

A Rhythm Constellation in the 1970s and 1980s - Lefebvre, Foucault, Barthes, Serres, Morin, Deleuze & Guattari, and Meschonnic

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In my conference, "[A Short History of Rhythm Theory Since the 1970s](#)," I mentioned a kind of constellation of thinkers, sociologists, philosophers, specialists in literature and art, who, in the late 1970s and the early 1980s, took, roughly for a decade, rhythm as a key subject. I think it is worth to describe it again, even briefly, because it will enable us to better understand the context in which rhythmology and rhythmanalysis reemerged in the second part of the 20th century, after a period of relative oblivion. It will also provide us with a few concepts that will be necessary to grasp Meschonnic's work.

Everyone knows the series of structuralist works published during the 1960s, especially in the pivotal year 1966, but it is less often noticed that a series of works, equally innovative and much more interesting, as far as we are concerned, has been carried out during the following decade.

Henri Lefebvre, who was a marginal Marxist, aloof from the Communist party and mentor of the French students who launched the rebellion movement in 1968, was probably the first to pay attention to rhythm. In 1968, he published *Le Droit à la ville* and, in 1974, *La production de l'espace*, where rhythm was not essential but was already clearly thematized as a conceptual tool useful to sociology, especially for the sociology dealing with urban and daily life. In 1985, he wrote an article with Catherine Régulier entitled « Le projet rythmanalytique. » His last reflections were finally published posthumously in 1992 under the title *Éléments de rythmanalyse*. This book had not much of an impact in France, but it showed that Lefebvre spent the last twenty years of his life contemplating the issue of rhythm. Yet, in 2004, the translation of this book into English under the title *Rhythmanalysis: Space, time and everyday life* made him again a kind of star. Today, he is very often cited and used in Anglo-Saxon countries. In France, his success is less visible but he has become again recently the subject of academic interest: in 2015, at the University of Lyon 3, Claire Revol presented her PhD Thesis on "La rythmanalyse chez Henri Lefebvre (1901-1991). Contribution à une poétique urbaine."

As announced in the very first page of the book, the rhythmanalytic program aimed at developing "a critique of the thing and of the process of *thingification* (of *reification*) in modern thought." It was "led in the name of becoming, of movement, of mobility in general." (p. 3) In other words, it was thought of as a reactualization of Lefebvre's peculiar Marxist program, of his critique of Modern

man, i.e. his critique of repetition and rigidification of modern life. But this critique of daily life in Capitalist societies was now intended to be elaborated from the most concrete reality: its rhythm. Finally, only rhythm could reintroduce fluidity and make us again in touch with experience.

One year after, in 1975, Foucault wrote one of the most beautiful books on social and body rhythms : *Discipline and Punish*. From the rhythmic point of view, Foucault's analysis in *Discipline and Punish* has proved to be a real breakthrough. The rhythmic transformations that we observe in the West in 19th century cannot be accounted for only, as mainstream Marxist thinkers claimed, by the development of industrial work, or as unorthodox Marxists critics as Kracauer and Benjamin asserted in the 1930s, by the development of transportation, communication and reproduction devices, but they have to be explained also by the emergence of a new legal and political system, namely modern democracy.

In order to build his case Foucault concentrated on one institution: the prison. Prison might seem marginal in terms of its operation but it is in fact the place where the rhythmic techniques, that spread in the West since the 17th century, were brought to their greatest intensity, and therefore where it is possible to observe them relatively easily, while they are often gently and invisibly working in the rest of society. The prison is a kind of rhythmic total institution whose program aims at transforming individuals by a convergent beam of rhythmic techniques. Radiating from this center, Foucault attempted to describe the series of institutions—school, army, factory, hospital and court—where, from the late 16th century, new manners to organize the flow of bodies and language which have become dominant features of the democratic era, have been developed.

It is striking to see how Foucault, just as Lefebvre, tried to bring political analysis on rhythmic ground. In both cases, the questioning aimed at the rhythms which were imposed upon life in modern societies.

