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A Short History of Rhythm Theory Since the 1970s

- Recherches
- Histoire des études rythmiques
- 2e XXe siècle
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This conference has been presented at Roskilde University (DK) on December 6, 2011. On the same topic, see also the more recent paper ["A Rhythm Constellation in the 1970s and 1980s - Lefebvre, Foucault, Barthes, Serres, Morin, Deleuze & Guattari, and Meschonnic"](#).

The website RHUTHMOS was opened a year ago and has been successfully developing since then in many directions. That is why, when Anne Elisabeth Sejten asked me to introduce it to you, I was a little embarrassed and I didn't know where to start from. After some hesitation, I finally thought that the simplest way to solve that problem was to tell you about the origin of my own concern for rhythm and the way this concern grew up little by little into a larger theoretical interest.

Rhythm in the 1970s and the Beginning of the 1980s - A New Approach in Critical Theory

In the 1970s structuralism was a declining force. In many different fields the main question was how to get rid of it and how to address the new problems that were rising very fast above the horizon. As you know, there were many attempts at doing that, the main being Nietzscheism, deconstruction and new kinds of Marxism. Among those trends, I was attracted by Foucault's and Deleuze's ways to reintroduce temporality, creativity and diversity in a worldview that had been for too long considered systematically or structurally organized, without any real possibility of renewal. But I was also attracted by a far less famous author : Henri Meschonnic.

Meschonnic was renewing poetics in a very interesting and original way. I had already read a few books among those he wrote in the 1970s but I was especially captivated by what is considered today as his masterpiece : his 1982 book *Critique du rythme. Anthropologie historique du langage*. This book has not been translated yet into English and that is a pity because it lays the foundation for a completely new approach of rhythm.

Actually Meschonnic was not, in those days, the only one among French thinkers to be interested in rhythm. We only begin to understand that many of those who had been previously involved in structuralism and then in the neo-Nietzschean reaction against it - particularly Foucault, Barthes and Deleuze - were actually reflecting on this concept, explicitly or implicitly using it as an alternative after the collapse of structuralism and against the coming methodological individualism ; maybe also - at least in my opinion - as a tool to curb the tendency of certain kind of Nietzscheism and Heideggerism to overplay dispersion, difference and chaos ? Whatever the answer to that question is, it is in my opinion very significant that Foucault wrote one of the most beautiful books on rhythm in 1975 : *Discipline and Punish* ; that Barthes started his teaching at the Collège de France in 1977 with a course on idiorhythm entitled *Comment vivre ensemble ?* ; that Michel Serres published the very same year *La naissance de la physique dans le texte de Lucrèce* and that Deleuze and Guattari published in 1980 *Thousand Plateaus*, in which rhythm is one of the main concerns. Rhythm is also central in *The Movement-Image* and *The Time-Image* published in 1983-85 by Deleuze alone.

Thus, when *Critique du rythme* was published in 1982, it was among a kind of new intellectual constellation which shared a common distrust for structuralism and individualism, and were trying to find new ways to push further critical thinking without falling into the trap of Heideggerian deconstruction. Unfortunately, Barthes and Foucault died rapidly in 1980 and 1984, and Meschonnic and Deleuze had no relation whatsoever, although they were teaching at the same university. Rhythm, which could have been a new common concept for critical thought, disappeared until the second half of the 1990s, when it was rediscovered in many different disciplines but with very few references to this short period of obscure glory.

In this rhythm constellation, Meschonnic was occupying a very peculiar position that makes his contribution today very original and attractive. Though he really appreciated the Foucaultian social critique, he had a very ambivalent feeling about Barthes' semiotics and subsequent switch to "plaisir du texte" and was for many reasons opposite to Deleuze and Guattari. First, he was very suspicious about the ways Nietzschean philosophers were dealing with literature and therefore with subjectivity, ethics and politics. He couldn't agree with their pragmatist belief that discourses are determined by forces that are acting on their own without any language mediation. He defended a linguistic anthropology against the Deleuzian ontology of power. As a poet and as a specialist of literature trained in linguistics, he considered that rhythm should be approached from a Humboldtian, Saussurean and Benvenistian viewpoint and not from a Nietzschean, Peircian and Austinian one. He never talked about it but I think he was indeed very suspicious about the kind of interpretation given to Nietzsche by Deleuze, who forgot that Nietzsche was a trained philologist, and also about the use by Serres of Leibniz, whom he considered right or wrong as an anti-Spinoza.

