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Rhythm as Original Principle of Art

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

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Rhuthmos

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The sudden emergence of artistic concerns in a book devoted to economics sounds rather strange and outdated by our current standards. Is there one single economist who would dare today cover a field of research spanning from work to art, from labor management to dance, poetry, and music? Yet, this was not only considered as entirely legitimate at the end of the 19th century, it was also addressing problems that have been quite mistakenly in my opinion put aside by modern economics. At the beginning of the 21st century, it becomes more and more obvious that the human beings cannot be reduced to production, exchange, and consumption, and that even the most classical economists have to take into account their cultures and values. Apart from the huge influence enjoyed by this part of Bücher's book, this is the reason why we must consider Bücher's discussion concerning the arts with utmost care.

The Rhythmization of Dance (Bücher - 1899)

In chapter 6, which was also entirely new, Bücher addressed "*Gesang mit andern Arten der Körperbewegung* - Song with Other Types of Body Movement," such as dancing, cradle rocking, magic spell, exorcism, blessing, and healing performing.

The section on dancing was particularly rich and attracted immediately the attention of pedagogues and "life reformers" as Émile Jaques-Dalcroze (1865-1950) and dancers as Rudolf Laban (1879-1958) who used it as a scientific basis to sustain their own artistic and ethical research on rhythm. Since the latter belong to a world different from the one considered in this book which limits itself to science, I will address their important contributions in another volume. However, it is easy to imagine the enthusiasm of these artists when they read the following lines concerning much wider and more expressive uses of the body than those practiced in the 19th century in body exercises and in ballroom as well as in ballet dances.

The dance of primitive peoples is not, like ours, merely a movement of the feet. There are dances performed while standing and sitting, the last especially in the South Sea islands. The Javanese dancers use almost only their hands and fingers. Many oriental dances are based on knee and hip movements. The upper part of the body, the head, actually all parts of the body capable of a peculiar movement, are used. (*Labor and Rhythm*, 1899, p. 254, my trans.)

Instead of the common emphasis on melody and harmony, Bücher also insisted on the centrality of rhythm in primitive dances. According to him, they all were representing common "processes and actions" in rhythmic forms. Although the case was not as clear as he claimed, this comment remarkably anticipated the imminent research on rhythm by dancers such as Laban or musicians such as Stravinsky (1882-1971).

We must therefore say that the dance of these peoples is rhythmic bodily movement *par excellence*. Its goal is a rhythmic representation [*rhythmische Darstellung*] of processes and actions which in and of themselves are not rhythmic, or a rhythmic figuration [*rhythmische Figuration*] of activities in which [by contrast] the rhythm is not usually lacking in daily life. (*Labor and Rhythm*, 1899, p. 254, my trans.)

In recognizing the fully artistic nature of primitive dances, Bücher was also perfectly in tune with the primitivist aesthetic that was developing in those years. Modern man was not the only one to be capable of art. Moreover, he could certainly find new expressive resources in primitive cultures; art was a common medium that connected the civilized man to his primitive forbear.

Thus the rhythmically moving human body becomes in dancing an artistic means of expression, and the tendency in human nature to rhythmically configure movements finds its highest perfection in dancing, in which it succeeds in achieving aesthetic effects. If poetry has been designated as the sculpture of the inner life, then the dance of primitive peoples may be deemed to be a sculpture of the external life, after the latter has passed through man's spiritual center. It is true that, in addition to mimetic elements, dance can and must express feelings. But with primitive peoples, it is always the whole body movement, arranged according to certain proportions and aiming at the pleasure of the spectators, which constitutes, in an inseparable association with song and music, the essence of the dance. (*Labor and Rhythm*, 1899, p. 254, my trans.)

Finally, in emphasizing the inseparability of music, poetry, and dance in primitive cultures, including in certain European folk traditions, Bücher provided ethnographical and anthropological evidence in favor of the widespread Wagnerian artistic motto of *Gesamtkunstwerk* - total work of art.

Dancing, singing and playing are inseparable to Spanish people. You do not dance without singing a song and playing an instrument. You do not hear a song or an instrument without giving the body the fleeting movement of the rhythm. Thus, because dancing, singing, and playing are practiced at the same time, there is a limit to these amusements: the dance does not become wild jumping, the song mere shouting, the accompanying music remains simple (raw, if you want), [and this has been unchanged] for centuries, for millennia. (*Labor and Rhythm*, 1899, p. 279, my trans.)