In 1976-1977, Barthes started his teaching at the Collège de France with a course on idiorrhhythm among the oriental monks during the Roman Empire entitled *Comment vivre ensemble ? - How to live together* (Lecture at the College de France, 1976-1977). In this strange lecture, Roland Barthes began to reflect on what could be a community where everyone would follow one's own rhythms, one's "idiorrhhythms." To explore this question, Barthes developed a thorough analysis of the history of monasticism. He spotted a big contrast between cenobitic communitarian monks, constrained to strict rules, and others, called idiorrhhythmic.

This opposition, however, claimed Barthes, takes its full meaning only if referred to a very special acceptance of the term "rhythm." He then recalled the famous article by Benveniste on "The concept of "rhythm" in its linguistic expression." (1951) Before Plato, who created the current metric acceptance as a succession of strong and weak beats or short and long time-lengths, arithmetically organized, the word *rhuthmos* meant as *schema* or *eidos*, a form. But whereas *schema* or *eidos* meant a fixed form, completed and posited as an object (for instance a statue, an orator or a choreographic figure), *rhuthmos* was denoting merely the "pattern of a fluid element, a "form of that which is moving, mobile, fluid", a form of that which has no "organic consistency" (a letter, a *peplos*, a mood). So it was a "way or a manner of flowing."

Historically, idiorrhhythmic communities have always referred to this ancient acceptance of the word

rhythm. Idiorrhymy has been defined as a personal manner as opposed to regulated and imposed manner to make one's life flow. The idiorrhymic communities therefore had the objective "to protect the *rhuthmos*, that is to say, the soft, available, mobile rhythm; a transient form, but still a form" against all attempts to rhythmically frame, that is to say, "mesterize" the idiorrhymms.

As you see, most probably without knowing it, Barthes was going in the same direction as Lefebvre and Foucault. Since the structuralist universalism heralded by Levi-Strauss was dying, and mainstream Marxism was on the verge of collapse, he too thought that the rhythmic organization of life was worth studying historically and elaborating theoretically.

In 1977, Michel Serres published *La naissance de la physique dans le texte de Lucrece* - translated in 2000 as *The Birth of Physics* which was dealing with the *rhuthmos* issue in Greek and Roman physics, especially in Lucretius' *De rerum natura*. As Barthes, Michel Serres cited Benveniste but, surprisingly, this time to oppose his interpretation : "The linguist," he argued with a bit of philosophical haughtiness, has not recognized the true nature of the pre-Platonic *rhuthmos*, which is a "vortex in the flow," a form "adopted by atoms in conjunction in the first *dinos*."

The linguist, like Heraclitus, Montaigne and the rest, had never sailed in fresh water. Nothing flows as they thought. Direct physical experience, simple practice, reveal the *rhuthmos* in the *rhein*, or the vortex in the flow, or the reversible in the irreversible. Rhythm is a form, yes, it is the form adopted by atoms in conjunction in the first *dinos*. In the beginning is the cataract, the waterfall: here is the reversibility to this irreversibility: thus *rhuthmos*. (Serres, 2000, p. 154, trans. Jack Hawkes)

This very harsh critique of Benveniste is actually supported by very little philological evidence, if any. Michel Serres is obviously projecting posterior concepts on Democritus' atomism. "The cataract," "the waterfall," the "*clinamen*," and the "vortex" are borrowed from Lucretius (c. 99 BC - c. 55 BC) and applied to older atomist doctrine. Most of Serres' claims are not compatible with philological evidence. As far as we know, Leucippus and Democritus did not use the term *rhuthmós* to name the primordial *dínos*. They did not view either the generation processes of the bodies populating the world as vortices. Except for the larger cosmic bodies, like the moon, the sun and the earth, those were brought about by stochastic encounters, bouncing and agglutination of atoms. By contrast, there are sufficient evidence to legitimately think that *rhuthmós* was used to refer to the impermanent yet consistent forms of atomic compounds, in other words that Benveniste was right and Serres wrong about the pre-Platonic meaning of the term.