Rhythm in Meschonnic's Poetics - New Grounds for a Rhythm Theory

One of the main ideas that are at the basis of Meschonnic's poetics comes directly from his practice as a writer and a translator. He was already an adult when he learned Hebrew and began to read the Bible in its original language. He then discovered that the text he was reading had almost nothing to do with the one he knew in French. Certainly this text was telling the same events, it was referring to the same characters and it was talking about the same things. But it had very different effects : the voices, the way the body was permeating it, the relation between what was meant and what was heard were deeply different. It was obvious that during the process of translation an enormous loss had occurred and Meschonnic began to elaborate his poetics in order to understand why this was the case. He started to theorize about literature while trying to translate one of the most famous literary texts : the Bible.

In the Hebrew Bible, the writing is full of oral marks. Actually, writing is not separated from voice. The text contains a series of accents and counter-accent, of vowel and consonant echoes, which participate in the production of meaning. Thus, meaning is not developing through signs referring to pieces of reality or to elements of thought, but it is rather a semantic activity of the whole discourse produced by all marks of the speech. The meaning is the result of a *significance*, i.e. an active production of signification through the entire system of signifiers that is used only marginally to refer and mainly to suggest desire and emotion, act and interact. It is a result of a linguistic activity that doesn't separate the signified from the signifier.

Meschonnic forged a new concept in order to grasp this activity of meaning that appears more clearly in literary texts but that exists in ordinary language as well : "the rhythm of a discourse". Naturally, this new concept entails a change in the usual definition of the term. Traditionally, what we call rhythm is a series of strong and weak beats that have a kind of arithmetical organization. Since Plato, who defined it for the first time as "an order of movement in dance and music", rhythm is composed of beats and entails proportions. It includes, even when it is said to be irregular, a meter (*metron*). It is a binary and arithmetical device set up to grasp an order by numbering the movement. In this traditional sense, the concept of rhythm correlates with the concept of sign, which is also of a dualistic nature, and

that of language as collection of signs - what we call *la langue* in French.

Meschonnic proposes to get back to the ancient meaning of the word. As Benveniste showed, before Plato, *rhuthmós* (ῥυθμός or ῥυθμός in Ionian) was not equal to *skhèma*, *morphè* or *ēdos*, which referred to fixed forms, to immobile realities. *Rhuthmós* comes from the verb *rhéin* (to flow). It was indicating the ephemeral form of something that was unsteady : a letter, a cloth (a peplos on a chair), someone's character or nature. This was the common meaning of the word. But if we look closely at the word itself, we see that it is composed of the root *rhéin* and the suffix *-(th)mys* which means a way, a manner. Therefore, *rhuthmós* not only refers to a dynamic reality observed at one moment of its flowing, it refers as well to the form of this dynamism itself. It is a way of flowing, "une manière de fluer" says Benveniste. It is clearly related with the worldview that was common among Pre-Socratic thinkers. [1]

Against the platonic philosophical tradition but also against the metrical tradition, that both reduce rhythm to an arithmetically organized alternation of strong and weak beats, Meschonnic redefines rhythm in poetry and literature as "an organization of the movement of speech in writing". This definition is a slightly different version of a proposition by Gerard Manley Hopkins who, as you know, coined the expression "sprung rhythm" [2].

I define rhythm in language as the organization of the marks through which the signifiers, whether they are linguistic or extra-linguistic (in the case of oral communication), produce a specific semantics, distinct from the lexical meaning, and that I call the *signifiance* : *i.e.* the values that belong to one discourse and to only one. These marks can be located on any level of language : accentuation, prosody, lexicon, syntax. [3]

This new concept of rhythm has various consequences. First : it enables Meschonnic to transcend all customary binary oppositions we are using when we read : content vs. form ; letter vs. spirit ; living voice vs. dead writing ; sound vs. meaning ; poetry vs. prose. What was only a translation problem turns out to be a very powerful critical strategy that opposes the continuity and the dynamic of rhythm to the discontinuity and unhistoricity of semiotics and metrics. The poetics of rhythm leads to a new Heraclitean viewpoint, which is a critique of all dualisms entailed by the model of the sign.

Second : unlike other critics of the metaphysics of the sign, Meschonnic thinks that the rhythm of a text produces a new kind of subject : a *poetic subject*. Literary works are endowed with a paradoxical nature : they are entities that constitute a world of their own ; they cannot be copied ; but they are nevertheless opened to endless reenactments. This paradoxical nature is based on the fact that, through their rhythm, they offer to human beings large subjective forms, which at the same time are conveying specific semantic powers and offering places that they can occupy whenever they read or see or hear them.