The conclusion of Bücher's survey in chapter 6 was that dance, music, and poetry had grown together in primitive cultures, and that rhythm was their common source. The problem was therefore to identify the source of the rhythm itself.

Our investigation has shown us body movement, music and poetry in close mutual connection. How did they originally join together? Were these three elements originally independent from each other, first existing by themselves, as in our cultural world, and then connecting only incidentally? Or did they emerge together and were they separated from each other only later on through a slow differentiation process? And if this is the case, which one of the three elements formed the nucleus with which the others two joined? In order to answer these questions, we can start from the fact that it is generally acknowledged that, originally, poetry and music are never separate. On a regular basis, poetry is also singing; lyrics and tune arise together, none of them can exist without the other. But we already know that for primitive peoples the essence of this double structure, the song, is its rhythm. Where does the latter come from? (*Labor and Rhythm*, 1899, p. 299, my trans.)

The Rhythmization of Poetry (Bücher - 1899)

In chapter 7, resuming with his previous study, Bücher came back to the question of "*Der Ursprung der Poesie und Musik* - The Origin of Poetry and Music" he had already addressed in chapter 4 of the 1896 edition. But he considerably expanded the section from 25 to 38 pages.

To begin with, Bücher argued again that language, whether considered as words or sentences, had originally no rhythm and that poetic rhythm must therefore have derived from an exterior source, namely body movements.

No language, as far as my knowledge goes, builds its words and sentences rhythmically by itself. [...] It is therefore very unlikely that people should have arrived, by mere observation of the speech, at measuring and counting the words and syllables by quantity or intensity of sound, at arranging rises and falls [*Hebungen und Senkungen*] in regular interval [*in gleichem Abstand*], in short at arranging the speech according to certain rhythmic rules. Since the poetic language cannot get rhythm from itself, it must have received it from outside, and it is only natural to suppose that rhythmically articulated bodily movements have imparted to the plastic speech the law of its course. (*Labor and Rhythm*, 1899, p. 300, my trans.)

Yet in "dancing and moving games" the body movements were "subject to free artistic creation" and thus represented "nothing solid and naturally compelling." Only "regular movements" performed during work were arranged according "temporal proportions induced by the technique itself" and "possessed their rhythmic law in themselves" (p. 300). The conclusion was therefore obvious: the very first poets had derived speech rhythms from work rhythms and, in a footnote, Bücher suggested again that it had most probably been the same with the very first dancers.

The first attempts at a rhythmic arrangement [*Gliederung*] of syllables and words resulted from a regular movement rhythm produced by an inner necessity (1). [...] 1) Of course, one can even go a step further and trace the origin of dancing to the habituation to certain working rhythms. (*Labor and Rhythm*, 1899, p. 301, my trans. - page missing in archive.org version)

Bücher then proposed an evolutionist reconstruction of the transmutation of bodily rhythm into linguistic rhythm which elaborated further ideas already presented in chapter 3. "The first step" by which the primitive man had introduced singing into his work had not consisted "in arranging meaningful words according to a determined rule of syllable succession, aiming at pleasantly and clearly expressing thoughts and feelings," but in varying "near-animal cries" and "arranging them in series corresponding to the course of his work in order to enhance the effect of relief induced by each single sound" (p. 302). The first work songs must therefore have been derived from "simple natural sounds" as it was amply shown by the number of them composed of "meaningless sound sequences." "The next step" had been the introduction of "simple sentences between the sound sequences" or, more probably, a "distortion of the usual way of speaking" by way of the pronunciation of the syllables as if they were meaningless natural sounds. Such songs were usually sung by a single singer, alternatively supported by the rest of the working group. "Finally," the work song was "fully developed into a poetic creation" whose extant examples still show "that they were connected with work" (p. 303). As a matter of fact, Bücher argued adventurously, most ancient poetic creation referred to work and expressed the "feelings and emotions of the workers." Although their content often varied due to a widespread habit of improvising, their rhythm was unchanged (p. 304).

In conclusion, Bücher argued that work bodily movements, music and poetry had emerged at the same time, intertwined in the same composite activity, but that work movements, even if they were not meant as strictly as it is in

modern societies (p. 306), were the decisive factor, while poetry and music were only "accessory."

We come to the conclusion that, at the primitive stage of their development, work, music and poetry must have been conflated into *one single* [activity], but that the basic element of this trinity was work, while the other two had only accessory meaning. What united them was their common rhythmic characteristic, which appears as essential in older music as in older poetry but occurs at work only under certain conditions prevalent in a primitive economic environment. (*Labor and Rhythm*, 1899, p. 305, my trans.)

