

Conclusion - An Essay on *Rhuthmology* - The Naturalistic Cluster – Part 6

Monday 11 October 2021, by [Pascal Michon](#)

Sommaire

- [Inconsistencies and Confusions in the Definition of the Concept of Rhythm](#)
- [Where Rhuthmic Ethical and Political Theory Turns to Mysticism and War](#)
- [Bridging the Naturalistic and the Anthropological Clusters](#)

[Previous chapter](#)

Inconsistencies and Confusions in the Definition of the Concept of Rhythm

These limits of Deleuze and Guattari's approach to language and literature have clearly had negative consequences on their capacity to develop their own *rhuthmic* strategy. Due to their rejection of the lessons learned from experience by writers, as well as the linguistic and poetic theories based on this experience, they did not have all the resources necessary to build a theory of rhythm robust enough to actually oppose the metric paradigm which, therefore, often endured under their most advanced arguments.

6.1 A good example of this subconscious persistence of the metric paradigm in Deleuze and Guattari's considerations concerning rhythm is provided to us by the famous Chapter 11 devoted to the "refrain." In this chapter, Deleuze and Guattari tackled the question which had already fascinated Morin: the problem of "consistency in the living." For Deleuze and Guattari, this problem was twofold: how do disparate fluid elements hold together within a particular assemblage and how heterogeneous fluid assemblages in turn hold together within a common upper assemblage?

6.1.1 We remember that to solve this typically *rhuthmical* problem, they first borrowed from the Belgian philosopher and sociologist Eugène Dupréel a threefold model, which gave a significant role to a mixed conception of rhythm, "a superposition of disparate rhythms, an articulation from within of an interrhythmicity, with no imposition of meter or cadence."

6.1.2 Then Deleuze and Guattari introduced the concept of "architecture," while innovating by calling the self-supporting surfaces of reinforced-concrete buildings "a complex rhythmic personage." Consistency was thus obtained by "rhythm" in a sense that was this time clearly non-metric. It was a kind of global equivalent of the concept of "paradoxical consistency" suggested from a molecularized viewpoint.

6.1.3 They then applied this idea to literature. For once, Deleuze and Guattari noted the converging

testimonies of various authors on their way of composing literary texts. Woolf and James—but similar statements could have been found in Baudelaire, Flaubert, Hopkins, Mallarmé and Proust—emphasized the necessary intricacy and resonance of the elements composing the text. Rhythm was remarkably used to denote the global consistency of a literary text.

6.1.4 Finally, Deleuze and Guattari introduced the concept of “*machinic opera*” to designate the complex “machine” which simultaneously tied together the heterogeneous elements of an assemblage and triggered change, mutation or creation in it.

6.1.5 This line of arguments meandering between the “interrhythmicity” of Dupréel, the concept of “complex architectural rhythmic personage,” the intricacy and resonance of literary texts noted by renowned writers, and finally the metaphysical concept of “*machinic opera*,” perfectly illustrates one of the problems encountered by Deleuze and Guattari’s approach to rhythm. On the one hand, with these concepts, they rightly emphasized the holistic nature of rhythm. But on the other hand, they made it simultaneously disappear, either by presupposing a metric conception drawn from the natural sciences, or by confusing rhythm in literature with rhythm in architecture and music, or by dissolving rhythm in a cosmic ontology. Quite inconsistently with their previous anti-metric commitment and their holistic concern, the term rhythm was then used successively as it had been defined in physiology and biology from the end of the 19th century, that is, as “cycles,” “oscillations,” or “succession of waves” (see Vol. 3, Part 1); or, as it was characterized by architects since Vitruvius, that is as a “repetition of basic measures” and their “integration into organized wholes” (see Vol. 3, p. 120); or as musicians did from the mid-19th century as “varying delay introduced in the metric pulsation”; or, in a sense which was no longer metric but not any better by including it in the much larger and abstract concept of “Machine.” As a matter of fact, since it implemented what they called the power of the “Natal,” the “*machinic opera*” was only a means of expression of the cosmic forces which maneuvered from afar the assemblage into which it was “plugged.”

