

Rhythm as Aesthetic Issue (Part 4)

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Organic vs. Crystalline Line Rhythm (Schmarsow - 1905)

Schmarsow completed his reflection by a few considerations concerning the “rhythm of lines,” and the “rhythm of colors.” Riegl, he noticed, first characterized the “*rhythm of lines*” as “the expression of the crystalline laws of material forms” (*Late Roman Art Industry*, 1901, p. 78). “The ancient plane composition” was based on a line-rhythm composed “of vertical and horizontals, interrupted by a few minor diagonals” (*op. cit.*, p. 78 – see [above](#)). “Rhythmically connecting diagonals” were an important tool (*op. cit.*, p. 90). Finally, the ancient artist sought the unity of his work of art in the rhythm of the lines within the plane (*op. cit.*, p. 60) (all quotes by Schmarsow, p. 95). However, Riegl presupposed, at the same time, “a second class of line rhythm, which concerns organic creature whose ‘rhythmic arrangement [*Gliederung*] of the outline’ (*op. cit.*, p. 75) entails the living mobility of the growth [phenomenon]” (p. 95).

This position was not consistent, Schmarsow argued. It was difficult to hold both views at the same time. Moreover, rhythm was not reducible to the mathematical arrangement of a crystal, which was only a geometrical grid, but was determined by the flowing succession of movements driving organic growth and living organisms.

In the scanning of the outlines of an organic form, the most characteristic lies in the flowing blending [*in dem fließenden Übergleiten*] of one direction into the other. The movement takes place in rises and falls [*in Hebungen und Senkungen*], like a wave [*eine Wellenlinie*] or a tendril [*Rankenzug*]. But where straight lines collide at sharp angles, verticals veer into horizontals, horizontals again into verticals, or where rows of vertical axes stand next to each other, only “interrupted” by a few diagonals, the continuous flow of motion [*der kontinuierliche Fluß der Bewegung*] is lacking, the lines bump harshly against each other, the directions collide. (*Basic Concepts of the Science of Art*, 1905, p. 95-96, my trans.)

When we call these crystalline arrangements rhythmic, we are actually only trying to cope with the uneasy feeling produced by these inorganic arrangements. We feel repelled by their “rigidity and inflexibility.” We try to introduce rhythmic movement into a monotonous “beat.”

And when we use such expressions [as Riegl's], it is just an unfortunate attempt to make easier the scanning of phenomena, to drive our tactile movements along lines which would correspond to the supple musculature of our organs. We feel repelled by the reversed change of direction, by the rigid, inflexible hardness of the crystalline laws [*der kristallinen Gesetzlichkeit*]. There is no movement, but immobility, solid continuity in the foreign materiality, which we feel cold even before we touch it. Crystalline bodies and directional antagonism between straight lines are for us humans the expression of other laws than those of the organic growth, or the curved outline, which characterize our own body. The sharp edge of the cube acts like a beat [*wie ein Taktschlag*]; the next produces nothing but a monotonous course. (*Basic Concepts of the Science of Art*, 1905, p. 96, my trans.)

Spatial vs. Plane Color Rhythm (Schmarsow - 1905)

Schmarsow criticized Riegl's use of the expression "*rhythm of colors*" on a different basis. According to Riegl, between the carved individual forms of a relief, there were *intervals* whose depth was "never so considerable as to call into question the effect of the rhythm bound to the plane, yet sufficient to fill these intervals with a shadow, more or less deep, which produces a colored rhythm of light and shadow, black and white, with the protruding bright individual forms interspersed in between" (*op. cit.*, p. 210 – see [above](#)). In many instances, Riegl mentioned "rhythm of light and shadow" (*op. cit.*, p. 60 – see [above](#)), "rhythmic alternation of illuminated and shaded parts" (*op. cit.*, p. 127 – see [above](#)), or "distribution of light and dark" (*op. cit.*, p. 78, 175 and *passim* – all quotes by Schmarsow, p. 96-97).

But, Schmarsow objected, those were "of a completely different nature than the rhythm of the lines on a surface" (p. 97). The latter was based initially "on purely visual sensory impressions," while the former were, "so to speak, connected by resonance with the haptic sensations of the difference between near and far" (p. 97). We recognized a rhythm of black and white parts only through their respective opposite optical movements into the depth. "White jumps to our eyes; black steps back."

Visually, black and white behave very differently—like hostile brothers. The optical powers of these opposites are so strong that they do not remain in one plane, unless one of them is absolutely dominant, like the white marble in a relief with very shallow shadows. White jumps to our eyes; black steps back. That is, they move in opposite directions, from back to front and from front to back. The dynamics do not take place in the material, nor in the mathematical plane, but occupy the first layer of space in front of the latter. White jumps to the eye; black deepens, retreats, seems a void space compared to the latter. Keeping the term "in the plane" here is a fiction. (*Basic Concepts of the Science of Art*, 1905, p. 97, my trans.)

Schmarsow could have cited Cézanne who, in the very same years, had consciously used the optical effects of the complementary colors—cool colors tend to recede, whereas warm ones advance—in the latest pictures of his series of the Montagne Sainte-Victoire (1902-1904). Anyway, he elaborated further his idea—introducing a subject that was to become crucial in the 20th century aesthetic reflection on painting—by showing that optic rhythm was not only synthesized through time by the moving viewer but that it depended as well on the distribution of the colors themselves.