Bücher found in the dualistic and alternate structure of the work movement composed of "rise and fall" the proof that the poetic metric, which was based on "arsis and thesis," viz. rise and fall "in the antique sense," derived from work. This was so obvious to him that he could not think for a second that he was perhaps only projecting the Platonic metric paradigm onto work movements.

Let us turn now to the formal side of our question, which is by far the most important one. It is immediately clear that in working the rhythmic series follow the same course as in poetry. Its units consist of single body movements; for the poet they consist of verse feet. Now, we already know (p. 26) that every single work movement is somehow a compound of rise and fall [*Hebung und Senkung*], withdrawal and extension of the limb or tool (constriction and expansion of the muscle), corresponding to the arsis and the thesis in the verse feet however only in the antique sense of these expressions, which is as we know contrary to the linguistic usage of the modern metric. (*Labor and Rhythm*, 1899, p. 307, my trans.)

However, Bücher rejected the hypothesis of a direct influence of the body rhythm upon the linguistic rhythm which would assume a crude physiological determinism. In order to stay closer to the latest psychological findings, he thought that the "bridge" between them could be found in the sounds produced by the tools or the limbs. Bodily movements produced sounds which in turn were perceived by the workers and translated into their speech.

One might think of directly relating these dual rhythmic units to each other by assuming that the body movement has simply translated its proportions into the accompanying sounds or words by making the word ictus coincide with the moment of the highest muscle effort. In fact, in the accompaniment of a vocal work process, the mutual relation of body movement and lyrics has [certainly] been fashioned in some cases in this way (for instance in the little miller song of Lesbos). But the rhythm of the movement and that of the language are separated from each other by such great a gap that one [cannot] derive directly one from the other. Rather, we must find a bridge between them and we find it in the tones already mentioned in the second chapter (p. 28), which result in many works from the contact of the tool or the limb with the material itself. The effect of these working noises, insofar as they have a rhythmical course of their own or are obtained through the cooperation of several workers, is undoubtedly a musical one. (*Labor and Rhythm*, 1899, p. 307-308, my trans.)

This circuit explained, he argued, why we could easily retrieve the most common kinds of poetic foot classified by the Ancients in various present-day works. In a spectacular inversion of cause and consequence, Bücher thus analyzed the sounds produced by a range of manual activities with the help of the traditional metric categories and fallaciously

concluded that those categories should have derived from these activities.

This is how we arrive to the basic forms of work movement: beating, pounding, rubbing with pressure (scraping, grinding, squeezing). Only the first two are sufficiently clearly demarcated by the short and clear-cut sound they produce and by the spatial course of the motion itself, to produce a musical effect through their mere rhythmical form. If the human voice is here added, then it only needs to follow or accompany the sound of the work itself by raising and lowering, or stretching and shortening the sound. So we shall have to pay attention to these pounding and beating rhythms [*diese Stampf- und Schlagrhythmen*], and indeed we find here again easily the simplest meters of the Ancients. The iamb [á] and trochee [á] are ramming mass [*sind Stampfmasse* - probably: produced by ramming mass P.M.]: a weak and a strong foot; the spondee [] is a beat meter [*ist ein Schlagmetrum*], everywhere easily recognizable where two hands are knocking in time [*im Takte*]; dactyl [á á] and anapest [á á] are hammer meters [*Hammermetren*] that can still be observed in every village smithy, where the worker precedes or follows each blow on the incandescent iron with two short blows on the anvil. The blacksmith calls this "to let the hammer sing." Finally, if you want to go farther, you can observe the three paeonic feet on every threshing floor or on the streets of our cities, where three stone-cutters hammer the paving stones in time [*im Takt*] with handheld pile drivers. Depending on the varying exertion of force of the individuals, and the height of fall of the iron pile drivers, a cretic [á á], a bacchius [á], or an antibacchius [á] comes about. (*Labor and Rhythm*, 1899, p. 310-311, my trans.)

The Rhythmization of Music (Bücher - 1899)

Music was the last art to become autonomous. For millennia, dance, poetry, and music have only been elements in the same compound artistic expression derived from work movements. Yet, they were not of the same importance: dance and poetry were still largely dominant while music remained in a subservient position. Bücher supported his claim by citing ethnographic observations drawn from the Malinke, the Bambara, the Maori, and the Iroquois concerning agricultural festivals, or the return from hunting, fishing, or war (p. 313-316). In primitive cultures, "the tune cannot exist for itself."

