated and expected obligation, a project. (*Rhythmanalysis: Space, time and everyday life*, 1992, trans. S. Elden & G. Moore, 2004, p. 8, my mod.)

This definition was slightly different from the one provided above in *The production of Space* (p. 205-206) but this did not change its general meaning. As in the late 19th century studies on rhythm in life or social science, measuring one specific rhythm entailed observing its speed, frequency, and elementary units—i.e. the elementary structures or measures of which it consists, as the translators rightly suggested by translating “*unités*” into “consistency.”

Each rhythm has its own and specific measure: speed, frequency, consistency [*unités* - units]. (*Rhythmanalysis: Space, time and everyday life*, 1992, trans. S. Elden & G. Moore, 2004, p. 8)

To put it in a nutshell, this metric presupposition reintroduced Plato into a program that was meant and announced as based on Heraclitus and Aristotle. It allowed Lefebvre to unduly consider as of the *same formal nature*, and therefore comparable, the temporal organization of arts such as “music, poetry, and dance” (pp. 8, 18, 57-66); of linguistic performances such as “eloquence and verbal rhythm” (p. 18); of psychological processes such as “recollection and memory” (p. 18); of physiological alternations such as those of the “heart, the kidneys, etc.” (pp. 16, 29); of bodily movements such as “gymnastics” (p. 8) and “march” (p. 9); of social activities such as “everyday, rites, ceremonies, fêtes, calendars” (pp. 6, 18, 94); of mechanical movements such as the “tick-tock” of the clock (p. 8); of natural movements such as the Mediterranean “waves” which “have and are rhythms” (p. 91); and of cosmic cycles such as “days, nights, seasons, the waves and tides of the sea, monthly cycles, etc.” (p. 8), that “from particles to galaxies” (p. 87).

By collapsing all levels of the universe under a common metric rule, Lefebvre regrettably joined with a number of speculative and idealist thinkers like Schelling (1775-1854), Steiner (1861-1925), and Klages (1872-1956), who have indulged in panrhythmic worldviews.

Now the study of rhythms covers an immense area: from the most natural (physiological, biological) to

the most sophisticated. (*Rhythmanalysis: Space, time and everyday life*, 1992, trans. S. Elden & G. Moore, 2004, p. 18)

He consequently made it quite difficult to grasp the specificity of each of these movements and imported, unwillingly but decisively, into his critical Heraclitean and Aristotelian project a Platonic principle of form that run contrary to it. The following statement illustrated perfectly this philosophical confusion. The whole world is flowing—but under a common metric law.

Nothing inert in the *world*, **no things**: very diverse rhythms, slow or lively (in relation to *us*). (This garden that I have before my eyes appears differently to me now from a moment ago. I have understood the **rhythms**: trees, flowers, birds and insects. They form a polyrrhythmia with the surroundings: the simultaneity of the **present** (therefore of presence), the apparent immobility that contains one thousand and one movements.... etc.) (*Rhythmanalysis: Space, time and everyday life*, 1992, trans. S. Elden & G. Moore, 2004, p. 17)

Klages under Marx's guise

The second problem of Lefebvre's conception of rhythmanalysis concerns the criteria used to appreciate the ethical and political qualities of rhythms. Lefebvre, a bit pompously, declared that he would develop "a critique from the left."

There was, in the heart of the centuries [following - *postérieurs à*] the Revolution, a critique from the *right* and a critique from the *left* of human (social) reality. The present writing engages deliberately in a critique from the **left**. (*Rhythmanalysis: Space, time and everyday life*, 1992, trans. S. Elden & G. Moore, 2004, p. 7, my mod.)

But if we look closely to what he was doing, the picture is not that clear. Since we most of the time have to deal with "bundles," "garlands" or "bouquets" of rhythms (p. 20), which he called *polyrhythmia*, the quality of these rhythmic bundles would principally depend on their "harmony" or their "discordance." Harmonious interaction between the rhythms of a human body and between the latter and those of the social groups to which it belongs would characterize *eurhythmia*; by contrast, disruptions or conflicts between rhythms would characterize *arrhythmia*. The former would produce "a state of health"; the latter "suffering", and "a pathological state."