6.2 A similar problem of inconsistency in Deleuze and Guattari’s approach to rhythm arose further down in the same chapter when they addressed the question of the relation between the chaotic “milieus” and the more or less stabilized “territory” in which living beings develop. While they at first clearly differentiated the concept of “rhythm” from its metric acception, they quickly and overwhelmingly confused it with the concept of “refrain,” which was, for its part, clearly based on metric patterns.

6.2.1 Initially, Deleuze and Guattari used the concept of rhythm to account for the flexible line going through and associating heterogeneous milieus in a chaotic environment. Chaos, they noted, generates milieus organized according to the metric implementation of genetic codes. But those milieus are in turn associated to each other by a flow of interactions, which unfolds according to circumstances with no premeditated or calculated plan and which, by the “rhythm” they constitute, associates heterogeneous space-time entities. In this case, Deleuze and Guattari explicitly rejected the Platonic metric paradigm: rhythm is not meter, it is not developing as sheer repetition according to codes in a milieu closed upon itself. On the contrary, it involves a supple temporal organization—which we may call a *rhuthmos*—between communicating milieus, which allows pure difference, bifurcation or novelty, and which therefore has nothing to do with the refrain.

6.2.2 However, despite this remarkable suggestion, rhythm remained for Deleuze and Guattari a

middle-range factor for understanding the main problem they were interested in: the constitution of “territory” by the use of “refrain.” This change of focus induced a regrettable bifurcation in Deleuze and Guattari’s reasoning. While they had used the concept of “rhythm” to denote the *organization of the supple flow of interactions between milieus in a chaotic environment*, they used it now to designate a part of the *repetitive behavior used for marking a territory within a milieu*. By recurrently singing, walking, and gesturing, that is by developing “refrains,” every singular or collective living individual delimited, for its own sake, a “territory” in which he, she or it lived and interacted with other singular or collective individuals. But since in the song-based refrain, “rhythm” was now a counterpart to “melody,” the term simply referred to a metric or parametric temporal organization. And by contamination, the refrains based on walking and gesture were also based on the more or less regular recurrence of stresses. Rhythmologically speaking, this was a real setback from their previous insight. The ethological metrics was insisting underneath the *rhuthmic* ecological perspective.

6.2.3 Indeed, because of this theoretical confusion, “refrain” and “rhythm” have often been wrongly considered as synonyms by the disciples of Deleuze and Guattari, to the great benefit, unnoticed by them, of the Platonic metric paradigm.

6.3 Strikingly, the same kind of rhythmological confusions occurred again in Chapter 14 which was devoted to “striated and smooth spaces” and was meant to be a conclusive chapter.

6.3.1 On the one hand, Deleuze and Guattari remarkably highlighted Boulez’s theoretical contribution, which clearly contrasted striated or metric space-time with smooth or *rhuthmic* space-time. What they were aiming at was something like the particular way of flowing of contemporary music described by Boulez, which included nonmetric parts defined by “continuous variation” or “continuous development of form,” as well as more traditional metric arrangements. Instead of a regular metric distribution of time, only mitigated by a few elements of rubato around regularly recurring time points, Boulez advocated the massive introduction of “smooth space” and “continuous variation” into regular music—without, in fact, prohibiting either any use of “striated space” with which the former was to “communicate” and “meld.” In this occasion, Deleuze and Guattari interestingly used the term “rhythm” to designate the “properly rhythmic values” which result from “the continuous variation, continuous development of form.” And, as a matter of fact, this could have been another base for an extension of their own concepts of “rhythmic personage” and “network of tensions.”

6.3.2 But, on the other hand, they were unable to ensure the concept of rhythm its full anti-metric power. Against Boulez’s intention of challenging the use of the traditional musical concept of rhythm, they stayed within the music frame. Rhythm was then only and vaguely defined as “the fusion of harmony and melody,” a definition that was not entirely clear and that in any case preserved the basic metric model.

