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***Rhuthmoi* of Fluidity: Rethinking Stability in Liquid Modernity**

Abstract

In the face of contemporary cultural and social conditions marked by rapid change and uncertainty—often described as fluid or liquid—this paper proposes a rethinking of stability through the concept of *rhuthmoi of fluidity*. Departing from traditional Platonic and metric conceptions of rhythm as fixed recurrence, the study revives the pre-Platonic notion of *rhuthmos* as a manner or mode of flowing, foregrounding process, movement, and continuous transformation. Through a selective engagement with postmodern theory, the paper reconceptualizes stability through a rheological lens, understanding it as a dynamic and relational effect emerging within the conditions of liquid modernity. Bringing the work of philosophers and theorists such as Pascal Michon, Zygmunt Bauman, Tim Ingold, and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari into conversation, the paper explores the interplay between difference and repetition, fixity and variability, highlighting the recursive and intra-active (Barad 2007) character of *rhuthmic* forms. It advocates for ethnographic, temporal-spatial, and pluralistic methodological approaches that attend to situatedness and emergent complexity. By reimagining *rhuthmos* as itineration rather than iteration (Ingold 2010), and stability as temporary and relational rather than absolute and constant, the paper contributes to ongoing debates in aesthetics, cultural theory, and the philosophy of *rhuthmos*, offering conceptual and theoretical impulses for understanding the coexistence of order and flux in contemporary social life.

Keywords

Rhuthmos, Postmodern Theory, Critical Rheology, Fluidity, Stability

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The twenty-first century is marked by the rapid dissolution of fixed social forms, a phenomenon variously described as “liquefaction” (Bauman 2000), “acceleration” (Rosa 2015), “singularization” (Reckwitz 2020), or “fragmentation” (Lyotard 1984). The everyday impression is that nothing holds, nothing endures—but this very condition characterizes a new kind of order: stability within flux.

As Pascal Michon observes, “[i]t is this new complexity and the surprisingly fluid, but no less jostling, aspect of the new world born from these mutations, which today call for the introduction of the notions of rhythm, and more particularly of *rhuthmos*” (Michon 2025, 1).

This paper excavates the pre-Platonic notion of *rhuthmos* as a manner of flowing, contrasting it with the dominant Platonic conception of rhythm as fixed recurrence. Rather than developing a systematic theoretical framework, it proposes *Rhuthmoi of Fluidity* as a heuristic lens through which stability can be examined as an emergent process rather than a static structure. Drawing on a rheological perspective, as suggested by Marcel Finke and Kassandra Nakas (2022), the humanities stand to gain from analyzing the flow and deformation behavior of contemporary phenomena. This approach allows situated *rhuthmoi*¹ of fluidity to be identified and described through rheological concepts such as viscosity, elasticity, or their combination—viscoelasticity. At this stage, the aim is conceptual clarification rather than fully developed methodological operationalization; translating rheological vocabulary into concrete research procedures therefore remains an open task for future work.

Rethinking Rhythm: From Metricity to *Rhuthmos*

The concept of rhythm has traditionally evoked a mechanical, fixed pattern—*metron* in the Platonic sense—emphasizing numerical regularity and repetition. Pascal Michon challenges this inherited view by reviving the pre-Platonic notion of *rhuthmos* as a “manner of flowing,” drawing on the work of Émile Benveniste (Michon 2021). As Michon argues, the Platonic perspective on rhythm “reduces observed phenomena or artistic forms [...] to extremely poor formal and numerical skeletons, quite incapable of accounting for their complexity” (2025, 3), resulting in problematic essentialist or normative reductions in both the arts and the sciences.

¹ Throughout this paper, I deliberately use the term *rhuthmos* (plural: *rhuthmoi*) to distinguish this concept from the widely employed metric notion of rhythm.

By contrast, the earliest atomist philosophers—among them Democritus and, especially, Lucretius—employed *rhuthmos* in a very different sense, signifying “the form of something in motion or the modality of a flow” (Michon 2025, 5). In this understanding, *rhuthmos* was neither fixed nor immutable: “A *rhuthmós* was not a ‘Form,’ an ‘Idea,’ an εἶδος – *eîdos*, but a shape ‘as it presents itself to the eyes’ of the observer. Far from being outworldly, it belonged to the phenomenal world. Moreover, it was not fixed, immobile, and eternal; it had a life of its own” (Michon 2019, 4).

