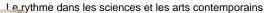http://www.rhuthmos.eu/spip.php?article2651

Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari and the Rhuthmoi of Territory - Part 3

- Recherches

- Le rythme dans les sciences et les arts contemporains

- Philosophie - Nouvel article

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Rhythmic Consistency of Assemblages

Then Deleuze and Guattari tackled the question which had fascinated Morin as soon as the first volume of *Method* (1977) and which was elaborated further in the second volume published the very same year as *A Thousand Plateaus*. Within each territorial assemblage, they noticed, "the organization was very rich and complex" (p. 323). For the Troglodytidae, for instance, the territory is associated with a "music box refrain," the building of several nests, and the modulation of the male's song and posture when a female arrives. Likewise, a display behavior is composed of "a dance, clicking of the beak, an exhibition of colors, a posture with neck outstretched, cries, smoothing of the feathers, bows, a refrain." Whence the "question *of consistency*: the 'holding together' of these heterogeneous elements" within the "intra-assemblage."

> All kinds of heterogeneous elements show up in the intra-assemblage: not only the assemblage marks that group materials, colors, odors, sounds, postures, etc., but also the various elements of given assembled behaviors that enter into a motif. [...] The first question to be asked is what holds these territorializing marks, territorial motifs, and territorialized functions together in the same intra-assemblage. This is a question *of consistency*: the "holding together" of heterogeneous elements. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 323)

But they immediately remarked that such "intra-assemblages" were also open onto other assemblages, thereby forming "interassemblages."

> The important thing for now is to note this formation of new assemblages within the territorial assemblage, and this movement from the intra-assemblage to interassemblages by means of components of passage and relay: An innovative opening of the territory onto the female, or the group. Selective pressure proceeds by way of interassemblages. It is as though forces of deterritorialization affected the territory itself, causing us to pass from the territorial assemblage to other types of assemblages (courtship or sexuality assemblages, group or social assemblages). (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 325)

Therefore the problem of "consistency" was twofold. It concerned "the components of a territorial assemblage" but also "the different assemblages" which hold together. How to hold together disparate flowing elements within one particular assemblage and heterogeneous flowing assemblages within a common superior assemblage?

The problem of *consistency* concerns the manner in which the components of a territorial assemblage hold together. But it also concerns the manner in which different assemblages hold together, with components of passage and relay. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 327)

To solve this typically *rhuthmical* problem, Deleuze and Guattari rejected the "formalizing, linear, hierarchized, centralized *arborescent* model[s]" (p. 327) and advocated a "rhizomatic functioning" based on "an articulation from within" (p. 328). A few lines below, they borrowed from the Belgian philosopher and sociologist Eugène Dupréel (1879-1967) a threefold model of consistency both of assemblages and of assemblages of assemblages, which gave a significant role to "a superposition of disparate rhythms, an articulation from within of an interrhythmicity, with no imposition of meter or cadence."

> First, [...] there is no beginning from which a linear sequence would derive, but rather densifications, intensifications, reinforcements, injections, showerings, like so many intercalary events ("there is growth only by intercalation"). Second, and this is not a contradiction, there must be an arrangement of intervals, a distribution of inequalities, such that it is sometimes necessary to make a hole in order to consolidate. Third, there is a superposition of disparate rhythms, an articulation from within of an interrhythmicity, with no imposition of meter or cadence. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, pp. 328-329)

Since Dupréel used the term rhythm as it was defined in physiology and biology from the end of the 19th century, that is to say as "cycle" or succession of "waves" (see Michon, 2019), this was another illustration of the possible regression towards metric which weighed on Deleuze and Guattari's reflection. The fact that the concept of rhythm was again attracted by the metric paradigm did not prevent it, tough, from being used as Meschonnic would do a few years later to account for the holistic phenomenon which had to be explained: the consistency itself of heterogeneous flowing entities.

Deleuze and Guattari first introduced the old concept of "architecture" without noticing that the term rhythm had been used since Vitruvius to refer to the overall harmony that makes parts composed by the repetition of the same *modulus*, fit aesthetically and technically together (see Michon, 2018a, Chap. 6 and 2019, Chap. 5).