But the connection between body movement and bound speech [*gebundener Rede*] is so firm that the tune cannot exist for itself. On the contrary, it involves the working movements, elaborates further its rhythmic-artistic side while the economic-technical side withers away, and thus those widespread danced pantomime emerge, the best of which is meant to be used in the service of the gods. (*Labor and Rhythm*, 1899, p. 313, my trans.)

Other evidence drawn, this time, from the Rig-Veda (c. 1500 BC-1200 BC) and the Homeric epics (800-650 BC) showed that dance (or ceremonial walking) and poetry were central in the religious life of the Ancients. The tune was unimportant compared to the rhythm which was directly derived from "the 'work' of the priests and worshippers."

And so, a great part of religious poetry seems to have originally been closely connected with the ritual movements required by the worship of the gods, the "work" of the priests and worshippers. Indeed, rhythmic movement of the body and accompanying vocal are so inextricably mingled at this stage of development that they are expressed by the Greeks with the same word (ῥυθμός). The great role which dance and ceremonial walking played in their older rituals, the number of symbolic acts accompanied by choral songs, which marked not only the service of Demeter but also that of Dionysus, need not be further described here. But it must be remembered that often in daily life, work and worship merged almost imperceptibly into each other. (*Labor and Rhythm*, 1899, p. 317-318, my trans.)

When, due to human development, the compound of dance, poetry, and music evolved into an artistically elaborated form, at first it did not split into different arts. All of them were still performed together in the first dramatic representations.

Once entered into the higher experience of the celebration, the threefold formation of body movement, music and poetry, which was naturally derived from work, experiences a purely artistic elaboration. The same may first be seen in the richer figuration of body movements, then in the more substantial nature of the lyrics and their melodies. Finally, what used to be the mere imitation of a labor, becomes the representation of a whole human destiny that can no longer be fully illustrated by the sheer mimic of the dancing choir. The actor joins in, or perhaps more correctly said: the choir master becomes an actor, and thus the Attic drama emerges. (*Labor and Rhythm*, 1899, p. 320, my trans.)

Bücher was not very specific about the period in which the separation of instrumental music from the drama occurred. He only mentioned "in historical time." He did not either elaborate on the translation of rhythm and tune from work to instrumental music as he had done with poetry, probably because the matter was too obvious to him to deserve special attention. But, echoing Wagner's success in the second half of the 19th century, he recalled instead the latter's pursuit of a better connection between movement, poetry and tune rhythms.

That their separation has taken place only in historical time is well known. [Yet] it has never been completely achieved. Indeed, in the musical drama of Richard Wagner we have experienced a reconnection with the earliest stages of this development, which also reveals itself as a "Renaissance" in that it demands a rhythmic arrangement [*rhythmische Gestaltung*] of the movements of the actor-singers. (*Labor and Rhythm*, 1899, p. 321-322, my trans.)

As far as lyric and epic poetry were concerned, the emancipation of music, Bücher noticed, may have occurred at an earlier stage. As a matter of fact, in such instances, the poetic content was less significant than its rhythmic and melodic form. To substantiate his claim, Bücher cited ethnographic observations made in the Samoa islands, that he daringly associated with other evidence drawn from the European modern tradition.

The differentiation of lyric and epic poetry takes place somewhat differently. Since the older work chants have no fixed text, but are improvised according to the time and the opportunity, the poem itself cannot reach an independent existence for the time being. Rather, it is the musical part of the old working process, which first reaches a separate existence: the melody. Hagen, for instance, records in Upolu [Samoa] such a lyric-less melody with the remark: "The lyrics of the song are improvised and refer to events that have taken place recently." Thus, with this emancipated melody, the word is by no means solidly united with the tune, and it stayed that way for a long time. Traces of this condition can be found in many of our older folk songs which are to be sung "to a familiar tune." (*Labor and Rhythm*, 1899, p. 322, my trans.)

Bücher then gave some consideration to the emergence and improvement of music instruments, first the percussion, "above all, drum and kettle drum, gong and tam-tam, sound slats and sticks, rattles and noisemakers of various kinds" (p. 324). In a second stage, the strings were derived from the bow, and the winds, which "seem to be of a more recent origin and, incidentally, are quite retarded among primitive peoples," from the pipe and whistle (p. 325).