6.3.3 A similar confusion occurred in the same chapter in the section devoted to textile production. According to them, textile resorted either to “fabric,” defined “as a striated space,” or to “felt” which, by contrast, possessed a “smooth,” “unlimited” and “noncentered” aspect. It therefore involved two exclusive features. However, in elaborate pieces, another strong opposition arose between “embroidery with its central theme or motif,” and “patchwork” and “quilt” with their “piece-by-piece construction, [their] infinite, successive additions of fabric.” Despite their common

dualism, the conjunction of these two partitions allowed to provide the concept of rhythm with an interesting meaning, even if it was not entirely clear. In quilt, Deleuze and Guattari claimed, “rhythm” was partaking in smooth space, it had no center, no limits.

6.3.4 However, it was still composed by recurrence of elements. Truly, while embroidery was based on “harmonic” repetition of motives, quilt used recurrences which “free[d] uniquely rhythmic values.” But this loose concept of repetition was far from the “rhythmic personage” or the “network of tensions,” they had evoked previously while reflecting on literature. Moreover, quite inconsistently with their interactionist program, this notion of rhythm could not prevent a strict opposition between “smooth” forms of textile, like felt and quilt, on the one hand, and “striated” forms, like fabrics, on the other hand. Contrary to what had been announced, contrary to Boulez’s concern to integrate both striated and smooth space-times, and contrary to the very similar conclusion that one could draw from the testimony of writers and theoreticians of poetics, there was no possible interaction between these two principles.

Where *Rhythmic* Ethical and Political Theory Turns to Mysticism and War

Deleuze and Guattari’s rejection of the lessons concerning the activity of language and subjectivity learned from experience by writers and more generally artists, as well as of the theories based on this experience, certainly explains the strange deviation of their legitimate critique of the ethical and political correlates of the metric paradigm into a questionable program implying, on the one hand, the dissolution of the singular and collective individuals into mystical “fuzzy aggregates” devoid of subjectivity, and on the other hand, the promotion of special corps of warriors drawn from the later and turned into kinds of “hypersubjectivities.” Mystics and warriors, or better still, warriors of passion and mystics of action, were the two symmetrical figures, equipped with the same anti-linguistic and anti-poetic weapons and shields, which embodied the limits of their ethical and political program.

7.1 We saw that they developed in Chapter 12 and 13 an elaborate political theory pitting the power of the “War Machine” against that of the State. They recognized that human beings could reach through a renovated political activism a certain level of agency which differentiated them from Nature. The subject was then recognized as “local absolute” shifting from individual to individual, energizing and empowering them successively. They even recognized the relation of this form of shifting subjectivity with the historical phenomenon of prophecy. The prophets were rightly considered as vectors and spreaders of “local absolutes,” challenging established religious and political powers. In addition to that, they painted a very broad view of universal history. They analyzed the functioning of modern society and State, as well as their relationship to the development of capitalism. All this enabled them to shed a bright light on new emerging social and economic *rhythmic* forms, while both resuming with and elaborating further the critique of the metrics of the modern world by Lefebvre, Foucault and Morin, as well as the elementary programmatic suggestions made by Barthes.

7.2 However, in their own materialist and naturalistic way, they finally joined with a long series of philosophers, theologians and mystics, who rejected the activity of language—and the humanity it allows to emerge—in order to access to what they thought was the ultimate truth, whether God or Nature. Due to the lack of adequate consideration for the central role of language, literature and art in human life, which resulted from their naturalism and hyperpragmatism, they deprived the ethical

and political actors of their capacity not only to speak, but also to imagine, to dream, to discuss, to convince, to learn, to establish links, to interact, to command, to lye, etc. By doing so, they stripped them from their capacity to participate in the innumerable mobile subjects that constantly emerge and circulate precisely thanks to language activity, literature and art. In short, failing to consider this other *rhuthmic* part of the life of human beings, the only solution that remained to them to fight the rigidified, stratified, striated, metric world against which they wanted to wage war, was to promote fairly abstract forms of individual and collective action that often involved a certain pragmatic mysticism or leaned unexpectedly into the promotion of small, closed, militarized groups of activists.