Nevertheless, Serres' reflection was very inspiring regarding rhythm *per se*. He brilliantly uncovered two important aspects of Greek science that before his research were, if not entirely ignored, at least largely underestimated: the genuine power of the older mathematics to develop infinitesimal calculus and the central significance of the hydraulic model for physics. Since both innovations allowed to overcome some limitations of former arithmetic and geometry and get beyond those of physics due to the primacy of statics and Pythagorean mathematics, both have produced the conditions for a significant re-definition of *rhuthmos*.

Yet, regarding politics and ethics, he relied on the weak suggestions made by Lucretius who

defended, as Barthes actually, small communities of friends enjoying leaving together and developing artistic activities. Serres was faithful to the spirit of 1968. However, his work opened a new door for rhythmology, since it showed indirectly that Benveniste suggestions should be read not only through their sociological consequences but as a discussion of the notions of Form itself, i.e. as an implicit critique of Platonic idealism in favor of a materialist atomistic doctrine.

The same year 1977, Edgar Morin published the first volume of *The Method*, which was the foundation of a huge project designed to introduce into social science the notions of “complexity” and “emergence” borrowed from the new physics and natural science. Morin did not refer to the concept of rhythm but I think the stakes involved in his research program were very close to those of his contemporaries. I won’t go here into details, because I want to be able to talk about Meschonnic, but one may notice that Morin, as Serres, approached rhythm from natural science, which was a way to give it a new but difficult meaning. As a matter of fact, there has been absolutely no communication between the two sides of rhythm studies until then.

In 1980, Deleuze and Guattari published *Thousand Plateaus*, in which rhythm was for the first time since Bachelard explicitly considered as plain philosophical subject. Rhythm became also essential in *The Movement-Image* and *The Time-Image*, published in 1983-85 by Deleuze alone, which dealt with cinema.

Thousand Plateaus is an enormous piece of work and I will limit myself here to the few pages devoted to “*la ritournelle*”—the refrain. Deleuze and Guattari are contemplating the issue of individuation. The forms that organize the flow of individuals are often identified with “styles.” The writer gives a style to his writing; the aesthete a style to his life; a group has a lifestyle. But this representation is itself embedded in one of the moments in the history of Western individuation: its individualistic moment. The style refers in fact to a substantial unity, the body, the ego, the group or the people, of which it is at the same time the expression and the manifestation. It is the form, deployed in time, of a subjective principle which is anterior to its realization. Moreover, style is also what makes possible to distinguish between singular or collective individuals. It is a temporal and aesthetic representation of the values of separation and independence that motivate modern individualism. It is therefore not capable of representing all cases of organization of the flow of individuation.

Another way of representing this organization is what Deleuze and Guattari call “*la ritournelle*”: “The refrain denotes every set of expression material that traces a territory and that develops into territorial grounds, into territorial landscapes.” Sometimes, as in the case of a child who is singing in the dark to reassure himself, the refrain creates a center, a beginning of order within the primordial chaos; sometimes, for example, at the foundation of a city whose outlines are traced to the sound of ritual songs, it succeeds in organizing a limited space where the germinating forces are protected from external chaos; sometimes it turns into improvisation and opens up to the new spaces of a world of possibilities. The refrain is often sonorous or musical, but this primacy of sound is only apparent, for there are, as a matter of fact, many other types of *ritournelles*: motor, gestural, optical, theoretical, etc.

Thus, in each of these cases, the refrain organizes individuation, but it does it quite differently from style. Where the style presupposes a previous subjective unit of which it is only the expression, the refrain affirms itself, as a “matter of expression which traces a territory,” in its positivity and its

original character. It does not refer to anything other than itself and its own deployment. Moreover, whereas style identifies individuals by difference, the refrain seeks to free them from all logic of distinction. The refrain indicates an autonomous organization of individuation.

With their reflection on the *ritournelle*, Deleuze and Guattari were addressing the same kind of ethical and political issue as Lefebvre, Foucault and Barthes. What was modern life worth, provided that it was organized through rhythms that were imposed upon the individuals? What alternative solutions could be imagined, provided that they should not limit themselves to the overthrow of the bourgeoisie and the destruction of capitalist states?