This pre-Platonic notion of *rhuthmos* is inherently processual. Rather than referring to a transcendental order, it designates “impermanent forms constituted by the agglutination of atoms in the atomic cascades” (Michon 2025, 5) and thus understands rhythm as a dynamic, temporal, and materially embedded form inseparable from motion itself.²

Understanding Postmodern Fluidity

Zygmunt Bauman’s concept of *liquid modernity* articulates the transformation of contemporary society into a condition characterized by increased fluidity, flexibility, and the ephemerality of social relations and institutions (Bauman 2000). This transition marks a significant departure from the dualistic thinking of early modernity, reframing formerly oppositional categories—such as subject–object, culture–nature, or male–female—as mutually entangled rather than ontologically separated. Dualisms are deeply embedded in Western epistemology and continue to shape language, modes of knowledge production, and historical narratives to this day, making their unlearning a crucial field of research.

In her critical examination of the category of nature as an oppositional term to culture, Val Plumwood (1993) identifies dualistic thinking as a foundation for various forms of discrimination, including racism, colonialism, and sexism, and highlights the need for a non-binary worldview from feminist and postcolonial perspectives. Extending this critique from the social and ecological to the epistemological domain, Jean-François Lyotard,

² For detailed accounts of the historical and philosophical development of rhythm, including the rediscovery of the pre-Platonic notion of *rhuthmos*, this paper refers to the work of Pascal Michon, which provides comprehensive and nuanced analyses. The present study does not engage further in historiographical or philological investigation, as its primary aim is instead to apply and elaborate the concept of *rhuthmoi* within a rheological perspective on fluidity and stability. Nonetheless, Michon’s sustained scholarly engagement with *rhuthmos* significantly informs the heuristic lens developed in this paper.

in *The Postmodern Condition* (1984), reflects on an emergent postmodern form of knowledge that rejects universal narratives in favor of heterogeneity and contingency. For Lyotard, knowledge becomes plural and localized: fluidity here is not chaos, but a multiplicity of intersecting, competing, and evolving temporalities and discursive practices.

This reconceptualization of knowledge, however, exposes a central methodological tension: how can fluidity itself be theorized within the parameters of scientific language and analytical models? Shaped by the mechanistic worldview established by Galileo, Descartes, and Bacon in the seventeenth century, scientific knowledge production remains largely oriented toward stability, fixity, and clear demarcation. When epistemic ideals are modeled on the logic of enduring, solid forms, phenomena defined by flux risk being neglected or rendered analytically intangible.

Against this background, rhuthmological approaches hold promise for providing the theoretical architecture necessary to grasp and articulate forms and logics of fluidity beyond binary oppositions such as form and matter, or structure and movement. By focusing on *rhuthmoi*—the historically underappreciated, processual forms that emerge from continuous flow (Michon 2021; 2025)—rhuthmology translates the abstract into the analyzable, rendering transformation itself theoretically productive.

Michel Serres has emphasized the temporality inherent in all material formations: “the solid body [...] is merely a stage in the flowing development itself” (Serres 1994, 56; translated by author). Apparent solidity, Serres argues, is observable only through the forgetting of time (1994, 54). Once the temporal dimension is restored, even phenomena such as rock formations must be understood as ineluctably shaped by ongoing processes of erosion, accretion, and transformation. From this perspective, stability is not the negation of fluidity but its provisional effect—an outcome of continuous processuality.

Although a processual view transcends specific historical periods, it acquires particular urgency today amid proliferating discourses on fluidity, liquidity, and ephemerality. These debates point to the need for a more differentiated vocabulary capable of addressing diverse modalities of flow—whether laminar or turbulent, Newtonian or non-Newtonian—each shaped by friction, resistance, or external stimuli. Growing scholarly attention to the fluid and dynamic dimensions of society since the late twentieth century has included critical debates on the “liquefaction” of norms as foundations of social life (Bauman 2000), as well as critiques of simplified notions of controllable flows of “people, things, and data” in fluid capitalism (Denecke 2022, 27).

Yet while postmodern and process-philosophical accounts often embrace fluidity as an ontological condition, critics caution that an overemphasis on flux risks undermining the minimal forms of solidity required for social orientation, normative legitimacy, and epistemic grounding. This tension raises an urgent question: if all aspects of social life and shared systems of knowledge are indeed in constant motion, what can be held onto and referred to? How is social life sustained? Where can stability, reference, or “truth” be located—and might new forms of rhuthmic or processual stability substitute for the lost certainties of the previously imagined solid modern order?

