

Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari and the *Rhuthmoi* of Art - Part 1

Sunday 11 July 2021, by [Pascal Michon](#)

Sommaire

- [From Classical Metric Art to](#)
- [From Romantic Rhuthmic Art to](#)

[Previous chapter](#)

Art, particularly music, painting and literature, regularly appeared throughout the book and always in strategic places. As a matter of fact, in Deleuze and Guattari's minds, art introduced to ethics and politics. It was an essentially *rhuthmic* activity that involved inserting molecular quanta of energy into our segmentary world and tracing new lines of flight whether in our individual or in our collective lives. As for the last Foucault, art presented us with a kind of model for a good life as much as a powerful inspiration for a political revolution.

However, surprisingly, there was no chapter in *A Thousand Plateaus* specifically devoted to art. It was a rather strange oversight in a book which was intended—in a way ultimately not so far from that of Morin—a kind of reasoned critique of all contemporary knowledge. Naturally, this anomaly could be explained by the fact that Deleuze and Guattari had already written, a few years before, an entire book dedicated to literature: *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1975, trans. 1986), but as we will see, it was also a symptom of art's resistance to their philosophical approach.

From Classical Metric Art to Romantic *Rhuthmic* Art

We saw that, in Chapter 11 devoted to the “refrain” and the constitution of “territory,” Deleuze and Guattari compared literature with architecture and introduced the remarkable notion of “complex rhythmic personage or character” bringing consistency to heterogeneous fluid entities, unfortunately without going any further (see above Chap. 7). However, at the end of the same chapter, they painted a large fresco describing Western history of art from the 17th century, which brought in a few other relevant elements on this subject that are worth noting.

This historical fresco reflected the successive forms of territorial organization which they had just described previously. Although the Renaissance was not taken into account, it was also partly reminiscent of the analysis of successive *epistémè*s developed by Foucault in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1966), the main difference being that Foucault had tried to extract epistemic structures from the confusion of scientific life, while Deleuze and Guattari wanted precisely to get as close as possible to the confusion of artistic life by applying a molecular perspective to it and to look back at the so-called structures from this molecular perspective.

Just like the Classical episteme was based, according to Foucault, on representation and ordering through categorization and taxonomy, “Classical art” was mainly interested in setting up metric “milieus” integrated into larger “compartmentalized, centralized, and hierarchized” perspectives. It was imbued with the values of order, hierarchy, measure and balance.

[In Classicism] Matter is organized by a succession of forms that are compartmentalized, centralized, and hierarchized in relation to one another, each of which takes charge of a greater or lesser amount of matter. Each form is like the code of a milieu, and the passage from one form to another is a veritable transcoding. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 338)

“Baroque,” which was often presented by art specialists as promoting values opposite to those of Classicism, was actually only an alternative way to perform the same task of confronting “chaos, the forces of chaos, the forces of a raw and untamed matter” and of imposing upon them “Forms” and “Codes” in order to transform them into “substances” and “milieus.” There was no “clear line” between Classicism and Baroque which belonged to the same artistic and epistemic world.

What the artist confronts in this way is chaos, the forces of chaos, the forces of a raw and untamed matter upon which Forms must be imposed in order to make substances, and Codes in order to make milieus. Phenomenal agility. That is why no one has ever been able to draw a clear line between baroque and classical. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 338)

As one may know, Foucault claimed that a sudden shift, an “epistemic break,” had occurred between the very end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century. This break brought about the transformation of general grammar into linguistics, of natural history into biology, and of science of wealth into economics. More broadly, it entailed a penetration of the historical perspective and of the concept of Man into science. Deleuze and Guattari, for their part, did not endorse the concept of “epistemic break” but they freely emulated Foucault’s stress on the diffusion of the historical spirit and its passion for specificity and change.

They claimed, that by contrast with the Classical period, “Romanticism” was the period of “territorialization” of art. Instead of seeking “de jure universality” and of building “metric milieus,” artists “territorializ[ed],” while trying to build “territorial assemblages”—which, as we have seen, were based on “rhythmic characters” and “melodic landscapes.”

With romanticism, the artist abandons the ambition of de jure universality and his or her status as creator: the artist territorializes, enters a territorial assemblage. The seasons are now territorialized. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 338)

At the same time, artists no longer attempted to control Chaos by enveloping it in solid forms, but, on the contrary, to gather “the forces of the Earth” and to find in them a deeper “ground or foundation.”