Let us notice, to finish with Deleuze and Guattari, that whereas Serres was interested in physics, they were discussing their subject mainly from life science and ethology. This is certainly another point that explains the absence of communication between these works.

From 1970, date of his first book, Meschonnic had already published several noticeable studies addressing the issue of rhythm. But in 1982, he published his masterpiece, *Critique du rythme. Anthropologie historique du langage*, which presented in a 730-page long study more than ten years of research about rhythm in language and literature. I shall return to Meschonnic in the second part of this presentation.

So, before examining Meschonnic's thought, let us recapitulate our first findings concerning the surprising rhythmic constellation which formed in the intellectual sky of the 1970s.

Historically speaking, it seems quite obvious that the rise of this constellation can be accounted for by the huge change that occurred in our societies during the 1970s and 1980s. After a deep crisis that started at the end of the 1960s and lasted for most of the 1970s, the late 1970s and early 1980s witnessed a rapid emergence of a new kind of capitalism. It was the very beginning of a deep mutation of our societies that was partly reminiscent of that which had occurred in the last decades of the 19th century and the first of the 20th century. The new wave of trade globalization, urbanization, development of new information, communication and reproduction technologies, financialization, triggered a kind of fluidization of our economies and societies.

These transformations had immediately drastic consequences for the individuals. Body and language were subjected to demands for constant work and consumption, to a bombardment of stimuli accentuated by the spread of information technologies, and to demands of flexibility that tended to fluidize if not liquefy their lives—as Zygmunt Bauman put it.

Therefore, it seems no wonder that at the dawn of this huge mutation some particularly perceptive thinkers resorted to the concept of rhythm, which had been used, as a matter of fact, to respond to a similar mutation a century before. As at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, rhythm seemed more fit to the new fluid societies that were emerging than structure and system. I studied some of these rhythmologies and rhythm analyses in my book *Rythme, pouvoir, mondialisation* published in 2005 [1]. As a matter of fact, some of these thinkers explicitly evoked the rhythmic researches developed during the first part of the 20th century: Meschonnic drew from Mauss and Benveniste, Deleuze relied heavily on Bergson and Whitehead, and Lefebvre put his steps

in those of Bachelard.

Scientifically speaking, the first point worth noticing is the strategic use of the concept of rhythm. Rhythm was explicitly or implicitly used as a way to overcome the collapse of structuralism and the exhaustion of systemism, but also to oppose, from the start, the coming methodological individualism and, I think, to curb the tendency of certain kinds of Heideggerism and Nietzscheism to overplay dispersion, difference and chaos. Indeed, in the late 1970s and the early 1980s, many intellectuals were trying to find new ways to push further critical thinking of the growing individualism and economic liberalism without falling into the traps of Heideggerian deconstruction, irony and postmodern thinking that were to be eventually, either quite benevolent to the coming world or quite inefficient in their critique of it.

The second point concerns the lack of any direct continuation. At the time, the constellation we are now reconstructing never appeared as a collective movement. This is indeed one of the reasons why I am using the “constellation” metaphor because the stars that composed it had very few relations if no relation at all to each other. Moreover, Barthes and Foucault died in 1980 and 1984. And in the 1980s, Meschonnic and Deleuze had no relations whatsoever, although they were teaching at the same university. Lefebvre was getting very old—he was born in 1901 and died in 1991. Serres and Morin were working in different directions, and different institutions.

This quite loose existence can account for the rapid fading of this constellation. Rhythm, which could have been a new common concept for critical thought, swiftly disappeared and receded into the dark until the second half of the 1990’s, when it was rediscovered in many different disciplines but with very few references to this short period of obscure glory and—I shall add—in a relative oblivion of its critical aspect.

