

# Could Rhythm Become a New Scientific Paradigm for the Humanities?

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## Recent Development of Rhythmic Studies

The first thing that becomes obvious when one is documenting the studies in human and social science dedicated to rhythmic phenomena or using rhythm as operating concept – whatever its definition – is the rapid increase in their number. Whereas thirty years ago rhythmic studies were very few and confined to sociology, economics, philosophy, musicology and poetics, they now both multiply and spread into new disciplines. For the last twenty years, rhythmic research has been developing in psychiatry, psychoanalysis and cognitive science. It emerged in anthropology, history, geography, urbanism. We saw it rising in linguistics and communication science – even in fields of knowledge that are more art than science, such as management and learning sciences. To make it short, we are witnessing a quite remarkable blooming of studies on rhythm or using rhythm as a tool.

## Emergence of a Rhythmic Scientific Paradigm?

This initial finding raises a question: should we see this re-emergence of rhythm as more than a fad? Should we see it, more specifically, as a transformation of knowledge or what one might call a ‘paradigm shift’?

Assuming that we define the concept of ‘paradigm’ as Thomas Kuhn did in the early 1960s, this would require that some problems, methods, concepts or certain findings would effectively be shared by a sufficiently large number of science and would provide a framework or a common epistemological support. Nowadays, obviously, this is not the case. Although increasingly frequent and spread in various fields, attention to rhythmic thematics remains dispersed and borrowings between disciplines are still rather rare.

This can be interpreted in three ways. The first, the most radical, would be that there is no and there will never be such thing as a 'rhythm paradigm.' This interpretation cannot be excluded from the outset but it has the flaw to close the debate even though we have not yet verified whether other interpretations are possible. The second, which is already a little more favorable, would be that the various examples, that have just been quickly listed, suggest that we would be at the mere beginning of a paradigmatic shift. This shift would be advanced enough to be detectable but not enough to be effective. The substitution of the new epistemological framework to the previous one would not be completed yet but it could happen in a foreseeable future. The last one would be that we may need to question Kuhn's view of scientific paradigms, which is itself a byproduct of a particular conception of science inspired by systemism/structuralism. Is it not possible indeed, that a paradigm supports, enlivens, irrigates some science without constituting an a priori, unconscious, uniform framework without exception? Could we not see the rhythmic paradigm rhythmically, i.e. as a simultaneously unitary and multiple ensemble of specific yet shareable ways to make the thought flow?

To put it in a nutshell, it is the third hypothesis which seems to me the most likely in view of the research that has been conducted on the web platform *Rhuthmos*. Rhythm is indeed a new paradigm but in quite a new way which implies diversity of approaches and flexible articulations. It is in this sense that we will use the term paradigm here.

## **Towards a New Kind of Paradigm?**

In order not to remain too abstract, I would like to present three examples: one taken in sociology, another one in anthropology and finally one in theory of language and poetics.

Sociology can rightly pride itself on numerous and ancient studies on rhythms of everyday life, rhythms of work, rhythms of leisure. Time, labor, urban and entertainment sociologies are today flourishing. In most of these studies, the concept of rhythm is taken either in its traditional periodic sense or as mere speed of action. The change of rhythm is identified in the first case to a change of accentuation, that can sometimes lead to dissolution and complete fluidity (Bauman 2000), and in the second to a change of pace that supports the very fashionable theme of 'acceleration' (Rosa 2010). But one sees in the work of young urban planners, sociologists and geographers new concerns that give to the concept of rhythm a different and quite remarkable meaning.

Given the space available, I will mention only one of these young researchers. In 2010, Benjamin Pradel defended a PhD thesis entitled *Temporary Urbanism and Event Urbanity: The New Collective Rhythms* (2011). In this research he sought to challenge the common idea that life in large cities is becoming increasingly arrhythmic and dominated by movement and fluidity. He showed instead that the number of rhythms continue to organize the generation, support and destruction of singular and collective identities. But by so doing, he was not content with reintroducing discontinuity into continuity, or accentuation into fluidity. His aim was to dismiss both holistic and individualistic conceptions of social time and to show that the temporality of action is built in a constant back and forth between individual and collective level, local and global scale. In great cities, rhythms of interaction certainly have no longer the regularity they had in urban societies of the past, but they are not completely dissolved either in what is often presented as a Brownian motion without term or form. To understand what is happening, we must, as Gilbert Simondon (1958) said, 'start from the middle'. These inter-action rhythms are new ways to produce social ties, which combine hypermodern features (e.g. the ceaseless weaving of weak ties) and updated legacy features (e.g. regular festive gatherings).