The earth is the intense point at the deepest level of the territory or is projected outside it like a focal point, where all the forces draw together in close embrace. [...] the artist no longer confronts chaos, but hell and the subterranean, the groundless. The artist no longer risks dissipation in the milieu but rather sinking too deeply into the earth: Empedocles. The artist no longer identifies with Creation but with the ground or foundation, the foundation has become creative. The artist is no longer God but the Hero who defies God: Found, Found, instead of Create. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, pp. 338-339)

This double inspiration explained why art now involved simultaneously a “melodic territorial refrain” and the “rhythmic song of the Earth” which constituted a kind of “Ur-refrain,” i.e. a primal refrain harnessing “all refrains whether territorial or not, and all milieu refrains.”

The refrain is indissolubly constituted by the territorial song and the singing of the earth that rises to drown it out. Thus at the end of *Das Lied von der Erde* (The song of the Earth) there are two coexistent motifs, one melodic, evoking the assemblages of the bird, the other rhythmic, evoking the deep, eternal breathing of the earth. Mahler says that the singing of the birds, the color of the flowers, and the fragrance of the forest are not enough to make Nature, that the god Dionysus and the great Pan are needed. The Ur-refrain of the earth harnesses all refrains whether territorial or not, and all milieu refrains. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 339)

The primacy of the “eternal breathing of the Earth” explained why artists “experience[d] the territory” as “necessarily lost” and themselves as “an exile, a voyager.”

It is owing to this disjunction, this decoding, that the romantic artist experiences the territory; but he or she experiences it as necessarily lost, and experiences him- or herself as an exile, a voyager, as deterritorialized. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 339)

Since there were no longer milieus and substances to be ordered or metrified, nor definite codes or forms usable for this purpose, artistic matter transformed into a “*moving matter in a continuous variation*,” while artistic form became a “*form in continuous development*.” Art now addressed a world that was not any longer *chaotic* but fundamentally *rhuthmic*. Consequently, the question of artistic form shifted from *metrics* to *rhuthmics*. Artistic material and artistic form were both conceived as in “development” or “moving.” The recognition and promotion of the *rhuthmic* nature of the world and of art led artists to seek to compensate for the loss of their ordering power by developing “great forms,” such as literary cycles or pictorial series, which would encompass and provide fluid frames to the magmatic materials they had now to deal with.

There were no longer substantial parts corresponding to forms, milieus corresponding to codes, or a matter in chaos given order in forms and by codes. The parts were instead like assemblages produced and dismantled at the surface. Form itself became a *great form in continuous development*, a gathering of the forces of the earth taking all the parts up into a sheaf. Matter itself was no longer a chaos to subjugate and organize but rather *the moving matter of a*

continuous variation. (A *Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 340)

The weakest point in Romanticism, according to Deleuze and Guattari—in strong opposition with a common vision emphasizing its connection to nation and nationalism—was its lack of interest in the people. Everything in art, they argued, was reduced to the solitary individual who could not relate to others and got stuck in his closed territory.

What romanticism lacks most is a people. The territory is haunted by a solitary voice [...] The territory does not open onto a people, it half-opens onto the Friend, the Loved One; but the Loved One is already dead, and the Friend uncertain, disturbing. (A *Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 340)

From Romantic *Rhuthmic* Art to Modern *Rhuthmic* Art

The “modern age”—starting from the end of the 19th century—was the third stage in Deleuze and Guattari’s grand history of art. Instead of aiming at dominating and metrifying “Chaos,” instead of riding “the forces of the Earth” and gathering “territories” through forms in continuous development, artistic modernity aimed at capturing and harnessing “the forces of the Cosmos,” the latter being the whole universe as it was now diversified by physics but also the whole world as it was unified by the nuclear danger of total destruction as well as by imperialism—they did not know yet about globalization but they would have recognized it easily as a new and powerful element in what they called the “age of the cosmic.”

If there is a modern age, it is, of course, the age of the cosmic. [...] The assemblage no longer confronts the forces of chaos, it no longer uses the forces of the earth or the people to deepen itself but instead opens onto the forces of the Cosmos. (A *Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 342)

While Romanticism had introduced the idea of a fundamentally *rhuthmic* world but had tried nonetheless to encompass it through large flowing forms, Modernity—as Foucault and Meschonnic, Deleuze and Guattari rejected Lyotard’s idea of a postmodernity—took over the postulate of a *rhuthmic* world but dramatically changed its response to its challenge. Since this world was now entirely molecularized and flowing, modern art proposed to build only local and limited apparatuses capable of “harnessing Cosmic forces.”

A material is a molecularized matter, which must accordingly “harness” forces [*capter des forces*]; these forces are necessarily forces of the Cosmos. (A *Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 342)

Paul Cézanne (1839-1906) was one of the first painter to oppose Impressionism. For him, the world was not fluid anymore but composed of “forces, densities, intensities.” The Earth itself lost its deep

mobility and tended to take on “the value of pure heavy material.” By contrast with Impressionists who aimed at the flows of light, at the atmosphere and the space between the painter and the motif, his painting attempted to render visible the nonvisual forces crisscrossing the Earth.