Instead, and this is the third point,—I will repeat here what I said in [my presentation](#) last year during the symposium organized by Paola Crespi and Professor Julian Henriques—two other concepts began to occupy the space left by the progressive withdrawal of the structural and systemic paradigms: on the one hand, the concept of “difference” which was presented as a legacy of Nietzsche’s and Heidegger’s critiques of metaphysics, but which also presupposed a number of principles drawn from structuralism; on the other hand, the concept of “individual.” While in the first case—the difference model—the philosophy of temporality replaced linguistics as paradigm core, in the second—the individualistic model—the economy took the place of cybernetics.

It seems to me that none of these paradigms correspond any longer to the way our neo-capitalist world, both fluid and full of shocks and divides, operates and that this fact alone already reopens a space for rhythm. The radical historical breakthrough which we have passed in the last twenty years has made these theoretical models obsolete, while it gave again to rhythm an operative character.

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I would like now to explain more about Meschonnic because he is still often ill-known and underestimated (his page on the [English Wikipedia](#) is quite elementary, to say the least), and because his brand of rhythmology and rhythmanalysis is quite original compared with that proposed

by the other thinkers interested in rhythm in the 1970s.

Meschonnic, just like Lefebvre, Foucault or Barthes, was addressing the political and ethical dimension of life rhythms. But literature, especially poetry, more generally speaking art, were the main subject of his research, although he never studied them for their own sake, like most of literary criticism techniques of his time did (stylistics, structuralism, new criticism). Literature was for him a way to get in touch with the most common but also the most commonly ignored capacity of human beings: not only that of speaking but that of producing works of art, which by being the expression of one become the support of experience for an indefinite series of readers/hearers in various social groups and times. Literature shows that we are able to produce works which are simultaneously enterly original and entirely shareable.

Just like Serres and Morin, Meschonnic was also trying to overcome the limitation of structuralism and systemism by reintroducing the concepts of transformation, becoming and flow, without yet either falling back into neo-dialectic logic as in main-stream Marxism, nor being involved in the headlong rush towards sheer difference as in deconstruction or in some extreme interpretation of Deleuze.

But unlike the former as well as the latter, Meschonnic was putting the stress on something that was surprisingly lacking in the works of his contemporaries: the language, which he did not define as *la langue*, as in structuralism or post-structuralism, but as activity or *enonciation* or *discours*, according to Benveniste's renovated linguistics. For various reasons ranging from the success of a pragmatic ontology to the primacy given to physics and natural science, most thinkers interested in rhythm had thrown the baby out with the bathwater.

Though he really appreciated the Foucaultian social critique, he had a very ambivalent feeling about Barthes' semiotics and subsequent switch to "plaisir du texte" and was for many reasons at odds with Deleuze and Guattari. First, he was suspicious about the ways Nietzschean philosophers were dealing with literature and therefore with subjectivity, ethics and politics. He couldn't agree with their pragmatist belief that discourses are only determined by forces which are acting on their own before any language mediation. He defended a linguistic anthropology against the Deleuzian ontology of power. As a poet and as a specialist of literature trained in linguistics, he considered that rhythm should be approached from a Humboldtian, Saussurean and Benvenistian viewpoint and not from a Nietzschean, Peircian and Austinian one. He never talked about it but I think he was indeed also suspicious about the kind of interpretation given to Nietzsche by Deleuze, who forgot that Nietzsche was a trained philologist, and also about the use by Serres of Leibniz, whom he considered right or wrong as an anti-Spinoza [2]. I think he was not opposed to Lefebvre's kind of Marxism but probably would have objected to his use of phenomenology in his approach of urban rhythm, if he had known about it, which I doubt. The same could be said about Morin, whose complexity theory, he hardly knew.

Meschonnic's interest in language is not merely theoretical or philosophical. It comes directly from his practice as a poet and a translator. I won't say much about his poetry but he wrote, during his whole life time, poems which received sometimes great praise. He was awarded by the Max-Jacob prize in 1972 and the Mallarmé prize, another renowned award, in 1986.

