

Elements of Rhythmology vol. 1 - Preface

Monday 16 January 2017, by [Pascal Michon](#)

Let no one who is a geometer enter

When I first fantasized this book, I wanted to explore the rhythmic of our present world, i.e. the ways bodies, speeches and groups are flowing. My aim was to develop a critique that would be more accurate than those based merely on class struggle, deconstruction of norms or politics of multitudes, and make, if possible, some ethical and political suggestions for the present and future.

My second objective was to give an account of some recent changes in social and human science. For at least two decades rhythm has been progressively used as conceptual tool and taken as subject of investigation by a great number of disciplines.

But I quickly realized that either on the political or the epistemological level the issue of rhythm was too poorly known and that it needed to be approached with utmost care. A detour was necessary to shed some light on a very rich and complex matter.

If the rapid changes in our societies have made clearly many of our critical tools obsolete - the fading of the traditional working class, the generalization of individualization of norms by the neoliberalism, the emergence of new frightening state powers - it was not certain that rhythm theories were already articulate enough to compensate for sagging critiques and to propose some firm ethical and political alternatives.

Furthermore, the epistemological change had visibly something to do with the recent transformations of the world - the new cycle in which capitalism has entered, the globalization of trade, production and consumption, the spreading of new communication technologies, the growing urbanization and the fluidization of our societies and daily lives - but it was still unclear if rhythm had already emerged as a new scientific paradigm, as structure, system, individual and deconstruction during the previous decades of the 20th century.

Before being able to achieve my goals, I needed to go quite far back in time. Indeed, by reflecting on rhythm, we inevitably get linked to a very old theoretical discussion that started in the most remote period of Western culture, when the Greek word *rhuthmós* simply signified something like a “form that is not permanent” or better yet, a “way of flowing” (Benveniste, 1966)—in this sense, a rhythmology is always, at least partly, a *rhuthmology*. As we will see, parts of this tradition provide us with tools that are much more convenient to deal with dynamic phenomena as art or ethics or politics, than the very narrow concept of rhythm that is today commonly taken for granted. Unfortunately, despite some brilliant resurgences, it has been obfuscated for centuries by one dominant paradigm which substituted previous paradigms.

In view of this complex theoretical situation, I will dedicate the first volume of this study to a historical and critical presentation of the Greek and Roman theories of rhythm. This will provide us with the best conceptual basis to correctly assess the various modern trends of rhythmological thinking and their variable oppositions. The detailed examination of the ancient theories of rhythm will enable us to progressively distinguish between three main paradigms—the Democritean physical, the Aristotelian poetic, and the Platonic metric paradigms—and to reconstitute their small-scale entanglement, as well as their large-scale theoretical drift. [1]

The next volumes will be devoted to the modern theories of rhythm since the Enlightenment up to present. Like this one, they will offer both philologically detailed analyses and broad discussions of the fierce struggles that have been waged during the last three centuries and that set the largely unconscious framework of our current debates.

With this research, I hope to be able to provide the readers with something that has been increasingly lacking in recent years: a history of the concept of rhythm that, instead of starting from the most common conception, would really aim at what we still do not know; a history that rather than reconstruct the linear development of one “idea” would involve the emergence, struggle, disappearance and resurgence of conflicting perspectives; last but not least, a history that would shed light on the emancipating artistic, ethical and political stakes of rhythm instead of reducing it to its normative and sometimes authoritarian conceptions and uses.

Before entering my subject I would like to stress two more points. The first concerns translation. Most of the texts that I will use have already been translated into English but I sometimes took the liberty to make some changes in those translations, while signaling them with square brackets []. A lot of those texts are indeed encumbered by a great deal of conceptual confusion. Rhythm, beat, meter, measure, rule, proportion, number, harmony are often disorderly used to translate the Greek *rhuthmós* and *métron* or the Latin *numerus*. In most cases, for the sake of better comprehension, I will provide the original text. For the Greek, I will use the French transliteration system because it is not entirely bad and is also the only one I know.

The other point concerns the span of the studies we will go through. We will look at various arts: poetry, painting, theater, cabaret, music, performance and more. We will also indulge in social sciences like sociology, anthropology, and history, but also in the so-called humanities: philosophy, critical theory, rhetoric and poetics. Specialists are usually unhappy with essays that cross academic frontiers. Nothing does appeal to them in these endeavors that do not respect the common order of things and disciplines. To those critics, I would simply recall that reality is not split into totally independent segments, that there are many continuities in it, but also that rhythmology aims precisely at tearing down the theoretical limits set by the past and to propose a new scientific paradigm.

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Footnotes

[1] By the term “paradigm” I mean a conceptual apparatus which entails a certain number of particular ontological, epistemological, and anthropological stands, and which has been used for

variable periods of time. I am not referring to an encompassing structure of knowledge covering a whole period as the Foucaultian episteme, nor to a general framework within which theories, laws, and generalizations and the experiments performed in support of them are formulated, as the Kuhnian paradigm, nor even to fixed epistemic tools that would be complete from the start and would not change in time. I am naming them according to their first known proponents but this does not imply any immutableness. As we will see, each one of the three original rhythmic paradigms have experienced many transformations.