> Architecture, as the art of the abode and the territory, attests to this: there are consolidations that are made afterward, and there are consolidations of the keystone type that are constituent parts of the ensemble. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 329)

But they innovated by calling the self-supporting surfaces of reinforced-concrete buildings "a complex rhythmic personage." Consistency was thus obtained by rhythm.

> More recently, matters like reinforced concrete have made it possible for the architectural ensemble to free itself from arborescent models employing tree-pillars, branch-beams, foliage-vaults. Not only is concrete a heterogeneous matter whose degree of consistency varies according to the elements in the mix, but iron is intercalated following a rhythm; moreover, its *self-supporting surfaces* form a complex rhythmic personage whose "stems" have different sections and variable intervals depending on the intensity and direction of the force to be tapped (armature instead of structure). (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 329)

They even applied this remarkable 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 Flaubert and Proust emphasized the necessary intricacy and resonance of the distinct elements composing the text.

> In this sense, the literary or musical work has an architecture: : "Saturate every atom," as Virginia Woolf said; or in the words of Henry James, it is necessary to "begin far away, as far away as possible," and to proceed by "blocks of wrought matter." It is no longer a question of imposing a form upon a matter but of elaborating an increasingly rich and consistent material, the better to tap increasingly intense forces. What makes a material increasingly rich is the same as what holds heterogeneities together without their ceasing to be heterogeneous. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 329)

The unfortunate confusion between literature and music, which appeared at the beginning of the previous quote, but also the confusion between art and the biological support of life, and the lack of consideration for the signifier level, probably explained why this intuition however was not brought to full completion. On the one hand, rhythm was remarkably used to denote the holistic consistency of a literary text, it was a "rhythmic personage," but at the same time, it was used quite inconsistently in the banal sense of biological or physical metric "oscillations."

> What holds them [the heterogeneities] together in this way are intercalary oscillators, synthesizers with at least two heads; these are interval analyzers, rhythm synchronizers (the word "synchronizer" is ambiguous because molecular synchronizers do not proceed by homogenizing and equalizing measurement, but operate from within, between two rhythms). (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 329)

Finally, it must be admitted, the problem of consistency of assemblage as well as that of assemblage of assemblages remained undecided. Did the consistency of assemblages result from their overall rhythmic "architecture," their "complex rhythmic personage," or from the "synchronizing" of their micro-rhythms? Deleuze and Guattari suggested that both levels were concerned but they did not explain their practical relations nor the relation between two concepts which, without mediation, remained opposite to each other.

Machinic Opera Between Strata and Plane of Consistency

As a final point, Deleuze and Guattari introduced the concept of "machinic opera" to designate the complex machine "tying together" the hetero¬geneous elements of an assemblage, Deleuze and Guattari introduced the concept of *"machinic opera"* to designate the complex machine "tying together" the heterogeneous elements of an assemblage. It was, I think, the position both closest to and furthest from the one Meschonnic would soon develop in *Critique du rythme*. On the one hand, as the concept of "complex rhythmic personage," it encapsulated the holistic nature of rhythm. But on the other hand, it made it disappear by including it into the larger concept of "machine"; moreover, it no longer concerned literature but only species and territories.

If a quality has motifs and counterpoints, if there are rhythmic characters and melodic landscapes in a given order, then there is the constitution of a veritable *machinic opera* tying together orders, species, and heterogeneous qualities. What we term machinic is precisely this synthesis of heterogeneities as such. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 330)

This "machinic opera" was mainly responsible, according to Deleuze and Guattari, for change, mutation or creation in the territorial assemblage. It implemented what they called the power of the "Natal" (p. 332). The machine was therefore necessarily different from the assemblage into which it was "plugged." It introduced into it deterritorialization, difference.

> Whenever a territorial assemblage is taken up by a movement that deterritorializes it (whether under so-called natural or artificial conditions), we say that a machine is released. That in fact is the distinction we would like to propose between *machine* and *assemblage:* a machine is like a set of cutting edges that insert themselves into the assemblage undergoing deterritorialization, and draw variations and mutations of it. For there are no mechanical effects; effects are always machinic, in other words, depend on a machine that is plugged into an assemblage and has been freed through deterritorialization. [...] As a general rule, a machine plugs into the territorial assemblage of a species and opens it to other assemblages, causes it to pass through the interassemblages of that species. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 333)

But, one should take into account entirely different forces too, those related to what Deleuze and Guattari called the "molecular," i.e. the "matter" itself.

