

# Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari and the *Rhuthmoi* of Territory - Part 1

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In Chapter 11, Deleuze and Guattari elaborated further the political and ethical questions which had been introduced in the two previous chapters. Individuals, whether collective or singular, could not be accounted for solely by their “body” and “internal tension, and had to be observed with and through the “territory” they occupy. This new concept will be discussed in more detail below, but it can already be tentatively defined, to help the reader understand what it is, as the part of an ecological “milieu” which has been appropriated by an individual through a rhythmic and melodic behavior called “refrain.” The common theories of individuation provided by philosophy as well as sociology were therefore to be transformed into, or at least supplemented by a “territoriology” [1].

Since it introduced the concept of rhythm into the *rhuthmic* perspective developed so far, this chapter was of particular interest from a rhythmological viewpoint. Rhythm was now explicitly developed as an alternative to meter and used as a tool to describe the constitution by individuals of the “territory” in which they lived.

However, as we will see, Deleuze and Guattari’s innovation in this matter remained modest because they preferred to give primacy to the debatable concept of “*ritournelle* - refrain,” which provided the title of the chapter. As I have done so far, I will try to analyze both the qualities and the limitations of their contribution.

## From Refrain to Musical Rhythm and Melody

At the end of chapter 10, Deleuze and Guattari introduced for the first time the concept of “refrain.” Music, they claimed, had one “essential content.” It primarily dealt with “becoming-woman, becoming-child, becoming-animal.” In other words, it was a genuinely ethical and political art which translated into sounds the “minoritarian becomings” of individuals and society they were after.

What does music deal with, what is the content indissociable from sound expression? It is hard to say, but it is something: a child dies, a child plays, a woman is born, a woman dies, a bird arrives, a bird flies off. We wish to say that these are not accidental themes in music (even if it is possible to multiply examples), much less imitative exercises; they are something essential. Why a child, a

woman, a bird? It is because musical expression is inseparable from a becoming-woman, a becoming-child, a becoming-animal that constitute its content. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 299)

Of course, such a translation involved significant dangers. It evoked “line[s] of flight or creative deterritorialization[s]” which could easily turn into massacre or/and self-destruction. This was, according to them, music’s “potential fascism.”

Why does the child die, or the bird fall as though pierced by an arrow? Because of the “danger” inherent in any line that escapes, in any line of flight or creative deterritorialization: the danger of veering toward destruction, toward abolition. [...] Music has a thirst for destruction, every kind of destruction, extinction, breakage, dislocation. Is that not its potential “fascism”? (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 299)

This is why “*la ritournelle* – the refrain” was so important. Whether that of “a child in the dark,” that of “a woman singing to herself,” or that of a simple “bird,” the refrain provided music with the minimum rhythmic and melodic form necessary to maintain the balance between the emancipating lines of flight and the risk to go astray. It was free and simple enough not to block the former; constant and formal enough not to let the mind tend to destruction.

We would say that the *refrain* is properly musical content, the block of content proper to music. A child comforts itself in the dark or claps its hands or invents a way of walking, adapting it to the cracks in the sidewalk, or chants “Fort-Da” (psychoanalysts deal with the Fort-Da very poorly when they treat it as a phonological opposition or a symbolic component of the language-unconscious, when it is in fact a refrain). Tra la la. A woman sings to herself, “I heard her softly singing a tune to herself under her breath.” A bird launches into its refrain. All of music is pervaded by bird songs, in a thousand different ways, from Jannequin to Messiaen. Frr, Frr. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, pp. 299-300)

Conversely, music helped to “deterritorialize the refrain” which risked otherwise to excessively “reterritorialize” the mind. Although the refrain had just been defined as “properly musical content,” music and refrain were in fact two kinds of opposite dynamic poles.

Music submits the refrain to this very special treatment of the diagonal or transversal, it uproots the refrain from its territoriality. Music is a creative, active operation that consists in deterritorializing the refrain. Whereas the refrain is essentially territorial, territorializing, or reterritorializing, music makes it a deterritorialized content for a deterritorializing form of expression. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 300)

As one may know, the translator of the book, Brian Massumi, chose to translate the French *ritournelle* by “refrain” and we will respect what has become a tradition in the English speaking world. However, we must be aware of a small difference between the two words. In English,

“refrain” implies the idea of “a regularly recurring phrase or verse” that pertains to the French *ritournelle* too, but it also means, as a matter of fact like the word *refrain* in French, a recurring phrase “especially at the end of each stanza or division of a poem or song” (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*). In classical French, *ritournelle* which was directly borrowed from the Italian *ritornello* (based for its part on *ritorno* – return), has a somewhat broader meaning: it denotes a “small air serving as a chorus to a song” but it can also designate a “short instrumental motif that introduces or recalls a melody at the beginning, at the end or between each stanza of a piece.” But the difference is even greater in popular language, where it also means “an easy and monotonous song,” a motif “too often repeated” that implies an extreme melodic and rhythmic simplicity, even a certain awkwardness (*Trésor de la langue française*).