Rhuthmology as Rheology

A productive conceptual advance in the study of fluidity lies not simply in asking whether a given phenomenon—be it organization, gender, aesthetics, language, or society—is fluid, but in interrogating how it is fluid. Such an approach prevents a relapse into simplified dualistic thinking that once again frames fluidity and stability as oppositional terms. This shift from a binary to a qualitative understanding revives the significance of the pre-Platonic notion of *rhuthmos*, elaborated by Benveniste and discussed by Michon (2021; 2025), which refers precisely to the “manner of flowing” rather than to the mere presence of flow itself.

Finke and Nakas, in the introduction to their volume *Fluidity: Materials in Motion* (2022), argue that a critical and nuanced interrogation of fluidity is essential for advancing theoretical and empirical understanding across ecological, economic, political, and social domains. They emphasize the necessity of a “critical cultural rheology” that resists reducing fluid phenomena to a single, undifferentiated state, instead calling for close attention to the “manifold cultural forms and manifestations” (Finke, Nakas 2022, 11) that the fluid may assume.

Drawing on the natural scientific discipline of rheology, which is devoted to the study of the deformation and flow behavior of matter—with particular attention to the complexity of non-Newtonian fluids (Doraiswamy 2002)—the humanities gain access to an analytical vocabulary that includes concepts such as viscosity, elasticity, and yield stress. By adapting these concepts, the humanities are equipped to critically investigate not only physical but also cultural, linguistic, and social manifestations of fluidity. A rheological lens enables scholars to distinguish between different modalities and “man-

ners of flowing”—that is, *rhuthmoi*—and to elucidate the processes through which dynamic patterns, stabilities, and resistances emerge across diverse domains of collective and material life.

An illustrative application of rheological vocabulary in cultural analysis is provided by Freddie Mason’s *The Viscous: Slime, Stickiness, Fondling, Mixtures* (2020). Mason develops a rheological perspective on viscosity as a contemporary material imagination, identifying key dynamics of viscous matter as they manifest across urban disasters, ecological philosophies, digital media, and colloidal technologies. By tracing these dynamics through material culture rather than reducing them to physical properties alone, Mason demonstrates how the viscous operates as a relational mode of contemporary imagination, rendering situated *rhuthmoi of fluidity* articulable through rheological vocabulary.

From my perspective, non-Newtonian flow behavior holds particular analytical potential in this context. Whereas Newtonian viscous flow describes a proportional relationship between shear stress and shear rate, resulting in linear and predictable flow behavior, rheology is primarily concerned with more complex, non-Newtonian forms of flow. Such behavior is characterized by non-linear responses: additional factors—such as variations in shear stress or external stimuli including temperature or mechanical pressure—alter the flow disproportionately. In shear-thinning behavior, for instance, complex fluids temporarily become more liquid under stress before returning to a more solid-like state after a certain relaxation period. Shear-thickening behavior, by contrast, describes the opposite reaction: the fluid solidifies under stress and liquefies again when at rest (Chhabra 2010).

These rheological mechanisms play a vital role in human bodily fluids, enabling essential processes such as cleansing and lubrication (Lai *et al.* 2009). The flow behavior of complex non-Newtonian fluids is therefore relationally entangled with both internal and external conditions; it cannot be universalized but must always be understood as situated. In this sense, a rheological vocabulary may also prove useful for analyzing adaptive social practices related to self-preservation, as suggested by sociologist Philipp Staab. In response to multiple overlapping crises—such as war, climate catastrophes, or pandemics—Staab (2022) develops adaptation as a leitmotif for contemporary and future societies.

Finke and Nakas’s notion of “critical cultural rheology” foregrounds the multiplicity of cultural and material forms of fluidity, emphasizing that flows—including those that may appear ‘natural’—are always shaped by

“the working together of various agencies, including human and non-human animals, substances, technologies, policies, or weather” (2022, 11). This perspective resonates strongly with non-Newtonian relational flow behavior as well as with Karen Barad’s new materialist concept of “intra-action,” rooted in an agential realism inspired by Niels Bohr’s philosophy of physics. For Barad, agency emerges through intra-active entanglements rather than through pre-existing individual actors, thereby dissolving the opposition between materiality and social construction (Barad 2007, 33). “Reality,” as Barad states, “is composed not of things-in-themselves or things-behind-phenomena but of things-in-phenomena” (2007, 140).