This is the postromantic turning point: the essential thing is no longer forms and matters, or themes, but forces, densities, intensities. The earth itself swings over, tending to take on the value of pure material for a force of gravitation or weight. Perhaps it is not until Cezanne that rocks begin to exist uniquely through the forces of folding they harness, landscapes through thermal and magnetic forces, and apples through forces of germination: nonvisual forces that nevertheless have been rendered visible. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 343)

Similarly, Paul Klee (1879-1940) became one of the most important artist of the first half of the 20th century because he was deeply aware of the new condition into which advanced societies had entered. In the machinic age, art could not limit itself to mimic the undulations and variations of the atmosphere as in Impressionism or the waves of nature as in Art Nouveau. It had now to face the entirely deterritorialized and massified reality of the period, and try to reach the “naturing nature,” or the creative dynamic of the Cosmos itself.

[Klee] adds that the artist begins by looking around him- or herself, into all the milieus, but does so in order to grasp the trace of creation in the created, of naturing nature in nature; then, adopting “an earthbound position,” the artist turns his or her attention to the microscopic, to crystals, molecules, atoms, and particles, not for scientific conformity, but for movement, for nothing but immanent movement; the artist tells him- or herself that this world has had different aspects, will have still others, and that there are already others on other planets; finally, the artist opens up to the Cosmos in order to harness forces in a “work.” (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 337)

The artistic problem radically changed again. It was no longer a question of finding how to begin organizing or “re-creating” the world, as in Classicism, or how to find its deepest base in the Earth and “re-founding it,” as in Romanticism. It now became “how to consolidate the material, make it consistent, so that it [could] harness unthinkable, invisible, nonsonorous forces.” Art consisted both in dealing with “deterritorialized” and “molecularized” matter and in installing pockets of “consistency or consolidation” capable of harnessing “cosmic forces.”

The problem is no longer that of the beginning, any more than it is that of a foundation-ground. It is now a problem of consistency or consolidation: how to consolidate the material, make it consistent, so that it can [capture] [capture] unthinkable, invisible, nonsonorous forces. Debussy... Music molecularizes sound matter and in so doing becomes capable of harnessing nonsonorous forces such as Duration and Intensity. *Render Duration sonorous.* (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 343, my mod.)

This meant the end of the age of sheer territorial assemblage, which had dominated the Romantic

era, and the emergence of new kinds of assemblages, into which dynamic machines—in a sense close to Morin's—were plugged, and which attempted to establish communication with the forces of the "Cosmos," that is the new world engendered by industrial development, capitalism and imperialism as much as the new world recognized by physics.

We thus leave behind the assemblages to enter the age of the Machine, the immense mechanosphere, the plane of cosmicization of forces to be harnessed. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 343)

Edgar Varèse (1883-1965) was one of the pioneers of this novel form of art, who immediately understood the main characteristics of the new era and whose work announced the more recent success of music electronically synthesized from microintervals and elementary sound material.

Varese's procedure, at the dawn of this age, is exemplary: a musical machine of consistency, a *sound machine* (not a machine for reproducing sounds), which molecularizes and atomizes, ionizes sound matter, and harnesses a cosmic energy. If this machine must have an assemblage, it is the synthesizer. By assembling modules, source elements, and elements for treating sound (oscillators, generators, and transformers), by arranging microintervals, the synthesizer makes audible the sound process itself, the production of that process, and puts us in contact with still other elements beyond sound matter. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 343)

The challenge for modern artists was therefore to avoid simplistically reterritorializing these "fuzzy aggregates" in the figures of "the child, the mad" or that of "noise" (p. 344), or to use this premise as a simple recipe that could be reproduced at will and without any risk. Much too often, Deleuze and Guattari noted, some artists "overdid" it and ended up reproducing "a scribble effacing all lines, a scramble effacing all sounds," thus preventing "any events from happening."

This synthesis of disparate elements is not without ambiguity. It has the same ambiguity, perhaps, as the modern valorization of children's drawings, texts by the mad, and concerts of noise. Sometimes one overdoes it, puts too much in, works with a jumble of lines and sounds; then instead of producing a cosmic machine capable of "rendering sonorous," one lapses back to a machine of reproduction that ends up reproducing nothing but a scribble effacing all lines, a scramble effacing all sounds. The claim is that one is opening music to all events, all irruptions, but one ends up reproducing a scrambling that prevents any event from happening. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, pp. 343-344)

The main task for modern artists was to find ways to give a specific consistency to the "fuzzy aggregates" they had to work with. Only such a densification—or better yet "tensification"—could make it possible to produce valuable works of art and enable us to "distinguish the disparate elements constituting [them]." Each time, the right balance between fuzziness, consistency and discernibility of the elements had to be established in a new way, providing a sort of "modern" equivalent of the "rhythmic character" and "melodic landscape" which characterized the works of

art in the Romantic era.