In anthropology, the notion of rhythm – which, in an already broader sense, was crucial to Franz Boas, Marcel Mauss and E. E. Evans-Pritchard – was dismissed after World War II and rejected from the circle of scientific concern (Michon 2016, Michon 2015a). But in recent years, a mutation occurred through the emergence of what François Laplantine (2005) suggested calling a ‘modal anthropology’. This, he said, is:

an approach to apprehend lifestyle, action and knowledge, ways of being, and more precisely modulations of behavior, including the most seemingly trivial, in the dimension of time, or rather the duration. While structural logic is a combinational logic presupposing the discontinuity of invariant signs likely to dispose and rearrange in a finite ensemble, a modal approach is much more attentive to transition processes and rhythmic transformations. Its main concern is less the nature of the relationship of the elements to the whole than the question of tone and intensity, that is to say the graduations oscillating between acceleration and deceleration, moving body and body at rest, contraction and relaxation. (Laplantine 2011)

This new anthropology rejects any eleatic perspective but also any structuralist elementarism. It wants to focus on continuity, modality, mutation, derailment and ultimately event – all kinds of phenomena that are not covered by traditional categories and deterministic logic. The rhythm, explicitly taken in the sense of mode of flowing, is thus becoming a leading operational concept. Without clearly saying it, this anthropology revives reflections by Georg Simmel, Mauss, Evans-Pritchard and many authors of the first half of the twentieth century, who considered rhythm a key anthropological issue. In the 1930s, Mauss said in one of his lectures: ‘Socially and individually, man is a rhythmic animal’ (1947: 85).

Last example: theory of language and poetics. For Henri Meschonnic, first of all, linguistics must be included in a more general discipline he called ‘theory of language’ – in French, *théorie du langage*. Unlike traditional linguistics, which poses the primacy of *la langue*, i.e. of a separate linguistic body linked to a social group – even when it includes the concept of enunciation – the theory of language is characterized by the primacy it gives to speech and language as an activity. It is part of a Humboldtian legacy that Meschonnic sees passing through Saussure and Benveniste. Moreover, this theory of language takes into account not only the ordinary discourse, as linguists and philosophers of language do, but also the literary discourse. So instead of considering poetics as external to linguistics, it places it instead at its centre (Michon 2010).

This double theoretical reversal is the frame that gives its meaning to Meschonnic’s quite innovative use of the rhythm concept. The language activity is characterized, Meschonnic says, by:

a relational morphological performativity, [which] neutralizes the opposition between signifier and signified. [. . .] This neutralization involves a representative function of language as discourse at all linguistic levels, in intonation, phonology, syntax (word order), organization of speech [. . .], etc. The signifier is no longer opposed to the signified; there is only one multiple, structural signifier, that brings about meaning from any part, a signifiante [. . .] constantly in the making and de-making. (Meschonnic 1975: 512)

Thus, far from being conceived, as in the dominant metric tradition, as a succession of strong and weak beats more or less strictly arithmetically organized, rhythm for Meschonnic means the continuing organization of this unique and at once multiple signifier, which produces *signifiance*:

I define rhythm in language as the organization of the marks by which the signifiers, be they linguistic or non-linguistic (especially in the case of oral communication), produce a specific semantics, separate from lexical meaning, that I call signifiance: that is to say the values specific to a discourse and to only one. These marks can be at all 'levels' of language: accentuation, prosody, lexis, syntax. (Meschonnic 1982: 216-17)

As we see, these three uses of the rhythm concept do not completely overlap. While the sociology of urban life still gives an important space to its metric definition and the anthropology of traditional groups adopts the opposite view by making rhythm the pure modality of a flow, theory of language and poetics seeks to elaborate a concept taking on the tension between form and flow.

These three various investigations share what one might call a 'family resemblance', which makes them reject any structural and even systemic model, without falling either into the differentialistic or individualistic views. They develop new perspectives from concepts neglected by previous paradigms: rhythms, modes and ways or manners of flowing. These differences as well as these common theoretical rejections and choices make these studies form a constellation whose elements are relatively independent from each other but share some important features.

## **Historical Differences with Previous Paradigms**

In the 1950s and more than ever in the 1960s, the concept of 'structure', defined as a stable organization based on a set of internal differences, provided a formal model for many human and social sciences. At the same time, it allowed these sciences to be organized around a discipline queen: linguistics. Language – at least as it was defined by phonology, i.e. as *la langue* – was a type of organization that seemed to be generalizable to many other realities. Simultaneously, but over a significantly longer period of time, the concept of 'system' represented a second 'universal' formal model, used both in social and natural science. This time it was not linguistics that provided the central model, but cybernetics. Like structure, system was defined as a stable organization, but its stability resulted from the divergent yet in the long run balanced interaction of differentiated elements.