I will say more about his interest in translation. He was already an adult when he learned Hebrew and began to read the Bible in its original language. He then discovered that the text he was reading had almost nothing to do with the one he knew in French. Certainly this text was telling the same events, it was referring to the same characters and it was talking about the same things. But it had very different effects : the voices, the way the body was permeating it, the relation between what was meant and what was heard were deeply different. It was obvious that during the process of translation an enormous loss had occurred and Meschonnic began to elaborate his poetics of rhythm, in the beginning of the 1970s, in order to understand why this was the case. He started to theorize about literary rhythm while trying to translate one of the most famous literary texts : the Bible. His first translation, *Les cinq rouleaux*, was published in 1970. In 1973, he published his second theoretical work which was devoted to translation: *Pour la poétique II. Épistémologie de l'écriture. Poétique de la traduction*. He spent a lot of time and energy until the end of his life to practice and theorize translation. In 1981, *Jona et le signifiant errant* ; in 1999, *Poétique du traduire*: and in the 2000s, he started a full translation of the Bible which he could not achieve though.

In the Hebrew Bible, the writing is scattered thick with oral marks. Actually, writing is not separate from voice, i.e. from the body. The text contains a series of accents and counter-accent, of vowel and consonant echoes, which participate in the production of meaning. Thus, meaning is not developing through signs referring to pieces of reality or to elements of thought, but it is rather a semantic activity of the whole discourse produced by all marks of the speech. The meaning is the result of a “*signifiance*”, i.e. an active production of signification through the entire system of signifiers that is used only marginally to refer and mainly to suggest desire and emotion, act and interact. It is a result of a linguistic activity that doesn't separate the signified from the signifier.

Meschonnic forged a new concept in order to grasp this activity of meaning that appears more clearly in literary texts but that exists in ordinary language as well : “the rhythm of a discourse.” Naturally, this new concept entails a change in the usual definition of the term. Traditionally, what we call rhythm is a series of strong and weak beats that have a kind of arithmetical organization. Since Plato who, as Benveniste showed in his 1951 article, defined it for the first time as “an order of movement in dance and music,” rhythm is composed of beats and entails proportions. It includes, even when it is said to be irregular, a measure, a meter (*metron*). It is a binary and arithmetical device set up to grasp an order by numbering the movement. In this traditional sense, the concept of rhythm correlates with the concept of sign, which is also of a dualistic nature and of language as collection of signs—what we call “*la langue*” in French.

Meschonnic proposed to get back to the ancient meaning of the word in a more convincing way than Barthes or Serres. As Benveniste showed, before Plato, *rhuthmós* (ῥυθμός or ῥυσμός in Ionian) was not equal to *skhèma*, *morphè* or *eídos*, which referred to fixed forms, to immobile realities. *Rhuthmós* comes from the verb *rhéin* (to flow). It was denoting the ephemeral form of something that was unsteady : a letter, a cloth (a *peplos* on a chair), someone's character or nature. This was the common meaning of the word. But if we look closely at the word itself, we see that it is composed of the root *rhéin* and the suffix *-(th)mós* which means a way, a manner. Therefore, *rhuthmós* not only refers to a dynamic reality observed at one moment of its flowing, it refers as well to the form of this dynamism itself. It is a way of flowing, “une manière de fluer” says Benveniste. It is clearly related with the worldview that was common among Pre-Socratic thinkers.

Against the Platonic philosophical tradition but also against the metrical tradition, that both reduce rhythm to an arithmetically organized alternation of strong and weak beats, Meschonnic redefined

rhythm in poetry and literature as “an organization of the movement of speech in writing.” Note that this definition is a slightly different version of a proposition by Gerard Manley Hopkins who, as you perhaps know, coined the expression “sprung rhythm.” [3]

I define rhythm in language as the organization of the marks through which the signifiers, whether linguistic or extra-linguistic (in the case of oral communication), produce a specific semantics, distinct from the lexical meaning, and that I call the *signifiante* : *i.e.* the values that belong to one discourse and to only one. These marks can be located on any level of language : accentuation, prosody, lexicon, syntax. [4]

This new concept of rhythm had various consequences. First: it enabled Meschonnic to transcend several customary binary oppositions: content vs. form; letter vs. spirit; living voice vs. dead writing; sound vs. meaning; poetry vs. prose. What was only a translation problem turned out to be a very powerful critical strategy that opposed the continuity and the dynamic of rhythm to the discontinuity and unhistoricalness of semiotics and metrics. The poetics of rhythm lead to a new Heraclitean viewpoint, which was a critique of all dualisms entailed by the model of the sign, a critique of the supremacy of Platonism in Western thought.

