Rhythm as Aesthetic Issue (Part 3)

- Recherches
- Le rythme dans les sciences et les arts contemporains
- Esthétique
-

Date de mise en ligne : Thursday 13 December 2018

Rhuthmos

Previous chapter

Active *vs.* Contemplative Rhythm (Schmarsow - 1905)

Chapter 7 was devoted to the third and most important configuration principle: that of rhythm. In the two previous chapters, Schmarsow had just shown how rhythm derived from symmetry and proportion along the two first axes. He insisted now on the prominence of the third axis over the two others and, consequently, of rhythm over symmetry and proportion. Rhythm was able to "penetrate both principles together" and "transform [their] solid substance [...] back into a living activity." Since it directly stemmed from the core of the human experience, rhythm was thus the overarching principle of architecture, if not of all arts.

> Just as proportionality depends on the first dimension of space, [...], and symmetry on the second, so the third dimension, the direction into the depth, is the natural basis of rhythm. But this third configuration principle *[Gestaltungsprinzip]* has a privilege over the others. It does not only combine independently with the other principles, like symmetry and proportionality do with each other, but it is able to penetrate them both together and transform the solid substance, into which they have turned, back into a living activity. It unites the first two principles through a third one and makes them into a higher unity, which, as the dominant feature of a dynamic execution, surpasses all other powers. Its concerns the whole reception of a work of art as an experience *[als Erlebnis]*. (*Basic Concepts of the Science of Art*, 1905, p. 85, my trans.)

To add one more proof to his point, Schmarsow cited Lotze he could have referred to Mach or Wundt, and even more recently to Bolton and the much publicized psychological experiment by which a subject seems, after a while, to recognize separate series of beats in what actually constitutes one regular series. This illusion proved, he claimed, that the regular partitioning of the continuous flow of stimuli which enters our consciousness is a natural reaction to master the perceptive overload.

> Our natural system protects itself against the excruciating effect of uniform sound impressions [...] by involuntary introducing in them an internal timing *[unwillkürliches inneres Taktieren]*. The individual introduces a subjective rhythmization *[Rhythmisierung]*, that is, an imposed partitioning *[Zerlegung]* of the series of the occurring stimuli, which does not occur objectively but in our recording apparatus. (*Basic Concepts of the Science of Art*, 1905, p. 86, my trans.)

But since Schmarsow wanted to address rhythm in architecture, that is, not only in the perception of sound but also, first and foremost, in that of space, he argued that this reactive phenomenon was not limited to hearing but existed for all other senses, especially for touch and sight, and even for the speech (p. 86) each time, as a matter of fact, that the mind tried to get over an excess of stimuli. Rhythm thus connected, under both guises of rule and law, the inner life with the universe.

> Once we have taken into account the full energy of this reaction, we realize that, like the periodic process of inhaling and exhaling, all the other processes of expressing our mind's power from the inside into the outside, and thus also her influence on other equally organized beings, are similarly subject to this particular configuration principle. Rhythm is recognized, on the subjective side, as the rule *[die Regel]*, and on the objective side, as the law *[das Gesetz]* of every sequential play of force in succession *[im Nacheinander]*. (*Basic Concepts of the Science of Art*, 1905, p. 86-87, my trans.)

Semper had it right, Schmarsow concluded, when he defined "eurhythmy" as recurrence of "rises and falls" concatenated in such way that they would form a closed figure. He was right also to claim that this rule was valid for "musical figures" as much as for "optical ones" even if the ear was able to "follow and discriminate a far more complicated order than the eye" (see above).

> Already in the juxtaposition of three different elements, Gottfried Semper draws attention to the difference in perceptive capacities between ear and eye. The structure *[Gliederung]* of the eurhythmic figures follows certain laws of recurrence, with rises and falls *[Hebungen und Senkungen]*, and so on, whose concatenation results in a closed figure. In this respect, the musical figures (melodies) and the optical ones are subject to the same laws, except that the ear is able to follow and discriminate a far more complicated order than the eye. We are completely in agreement with that. (*Basic Concepts of the Science of Art*, 1905, p. 88, my trans.)