> Thus consistency of matters of expression relates, on the one hand, to their aptitude to form melodic and rhythmic themes and, on the other hand, to the power of the natal. Finally, there is one other aspect: their very special relation to the molecular (the machine starts us down this road). The very words, "matters of expression," imply that expression has a primary relation to matter. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 334)

As a matter of fact, there were "two tendencies of atomic matter": "stratified systems or systems of stratification on the one hand, and consistent, self-consistent aggregates on the other" (p. 335). In the first case, matter was transformed into organizations capable of reproducing themselves only according to "a regulated succession of forms-substances." In the second case, matter would agglutinate into organizations capable of engaging in destratification by "short-circuits," "reverse causalities," and unexpected "captures," and, simultaneously, of providing heterogeneous entities with a certain consistency.

> There is a coded system of stratification whenever, horizontally, there are linear causalities between elements; and, vertically, hierarchies of order between groupings [...] On the other hand, we may speak of aggregates of consistency when instead of a regulated succession of forms-substances we are presented with consolidations of very heterogeneous elements, orders that have been short-circuited or even reverse causalities, and captures between materials and forces of a different nature: : as if a *machinic phylum, a destratifying transversality,* moved through elements, orders, forms and substances, the molar and the molecular, freeing a matter and tapping forces. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 335)

Since life entailed, at the same time, destratification and gain in consistency, it would naturally belong to the second category but it could also be considered as a stratum in itself. In fact, it was both as "a complex system of stratification and [as] an aggregate of consistency that disrupts orders, forms, and substances."

 [Life] undoubtedly implies a gain in consistency [...] It is destratifying from the outset, since its code is not distributed throughout the entire stratum but rather occupies an eminently specialized genetic line. [...] [But] It is true that it is both at once: a particularly complex system of stratification and an aggregate of consistency that disrupts orders, forms, and substances. As we have seen, the living thing performs a transcoding of milieus that can be considered both to constitute a stratum and to effect reverse causalities and transversals of destratification. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 336)

What ensured the consistency of living assemblages was, however, "not the play of framing forms or linear causalities" but "its most deterritorialized component."

> What holds all the components together are *transversals,* and the transversal itself is only a component that has taken upon itself the specialized vector of deterritorialization. In effect, what holds an assemblage together is not the play of framing forms or linear causalities but, actually or potentially, its most deterritorialized component, a cutting edge of deterritorialization. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 336)

Life implied both a certain decoding drift which transformed the genetic chains and thus opened onto the constitution of new territorial assemblages, and, at the same time, a deterritorialization dynamic that transformed the territorial assemblages already formed. Both genetic and ecological levels were constantly metamorphosing.

> When life no longer restricts itself to mixing milieus but assembles territories as well [...] the territorial assemblage implies a *decoding* and is inseparable from its own *deterritorialization.* (two new types of surplus value). (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 336)

Ontologically, this double dynamics of life could be accounted for by the existence of the abstract and virtual "plane of consistency" from which it drew its power.

> Thus it is not surprising that the distinction we were seeking was not between assemblages and something else but between the two limits of any possible assemblage, in other words, between the system of strata and the plane of consistency. We should not forget that the strata rigidify and are organized on the plane of consistency, and that the plane of consistency is at work and is constructed in the strata, in both cases piece by piece, blow by blow, operation by operation. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 337)

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Chapter 11 provided an important complement to the theory of individuation already presented in the previous chapters. Individuals' singularity could not be accounted for only by their "body" and "internal drive." It had also to be referred to the "territory" they occupy.

Before switching to the last section of the chapter which was devoted to art and which I will discuss in a future chapter Deleuze and Guattari encapsulated this theory in a few sentences. First, they had gone, so to speak horizontally, from the metric milieus to the territorialized assemblages and their melodic/ rhythmic organization, but also vertically, from the matter, the molecular, the forces of Chaos, to the forces gathered and intensified into those assemblages, on what they called "the Earth." Second, they had extended this description, horizontally by that of the association of territorial assemblages into larger assemblages through non-metric as well as metric rhythms, and vertically by the presentation of their final opening by deterritorializing dynamics onto "the Cosmos" which was a kind of mirror image of the molecular "Chaos," encompassing this time the whole universe.