Second: unlike other critics of the metaphysics of the sign, for instance Derrida and other deconstructionists, Meschonnic thought that the rhythm of a text heralds a new kind of subject: a *poetic subject*. Literary and more generally artistic works are endowed with a paradoxical nature: they are entities that constitute a world of their own; they cannot be copied; but they are nevertheless opened to endless reenactments. This paradoxical nature is based on the fact that, through their rhythm, they offer to human beings large subjective forms, which are at the same time conveying specific semantic powers and offering places that they can occupy whenever they read, see, hear or enact them.

Any work of art constitutes somehow a big I, which has a format that is different from the I of enunciation, since the entire text (or the entire work) is concerned, but which partly works in the same performative way. Like the I, a poem or a novel (or a work) institutes a subjective form, which is re-enunciatable *ad infinitum*. Indeed, just like the I, a poem, a novel or a dance doesn't refer to a concrete individual—the person of the author. It doesn't refer either to an abstract idea—as would be the true meaning of the piece. It remains open to further re-enunciations (further reenactments) because it is “sui-referential”, *i.e.* it only refers to an ephemeral *je-ici-maintenant* - *I-here-now* which is set up each time it is pronounced.

The difference between linguistic and artistic subjects is that the former is a void form without any specific quality, whereas the latter proposes a system of unique semantic values ingrained in rhythm. To step into the void form of the I doesn't change specifically the way we feel, think, behave or act. It could help us to reach agency, but it could also aggravate our alienation and make us believe we are agents when we are not. Psychoanalysis deals with that kind of illusion: “I am I”... On the contrary, the reading or hearing of a literary text, the observation of a painting, the reenactment of a dance, change our ways of feeling, thinking, behaving or acting. The utterance of this kind of larger I *makes an individual participate in a specific form of subjectivity*. Literary texts, paintings, pieces of dance, generally speaking works of arts, transmit rhythms, *i.e.* dynamic subjective forms.

In other words, language (and body action) provides us with two forms of subjectivity. The first one is universal, it exists in all human languages but it is an empty container that must be refilled each time we use it. The second one comes into sight when we change focus from discourse to discourses, from ordinary language to literature (from ordinary movement to dance). It always appears through specific and strictly individualized forms that nevertheless remain open to reenactments and therefore are able to circulate, to upset us, to turn us upside down, to change our perceptions, our feelings, to help us to change and to act. Whereas the linguistic subject offers everywhere the same empty form, poetic or artistic subjects appear as proliferating dynamic rhythmic systems. Poetic subjects are *transsubjects* based on specific rhythms given to the activity of language or the activity of the body.

This particular position makes Meschonnic quite interesting among the critical thinkers of his time. Unlike most of them, he never abandoned the concept of subjectivity. He transformed it in order to get rid of its traditional definition but without making it disappear.

From the rhythmic viewpoint, the language do endow human beings with various forms of subjectivity but none of them falls under its classical definition as a basis of faith, will and knowledge (as a *hupokeimenon*). They are not believing, willing or thinking substances. They don't belong to the modern paradigm designed by Luther, Grotius and Descartes. In other words, they don't appear through an opposition to the Church, the State or the World. They are not the result of a dualistic process. And therefore, they are not reducible to the Self, the Individual, or the Ego.

