

Conclusion - *Elements of Rhythmology* - Vol. 4

Monday 15 February 2021, by [Pascal Michon](#)

[Previous chapter](#)

Over the past fifteen years rhythm has become the object of increasing attention in social science and cultural studies. The number of papers and books devoted to rhythm analysis has increased exponentially, even if one excludes studies more specifically devoted to subjects related to music. A fairly broad intellectual movement is taking place, which most certainly corresponds to needs motivated by the transformations of the world that we have witnessed at the beginning of the 21st century.

However, this success was not accompanied by a corresponding expansion of the rhythmological reflection. Extensive studies on the history of the notion of rhythm as well as more fundamental philosophical elaborations have been carried out, but these contributions remain poorly known. As a result, rhythm receives a large number of meanings which are not always compatible and which often simply resume with the old Platonic metric tradition.

The purpose of this book was therefore to provide researchers and, beyond, all those who could be interested, with the bases of what we might call a “modern rhythmology”—in the ethical sense that Foucault or Meschonnic gave to the term “modernity”—in short, a rhythmology more suited to our fluid world and our critical needs.

1. Against the common vision that describes a sudden shift in the 1970s in social science and cultural studies from systemism and structuralism to individualism, poststructuralism and postmodernism, our investigation has revealed the appearance in the French intellectual firmament, for a rather short period of time, of a constellation of thinkers, directly or indirectly, interested in rhythm.

1.1 At the end of the three decades following World War II, which had just been dominated by holistic paradigms, and just before the surfacing of new models more suited to the emerging neoliberal world, there was a sort of imperceptible conjunction of stars emphasizing the need for an alternative approach to science, art and philosophy. Building such an alternative was a challenging concern for most important thinkers of the time. Lefebvre, Foucault, Benveniste, Barthes, Serres, Morin, Deleuze, Guattari and Meschonnic, all were fighting against the old systemic and structural world but also to establish a new perspective which would avoid the pitfall of the simple inversion of previous paradigms into a purely individualist critique, in their simple deconstruction, or even in their alleged dissolution into an ironic eclecticism.

1.2 Now, our analysis has shown that despite noticeable differences, these thinkers shared—even Lefebvre, who was certainly the less consistent on that matter—a common antimetric perspective. The same hostility towards meter motivated the opposition by Lefebvre to the invasion of everyday life by “linear rhythms,” the critique developed by Foucault of the domestication of the individuals by power metrics, that of the reduction of the language flow to a succession of discrete signs by Benveniste, that of the suppression of the idiorhythmic lifestyles and of the control of bodies and souls by monastic and industrial rules highlighted by Barthes, that of the discredit, denounced by Serres, cast on the ancient physics and mathematics based on flows, deviations, vortices and infinitesimal calculus, in favor of a tradition based on Euclidean geometry and rational arithmetic, and, finally, that of the classical deterministic concept of science based on order, law, regularity and reversibility to the benefit of a novel concept including the notions of disorder, loop, generativity and emergence, by Morin.

1.3 We have seen that this anti-metric spirit spread into many disciplines. While penetrating social science and political philosophy, it reached language theory and cultural studies, then natural science and technology. Rhythmanalysis, which, with Lefebvre and Foucault, was mainly concerned, so to speak, by the “metrization” of society, individual and time, transformed, with Benveniste and Barthes, into a theory and a study of the ways of flowing of language, subjectivity and self, and finally, with Serres and Morin, into a vast theory and description of the ways of flowing of nature, machines, information and society.

1.4 We also noticed that this extension was accompanied by a remarkable transformation of the theoretical tools used in these proliferating approaches. There was a clear shift, which we can legitimately call a “rhythmological turn,” from studies mainly focused on *meter* (Lefebvre, Foucault) towards studies based on a much broader concept involving, explicitly or implicitly, a *rhuthmic* perspective (Benveniste, Barthes, Serres, Morin). The discovery of the concept of *rhuthmos* was made by Benveniste, who was the first to clearly differentiate it from the *metron*, but we owe the first thoughtful use, outside its original philological context, to Barthes who began, for the very first time, to use it in anthropological, ethical and political reflection. The same year, Serres explicitly referred to Benveniste’s contribution, partly denying it sufficient accuracy, but using it extensively in his description of ancient physics. Morin did not explicitly mention the concept of *rhuthmos* but his whole enterprise was consistent with the *rhuthmic* trend which was reemerging in those years.