From this perspective, the qualitative multiplicity of fluid phenomena becomes analytically accessible through a rhuthmanalysis grounded in the theoretical conception of *Rhuthmology as Rheology*. Distinct *rhuthmoi of fluidity* can thus be understood in terms of their relational flow velocities, surface tensions, viscosities, and capacities to form, deform, and reform, rather than as instances of linear and repetitive becoming. Such rheological descriptions enable situated explorations of fluid phenomena as they are inscribed in language, thought, aesthetics, and performative practices across social and economic life.

Accordingly, *Rhuthmology as Rheology* offers a heuristic vocabulary for tracing diverse modes of flowing and their cultural articulation, recognizing fluidity as a fundamental yet differentiated feature of contemporary life without succumbing to relativism. Barad’s agential realism provides a crucial grounding for this material-cultural perspective by demonstrating that social construction does not negate materiality. Phenomena—and agency itself—emerge through intra-active material-discursive entanglements, rendering epistemology and ontology inseparable (Barad 2007, 132-185).

Rhuthmoi of Fluidity: Reframing Stability as Itineration

Iteration is metronomic, itineration rhythmic.

(Ingold 2010, 98)

While rheology provides a differentiated vocabulary for describing fluidity, the question of how stability might be reframed in non-binary, dynamic terms remains open. Here, Tim Ingold’s distinction between iteration and itineration offers a valuable framework for rethinking rhythm and stability beyond fixed measures. Unlike iteration, which denotes the repetition

of identical units in a discrete sequence—akin to classical, metric rhythms—*itineration* describes a processual, rhuthmic mode of becoming rooted in movement, path-making, and transformation (Ingold 2010, 97-99).

Whereas iteration seeks the repetition of sameness—for example, regular beats, gestures, or events that can be abstracted and measured—*itineration* foregrounds the uniqueness of each temporal occurrence. As Deleuze and Guattari emphasize, “it is the difference that is rhythmic, not the repetition, which nevertheless produces it: productive repetition has nothing to do with reproductive meter” (1987, 314). While repetition is therefore involved, it is deviation—the *clinamen* (Deleuze, Guattari 1987, 371)—that actively forms the *rhuthmos*. Deleuze had already elaborated the primacy of difference over identity as a philosophical leitmotif in *Difference and Repetition*, first published in 1968 (Deleuze 1994), arguing that difference precedes identity and enables repetition as a productive force rather than mere reproduction.

From this perspective, rhuthmic patterning appears not as circular (Deleuze, Guattari 1987, 317) but as open-ended and responsive: a form of “wayfaring” in which each step traverses singular conditions and leaves traces that are never precisely replicated (Ingold 2010, 97-99). Stability in this mode is not a given but a dynamic achievement, constituted through continuous processes of engagement and adaptation. Stability thus emerges within ongoing becoming, as well as in the traces left behind—making visible the “manner of flowing,” the *rhuthmos* of becoming itself.

The insight that stability arises in and through *itineration* shifts the analytical focus from fixed periodicity to processual persistence: rhythms endure not through exact replication but through continuous variation that maintains sufficient constancy to sustain recognition and coherence. As Deleuze and Guattari put it:

Drying up, death, intrusion have rhythm. It is well known that rhythm is not meter or cadence, even irregular meter or cadence: there is nothing less rhythmic than a military march. The tom-tom is not 1-2, the waltz is not 1, 2, 3, music is not binary or ternary, but rather forty-seven basic meters, as in Turkish music. Meter, whether regular or not, assumes a coded form whose unit of measure may vary, but in a noncommunicating milieu, whereas rhythm is the Unequal or the Incommensurable that is always undergoing transcoding. Meter is dogmatic, but rhythm is critical; it ties together critical moments or ties itself together in passing from one milieu to another. It does not operate in a homogeneous space-time, but by heterogeneous blocks. It changes direction (Deleuze, Guattari 1987, 313).

Rhythm, as Deleuze and Guattari conceive it, is fundamentally relational: it “ties together critical moments” and sustains coherence as it passes “from one milieu to another.” Rhythm thus appears as an in-between, as movement itself, insofar as it “changes direction.” This understanding closely corresponds to the pre-Platonic notion of *rhuthmos* as a “manner of flowing.” Deleuze and Guattari elaborate this conception of rhythm in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), where they challenge hierarchical, stable, tree-like structures in favor of rhizomatic becomings that are nonlinear, connective, and processual. From this non-binary perspective, fluidity and stability can be reframed as mutually constitutive rather than antagonistic.