We have gone from stratified milieus to territorialized assemblages and simultaneously, from the forces of chaos, as broken down, coded, trans-coded by the milieus, to the forces of the earth, as gathered into the assemblages. Then we went from territorial assemblages to interassemblages, to the opening of assemblages along lines of deterritorialization; and simultaneously, the same from the ingathered forces of the earth to the deterritorialized, or rather deterritorializing, Cosmos. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 337)

This synthesis of the discussion was so dense that it has discouraged many commentators who do not cite it. It needs indeed to be "unfolded" or "explicated" in the etymological sense of the word. Let us try to shed some light on this complicated question.

1. The discussion of the constitution of "territory" by the "refrain" introduced, through a massive borrowing from ethology and ecology, very innovative ideas into the philosophical and sociological reflection on individual and group. It was clearly meant as an extension of the limited presentation of Tarde's sociology in Chapter 9 and of the discussion of Spinoza and Duns Scotus' philosophical views on individuality presented in Chapter 10.

1.1 In the 19th and 20th centuries, there were very few concepts adapted to the *rhuthmic* quality of singular or collective individuals. The forms which organize the flow of individuals were mostly identified with "styles." It is still commonly said that a writer gives a "style" to his writing, an aesthete a "style" to his life, and that a group has a "lifestyle." But this representation is itself rooted in one of the moments in the history of Western individualization: its individualistic moment. Style refers in fact to a substantial unit, the body, the ego, the self, the group or the people, of which it is both the expression and the manifestation. It is the form, deployed over time, of a subjective principle which exists prior to its realization. In addition, it is also the style that makes possible to distinguish singular or collective individuals from one another. It is a temporal, sociological and aesthetic representation of the values of separation and independence that drive modern individualism.

1.2 By contrast, the refrain also allows individuation and agency but it does it quite differently from style. Whereas the style presupposes a previously existing subjective unit of which it is only the expression, the refrain, which is an "aggregate of matters of expression that draws a territory," asserts itself in its positivity and its original character. Entirely defined by its melodic and rhythmic form, it refers to nothing other than itself and its own deployment. Moreover, while the style identifies individuals by difference, the concept of refrain seeks to free them from any logic of distinction and replaces the latter with interaction. The refrain indicates an autonomous, interactive and productive organization of individuation that potentially opens up to a certain degree of agency.

1.3 By emphasizing the refrain, Deleuze and Guattari thus fundamentally addressed the same kind of ethical and political issue as Lefebvre, Foucault and Barthes: what was modern life worth, provided that it was partly organized through rhythms that were imposed upon the individuals? But they also took advantage as Serres and Morin of the remarkable progress recently achieved by natural science, in their case biology and ethology, concerning both the ecological and the explosive nature of the organization of natural phenomena, while drawing these new principles unlike Serres and Morin into politics. Rhythm was therefore not to be considered only as a constraint, a vector of discipline; it was as Lefebvre and Barthes had glimpsed, without yet being able to go much further, both a source of individuation and a resource, a potential producer of difference and agency.

2. One is struck by the scope of the vision carefully constructed by Deleuze and Guattari in this chapter.

2.1 It encompassed nothing less than the primal "Chaos," the living individuals, the territories in which they live and which they carve out of their natural environment, the dynamic forces coming from "Chaos" and those concentrated by the living on "Earth," the complex entanglement of these individual territories into larger assemblages, whether intra- or inter-species, and the outer forces this time coming from the "Cosmos" and opening these larger assemblages to change and innovation. It was a complete *rhuthmic* theory of individuation, swept by constant fluxes of forces, and spanning from the Alpha of molecular Chaos to the Omega of universal Cosmos, including all intermediate layers of the Earth.

2.2 Attention is also drawn to a series of remarkable conceptual innovations aimed at best adjusting to this *rhuthmic* world. Contrary to an age-old tradition which linked it with measure, repetition and regularity, rhythm was redefined as "the Unequal or the Incommensurable" tying together "critical moments" and operating between "heterogeneous

blocks" of space-time. It was on the side of "difference" and opposite to "metric." However, in a striking way, it simultaneously referred to the "complex personages" providing "consistency" to heterogeneous assemblages, whether concrete buildings or literary constructions. Deleuze and Guattari thus suggested the concept of *"machinic opera"* to designate the complex machine "tying together" the "heterogeneous elements" of an assemblage. This conjunction of differential and holistic concerns is one of the most important contribution of Deleuze and Guattari in this matter.