1.5 As a result, while the very first bases of a rather incisive *rhythmanalytical* critique of modern everyday life and democratic societies were laid by Lefebvre, Foucault, and Barthes, a fairly substantial *rhuthmological* perspective began to form, comprising no less than a *rhuthmic* ontology (Serres and Morin), a *rhuthmic* doctrine of time and becoming (Foucault, Benveniste, Serres and Morin), a *rhuthmic* theory of knowledge (Serres and Morin), a *rhuthmic* conception of nature and its evolution (Serres and Morin), a *rhuthmic* theory of individuation and self (Barthes, Serres and Morin), a *rhuthmic* theory of human subjectivity (Benveniste), a *rhuthmic* theory of information and language (Morin and Benveniste), and, last but not least, some elements of a *rhuthmic* doctrine of ethics and politics (Benveniste, Barthes, Morin).

1.6 On the basis of these first conclusions, we can safely say that the 1970s witnessed the emergence of a new scientific and philosophical perspective which aimed at overcoming the limits of the systemist and structuralist paradigms, while warding off, in advance, the main weaknesses of those that would emerge over the next decade. From the rhythmological viewpoint, this perspective resolutely broke with the Platonic metric paradigm, whose diffusion during the late 19th and early

20th centuries had been so impressive (Vol. 3), and remarkably revived both the Democritean and the Aristotelian *rhuthmic* paradigms (Vol. 1 and 2).

2. The originality of these very first rhythm analytical critiques and rhythmological propositions, the strength and speed of their expansion, and the sophistication of their conceptual elaboration, should have transformed them into a whole new scientific and philosophical paradigm. However we know that this did not happen.

2.1 In its greatest extension, this movement covered a period beginning in 1966, with the reissue of Benveniste's essay on the notion of rhythm. It gained momentum in the mid-1970s, especially in 1977, with Barthes, Serres and Morin each contributing a major work, and finally reached a sort of climax with the publication in 1980 of Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* and in 1982 of Meschonnic's *Critique of Rhythm*.

2.2 As soon as the early 1980s, the rhythmic constellation disappeared from the heavens, as quickly as it got there. Some more works using the concept of rhythm and even sometimes elaborating further on it were published in the 1980s and 1990s by Deleuze, Meschonnic or Lefebvre, however rhythm did not become an inspiring concept shared by a large number of scientists and thinkers. The celestial conjunction of stars did not turn into a concrete and effective intellectual network. Instead, individual, difference, and eclecticism, which were seemingly opposed to each other but in fact largely interdependent, occupied the space left open.

2.3 At the end of the 1990s and in the early 2000s, rhythm began to attract attention again. The number of works addressing the question or using the concept as a descriptive or critical tool started to grow with a noticeable acceleration in the 2010s. Since then, a large number of rhythm analytical studies have been carried out in geography, history, sociology, cultural studies, art studies, architecture, urban planning, management, science of education, and more, while a growing number of artists and performers embarked on rhythmic experiments hybridizing uses drawn from cultural studies, social sciences and music. Simultaneously, rhythmology has also witnessed some progress with a few studies concerning the history of the notion of rhythm as well as some discussions aimed at better elaborating the concept itself.

2.4 Now that individualism, differentialism and eclecticism have partly receded, the time for a reemergence of a rhythmic perspective may have arrived. Indeed, the former had been developed in the 1980s as theoretical war machines against the previous holistic perspectives but had quickly become, some enthusiastically, others more indirectly, akin to the fast-rising neoliberal order. By contrast, the rhythmic paradigm seems much more adequate to and critical of the fluid world we entered at the end of the 1990s than the previous ones. Recent rhythm analytical studies, which prolonged the initial impulses provided by Lefebvre and Foucault, have already produced significant results, and we certainly may expect more progress from a *rhuthmic* extension of the concept of rhythm, comparable to that which occurred in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

3. Such a reemergence can only succeed, however, if it manages to overcome some of the weaknesses of the 1970s constellation and of its subsequent avatars. Indeed, if we are to take these contributions to our own account and adapt them to our world, we must understand the main reasons for which, despite the successes they have been able to meet individually, they have failed to

collectively change the intellectual landscape of their time and to effectively oppose the other paradigms that have finally imposed themselves.