A work of art constitutes in a way a big I, which has a format that is different from the I of enunciation, since the entire text is concerned, but which partly works in the same performative way. Like the I, a poem or a novel institutes a subjective form, which is reenunciatable *ad infinitum*. Indeed, just like the I, a poem or a novel doesn't refer to a concrete individual - the person of the author. It doesn't refer either to an abstract idea - as would be the true meaning of the text. It remains open to further reenunciations because it is "sui-referential", *i.e.* it only refers to an ephemeral *I-here-now* which is set up each time it is pronounced.

The difference between linguistic and poetic subjects is that the former is a void form without any specific quality, whereas the latter proposes a system of unique semantic values ingrained in rhythm. To slip into the void form of the I doesn't change specifically the way we feel, think, behave or act. It could help us to reach agency, but it could also aggravate our alienation and make us believe we are agents when we are not. On the contrary, the reading or

hearing of a literary text changes our ways of feeling, thinking, behaving or acting. The utterance of this kind of larger *I makes an individual participate in a specific form of subjectivity*. Literary texts transmit rhythms, *i.e.* dynamic subjective forms.

In other words, language provides us with two forms of subjectivity. The first one is universal, it exists in all human languages but it is an empty container that must be refilled each time we use it. The second one comes into sight when we change focus from discourse to discourses, from ordinary language to literature. It always appears through specific and strictly individualized forms that nevertheless remain open to reenactments and therefore are able to circulate, to upset us, to turn us upside down, to change our perceptions, our feelings, to help us to change and to act. To put it in a nutshell, whereas the linguistic subject offers everywhere the same empty form, poetic subjects appear as proliferating dynamic rhythmic systems. Poetic subjects are *transsubjects* based on specific rhythms given to the activity of language.

This particular position makes Meschonnic quite interesting among critical thinkers of his time. Unlike most of them, he never abandoned the concept of subjectivity. He transformed it in order to get rid of its traditional definition but without making it disappear.

From the rhythmic viewpoint, the language do endow human beings with various forms of subjectivity but none of them falls under its classical definition as a basis of faith, will and knowledge (as a *hupokeimenon*). They are not believing, willing or thinking substances. They don't belong to the modern paradigm designed by Luther, Grotius and Descartes. In other words, they don't appear through an opposition to the Church, the State or the World. They are not the result of a dualistic process. And therefore, they are not reducible to the Individual, the Ego or the Self.

At the same time, subjectivity is never completely dissolved by dispersion or difference, *i.e.* by a constant reference of signs to other signs. It is not defined by the mere functioning of a structure called *la langue* because this structure doesn't exist, it is just a scientific artefact ; and the sign is nothing but a traditional model that impedes our understanding of language. Subjectivity is instituted by and during the enunciation or reenunciation of a discourse and only through it. Thus, it certainly has not the stability of a substance that would be separated, once and for all, from its environment, and must be, on the contrary, understood as related to its successive reactualizations, which make it discontinuous and plural. Nevertheless, that doesn't mean it doesn't exist ; despite its shallow form, it is still completely and universally available and always carries some kind of power. When we speak we are partaking in linguistic and rhythmic prowling powers that enable us or impede us to become subjects.

Rhythm in the 1990s - Extending Rhythm Theory to Social Science

As soon as 1982, Meschonnic proposed to apply to society an approach inspired by the new developments of poetics. Society, and by the same token ethics and politics, would be observed from the viewpoint given by this new conception of production of subjectivity through rhythm in language.

Unfortunately, he failed to implement his own project. Among other essays, he published a book in 1995 entitled *Politique du rythme. Politique du sujet*, which was not very satisfactory. I don't have time to explain the various reasons that impeded further development of his programmed "poétique du social", but one of the main ones was certainly that he had a very bad understanding of what was happening around him. He didn't realize the kind of help he could get from the numerous studies about individuation and subjectivation, in social science as well in philosophy, which were similarly fighting against dualism ; he never understood the nature of the complexity theories that were close to his and failed to recognize other thinkers' interest in rhythm. Therefore he was more and more

marginalized and isolated.

Usually specialists in literature borrow concepts from other disciplines like psychoanalysis, sociology, anthropology, Marxism, philosophy, etc. For once, the program of poetics of society was suggesting the possibility to transfer a concept that had been first elaborated in literary theory into social and human science and see what light it would shed in those disciplines. And that is what I started to do in 1995 through an epistemological study, a part of which has been published later under the title *Éléments d'une histoire du sujet*. This study was centered on three important thinkers who had combined history and anthropology during the first half of the 20th century - in a way that was not taken into account by Foucault's critique in *The Order of Things*. Those thinkers were an anthropologist, a historian and a philosopher - Marcel Mauss, Johann Huizinga and Bernard Groethuysen. Each one of their ways to hybridize history and anthropology was studied in the light of poetics and especially of its new concept of rhythm.