But Schmarsow reproached Semper and by the same token Riegl for having based his definition of rhythm on an "immobile contemplation" whereas architects were "prevailingly dealing with successive perceptions." Semper, faithful to a very ancient tradition, had wrongly considered architecture as an immobile art form whereas movement and temporality were two of its most essential features.

> But Semper carries this distinction too far when he reduces it to the condition of an immobile contemplation because the eye "is supposed to absorb the whole in an instantaneous intuition." This would mean considering simultaneous perception as the only valid one whereas we are prevailingly dealing with successive perceptions. (*Basic Concepts of the Science of Art*, 1905, p. 88, my trans.)

The primacy given by Semper and Riegl after him in his reflection to immobile structure even when he used the concept of rhythm implied ruling out the action of memory and imagination.

> We would confuse rhythm with symmetry or lump them together, as Semper did in fact, and at the same time rule out the participation of memory images, that is, of the imagination, which plays a significant role in the temporal course of sensations and their psychological processing. (*Basic Concepts of the Science of Art*, 1905, p. 88, my trans.)

Semper's lack of concern for temporality was responsible for a reduction of rhythm to symmetry, that is of a temporal configuration principle to an instantaneous one. Instead of the fixed gaze which had been presupposed by architects at least since the Renaissance, Schmarsow suggested again to start from the alternation between "an integrating look and a wandering gaze." Both were necessary to weave the rhythmic fabric of our perception.

However, [...] we have noticed how many different activities already take place when perceiving an alternating arrangement or the simplest juxtaposition. Again, it should be noted that our sight always alternates between an immobile standpoint *[Standpunkt]* which allows an integrating look and a wandering gaze. In a sequence *[Reihung]*, we hold on to a fixation point *[Fixationpunktes]* and follow it in one direction. The movement, however, is here the main thing, as was the fixed viewpoint in symmetry. In rhythm the transitory is the warp and the interruptions of this course are only the weft. (*Basic Concepts of the Science of Art*, 1905, p. 88, my trans., I thank Alice Volkwein for her help on this passage)

In order to stress the primacy of movement in rhythm in a way that was quite close, actually, to Riemann's insistence on "movement" in music, Riemann who was his colleague at Leipzig university since the 1890s Schmarsow took again the example of the series *abcba* already introduced in the previous chapter and that of the series *abacabaca* which was derived from it. In both cases, he argued, the "solidified members" and their mere "regular alternation" had to be "set into motion" and follow a continuous "guideline" in order to "prevent paralysis" or to unable them to "lift off."

> If we want to exit from the perception of the last-considered group *abcba*, after having fixed the letter *c*, performed a first diremption from *b* to *b*, a second from *a* to *a*, and finally returned from the extremities back to the middle, we must, as we have already said, let the third element return, in order to set the solidified members once again into motion *[in Fluß zu bringen]*. Another means of preventing paralysis is to introduce the first member before every other ones, so that the series *abacabaca*, etc. runs evenly. By doing this, we have distinguished two levels *[zwei Gradunterschiede]* in the arrangement *[die Ökonomie]*: the continuous similar *(a)* and the alternating dissimilar *(bc)*. The former then constitute, as it were, the guideline *[den Leitfaden]* on which the regular alternation *[regelmäßige Abwechslung]* of the others two lifts off. (*Basic Concepts of the Science of Art*, 1905, p. 89, my trans.)

Schmarsow noticed that we could read the series "*aabaacaabaaca,* etc." as "*a - aba - aca - aba - aca*," etc., as well as "*aabaa - c - aabaa*," etc., or even as "*aab - aacaa - baa*," etc., depending on where the stress was put (p. 89). Instead, we immediately recognized in the series "*abaabaabaaba*" the members "*aba - aba - aba - aba*." But if we introduce a second *b* as in "*abbaabbaabba*" we could read it again in two different ways depending whether the stress was put on the "*aa*" or on the "*bb*" (p. 90). All in all, this meant that the rhythm could range from sheer elementary regularity to complex arrangement of separate parts, but that whatever the extension of its different parts, they needed to be carried on by "the continuous flow of the whole" *[Moreover, since the intervals between the various segments could easily change into their opposite, the groups themselves were only "temporary associations or complexes," that is, pure "appearances."*