3.1 Most obvious among these is the absence of direct confrontation or debate among the various members of the constellation. Although they belonged to the same intellectual milieu, sometimes knew each other quite well, shared the same point of view on politics and especially on the revolt of 1968, and sometimes worked in the same academic institutions, the rhythm never became a subject clearly thematized and discussed for itself among them. This is certainly one of the first thing that could be improved nowadays, despite the rareness of academic institutions interested in rhythm.

3.2 Another reason appears in the list drawn up previously in paragraph 1.5. If this list constitutes a posteriori an impressive series of achievements, it also shows that each one of these has been developed separately without too much connection with the others, and sometimes even in complete ignorance of existing parallel enterprises. Rhythmanalysis as well as rhythmology have remained utterly fragmented. The specialization demanded by modern academic standards certainly prevented the communication between the various disciplines involved in the rhythmic constellation. Moreover, there was—and still is—a sort of regrettable iron curtain which almost hermetically separated social, linguistic and cultural studies, on the one hand, and natural sciences and mathematics, on the other. Even thinkers who dared to tear down the wall and crossed the no-man's land between the two blocs, such as Serres, Morin, or Deleuze and Guattari, struggled to reach to the other side. This is the second problem we will face.

3.3 In addition to this regrettable combination of lack of debate, narrow specialization and scientific cold war, we must finally take into account the divisions and weaknesses of the rhythmic constellation itself. First, it was clearly divided into two opposing stellar alignments composed of Serres, Morin, Deleuze and Guattari on the Democritean physical side, and of Benveniste and Meschonnic on the Aristotelian linguistic and poetic side, with Lefebvre, Foucault and Barthes distributing their luminaries in between, at varying distances from these two rows. Second, not only was the Aristotelian linguistic and poetic line in the minority from the start, it was also quickly marginalized and eventually erased from the common theoretical culture and debates of the following decades. Here we come up against the third challenge we will have to face, probably the most difficult of all.

4. I would not say, as Deleuze and Guattari, that we are dealing here with a case in which “nomad science” has been “‘barred,’ inhibited, or banned by the demands and conditions of State science” (1980/1987, p. 362), but Benveniste’s linguistics and Meschonnic’s poetics have certainly be the victims of a rapid sidelining which led to their absence in current mainstream knowledge.

4.1 I will tackle the question of poetics in another volume. Let us focus for the moment on linguistics. We already noticed this problem among the members of the rhythmic constellation. While Barthes and Meschonnic fully recognized the importance of Benveniste’s contribution, others simply ignored it like Lefebvre, Foucault or Morin, mocked it like Serres, or, as we will see, severely underestimated it like Deleuze and Guattari, who ironically helped a lot in its transmutation into “minor science.”

4.2 Looking now at the larger picture, we see that, despite a brief and surprising moment of glory in

1968 (Malkiel, 1980), Benveniste remained a *célèbre inconnu*. As a matter of fact, due to its former status as the queen discipline of the human sciences, linguistics became during the 1970s an object of mistrust and was now criticized as “imperialist.” Even if his own kind of linguistics was no longer based on the concept of structure, Benveniste himself was handicapped by his alleged association with structuralism. In addition, in 1969 he suffered a stroke, which prevented him from defending and further developing the two collections of general linguistics essays he published in 1966 and 1974, and finally he passed away in 1976. For their part, those in the rhythmic constellation who were familiar with his work and who could contribute to its better recognition were prevented from doing so for various reasons. Barthes died accidentally in 1980 and his first lecture at the Collège de France was not published until 2002. Meschonnic was a sort of hermit, working in isolation, having rare connections with his peers and little interest in passing on to a younger generation. As a result of this series of regrettable misunderstanding and unfortunate events, unlike Foucault, Barthes, Serres, Morin, Deleuze and Guattari, who quickly gained large and international recognition, Benveniste remained confined to linguistics, even in France, and very few of his books were eventually translated into foreign languages.