In the middle of the 1990s, social and human science had already gone through an important epistemological change. After a decade dominated by the rise of methodological individualism, the Habermasian attempt to bridge phenomenology, pragmatism and analytic philosophy and the success of deconstruction, new methodologies like postmodernist eclecticism and irony, interactionism and hermeneutics were thriving.

My concern with rhythm had not much to do with deconstruction and postmodernism but it was quite close to interactionism and hermeneutics. For decades two main methodological paradigms had ruled over social science. Let's call them the *Bottom-Up* and *Top-Down* paradigms. In the *Bottom-Up* theories specialists analyze the behavior of interacting individuals, then they climb up from one level of interaction to the next, through successive syntheses, and finally reach the system that contains them all. The other school goes over the same path but the other way around, starting from the structures or the systems then climbing down the ladder in order to get finally to the individuals. According to these conceptions, any society is composed of substantial singular or collective elements, which are considered to be describable and isolated *per se*, and whose interactions are *eventually* to be understood - e.g. Weber vs. Durkheim / Boudon vs. Talcott-Parsons.

Interactionism and hermeneutics were not that new but they were beginning to succeed in their critique of these substantialistic preconceptions without going as far as the deconstructionists and Neo-Nietzschean thinkers were doing. Henceforth an increasing number of theorists were putting the stress on language on the one hand, and on processes on the other. Instead of starting from singular or collective individuals, conceived as substantial beings, these authors were looking directly at the processes through which these individuals were produced, regenerated or destroyed. They were observing both the horizontal interactions between singulars and the vertical interactions between singulars and collectives - without forgetting the interactions between collectives themselves. In those processes language was often central. Those scientists were quite different one from another. Sociologists as Elias, Touraine, Bourdieu, Habermas, Honneth, Giddens, Caillé, Boltanski and Thévenot, or philosophers as Gadamer, Ricoeur and Descombes, had very different viewpoints but they were all trying hard to get rid of traditional dualisms by "starting from the middle", as Simondon would have put it.

One of the problems with these theories was that they were giving the impression that the dynamics of individuation or subjectivation always unfold in the same circular or better, yet, spiral-like way. They were focusing on the processes that are responsible for the production of singular and collective individuals but they were not paying attention to the specific forms of these processes. Paradoxically they had an unhistorical conception of dynamism.

The second problem was that a certain number among them were not interested in language and were presupposing as usual the primacy of society upon it. Or, whenever they were more aware of the necessity to take language into account, like Habermas, Boltanski and Thévenot, or Gadamer, Ricoeur and Descombes, they were working only with conceptual tools borrowed from German hermeneutics and Anglo-Saxon pragmatism and ignoring the contribution of French general linguistics and poetics.

Rhythm in the 2000s - Outlines of a General Rhythmic Theory

That's why I suggested in a series of books published in the following years to complement these methodologies with a theory of the ways the processes of individuation unfold, a theory of their *ways of flowing*, i.e. of their *rhythms*, a theory that would be backed by Benveniste's general linguistics and Meschonnic's poetics.

I have proposed a three-dimension model to surpass the limitations of the interactionist and hermeneutic methodologies [4]. In my view, individuation processes interweave techniques of the body, techniques of discourse and techniques of interactions. In other words, individuation is brought about by manners of using the body, manners of practicing the activity of speech and manners of organizing interactions in time.

From this new methodological viewpoint, social science must no longer target *the elements that are functioning* (like in *Bottom-Up* and *Top-Down* theories), nor even *the functioning together of elements* (like in interactionist and hermeneutic theories) ; rather, they must look for *the specificity and the quality of the ways of producing-reproducing-destroying both the elements and the totalities to which they belong* (and I guess that this could be the best definition for rhythm theories).

Indeed, one can distinguish more or less favorable ways of producing-reproducing singular and collective individuals. Since individuation processes are closely related with subjectivation or on the contrary desubjectivation (I take these terms in the sense of a more or less powerful agency), the final aim of these disciplines should be to measure the quality of those processes. This kind of approach seems to fit in the new globalized and fluid world we are living in much better than the old structural and systemic approaches, but also more convincingly than the deconstructionist critiques on the one hand and more precisely than the interactionist and hermeneutic theories on the other hand.