Since the 1970s and especially the 1980s, both models have been regularly challenged and two other concepts began to occupy the space left by their progressive withdrawal: on the one hand, the concept of 'difference', which was presented as a legacy of Nietzsche's and Heidegger's critiques of metaphysics but which also presupposed a number of principles drawn from structuralism; on the other hand, the concept of 'individual' that first, in the 1980s, openly challenged the concept of system, but eventually, in the 1990s, combined with it in new syntheses based on hermeneutical, interactionist or neo-dialectic methodologies. While in the first case – the difference model – the philosophy of temporality replaced linguistics as paradigm core, in the second – the individualist model – economy took the place of cybernetics.

Opinions on what remains today of these four paradigms diverge sharply. While everyone agrees

that the structural paradigm collapsed a long time ago, the fate of the other three is still the subject of lively debate. It seems to me that none of these paradigms correspond any longer to the way our neo-capitalist world – both fluid and full of shocks and divides – operates, and that this fact alone already opens a space for rhythm. The radical break we have experienced in the last twenty-five years has made these theoretical models obsolete, while it gave again to rhythm an operative character. If our societies are penetrated by forces that fragment them and increasingly individualize us, this does not entail a greater capacity for action and experience. It is rather the opposite: we are more and more individualized, but we become less easily subjects. Therefore, except for the economists of the classical school and some sociologists, very few scientists still support the view that individuals can be considered as the primary elements of reality from which any human or social science should be built.

Overall, systemic approaches have not lost all legitimacy. But here too there are questions about their appropriateness to a universe that has been largely de-systematized for at least two decades. While the world as it emerged from World War II was composed of relatively stable systems fitting inside one another – United Nations Organization, blocks, free trade areas, states, businesses, families, even individuals – the events that have occurred in the last decades have questioned all these modes of organization one after the other. The blocks have disappeared; the UN has been ruled out at least for a time; production, consumption and information have been globalised through transport, telecommunication and information networks that grid now the entire globe. The states have been liberalized; businesses reorganized into networks; the traditional family has had to accept periodic reconfigurations and individuals to demonstrate capabilities of faster engagement and disengagement. None of these new forms still pertains to the traditional system theories.

Finally, approaches based on the various philosophies of difference, whether ontological, semiotic or pragmatist, continue, meanwhile, to be a great success – at least quantitatively. But one may question the relevance of the critiques they have been developing, for a good twenty years now, with regard to the contemporary world, whose operation consists for a great part in the deconstruction of oppositions and frontiers, the questioning of hierarchical systems and the commoditization of alternative lifestyles. One wonders even if, in some cases, these approaches have not become more or less willingly mere auxiliaries of the current capitalist revolution. What looked critical when the world was dominated by hierarchical, stable and stifling classification systems seems less and less relevant since the world has become open, mobile and fluid.

As in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, we are now faced with an intensification of economic globalization, a fluidization of societies, an increase in social inequality and a reorganization of the balance of power in the world. And that is why, as a hundred and thirty years ago, when rhythm began to be taken into account by human and social science, we need new thinking models that are adequate to the new world, at once fluid and fractured, in which we have entered. Indeed, it is precisely a model of this kind that the rebirth of the concept of rhythm suggests.

## **Conceptual Characteristics of the Rhythmic Paradigm**

We may turn now to the main features that give the new emerging concept of rhythm its particular potential in the historical and theoretical context just described.

The first is the *rejection of the metric model* that has dominated Western thought since Plato, Aristotle and Aristoxenus of Tarentum. By explicitly abandoning for poetics the Platonic model of rhythm as simple 'order of movement' (*hê tês kinêseôs táxis* – ἡ τῆς κινήσεως τάξις, Pl. *Lg.* 665a), or 'regular recurring motion' (*pâs rhuthmôs hôrisménêi metreítai kinêsei* – πᾶς ῥυθμὸς ὠρισμένη μετρεῖται κινήσει, Arist. *Pr.* 882b2) (see Michon 2018a), Meschonnic anticipated what happened later, more or less explicitly, in other disciplines: he returned to the pre-Socratic view reported by Benveniste (1971: 281–8) in his famous article 'The Notion of "Rhythm" in its Linguistic Expression' (see Michon 2018a). The rhythm recovered its ancient meaning of *rhuthmos*, that is to say not only, as we read too often in hasty comments, 'a configuration at a given moment of a reality that is soon going to change', but a real 'way of flowing'. Now this is one of the most significant elements of the current scientific changes: the best of them are made in the name of what we call a *rhuthmological* conception of rhythm (Michon 2018b).

The second important feature of the new concept of rhythm concerns its *ontogenetic dimension*. Far from being a mere sensitive phenomenon, consequently pertaining only to *aesthesis*, rhythm is considered as the support of *individuation* phenomena, i.e. the generation of entities separate from each other but which are nevertheless in permanent if not constant mutation.

