

Conclusion - An Essay on *Rhuthmology* - The Naturalistic Cluster — Part 1

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

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In the first volume of this series, we followed the emergence and the conflicting development in Antiquity of three rhythmic paradigms which have been active in Western thought ever since: the *Democritean physical*, the *Platonic metric*, and the *Aristotelian poetic paradigms*. We observed how the two *rhuthmic* models disappeared in the last centuries before the Current Era and how the Platonic model, with its metric and idealistic dimensions, subsequently acquired complete supremacy until the end of the Middle Ages.

The second volume was principally meant to bring to light the reemergence between 1750 and 1900, thanks to a series of poets, artists and philosophers, of the two anti-metric and materialist paradigms that had vanished in Antiquity and to evaluate the consequences of their reintroduction into modern Western culture, particularly their potential for new development still largely unexploited nowadays.

Volume 3 aimed at expanding the investigation into the spread of the Platonic paradigm in Modern era, which had already been engaged in Volume 2, with an extensive survey that covered natural sciences, aesthetics, as well as social sciences, over a period spanning from the 1840s to the 1910s. It showed very precisely through which channels this model has become dominant nowadays.

In Volume 4, we identified a constellation of thinkers who developed in the 1970s a series of powerful critiques of the Platonic paradigm and opposed it, at least for a majority of them, with remarkable re-actualizations of the Democritean and Aristotelian paradigms. First Lefebvre and Foucault opened the way with a radical critique of the *metric* spirit that had dominated most of the last hundred years. Then Benveniste and Barthes, resuming with Aristotle and some of his followers like Diderot, Goethe and Humboldt, initiated a more constructive approach by introducing the question of the *ways of flowing* or *rhuthmoi* of language, subjectivity and self, while Serres and Morin developed, on comparable bases, very broad neo-Democritean and neo-Lucretian views of the *rhuthmoi* of nature, machines and information. From every angles, the old metric perspective, which had spread widely from the 19th century into Western culture, was strongly questioned and began to be replaced by an entirely new one based on the notion of *rhuthmos*.

Our objective in Volume 5 has been to analyze Deleuze and Guattari's particular contribution to this new trend, but also the main factors which ultimately hindered its development into a full grown paradigm. With *A Thousand Plateaus*, the rhythmic perspective reached indeed a remarkable level of sophistication. It covered most of the common questions usually debated in philosophy, natural sciences, social sciences and cultural studies. However, it was also hampered by questionable views on language, literature and art.

A Gateway to Poststructuralism and Postmodernism?

Before starting our final reflection, we need to say a few words about the common reception of Deleuze and Guattari's work. As one may know, *A Thousand Plateaus* has often been hailed as a "significant step in the evolution of post-structuralism" and one of "the formative texts of postmodernism." [1] However, we may wonder how much credit we must grant to these categorizations.

1.1 While being certainly "post-structuralist," because being simply and surely strongly opposed to 1950s and 1960s structuralism, there is no reason to associate their thought with "postmodernism" *stricto sensu*, that is to say with that advocated by Jean-François Lyotard (1924-1998), Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007) or Richard Rorty (1931-2007), whose skepticism, relativism and ironic play with previous paradigms they explicitly rebuffed—like all other members of the rhythmic constellation, as a matter of fact.

1.2 It is true that the term "postmodernism" is often taken in a very broad sense which comprises any kind of critique of the previous essentialist and holistic paradigms. Following some of the suggestions made by the authors themselves, posterior readers have thus often concentrated on the dissolving or dispersive character of the book, "its emphasis on the nomadic nature of knowledge and identity, as seen for example in the authors' stress on the continuities between the human and the animal" (*Ibid.*). In this broader sense, Deleuze and Guattari's viewpoint has often been associated with Derrida's deconstruction and other kinds of anti-foundationalism.

1.2.1 There are many reasons to believe that this way of interpreting their contribution *lato sensu* is no less inaccurate than that put forward *stricto sensu*. First of all, contrary to many of the so-called postmodern or deconstructionist thinkers, Deleuze and Guattari suggested a complete and very well structured theory of world and man. After two preliminary chapters dedicated to epistemology, methodology, cosmology and ontology, their theory unfolded through a series of carefully interconnected chapters describing, in an obvious constructivist order, no less than language, culture, subjectivity, society, individuation, territory (in the ecological as well as social sense), war (in science and society), politics and economics (in nation-state and capitalism), and finally art. Anybody reading *A Thousand Plateaus* in its entirety and with sufficient attention will have a hard time recognizing the so-called "nomadic," "rhizomatic" or "minor" way of doing theory, which has been so successful among the followers of Deleuze and Guattari, and he or she will rather discover an extraordinary treaty, a kind of *Summa Cosmologica*, made according the most traditional philosophical order covering methodology, epistemology, metaphysics, natural science, social science, cultural studies, ethics, politics and art.