Fluidity and stability, as Ingold’s conception of itineration and Deleuze and Guattari’s understanding of rhythm as a relational phenomenon demonstrate, are intertwined as mutually enabling conditions of dynamic systems. Deleuze and Guattari articulate this relation by observing that “it is not one or the other, fixity or variability; certain motifs or points are fixed only if others are variable, or else they are fixed on one occasion and variable on another” (1987, 318). The identification of stability thus always presupposes the existence of difference, movement, or instability against which it can be perceived.

This reframing is particularly apt for understanding liquid modernity, in which social and material forms are perennially in flux and stability is necessarily provisional and relational. Stability, from this perspective, is not foundational but a local and transitory achievement—one that emerges, dissolves, and reforms amid continuous, situated processes. Rhuthmic stability, in the manner of *rhuthmoi*, is therefore always contextual and temporally negotiated, never abstracted from the flows that enable its very identification (Michon 2025, 9).

Limitations and Conclusion

While the conceptual lens of *rhuthmoi of fluidity* advances our understanding of rhythm and stability beyond fixed, metric conceptions, it also raises important challenges and limitations that require critical reflection. A crucial and ongoing concern for further research lies in the complexity of differentiation and the question of agency within liquid modernity.

Karen Barad’s work on intra-action offers a complementary perspective by emphasizing the situated, contextual, and relational constitution of agencies and phenomena (Barad 2007). This resonates with Donna Haraway’s call for “situated knowledges,” understood as partial and embodied perspec-

tives that reject the “god trick” of disembodied objectivity and instead embrace accountability from specific positions (Haraway 1988). Barad similarly rejects the assumption of pre-existing, discrete entities that interact externally, proposing instead that entities emerge through intra-active entanglements. This emphasis on situatedness points to a fundamental limitation of any rhuthmanalysis: analytical attention must remain attuned to local and contingent conditions, as well as to the specific material-discursive practices through which *rhuthmoi* come into being. Attempts to generalize fluid *rhuthmoi* risk flattening contextual richness or overextending claims about stability and flow. To offer a brief but illustrative example, analyses of specific social media phenomena must account for algorithms, which can themselves be understood as *rhuthmoi*, insofar as they exert a profound influence on the visibility of content and the modulation of flows. Research in such domains—closely intertwined with contemporary everyday life—not only benefits from but requires a critical engagement with situatedness as an integral component of rhuthmanalytical inquiry.

Thus, while rheology offers a differentiated vocabulary that foregrounds *rhuthmos* as emergent patterning incorporating recursive processes, situatedness, and relationality, it also demands epistemic humility. Methodologically, the limitations discussed above encourage pluralist, embodied, and reflexive research approaches. Ethnographic attentiveness to the enactment of *rhuthmoi* in local contexts, combined with systemic modeling of recursive patterning, can help balance abstraction and situated specificity. Moreover, critical awareness of the politics of distinction and boundary drawing must remain central, since the very act of delineating *rhuthmoi* enacts power relations and shapes possibilities for action.

The heuristic lens developed in this paper therefore requires further methodological elaboration in order to realize its full potential and to demonstrate its analytical value through empirical application.³ In particular, the rheological vocabulary proposed here is intended as a conceptual repertoire: its translation into concrete analytical protocols, case-study designs, or qualitative and quantitative procedures cannot be accomplished within the scope of this article and must be pursued in subsequent methodological work. Nevertheless, the aim of this paper has been to outline a foundational framework and to open conceptual space for rhuthmological-rheological analyses of phenomena in liquid modernity.

³ Such an approach is currently being elaborated through a biomimetic rheological method and applied to contemporary phenomena in the author's dissertation *Fluide Formen*.

In conclusion, the concept of *rhuthmoi* must be applied with an awareness of its inherent recursive complexity and situated contingency—conceptually rich, yet necessarily modest in scope, open to revision, and attentive to the multiple realities of fluid stability. As an outlook, fractal geometry, as developed by Benoît Mandelbrot (1986), offers potential for empirical extension: through principles of self-similarity and scale invariance, it captures recursive patterning across different scales. Fractal thinking thus provides a perspective on stability as fuzzy and on *rhuthmoi* as self-similar structures that vary in relation to scale, illustrating rhuthmic persistence in turbulent phenomena such as crowd dynamics or algorithmic flows.

The ultimate aim of the heuristic lens presented in this paper is to deepen understanding of the present in order to enable active engagement and collective shaping. In times of liquefaction, this entails regaining a sense of security not through rigidification or reductionist, dualistic logics, but through differentiated analyses of transience and a reframing of stability as co-constitutive—emerging within recognizable *rhuthmoi* and processes of *itineration*.

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