The notion of rhythm brings with it or requires some complementary considerations: the implied but different notions of polyrhythmia, eurhythmia and arrhythmia. Polyrhythmia? It suffices to consult one's body; thus the everyday reveals itself to be polyrhythmia from the first listening. Eurhythmia? Rhythms unite with one another in the state of health; in normal (which is to say normed!) everydayness ; when they are discordant, there is suffering, a pathological state (of which arrhythmia is generally, at the same time, symptom, cause and effect). The discordance of rhythms brings previously eurhythmic organizations towards fatal disorder. (*Rhythmanalysis: Space, time and everyday life*, 1992, trans. S. Elden & G. Moore, 2004, p. 16, same idea pp. 67-68)

Consequently, the ethical and political program induced by these premises would be to avoid "arrhythmia" and "to strengthen or re-establish eurhythmia."

Intervention through rhythm [...] has a goal, an objective: to strengthen or re-establish eurhythmia. (*Rhythmanalysis: Space, time and everyday life*, 1992, trans. S. Elden & G. Moore, 2004, p. 68)

Historically, Lefebvre claimed—joining then in a common lament initiated at the end of the 19th century by the liberal economist Karl Bücher (1847-1930) and developed during the first decades of the following century by right-wing thinkers such as Ludwig Klages (1872-1956), Rudolf Laban (1879-1958), and Rudolf Bode (1881-1971) [2]—the rhythms of the traditional rural societies were more human and healthy, due to the importance they still gave to natural cycles, than those of the modern industrial societies, which have imposed upon the individuals the dehumanizing cadence of the machinery (and now) consumption that Lefebvre called “linear time” (same idea in 1985, p. 90).

But such polarities as harmonious vs discordant rhythms (if we consider a certain historical time), or cyclical-traditional vs linear-modern rhythms (which contrasts past and present), are actually quite debatable. One wonders, for example, if the so-called “*eurhythmia* - rhythmic harmony” could not become sometimes oppressive and if some “*arrhythmia* - rhythmic discordances” between the individual and his or her groups, or even within him- or herself, are not necessary to experiment and progress? What is then the difference between good and bad *eurhythmia* and between good and bad *arrhythmia*? As Brighenti and Kärholm recently accurately noticed, these binary categories are actually ill-based and unjustified.

Lefebvre’s characterization of eurhythmia and arrhythmia appears as a transcription of classic notions of utopia and dystopia that is not particularly helpful. In fact, we must acknowledge that there is no *fundamentum in re* for this distinction: The prefixes ‘eu-’ and ‘dys-’ or ‘a-’ are always correlative to a judgment, to an evaluative point of view. Therefore, similar distinctions cannot be grounded in pseudo-universal binaries such as nature/culture and so on, as Lefebvre does; instead, what amounts to a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ rhythm must be gauged in the light of a political stance and a cultural context. (Brighenti & Kärholm, 2018)

Similarly, one wonders why taking as principal tool the metric definition of rhythm—be it under its “cyclical” or “linear” aspects—whose recent domination over science has yet clearly been correlated with the spread of industry, finance and capitalism at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries (Michon, 2019). My guess is that this blatant contradiction might have something to do with Lefebvre’s faithfulness, through Marx, towards Hegel who not only was a fervent proponent of Idealism but was also one of the main actor, at the beginning of the 19th century, responsible for the reduction of rhythm to meter (Michon, 2018b, chap. 6).

Moreover, one wonders if the “cyclical time” of the traditional rural societies was less “artificial” than the “linear time” of our modern industrial societies—Mauss, for instance, thought the contrary (Michon, 2010/2015b)—and if the emancipation from the cosmic cycles has not brought new forms of life that we consider as real progress (see for opposite views, Simmel, 1900; Benjamin, 1936; Michon, 2005/2016). Again, I agree with Brighenti and Kärholm on this point.