> *The positive intervals between bb* and the negative ones between *aa* switch with one another. One interval has become the *dominant*, the other the corresponding *zero*. But if we recall that the character of the successive perception is a continuous one, then we must recognize that these groupings, these dominants and these blanks, too, lack of permanent existence, and are all subject to the continuous flow of the whole *[dem fortlaufenden Flusse des Ganzen]*. They work only as partitioning moments within the series, so that we do not really recognize them as groups, that is, not as lasting syntheses, but only as temporary associations or complexes, even if we call them series or periods. Thus it is clear that we are dealing with nothing but pure appearances of the rhythmic configuration principle. (*Basic Concepts of the Science of Art*, 1905, p. 90, my trans.)

This did not mean, however, that every form should be dissolved by the ever running flow of our stimuli. Due to his own "organization," man could project on this flow "symmetry and proportionality" and finally recognize rhythmic groups and series, "although both were now plunged into the flowing medium of the temporal course."

However, if we look closer at the factors which make up the serial formations *[Reihengebilde]* or periods, and ask what connects the presumed groups and separates them from each other, we recognize again the effectiveness of the same two principles of configuration that we have previously considered: symmetry and proportionality, although both are now plunged into the flowing medium of the temporal course *[in das flüssige Medium der Zeitlichen Abfolge]*, carried away by the prevailing direction of movement, or, after every attempt at a simultenaous [view], dissolved again into the successiveness. (*Basic Concepts of the Science of Art*, 1905, p. 90-91, my trans.)

The analysis of sequences such as *abcba*, *abacabaca*, or *aabaacaabaaca* shed some light on the rhythmic operation of the sight and the logic of its rhythmics. However, it did not take yet into account the movements of the body. Schmarsow added thus a second argument concerning, this time, the extension of symmetry and proportionality into the depth. Riegl was utterly mistaken to limit the latter to the plane. Both could be best appreciated by moving into the space, or by looking at them from a distance.

> We can interpret [the principles of symmetry or proportionality] through our body, to the left and right, to the front and back, or under and above it as horizontal, that is as floor or ceiling. We can lay them down in parallel to these body levels, in close or far distance, as far as our hands can reach, and finally we can push them further away, so that we can no longer touch them but only reach them through our eyes. We carry out the spatial dispute along the third dimension as the directional axis of our movement and of our will, that is to say, also as the most original and most radical activity of our artistic will *[unseres Kunstwollens]*. (*Basic Concepts of the Science of Art*, 1905, p. 91, my trans.)

As a matter of fact, stereometric symmetry and proportion divided, or better yet, articulated the spatial continuum in all three dimensions into a kind of rhythmic organism traversed by "tension and relaxation, resistance and competition" and shaped both by its punctuation through "dominant" stresses and "negative intervals" and the permanent "return of the same constellation."

> But they are the only ones who bring variety and contrast effects into the regular course *[in den gleichmäßigen Verlauf]*, by offering to the superior power of the execution, by tension and relaxation *[Spannung und Lösung]*, resistance and competition *[Widerstand und Wetteifer]*, the opportunity to test the whole dynamism at hand. The proportion of our forces drags us into the sphere of influence of the dominant [the stressed element of the series - PM], which attracts the symmetrical limbs, brings them to a standstill, and at the same time acts as a climax. [On the other hand], the symmetry of the coordinated members appears as the basis of the regular course, but unexpectedly becomes a negative interval in the movement and even develops into the opposite pole between the power spheres of two dominants, only to achieve, though, by the return of the same constellation, the decisive victory of the movement over any attempt at inertia. (*Basic Concepts of the Science of Art*, 1905, p. 91, my trans.)

Riegl did not recognize that they both participated in the stereometric "rhythmic composition," and were, at the same time, required by it "to implement their own dynamics."