7.2.1 On the ethical level, the individual subject had to be “abolished” in order to reach the fundamental and pure mobile condition of the being, what they called the “pure molecular becoming” and the “absolute power of deterritorialization,” and by so doing to transform oneself in pure “movement” or in pure “desire” or “passion,” just as, for Saint John of the Cross or Teresa of Ávila, the earthly condition of man should be first overcome to be able to reach God. And the condition for that was strikingly similar to that experienced by those mystics: to defeat both the spell of the organic body by making oneself a “body without organ” and the spell of human language imposing on us a deceptive subjectivity by producing what we might call a “speechless discourse.”

7.2.2 This problem was naturally replicated on the political level. The existing collective subjects, such as the unions, the political parties, all State subsystems, the Nation-States, but also the minority lobbies, all types of associations seeking to only add “new axioms” to the Welfare State, were to be entirely deconstructed and fluidized in order to allow actions based both on “hand” and “tools,” and the production of anonymous and incorporeal “statements,” the former as the latter aiming at making “fuzzy aggregates” of “molecularized individuals” into simultaneously affective and effective political forces. To overcome both the rigidity of the existing collective organic bodies and that of the dominant collective discourses or ideologies, the minorities had to transform themselves into “collective assemblages,” that is to say, into some kinds of collective “bodies without organ” and to produce collective “speechless discourses” or “flat assemblages of statements.” Even if they did not make these points central in their reflection, it is nevertheless revealing that this political theory led Deleuze and Guattari to finally dismiss the ethical and political particular power of prophecy, which was reduced to its military participation in holy wars and war machines, while suspiciously promoting specialized and quasi-militarized bodies, drawn from the “fuzzy aggregates” and supposed to pilot the war machines for the best.

7.3 This kind of abusively deflationist pragmatism, which disregarded a good part of the layer which extends between the human beings and the world, was supposed to connect without intermediary the former to the latter, and to plug the human actors directly into the flows of social and cosmic forces, allowing them, thereby, to become individually as well as collectively active and joyful. As Deleuze and Guattari themselves noted, this program was not, on both individual and collective levels, without dangers of rigidification, violence and destruction of its own. Even if they did not insist on this subject and did not ask themselves whether those dangers were only side effects of an otherwise positive program or, on the contrary, logical results of their hyperpragmatism and of the bypass of language activity and subjectivity, we must recognize that they did not fail to warn the readers against possible negative deviations. Anyhow, it was fundamentally compromised by its abstractness which impeded to understand how human beings use practically as much body as language to interpret, criticize, imagine, expand both their lives and the societies in which they live and which left them with no other alternative than to disappear singularly and collectively in erratic

flows of actions and statements, while being led by small bodies of warriors or activists.

Bridging the Naturalistic and the Anthropological Clusters

Thanks to the careful examination carried out in Volume 4, we have been able to spot the rise in the sky of the 1970s and 1980s of a constellation of stars sharing the same anti-metric spirit. All members of this constellation strongly questioned the metric paradigm which had become dominant in natural as well as human and social sciences from the end of the 19th century. We also observed that this antimetric spirit, which was initially limited in Lefebvre and Foucault to a purely critical perspective, quickly gave rise, thanks to Benveniste, Barthes, Serres and Morin, to a series of more positive views based directly or more distantly on the notion of *rhuthmos*. Volume 5 has allowed us to extend this observation to a second series of thinkers who published large essays at the very beginning of the 1980s, but also to improve the description of a division that had been already identified in volume 4 and which opposed, within the *rhuthmic* group, two clearly distinct clusters: on one side, a *naturalistic cluster*, comprising Serres, Morin, Deleuze and Guattari, and on the other, an *anthropological cluster*, comprising Benveniste, Barthes and Meschonnic.

8.1 Our analysis has shown the extent of the rhythmological advances obtained by the members of the *naturalistic cluster*. Those are impressive and make *The Birth of Physics, Method* and *A Thousand Plateaus*, undoubtedly, three of the greatest philosophical essays of the second half of the 20th century. Among many other things, a wide range of their findings concerning the theory of *rhuthmos* deserve to be taken into account.