In order to support my claim I studied, in a book published in 2005 titled [Rythme, pouvoir, mondialisation](#), rhythm in social and human science since the 1880's and throughout the first part of 20th century. At the beginning I was very suspicious about my findings ; but the evidence was overwhelming that rhythm had been very important in sociology, anthropology, history, as well as in psychoanalysis, critical theory and philology, at least until WW2. Something happened during those decades that triggered a new kind of interest for rhythm, something that was very close to our contemporary experience : urbanization, rapid social change, fluidity of communication, globalization, development of financial system, imperialism. Among the main authors of this era, many could be reread from a rhythmic viewpoint : Durkheim, Simmel, Tarde, Mauss, Granet, Evans-Pritchard or Tchakhotine, who explicitly considered rhythm as an important issue, but also thinkers who used rhythm in a more implicit way like Freud, Kracauer, Benjamin or Klemperer.

The rhythm issue disappeared during the 1960s until it popped up again at the end of the 1970s, only to disappear a few years later for another 10 years. In my opinion, these blank periods in the history of rhythm could be accounted for by the consecutive supremacy of structural and systemic viewpoints, followed by deconstruction and methodological individualism.

This conclusion prompted me to publish in 2007 a second essay, entitled *Les Rythmes du politique. Démocratie et capitalisme mondialisé*, which covers the second part of the 20th century and especially those authors like Foucault, Barthes and Deleuze who participated in the very short surge of rhythm at the end of 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s. This enabled me to draw the first outlines of a critique of the news way the power works in our globalized world and culture.

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The more I work on this matter, the clearer I see that the interest in rhythm is getting momentum. Something is happening around us bearing a lot of similarities with what happened at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th : globalization of economy, fluidization of societies and reorganization of power equilibrium in the world. As a matter of fact, more and more disciplines are using the concept of rhythm as a tool that could help them to address the new problems they are facing due, directly or indirectly, to global change.

Basically, the rhythm concept is useful when observers are confronted with entities that are defined by the ways they are flowing. If rhythm is not conceived only as a numbered order of the movement made by an object, but as the organization of the processes that produce what appears to us as an object, it becomes very effective. Especially in disciplines which try to get rid of the old models of structure and system and to take into account the radical historicity of their objects, without falling into the symmetric traps of extreme conceptions, which dissolve individual and subjectivity in difference and passing of time, and of more balanced conceptions, which maintain them but in still too formal a way. This new conception of rhythm avoids simultaneously the mere repetition that characterizes system theories, the dispersion and the chaos that permeates the worldview of too many critical theories, and the enduring formalism of interaction and hermeneutic methodologies.

For the time being, two obstacles still hinder the development of rhythm theory. First, to my knowledge, there is yet in Europe not one research center fully dedicated to rhythm. A lot of work is done everyday on that subject, but all that work is made in specialized disciplinary centers. Interest for rhythm is still confined to particular departments and it has not yet acquired the scientific status it deserves in the mind of the scientific community.

The second is that the concept of rhythm remains very often defined in a traditional way, which tends to erase the specificities of the phenomena humanists and scientists are studying. If certain ways of flowing are regular, cyclic or periodic, most of them, especially in the humanities, don't follow that pattern. There were recent attempts at switching towards a more comprehensive definition using Deleuze's work. But in those attempts, rhythm is more a matter of tempo, of speed and acceleration, than a matter of complex organization of processes. I personally think that if we definitely need to follow an Anti-Platonic path, we have to set up a broader concept of rhythm based on what we learned from general linguistics and poetics.

Both reasons explain the launching of RHUTHMOS in September 2010. To address the first problem, RHUTHMOS was designed as an international and transdisciplinary vessel that would sail on the Internet Ocean. Making a virtue out of necessity, it was severed from all ties with academic institutions. That makes it fragile and poor but it provides us with something that is invaluable : freedom of experimentation, curiosity for unknown works, and desire for hybridization of disciplines that are usually considered far away from each other.

To address the second problem, RHUTHMOS was designed in order to accept all kinds of approach, without any exclusion. Of course, I stick to my own conception that results from the work I have accomplished these last 20 years. But, I think that a lot of surprising new ideas are emerging in various fields and that one must remain open to the unknown.

Let's hope that the network of researchers that is now forming will help to overcome both of these obstacles.

[1] É. Benveniste, « La notion de rythme dans son expression linguistique » (1951), *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, Paris, Gallimard, 1966.

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[2] See *Pour la poésie I*, Paris, Gallimard, 1970, p. 68

[3] H. Meschonnic, *Critique du rythme. Anthropologie du langage*, Lagrasse, Verdier, 1982, p. 216-17.

[4] See P. Michon, *Rythmes, pouvoir, mondialisation*, Paris, PUF, 2005 ; *Les rythmes du politique. Démocratie et capitalisme mondialisé*, Paris, Les Prairies ordinaires, 2007.