4.3 When he was read outside of his original domain, which was not so often, the kind of radically historical anthropology he suggested was received either as a mere linguistic version of a culturalist worldview (he was then assimilated to Lévi-Strauss), either as a linguistic form of phenomenology of subjectivity (he was then assimilated to Merleau-Ponty), or, in the worst interpretations, as just another brand of essentialist anthropology (he was then assimilated to the personalist thinker Emmanuel Mounier (1905–1950)). However, if we make the effort to read Benveniste from his own point of view, instead of projecting outward interpretations on him, something very different and very original emerges which is certainly one of the most significant contribution to rhythmology of this period.

5. In his essays on general linguistics, Benveniste offered much more than a simple technical point of view on language. He indeed conceived a very broad vision of the world which rested, like those of his contemporaries, on *rhuthmic* premises, but which had two advantages over them: on the one hand, it was motivated by a first-hand knowledge of the concept of *rhuthmos* and, on the other hand, it was not limited by naturalistic or culturalist presuppositions.

5.1 While agreeing with Lévi-Strauss in considering culture and symbolism as the specific environment of humanity which distinguishes it from the physical and biological environment as well as from so-called pure social and historical forces, thus rendering inappropriate any form of naturalistic or hyperpragmatic perspective, he did not consider culture and symbolism to be completely autonomous and made them dependent on language. In fact, even if they all seem equally essential, linguistic activity always comes before culture and symbolism.

5.2 However, he did not see language itself like Gadamer as a collection and a transmitter of specific meanings subjecting speakers to a higher and anonymous order, or like Derrida as a differential semiotic structure imposing on them polysemy and constant shift of meaning, destroying, thereby, any possibility of subjectivation. On the contrary, for Benveniste, language activity, which sustains language semantic power, propels the constant invention of humankind by itself through the development of its languages, cultures, religions, societies, individuals, but also through the subjectivities which it allows to emerge, develop and circulate.

5.3 Here two points must be specified. First, this does not mean that language would be supported by a substantial subjectivity which would be the linguistic correlate of the soul, or even by a phenomenological subjectivity based on the body and its feeling, which would exist before and independently of it. Again, language activity comes first and subjectivity, which directly depends on the *rhuthmoi* of language, is therefore discontinuous, mobile among the interlocutors and permanently available to any other human being.

5.4 Second, this possibility of subjectivation does not imply either that it would guarantee, more or less automatically, a certain progress towards more freedom and more humanity. The radically historical anthropology suggested by Benveniste cannot be reduced to any of the dialectical or hermeneutical forms of historical anthropology advocated by Lefebvre, Habermas or Ricœur. In a somewhat cryptic way Benveniste concluded: "The condition of man in language is unique." I would suggest to understand this statement as holding that "man's condition in language is *rhuthmic*, that is to say, radically historical."

6. We can now better understand the difficulties resulting from the erroneous interpretations developed at the time and the subsequent erasure of Benveniste's contribution, but also the resources that we can find in it, if we manage to restore it to its original theoretical momentum.

6.1 First, Benveniste provides us with the means to get rid for good of the Platonic metric paradigm, which for the time being continues to hamper the efforts of rhythmanalysis as well as rhythmology. Without his discovery of the concept of *rhuthmos*, it was—and still is—very difficult to make sense of the rhythmological turn which took place in the 1970s. The need to overcome the metric paradigm was clearly felt, with the ambiguous exception of Lefebvre, by all members of the rhythmic constellation, but most of them lacked an alternative perspective that could help them support their claim. As far as we are concerned, we should avoid repeating the same mistake and develop and promote a fully *rhuthmic strategy*.

6.2 Secondly, if Benveniste did not address the questions of art and poetics, which, as we will see in the next volumes, are the keys to any *rhuthmic* politics and ethics, he already gives us the means to overcome certain deeper issues that marred the rhythmic constellation of the 1970s, without falling into the traps of the paradigms that flourished in the following decades. Indeed, by opening up to a radically historical anthropology, his *rhuthmic* theory of language makes it possible to oppose both the mixture of naturalism and hyperpragmatism advocated by many thinkers on the Democritean side of the constellation, and the pure culturalism advocated by later poststructuralist and postmodern thinkers. Although it still misses important aspects of man's life, it therefore constitutes a theoretical resource perfectly suited to our current needs.

6.3 Pending further analysis of these missing aspects, if we managed to develop and articulate these two premises, a solid foundation would already be established which could help both rhythmology and rhythmanalysis to boost their current dynamics, to broaden the scope of their interventions and perhaps, this time, to find the place they deserve in our intellectual life.