At the same time, subjectivity is never completely dissolved by dispersion or difference, *i.e.* by a constant reference of signs to other signs. It is not defined by the mere functioning of a structure called "*la langue*" or "*le symbolique*" because such structures do not exist, they are just scientific artifacts; and the sign is nothing but a traditional model that impedes our understanding of language—and I should add: of body. Subjectivity is instituted by the enunciation or reenunciation of a discourse, the reenactment of a dance, and only through it. Thus, it certainly has not the stability of a substance that would be separate, once and for all, from its environment, and must be, on the contrary, understood as related to its successive reactualizations, which make it discontinuous and plural. Nevertheless, that doesn't mean that it doesn't exist; despite its shallow form, it is still completely and universally available and always carries some kind of power. When we speak, when we dance, we are partaking in linguistic and rhythmic circulating powers that enable us or impede us to become subjects.

To conclude on Meschonnic, I would like to emphasize what he brings to our understanding of art, especially if you compare him to others theorists of the same period. Writing, painting, playing an instrument, dancing, performing, choreographing, reflecting on past and present artistic experiences, are naturally primarily linked with the issues of body, movement, expression, relation with audiences, etc. But none of these, actually, goes without raising questions concerning language, speech, discourse, representations. Artists, whatever their art, are not mute and deaf, they speak, they discuss, they interact, they read, they dream, they take lessons, they participate in seminars, and that is why they cannot help introducing in their practice feelings, images, fragments of sentences, verses, mottoes, even concepts and more or less obscure ideas that are brought about by linguistic means. I guess it is the same as for a historian and philosopher of subjectivity like me: actually there is no split between body and language, body techniques on one side, language techniques on the other. What we have to deal with is the whole human being; not just a part of it, all of it: his or her body, his or her language and his or her social interactions.

And rhythm is exactly about that: about avoiding these artificial splits. It is about understanding the human being in its entirety. Instead of breaking it into pieces, body, language, social interactions, and trying eventually to make those pieces fit together, the concept of rhythm allows to start from the activity itself, from life, in order to see how this activity is organized, how it flows, and how this flowing produces a more or less powerful subjectivity, i.e. a more or less vivid personal experience and a more or less intense social interaction.

Conclusions

Conclusion 1: we must get rid of the traditional Platonic definition of rhythm and replace it with a pre-Platonic view, i.e. to come back to *rhuthmos* in its original sense. This is the only way to overcome the Idealistic influence on rhythmology and rhythmanalysis and to reintroduce the materialist concerns that were first developed by Democritus, Epicurus and Lucretius.

Conclusion 2: this anti-Platonic strategy must not, however, go as far as to forget one important part of Aristotle's contribution. I think that's the point that makes Meschonnic's contribution interesting compared to Lefebvre's, Barthes', Deleuze's and Guattari's, on the one hand, or Serres' and Morin's, on the other hand. As Werner Jaeger showed a long time ago, Aristotle began his philosophical career by heavily borrowing from Plato. His first conception of rhythm, for instance, is close to that of his mentor. But, with maturity, Aristotle changed and distanced himself from his predecessor. In *Politics*, *Rhetoric* and *Poetics*, he built a new conception of rhythm, which was taking into account various language forms, which was not based any more on sheer metric, and which Meschonnic re-actualized in the 20th century in his own way.

Conclusion 3: if rhythm is defined within this larger scope including language, it can become an efficient tool to investigate the ethical and political aspects of our globalized world. It can help us to develop a political critique of neo-liberalism which could be more accurate than those based only on class struggle, deconstruction of norms or politics of multitudes.

Conclusion 4: since rhythm is increasingly used both as conceptual tool and as subject of investigation by a great number of disciplines, it may become in the 21st century a new scientific paradigm, as *structure*, *system*, *individual* or *difference* have been during the second part of the 20th century.

[*To a larger study of the rhythmic constellation in the 1970s and 1980s*](#)

Footnotes

[1] See also my more recent *Elements of Rhythmology*, vol. 2 and 3)

[2] On this forgotten side of Nietzsche's work, see my *Elements of Rhythmology*, vol. 2

[3] See *Pour la poésie I*, Paris, Gallimard, 1970, p. 68.

[4] H. Meschonnic, *Critique du rythme. Anthropologie du langage*, Lagrasse, Verdier, 1982, p. 216-17.