This dichotomy is in fact a reiteration of a nostalgic and, at bottom, moralistic idea about modern time regarded as mechanic and unhealthy, as opposed to the ancient time seen as organic and curative. The opposition of ‘qualitative’ and ‘quantitative’ rhythms, or cyclical and linear, indulges a Manichean vision. (Brighenti & Kärholm, 2018)

Contrary to his introductory claim, this dualistic conception of ethics, politics, and history actually blurred the political frontiers and provided no clear direction for the intended “critique from the left.” A few pages below, Lefebvre lamented about the destruction of “nature, fatherland, [and] roots” in terms that could have been used by Klages or Bode.

Capital has something more than maliciousness, malignance and malevolence about it. [...] It kills artistic creation, creative capacity. It goes as far as threatening the last resource: nature, the fatherland, roots. (*Rhythmanalysis: Space, time and everyday life*, 1992, trans. S. Elden & G. Moore, 2004, p. 53)

Lefebvre under Bachelard’s guise

The last limitation of Lefebvre’s rhythmanalysis that currently hampers further development concerns his impressive lack of documentation and curiosity for other thinkers’ contributions. While there is now plenty of evidence that rhythm has been at the center of the preoccupations of a very large number of artists, thinkers and scientists since the middle of the 19th century and during the first half of the 20th century (Hanse, 2010; Michon, 2005/2016, 2010/2015b, 2018b, 2019), Lefebvre absurdly contended that “the philosophers, included Nietzsche,” had “only presaged” the “importance of *rhythm*” (2004, p. 9) [3].

Henri Bergson (1859-1941), who had yet meditated during his entire life on the concepts necessary to describe the organization of the flow of consciousness, the manners of flowing of nature and life, was mentioned only once, quite indirectly as a matter of fact, and to summarily reject his contribution.

Much has been spoken and written about musical time, especially after Schopenhauer and Bergson, in accordance with their philosophies of temporality. When the narrow relation between musical time and lived time was described [...] everything was said and nothing was said. (*Rhythmanalysis: Space, time and everyday life*, 1992, trans. S. Elden & G. Moore, 2004, p. 64)

Lefebvre mentioned, in passing, Gaston Bachelard (1884-1962) and Lúcio Alberto Pinheiro dos Santos (1889-1950), whom he criticized for their supposed lack of achievement [4].

It is from a Portuguese, dos Santos, that Bachelard, in *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, borrows the word “rhythmanalysis,” though without developing the meaning any more than did dos Santos. (*Rhythmanalysis: Space, time and everyday life*, 1992, trans. S. Elden & G. Moore, 2004, p. 9)

De facto, Lefebvre presented himself as the only thinker who had really paid heed to rhythm in the 20th century. Just to name a few in the first half of the century, he could have however resorted to *philosophers* such as Alfred N. Whitehead (1861-1947), Ludwig Klages (1872-1956) and Matila Ghyka (1881-1965); *artists* such as Ferdinand Hodler (1853-1918), Piet Mondrian (1872-1944), Paul Klee (1879-1940) and Robert Delaunay (1885-1941); *poets and novelists* such as Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898), Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889), William Butler Yeats (1865-1939), Filippo Marinetti (1876-1944), Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) and Vladimir Mayakovski (1893-1930); *theater and movie directors* such as Konstantin Stanislavski (1863-1938), Sergei Eisenstein (1898-1948), Fernand Léger (1881-1955), Dudley Murphy (1897-1968), Guido Seiber (1879-1940), Walter Ruttmann (1887-1941), Hans Richter (1888-1976); *advertising theorists* such as Fritz Pauli; *art historians and architects* such as August Schmarsow

(1853-1936) and Moisei Ginzburg (1892-1946); *economists* such as Karl Bücher (1847-1930), Albert Aftalion (1874-1956), Wesley Clair Mitchell (1874-1948); *pedagogues, gymnasts, and dancers* such as Émile Jaques-Dalcroze (1865-1950), Rudolf Laban (1879-1958), and Rudolf Bode (1881-1971); *sociologists and anthropologists* such as Émile Durkheim (1858-1917), Georg Simmel (1858-1918), Marcel Mauss (1872-1950), Maurice Halbwachs (1877-1945), Georges Gurvitch (1894-1965), and Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard (1902-1973).