1.2.2 The thorough study of this book we have made shows that Deleuze and Guattari sought actually to find a way to criticize the previous holistic and essentialist paradigms without falling into the traps of the emerging hyperhermeneutic, deconstructionist and postmodern strategies, which could in fact only undo what had been done before in hope of reaching the erratic collective movements of meaning, as Gadamer, or a new kind of negative truth, as Derrida, or a state of innocence close to children game or madness, viewed through Nietzsche, as Lyotard and Baudrillard. Unlike their contemporaries, Deleuze and Guattari did not shy away from asserting positions they believed to be true, they dismissed any negative approach to the being, and they were

wary about considering childhood, madness or minority as reproducible and exploitable at will, like cooking recipes. In fact, Deleuze explained later that, as far as he was concerned, he did not consider metaphysics as over and he sometimes presented himself as a metaphysician. In order to oppose essentialism, structuralism and systemism, Deleuze and Guattari did not refer to the temporal difference or to the endless shift of meaning from sign to sign corroding any firm being, structure or system, neither did they promote a questionable calculated play with heterogeneous inherited material mimicking the plurality of the being. Their suggestion to introduce the virtual aspect of the being was very close to those of other thinkers of the rhythmic constellation while radicalizing them by fully elaborating the question of the way of flowing of matter and desire. From start to finish, it was a *rhuthmic* contribution.

1.2.3 In any case, however accurate they may have been, postmodern interpretations have been rendered obsolete by the radical changes that have occurred in the 1980s and 1990s. Because of the collapse of the Yalta world order due to the disintegration of the USSR, because of the shrinking of welfare state institutions resulting from the extension of neoliberal policies in Western countries and later in post-communist countries, because of the deep transformations of our societies induced by the fourth industrial revolution, the emergence of a global informational network, the economic globalization and, the new wave of financialization of capitalism, we certainly cannot nowadays content ourselves with merely prolonging views opposing a world that has entirely disappeared. Moreover, due to the very efficient deconstruction of collective values and organizations under the pressure of individualism, market values and mass communication in our societies, these views have lost most of their critical acuity, when they have not become mere adjuvants of the general fluidization of our lives.

1.3 Instead of making *A Thousand Plateaus* a monumental gateway leading to “postmodernism” or even “poststructuralism”—which are, if you think about it, very bizarre qualifications based on the simplistic and cryptohistoricist idea that most significant works of the 1980s and 1990s would be defined not by their positive contributions but only by reference to past norms—it would therefore be much more adequate to consider it as one element of the rhythmic constellation of the 1970s, and more precisely of its *rhuthmic and naturalistic cluster*. It is this cluster, in its unity as in its interior divisions, in its strengths as in its weaknesses, that we would like to consider now.

1.3.1 Chapter after chapter, we have seen that, in their own way, Deleuze and Guattari continued Serres’ and Morin’s efforts to develop a new materialist worldview based on both a fundamentally dynamic conception of knowledge and on an atomistic conception of matter in constant flux. Whether we focused on epistemology and methodology, or on cosmology and ontology, or on one of the various issues addressed successively in the treaty, language, culture, society, individual, state, minorities, politics, art, we have each time found the same urge to account for the specific ways of flowing—the *rhuthmoi*—whether of the concepts or of the phenomena involved. Shedding light on these common points of view will be our first objective of this concluding chapter.

1.3.2 Naturally, we also found that Deleuze and Guattari’s perspective also had strong specificities. While they explicitly endorsed most of Serres’ analyzes, they kept a certain distance from Morin’s proposals, especially those concerning culture, ethics and politics. Consequently, our second objective will be to assess, as precisely as possible, the differences, sometimes slight and sometimes more important, which divided the naturalistic cluster.

1.3.3 Finally, we progressively realized that the *rhuthmic naturalistic cluster* was also defined by its relations with the other groups constituting the constellation. Most strikingly, all of its members simply ignored or, when they knew of their existence, rejected the contributions of Barthes, Benveniste and Meschonnic, which constituted, not without divides of their own, a kind of symmetrical *rhuthmic anthropological cluster*. The third objective of this conclusive essay will be to underline the problems which have resulted from this disinterest or this rejection, and to initiate a reflection on this second group of research that we hope to be able to develop more widely in the next volume of this series.

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Footnotes

[1] Wikipedia, "Deleuze and Guattari," retrieved April 11, 2021.