> It is precisely this participation of symmetry and proportionality as components in the rhythmic composition, which requires both of them to implement their own dynamics, as the stream of mountain water rolls uprooted tree trunks and washed-away boulders, [...] it is precisely this greatness of the very nature of rhythm that has led one to recognize it only where it occurs in miniature, and confuse it with a configuration principle limited to the surface dimensions, as if it was exhausted by its relations with them. We witness this inadequately developed role in Riegl's ideas, who already wanted to limit symmetry to the plane and regarded depth only as an impairment of its full validity. (*Basic Concepts of the Science of Art*, 1905, p. 91, my trans.)

The same was true, naturally, of Riegl's handling of the concept of rhythm itself. As the reader may remember, the latter did recognize rhythm in "elements side by side and on top of each other, but not one behind the other." In the latter case, Riegl added, "the individual forms and parts overlap and thus escape the immediate sensory perception of the beholder. As a result, an art that wants to arrange units into a rhythmic composition is compelled to compose in the plane and avoid the deep space." (*Late Roman Art Industry*, 1901, p. 209 - see above - quoted by Schmarsow, p. 91). For the same reason as previously, Schmarsow considered this description as much too limited.

> An attempt is here made, in the same manner, to reduce the rhythm to the plane, as the symmetry before although initially under the condition that it should appear *immediately* evident to the observer, but finally with the firm assumption that there is no rhythm of elements one behind the other. Once we have clearly recognized the nature of rhythm, and as its fundamental characteristic the one-after-the-other-ness *[das Nacheinander]*, the successive recording *[die successive Aufnahme]*, that is, the one-behind-the-other-ness *[das Hintereinander]*, at least in time, the strongest doubts must be raised against this claim, from the very beginning. (*Basic Concepts of the Science of Art*, 1905, p. 92, my trans.)

Schmarsow reproached Riegl for presupposing a fixed viewpoint whereas such viewpoint was valid only for "certain types of art, such as painting and relief," and clearly mistaken for architecture. In this case, elements momentarily covered by others appear to the sight as soon as the viewer moves into the space and changes his angle of vision. It is therefore impossible to base a general concept of rhythm on such restrictive presupposition.

> Riegl evidently presupposes a firm standpoint for an immobile look. Only this situation explains the assumption that the individual forms and the parts that lie one behind the other in the space *[im Räume hintereinander liegen]* must cover each other and are thus partially removed from the immediate sensory perception of the spectator. However, apart from certain types of art, such as painting and relief, such a fixed position of the optical record of the whole, that is, of our field of vision, always has relative validity. As a result, it cannot be taken here into account; a general concept depends only on the generally valid conditions which are also familiar in ornamentation of the configuration principle. (*Basic Concepts of the Science of Art*, 1905, p. 92, my trans.)

Riegl's assumption that rhythm should be recognized immediately resulted from his own reduction of the spatial field of vision to the plane, yet the latter was only "a special case, not a general law" of rhythm.

> The demand that the rhythm should appear immediately evident to the observer and that it should offer itself exclusively to direct sensory perception is postulated by the plane; but vice versa, the plane is not postulated, as Riegl claims, by the rhythm. It is only a special case, not a general law of this configuration principle. (*Basic Concepts of the Science of Art*, 1905, p. 93, my trans.)

By contrast, Schmarsow suggested to consider as rhythmic not only the series of elements side by side or on top of each other, which were perceived instantly on a plane, but also all series that could be discovered and synthesized in time by walking, gazing around, memorizing, and even imagining the same configurations from different viewpoints.

> Under the natural conditions of our intercourse with things, all phenomena approach us *[an uns herankommen]*, or, conversely, everything that is first perceived only from afar as pure visual appearance is gradually reached by our sensory organs, and becomes bodily *[ins Körperhafte]*, or, as we said, corporal *[ins Leibhaftige]*, and proves through pressure and shock, heat or cold, its impenetrability and seclusion, its crystalline rigidity, or its organic life. If we get rid of the prejudice in favor of the optical sense perception, we owe to this palpable proof provided by the bodies side by side, one above the other, but especially behind each other, the strongest conviction to be there with them and to live among them. This really is the preferential action field *[Spielraum]* for the rhythm. (*Basic Concepts of the Science of Art*, 1905, p. 94, my trans.)

Next chapter