This evidence corroborated the long-lasting primacy of rhythm over melody.

The most common [wind instruments] are the chiefly rhythmic flute and pipe whistle. For the ancient Greeks, the flute was first and foremost a rhythmical and accompaniment instrument [*in erster Linie Taktierungs- und Begleitungsinstrument*]. (*Labor and Rhythm*, 1899, p. 325, my trans.)

In parallel with the development of new and more sophisticated instruments, lyric poetry underwent a four-stage development which led to the final separation of poetry and music. First, it emerged "with the popular form of the dance song" derived "from the third genre of our working song." The lyrics still had to follow the rhythm given by the movements of the dancer and the musical instruments.

Its special story begins everywhere, where we can trace it back far enough, with the popular form of the dance song, which has evolved from the third genre of our working songs, so that the body movements of the dancers and the accompanying musical instrument give the rhythm that the lyrics, extemporaneously associated with the dance, have to follow. (*Labor and Rhythm*, 1899, p. 327, my trans.)

In the second stage, the lyrics began to detach themselves from the dance and the melody to become independent, although still under the rule of the rhythm.

The second stage of the development shows us music-accompanied vocals [already] detached from the dance. The musical sense has meanwhile developed sufficiently to independently achieve the transmission of existing melodies and the creation of new ones. The word is still intimately connected with the air but in such a way that the latter is now stronger than the former. The air is suggested by an instrument or at least the beat [*der Takt*] of the tune indicated with the hands. (*Labor and Rhythm*, 1899, p. 328, my trans.)

In the third and fourth stages, pure poetry devoid of melody and pure instrumental music devoid of lyrics parted from each other, the former being based "only on the word rhythm" and the latter on its particular "tone-rhythm." Similarly, epic poetry began to separate from musical rendition "as soon as it was written down" (p. 331).

The third stage begins with the disappearance of the musical accompaniment. Lyric poetry still produces songs but they are composed to known melodies before going into larger use. It is the period of the folk song [*des Volksliedes*] in the usual sense of this expression. Only the fourth stage yields the actual lyrical poetry. A divorce takes place: on the one hand, there arises the pure poem (without melody and based only on the word rhythm), the "bound speech" [*die "gebundene Rede"*]; on the other, the pure instrumental music (which has outgrown the word meaning). Thus the poet and the composer often separate from each other and both from the reciter and the performing musician. The division of labor is carried out as fully as possible. With the separate existence of lyric poetry and music, the possibility of a separate development is made possible for both. Each of them perfects its technique for itself and uses its particular means to the utmost. Finally both arrive at forms that hardly hint at the former community. (*Labor and Rhythm*, 1899, p. 329, my trans.)

In a footnote, Bücher explained that this development scheme could be checked, for instance, against the development of the Ancient Greek lyric.

The first stage is represented by choral poetry with its hymns, paeans, dithyrambs, prosodies, partheneia, hyporchemata, and so on, all of which conform to the rhythmic demands of the round dance. As a representative of the second stage we find the melic poetry which is sung only with musical accompaniment. In Greece both become early artistic forms, while they develop elsewhere only into popular tunes. In the last stage of the development, the song merely sung (without accompaniment) finally emerges as well as, on the one hand, the independent music (ἔπος τῷ ᾄσματι ἄνευ ὀργάνου), and, on the other hand, the poem merely uttered (ἔπος τῷ ᾄσματι ἄνευ ὀργάνου). (*Labor and Rhythm*, 1899, p. 329, n. 1, my trans.)

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In addition to the evolutionist account of the emergence of the rhythmized labor, Bücher thus provided a reconstruction of the origin of the three main "*Künste der Bewegung* - arts of movement," as he called them. Dance, poetry, and music had all derived, more or less directly, from the bodily movements and songs of working people.

By our current standards, this reconstruction could naturally be deemed speculative and ill-founded. Yet it fitted perfectly with the strong interest that had already developed for several decades in history of art concerning the rhythm in "*die Künste der Ruhe* - the arts of silence": architecture, sculpture, painting, and ornamentation. It also anticipated the controversy between Riegl and Schmarsow that was soon to break out.

It above all introduced into economics questions that are today quite unfortunately disregarded by contemporary specialists. Human beings were not only producers, traders, and consumers, they also enjoyed sound, bodily movement, and speech, particularly when those were endowed with rhythm. This was the part of human life that Bücher wanted both to defend from the invasion by modern industry and capitalism, and promote as a resource for improving modern life and easing social tensions.

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