Finally, the third significant feature of the new concept of rhythm is its *ethical and political dimension*. If rhythm supports individuation, it may sometimes support subjectivation as well, in the sense of a becoming-agent of the individuals that or who are concerned. Then rhythm has a critical dimension that makes it a fundamental tool for understanding our past, but also the new world we are now living in. These three features explain – although the analysis should certainly be further refined – the epistemological, ethical and political effectiveness of the new concept of rhythm. Once redefined as *rhuthmos* and with its dimensions of *individuation* and possible *subjectivation*, the concept of rhythm becomes a very powerful tool.

## Conclusion

Owing to historical studies that have multiplied in recent years, we begin to understand that the current emergence of rhythm actually re-actualizes a number of previous artistic, philosophical and scientific endeavors: before the twentieth century, the Platonic metric model had already been challenged. I think of Diderot in France in the eighteenth century or of the group of artists and art theorists that in Germany in the late eighteenth century included Moritz, Goethe, Schiller, Schlegel, Hölderlin. I also think of the constellation that marked the second half of the nineteenth century with Baudelaire, Wagner, Nietzsche, Hopkins, Mallarmé, Debussy, Mahler (Michon 2015b and 2018b). Finally, I think of the scholars who, in the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, set rhythm at the centre of their concerns, while implicitly or explicitly challenging its Platonic definition: Tarde, Simmel, Mauss, Evans-Pritchard, Granet, Bergson, Whitehead (Michon 2016). To this list, we should add all thinkers who reflected on rhythm in the late 1970s and the early 1980s: Foucault, Barthes, Serres, Deleuze, Lefebvre and Meschonnic, who is one of the most articulate on the matter (Michon 2015a).

Taking rhythm as *rhuthmos* – let us repeat it because it is the source of persistent misunderstandings – is not intended to oppose the fact that there are phenomena ordered by a succession of strong and weak beats distributed arithmetically, or by recurring periods or cyclical oscillations. But simply put, as already pointed out by Aristotle in his *Poetics*, it is not rhythm that is in the meter, but meter in rhythm. All metric organizations are organizations of dynamic phenomena



and are therefore rhythms. But many rhythms are not reducible to the concept of measured order of movement that the Greeks called *metron*. The contrast between rhythmicity and metrics is therefore not only conceptual, it is primarily strategic: it is about how to fit these concepts into one another. The concept of *rhuthmos* is broader and more powerful than the traditional concept of rhythm. It includes more cases in extension while it describes better their specificities.

Now we see what may be the main reason that explains the emergence of rhythm as we have witnessed for the last twenty years. Rhythm, when redefined as *rhuthmos* – i.e. as a way of flowing resulting in individuation and possibly subjectivation – is much better suited to the needs of any science that deals with objects that manifest themselves as organized flows. Whether those are the flows of speech, writing or information, the flows that ceaselessly inter-twine in major global cities and tourist places or the personal and social flows that the new modal anthropology tries to understand, every time modern science must solve the same type of problem: the observer faces a dynamic reality that runs continuously, and whose particularity is that it can never be stopped and fixed in a stable form. But it is not either a totally liquid, amorphous, unorganized reality, as some claim a bit hastily. It is a moving organization, or an organized mutation.

Studying beings from the rhythms that make them emerge fulfils the vow of Simondon to ‘start from the middle’ (Simondon 2007); that is to say, from the activities in which they are constantly generated and destroyed, while they seem falsely to exist by themselves and retain a substantial identity. Instead of starting from *individuals* or *systems*, as if they already existed *per se*, and look how they eventually interact, but also instead of looking only to the countless ways linguistic *différance* or temporal difference subvert identity, the new sciences study the singular and collective individuation-deindividuation processes, i.e. the processes of simultaneous generation-destruction of individuals and systems, concurrently at body, language and social levels. That kind of approach certainly removes any ethical and political guarantee based on individual or collective consciousness, but it does not indulge in relativism either, because these processes can always be classified and criticized accordingly: firstly, to the degree of *life power*, that is to say of *subjectivation*, each of them guarantees to singular and collective individuals; and secondly, the degree of *shareability* of this power. A process generating individuals by discriminating or even destroying other individuals is clearly the lowest it can exist. On the contrary, a process generating individuals by including and empowering others is the best one can hope for.

I conclude with a few words of praise and encouragement to all researchers engaged in recent years in rhythm-analytical or rhythmological research. Apart from a few seniors, such as François Laplantine, Jean-Claude Schmitt and myself, most of those researchers are young. They form a group of people who, without always being fully aware of it, share common formal and methodological concerns. These young researchers stumble against many obstacles: lack of jobs, rejection of innovation, fierce resistance against anything that might question the scientific legitimacy of existing authority relying on outdated paradigms. We have no less confidence in their future. We believe a new ‘rhythm-generation’ is slowly emerging: a generation that will, I am confident, introduce a radical change of rhythm in human and social science.

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