Here really a dynamic is triggered, whose movement fills a certain space. Its permanent direction is the depth axis from the observer down to the original surface, when we start from the subject, or from the original surface to the observer, when we begin from the object. But of course, due to the gradation between the rises and the falls [*zwischen Hebungen und Senkungen*], all the other directions, in height and width as in the mediating diagonals, are accessible, in the whole layer of the distance. The modulations of this movement, the periodic return of the divisions [*der Gliederungen*], the caesuras and cadences in the continuous course, those are the facts that justify the name “rhythm” for the configuration principle here as well. (*Basic Concepts of the Science of Art*, 1905, p. 98, my trans.)

Schmarsow’s last objection concerned Riegl’s frequent equating of the “*rhythm of shadows*” with a “rhythm of colors.” “Light and shadow are not colors,” he argued. When they happen to be “rhythmically swaying” they certainly please us but they are not necessarily always “rhythmically appearing to us.” The phrase “color rhythm” should therefore be kept for the clear alternation of black and white and the opposite optic movements they trigger.

This insight into the nature of the phenomenon raises also an objection to the designation by Riegl of this chiaroscuro rhythm [*Helldunkelrhythmus*] as color rhythm. Light and shadow are not colors, but intensity values, such as a positive and a negative poles, which, like two forces counteracting in our senses, transform the impression of countermovement, contrast, and balance into harmony. The light floods us, the darkness ebbs away. We pursue with pleasure their rhythmically arranged swaying [*ihr rhythmisch gegliedertes Gewoge*]. [But] every change of light and shadow is not necessarily rhythmically graduated [*rhythmisch abgestuft*], or rhythmically appearing to us [*uns rhythmisch anzumuten*], as Riegl seems to presuppose in many places. The justification for this adjective would have to be examined case by case. If the term “colored rhythm” was nevertheless used in this instance, we could not accept it. The confusion with colors comes only through the equating of light and dark with white and black. White and black pigments on the painting surface are something very different from light and shadow in space, even though in painting the former can also stand for the latter. (*Basic Concepts of the Science of Art*, 1905, p. 98-99, my trans.)

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Although the opposition between the basic principles supporting their respective positions: experience, harmonic, succession, depth, activity, organicity, spatiality, on the one hand, and dialectic, metric, instantaneity, plane, contemplation, crystallinity, planarity, on the other, is quite clear, assessing the result of the controversy between Riegl and Schmarsow is not easy. The wealth of descriptions, the analytical subtlety, the number of the new concepts produced make it difficult to handle. As far as rhythmology is concerned, a few points can nevertheless be singled out.

Unlike Georg Vasold, I do not think that there has been only a kind of misunderstanding between Riegl and Schmarsow who would have fruitlessly quarreled because they were fundamentally interested in completely different parts of the reality. There would be no need to choose between them and we could thus give free rein to our historiographical neutrality.

All in all, they talk about completely different things in their interpretation of rhythm. While Schmarsow analyzes the artistic space, since he believes that it is only there—in the third dimension—that an experience of rhythm is possible, Riegl names the flatness [*Flächigkeit*] as a characteristic of rhythm. And while Schmarsow sees the observer as an active participant in the artistic process, Riegl insists that art—in its very rhythmic quality—is not interested in bodily and haptic perception, but rather in optical and contemplative perception. (Vasold, “Optique ou haptique : le rythme dans les études sur l’art au début du 20^e siècle”, 2010, p. 50, my trans.)

The dispute was clearly about the same thing, namely rhythm—and it still is.

1. It is true that there were some important aspects that were not taken into account in Schmarsow’s critique of Riegl. First of all, as we have many times noticed, the latter did not disregard space as such. Quite the contrary, the expansion of space in the artistic representation was, in his view, the deepest driving force that explained its development. His analysis was therefore based on a dialectic between plane and space, rhythm being the momentary result of this conflict, a transitional principle particularly present in the Late Antique era.

2. Secondly, for Riegl, because of its very historicity, the rhythm was not only an operative concept that could be used in whatever period of time. It had its own trajectory which culminated in the latest period of Antiquity before receding during the first centuries of the Middle Ages. If rhythmic forms could be recognized in later artistic expressions, for instance in architecture, they had to be defined according to the progress of the principle of space in Western art.

Due to his radical rejection of any Hegelian presupposition, Schmarsow did certainly miss the historical-formalist side of Riegl’s work which actually could not be reduced to a sheer historicist metaphysics.

3. However, Schmarsow was much more accurate when he targeted the lack of concern, in Riegl’s work, for the beholder himself, especially for his sensory and bodily experience, his memory, and his imagination. Whereas, for Riegl, the recognition of rhythm happened only through an immobile gaze projected from a distance on a visual plane, it could, for Schmarsow, only result from the mobile vision, sensitivity, imagination of a beholder strolling around, in and out a building, or around a work of art. He opposed to Riegl’s primarily optic concept not only a *haptic* one, as Vasold claimed—the latter was clearly taken into account by Riegl as the former was largely covered by Schmarsow—but a fully *experiential* if not already *existential* one.

4. Schmarsow also rightfully objected to Riegl’s resolute endorsement of the metric trend that was swiftly developing at the end of the 19th century. He ignored Baudelaire’s, Hopkins’ or Mallarmé’s poetic reflections (see vol. 2, chap. 8) but he knew and approved of the attempt made by Hauptmann and Riemann to oppose any domination of metrics in music.

5. So, as far as we are concerned, we cannot think that there was no relation between these two problems: the bracketing of the body and its experience in Riegl’s formalism—as in the following formalist theories in the 20th century—on the one hand, and his clear preference for metrics, on the

other, were closely correlated. Conversely, Schmarsow's attention to non-metric aspects of rhythm—even if it was not completely satisfactory due to his lack of poetics, i.e. of interest for the artistic dimension of the language—was clearly linked with his attention to the body and its experience.

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