8.2 However, the examination of their respective ways of elaborating and developing theory—so to speak of their particular “theoretical *rhuthmoi*”—has also revealed recurring problems. While they remarkably took advantage of a very wide range of contributions borrowed from the latest physics, biology and ethology to construct very convincing *rhuthmic* visions of Nature, Serres, Morin, Deleuze & Guattari encountered difficulties in applying the same approach to a number of fundamental issues pertaining to Culture, such as language, literature, art and subjectivity. Strikingly, despite significant differences, they all experienced, when confronted with these issues, the same kind of methodological oscillations between a few innovative proposals consistent with their *rhuthmological* commitments and long series of disturbing regressions to metric. Regarding more specifically language and literature, they regularly oscillated between a few intuitions of their fundamental role in human life, and deep difficulties to grasp them in their corporeity, their sonic depth, and their pragmatic power. Finally, regarding anthropology, the members of the naturalistic cluster often tilted from a consistent theory of subjectivation granting human beings the possibility to become the subjects of their lives into a theory of sheer subjugation. Due to their disregard for the concrete and pragmatic aspects of language, they inconsistently reduced human agents to either silent actors or speakers devoid of bodies, and were never able to regard them as *actors, both speaking and endowed with bodies*, capable of accessing *subjectivity* and participating in *transsubjectivity*.

8.3 Repeatedly, we have arrived at the same conclusion. All these oscillations and confusions resulted from a common limitation: without a proper concept of language, *pragmatics* and *poetics* were transformed into a *generalized hyperpragmatism*, that is a purely naturalistic perspective which relied solely on the concepts of energy, force and action and provided no room for anthropology, even a radically historical one. To put it in a nutshell, Serres, Morin, as well as Deleuze and Guattari suffered from their profound ignorance or strong rejection not only of

Benveniste's, Barthes' and Meschonnic's contributions but also of the many contributions of writers and philosophers who, since the mid-18th century had shed light on these questions (see, Vol. 2). While they offered an articulate view of the universe based on a *rhuthmic* theory of knowledge and a *rhuthmic* theory of nature drawn from the latest scientific theories, they inconsistently rejected the artistic, philosophical and scientific contributions of their predecessors and contemporaries, who had fruitfully addressed the issues of language, literature and culture flows

8.4 Everything thus happened as if the cleavage between the Democritean physical and the Aristotelian poetic paradigms, which had regularly divided the *rhuthmic* thought since Antiquity (see, Vol. 1), was experiencing a particularly vigorous revival. A naturalistic and anti-anthropological cluster strongly opposed an anthropological and anti-naturalistic cluster. This is something which we need to be aware of.

8.5 However, this does not mean that we must accept this division as established from the naturalistic side of the rhythmic constellation. First, because we know that it has sometimes experienced interesting regressions as in Diderot, Goethe and Nietzsche (see Vol. 3). Second, because by examining the essays of Morin and Deleuze & Guattari, we paradoxically identified a number of intuitions which, despite their incompleteness, foreshadowed the possibility of building bridges between the two perspectives. Naturally, a reflection larger than what these few clues suggest will be necessary to articulate them to each other, but these few hints produced from within the naturalistic cluster itself, in addition to the examples given by these three great thinkers, already show us the way. Such a larger reflection is what we intend to develop in the next volume of this series, in which we would like to examine the second important contribution to the *rhuthmic* paradigm which was published at the beginning of the 1980s: that of Henri Meschonnic with its strong links with that of Benveniste. Like the present study, it will not be considered for itself but as a counterpoint to the reflection carried out by the members of the *naturalistic cluster*, that is as a means, as Deleuze and Guattari would put it, of drawing a "line of flight" opening onto unexpected growths of the rhythmic rhizome, but also, as Morin would have it, of introducing a loop into our own reflection and hopefully being able to "en-cyclo-pedize" our findings concerning the rhythmic constellation.