 3. But on the other hand, one cannot but notice certain limitations of Deleuze and Guattari's theory of "territory" and "refrain."

 3.1.1 Their effort to account for the individuation in a rhuthmic world in fact presupposed the metaphysical principle of initial disorder, which they called "Chaos." Consequently, individuation was thought of in the form of "territorialization," i.e. the creation of an area of relative stability within the surrounding chaos, by the marking, the appropriation, and the defense of a "territory." The dynamic aspect of individuation was reduced to the creation and distribution of more or less stabilized life spheres, and the fluid identity to a territorial permanence more or less threatened of elimination. But, these "more or less" were themselves erratic and depended on the variable intensity of the ambient chaos and of the forces which were territorializing-deterritorializing it, that is to say on the war that these forces waged permanently against each other. As a result, there were only incomparable "hecceities" or "singularities."

 3.1.2 The only solution left to account for the relative but existing stability of the organic stratum, the species, and the living individuals, on the singular or collective level, was therefore to attribute to "stratifying," "encoding" or "territorializing" processes the power to stabilize the latter through sheer metric repetition. Species would reproduce cyclically by the implementation of genetic codes and singular or collective individuals by the constitution of territories through a regulated repetition of behaviors.

 3.1.3 Yet one wonders, at least with regard to human individuals, if this definition of individuation by a constant interaction between chaos and repetition, should not be instead accounted for by the concept of rhuthmos or particular manner of flowing? Indeed, while 20th century natural science developed the concept of "homeostasis" maintained by regular loopings between living beings and milieus, making individuation the result of a bundle of oscillatory processes, we saw in Vol. 3 that a small but significant series of scholars in social science has been more and more interested in non-metric models of singular and collective individuation. As soon as the early 1900s, Mauss described "starting from the middle" as Deleuze would have it the manners of flowing of Eskimo societies. Likewise, we find in the following decades similar approaches in Granet and Evans-Pritchard (Michon, 2015b, 2016, and Vol. 3, Chap. 16).

 3.2 Another problem with this view concerned the lack of account of language activity, to say nothing about society. Nothing was said about the role of language in human individuation which was hastily put on the same level as that of animals deprived of language. Deleuze and Guattari did not distinguish between natural and human worlds, and, more often than not, did align the historical with the cosmic. The refrains of "Greek modes" or "Hindu rhythms" were, for example, placed on the same level as those of "bird songs." (p. 312). Anthropology and sociology were dissolved into ethology. However, from the radicalized historical perspective which is ours here, human individuation mainly depends on social groups, human bodies and language dynamics. Plant, animal or cosmic dynamics are of a different nature and have cyclical forms that cannot be put in continuity with those of the dynamics of singular and collective human individuation, unless a strong mediation is built to account for it.

 3.3 Finally, regarding rhythm itself, most of their enlightening intuitions were stopped and substituted by unconscious returns to the metric paradigm. Significantly, the whole chapter was put under the aegis of the *"ritournelle"* which, in popular French, involved repetition and exasperating monotony. Music was invoked as a powerful

"deterritorialization" force, totally free from repetition, but the traditional musical concept of rhythm remained actually the main tool to describe "territorialization" phenomena which involved "optical, gestural, [or] motor" routines. In these instances, rhythm merely referred to a repetitive behavior used for marking a territory within a milieu. It was organized as a more or less measured distribution of time. Finally, Deleuze and Guattari undermined their remarkably innovative explanation of the consistency of assemblages by their overall rhythmic "architecture" or their "complex rhythmic personage," by resorting again to the "synchronizing" of "micro-oscillations," i.e. alternate repetitive movements. Even the ultimate introduction of the remarkable concept of "machinic opera" to account simultaneously for the holistic nature and the heterogeneity of assemblages was made with no mention of literature and limited to species and territories.

 To put it in a nutshell, Deleuze and Guattari's territoriology opened up new perspectives for the theory of individuation. It was clearly oriented in a *rhuthmological* direction. But if we wish to benefit from it, we must be aware of its limitations and prolong it by a *rhuthmology* which would be less naturalistic and, if I may say so, more language-friendy.

[Next chapter](#)