More surprising, Lefebvre also totally ignored his contemporaries who in the 1970s and 1980s had yet produced, as we shall see, significant rhythm-analytical and sometimes rhythmological studies: Roland Barthes (1915-1980), Edgar Morin (1921-), Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995), Michel Foucault (1926-1984), Michel Serres (1930-2019), Felix Guattari (1930-1992), and Henri Meschonnic (1932-2009). This essay will try to fill this gap, to the best of my ability.

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Although Lefebvre's contribution has powerfully renovated the Marxist critique by introducing into its traditional social and economic views concerns for the modern production of daily life and urban space through rhythm, although his last essay has provided recent social sciences, urban studies, cultural studies, humanities, and even sometimes arts, with a methodological approach that has met with a great success, this contribution has been marred by important flaws, ambiguities and tensions which have hindered the expression of its full critical power.

1. First of all Lefebvre has maintained, until the end, the common metric definition of rhythm, which was dominant in the first part of the 20th century, without examining it deeply enough. This has resulted in founding an intended materialist Marxist social critique on a plain Platonic conceptual paradigm. In my opinion, this fundamental contradiction has not attracted enough attention from contemporary rhythm-analysts, even though it induces very serious consequences.

2. As soon as the very beginning of the 1960s, Lefebvre has established for rhythm-analysis ethical and political criteria in a very clumsy way, sometimes by resorting to a most dubious historical opposition between traditional cyclical societies and modern linear-repetitive ones, sometimes by sheer verbal affirmation that "rhythmic harmony" is good and "rhythmic discordance" is bad. This has finally brought his intended "critique from the left" very close to the "critique from the right" developed by German thinkers such as Klages, Bode and Laban, under the banner of "nature, fatherland, and roots." This is the second point that urgently needs to be clarified by present rhythm-analysts.

3. Lefebvre's lack of interest and knowledge concerning other thinkers' contributions has certainly reinforced the effects of his contradictory ontological and ethical-political stands. He had no challenging reference to turn to in order to correct or improve his speculations. Learning from this mistake, rhythm-analysts should thus now open windows and doors and document thoroughly past and present rhythm-analytical as well as rhythmological studies, in order to build their own theory and practice on more solid grounds.

4. Due to his remarkable longevity, Lefebvre has constituted by himself a kind of bridge between the pre-WW2 era and the second half of the 20th century. This particular historical position combined with his rejection of dogmatism, and personal attraction to the most concrete aspects of everyday life has allowed him to become one of the prominent thinkers who have reintroduced, in the 1970s and 1980s, the old rhythmic theme that had preoccupied so many scientists, philosophers and artists from the 1860s to the

1940s. Thanks to his contribution to the renovation of Marxist critique in the second half of the 20th century, he still remains an important figure. Rhythmologically speaking, his main achievement is the outlining of a methodological apparatus which is not without limits but is easily reusable by other observers. He was also the first in the rhythmic constellation to target the spread of metric rhythms in modern societies. But his scientific documentation and his theoretical reflection were much too limited and ambiguous. These flaws have probably been partly responsible for the unbalance between description and critique that characterizes the current flow of rhythmanalytical studies. His descriptive methodology is as rich and fertile as his critique is poor and ill-founded. Therefore, further progress in rhythmanalysis largely depends on our capacity to integrate and profit from a much larger number of contributions. Let us hope that such inquiry will allow us to present better ontological premises as well as more convincing ethical and political criteria.

[Next chapter](#)

Footnotes

[1] It is quite unfortunate, though, that Lefebvre did not refer here to G. Deleuze, *Différence et Répétition*, which was published in 1968.

[2] Bode, 1920; Laban, 1921; Klages, 1922/2004 - for recent comprehensive studies, see Hanse "Avant-propos" in Klages, 1922/2004; Hanse 2010; Crespi, 2014; Michon, 2019.

[3] For documented proofs of Nietzsche's deep and life long interest in rhythm, see Michon, 2018b.

[4] Surprisingly, Lefebvre apparently did not know the conclusive chapter (chap. VIII) dedicated to "Rhythmanalysis" in *La Dialectique de la durée* (1936/1950). He only mentioned *Psychanalyse du feu* which was published two years after and where the term *rythmanalyse* was used only once. For a recent study that does better justice to Bachelard's rhythmanalytical suggestions, see Lamy, 2018.