One makes an aggregate fuzzy, instead of defining the fuzzy aggregate by the operations of consistency or consolidation pertaining to it. For this is the essential thing: *a fuzzy aggregate, a synthesis of disparate elements, is defined only by a degree of consistency that makes it possible to distinguish the disparate elements constituting that aggregate (discernibility)*. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 344)

This new type of art naturally had ethical and political correlates. The artists discarded the solitary romantic figures and relinquished both the forces of the Earth and those of the traditional peoples based on territory. Indeed, the Earth had been entirely deterritorialized by physics as much as by imperialism, while the peoples had been deeply massified or molecularized by capitalism, mass media and mass organizations.

Finally, it is clear that the relation to the earth and the people has changed, and is no longer of the romantic type. The earth is now at its most deterritorialized: not only a point in a galaxy, but one galaxy among others. The people is now at its most molecularized: a molecular population, a people of oscillators as so many forces of interaction. [...] The mass media, the great people's organizations of the party or union type, are machines for reproduction, fuzzification machines that effectively scramble all the terrestrial forces of the people. The established powers have placed us in the situation of a combat at once atomic and cosmic, galactic. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 345)

The artistic challenge was therefore to stir up or help create "a people yet to come" by transforming the existing peoples, deeply massified and controlled by "mass media, monitoring procedures, computers, space weapons," into other kinds of "molecular populations."

The question then became whether molecular or atomic "populations" of all natures (mass media, monitoring procedures, computers, space weapons) would continue to bombard the existing people in order to train it or control it or annihilate it—or if other molecular populations were possible, could slip into the first and give rise to a people yet to come. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 345)

Deleuze and Guattari cited Paul Virilio (1932-2018) who claimed that "poets," in a larger sense that included "pop musicians" (p. 346), "let loose molecular populations" in hopes that this would "engender the people to come."

The poet, on the other hand, is one who lets loose molecular populations in hopes that this will sow the seeds of, or even engender, the people to come, that these populations will pass into a people to come, open a cosmos. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 345)

To conclude, they swiftly brushed a picture of the future in which Earth and People would no longer

be massified and organized in a hierarchical cosmos, but would, on the contrary, become “the vectors of a cosmos that carries them off.” As a sort of subconscious homage to Barthes, Deleuze and Guattari imagined that Eearth and People would flow freely at their own rhythm and that the cosmos itself, so to speak, would become art. The idiorrhythmy would then be extended from the small group of friends considered by Barthes to the whole humankind.

Instead of being bombarded from all sides in a limiting cosmos, the people and the earth must be like the vectors of a cosmos that carries them off; then the cosmos itself will be art. From depopulation, make a cosmic people; from deterritorialization, a cosmic earth—that is the wish of the artisan-artist, here, there, locally. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 346)

At the end of the chapter, because this three-stage narrative could be understood as a concession to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) or Auguste Comte (1798-1857) (for instance in p. 346 they cited the “three ‘ages’”), or as a declaration of allegiance to evolutionism, or even to a Foucault-style series of “structures separated by signifying breaks,” Deleuze and Guattari deconstructed their own narrative and turned it finally into a simple typology. All “ages” actually contained all three types of “machines,” yet in different proportions.

These three “ages,” the classical, romantic, and modern (for lack of a better term), should not be interpreted as an evolution, or as structures separated by signifying breaks. They are assemblages enveloping different Machines, or different relations to the Machine. In a sense, everything we attribute to an age was already present in the preceding age. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 346)

The development of the absolute Spirit had nothing to do with this description, which focused only on the “technical” or, better yet, the “machinical” aspect of the relation between matter or material, and form. Since “the essential question [was] no longer matter-forms (or substances-attributes),” as in the Platonic-Aristotelian worldview which supported Classicism, nor that of “the continuous development of form and the continuous variation of matter,” which grounded Romanticism, it was now “a direct relation *material-forces*” which implied both molecularized matter and the infinitely many forces of the Cosmos.

All this seems extremely general, and somewhat Hegelian, testifying to an absolute Spirit. Yet it is, should be, a question of technique, exclusively a question of technique. The essential relation is no longer matters-forms (or substances-attributes); neither is it the continuous development of form and the continuous variation of matter. It is now a direct relation *material-forces*. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 342)

[Next chapter](#)