The French word “*ritournelle*” therefore seems to cover a semantic range larger than the English “refrain” in two directions: on the one hand, it designates a musical motif that can be used at anytime and, less often, a refrain between stanzas for which French use the term “*refrain*”; on the other hand, it implies a certain simplicity and sometimes an exasperating monotony, which are particularly present in the children’s, women’s, bird’s *ritournelles* invoked by Deleuze and Guattari. This is worth noticing because it had direct consequences concerning the rhythm which, according to Deleuze and Guattari, was derived from it.

Musical “rhythm,” indeed, was nothing else than a learned extension of the “refrain.” It was a more sophisticated version of the unpretentious structure of the songs improvised by children, women, ethnic groups or birds. The “refrain” accounted for “the birth of rhythm.”

Music is pervaded by childhood blocks, by blocks of femininity. Music is pervaded by every minority, and yet composes an immense power. Children’s, women’s, ethnic, and territorial [*d’ethnies et de territoires*] refrains, refrains of love and destruction: the birth of rhythm. (A *Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 300)

And, naturally, rhythm had the same virtues of balancing the lines of flight with a repetitive temporal form but also involved the same risks of excessive metric reterritorialization, if it were not contained by the emancipatory power of “music” defined as “system of melodic and harmonic coordinates.” In short, the refrain explained the further development of both the rhythm and the package melody/harmony, and also their tensions.

Animal and child refrains seem to be territorial: therefore they are not “music.” But when music lays hold of the refrain and deterritorializes it, and deterritorializes the voice, when it lays hold of the refrain and sends it racing off in a rhythmic sound block, when the refrain “becomes” Schumann or Debussy, it is through a system of melodic and harmonic coordinates by means of which music reterritorializes upon itself, *qua* music. (A *Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 303)

## **From Refrain to Territory**

Let us now look into the most famous Chapter 11 entitled “Of the Refrain,” in which Deleuze and Guattari developed the suggestions set out at the end of the previous chapter.

The chapter began with a three-part analysis, the structure of which would be developed throughout the rest. Sometimes, as in the case of “a child [singing] in the dark” to reassure him- or herself, walking and skipping “as he sings,” “hastening or slowing his pace,” the refrain created a center, a “beginning of order” within the primordial “chaos.”

I. A child in the dark, gripped with fear, comforts himself by singing under his breath. He walks and halts to his song. Lost, he takes shelter, or orients himself with his little song as best he can. The song is like a rough sketch of a calming and stabilizing, calm and stable, center in the heart of chaos. Perhaps the child skips as he sings, hastens or slows his pace. But the song itself is already a skip: it jumps from chaos to the beginnings of order in chaos and is in danger of breaking apart at any moment. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 311)

Sometimes, for example, at “the foundation of a city” whose outlines were traced to the sound of ritual songs, the refrain succeeded in organizing a limited space where “the germinal forces” were protected from external “forces of chaos.”

II. Now we are at home. But home does not preexist: it was necessary to draw a circle around that uncertain and fragile center, to organize a limited space. Many, very diverse, components have a part in this, landmarks and marks of all kinds. This was already true of the previous case. But now the components are used for organizing a space, not for the momentary determination of a center. The forces of chaos are kept outside as much as possible, and the interior space protects the germinal forces of a task to fulfill or a deed to do. [...] For sublime deeds like the foundation of a city or the fabrication of a golem, one draws a circle, or better yet walks in a circle as in a children’s dance, combining rhythmic vowels and consonants that correspond to the interior forces of creation as to the differentiated parts of an organism. A mistake in speed, rhythm, or harmony would be catastrophic because it would bring back the forces of chaos, destroying both creator and creation. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 311)

Sometimes the refrain turned into an “improvisation” thus joining with “the forces of the future.” It allowed oneself to join the world or even “meld with it.”

III. Finally, one opens the circle a crack, opens it all the way, lets some one in, calls someone, or else goes out oneself, launches forth. One opens the circle not on the side where the old forces of chaos press against it but in another region, one created by the circle itself. As though the circle tended on its own to open onto a future, as a function of the working forces it shelters. This time, it is in order to join with the forces of the future, cosmic forces. One launches forth, hazards an improvisation. But to improvise is to join with the World, or meld with it. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 311)

We see that Deleuze and Guattari significantly extended their concept. While in Chapter 10 the refrain provided music with its first melodic and rhythmic forms, it was now broadened in order to include “optical, gestural, motor, etc.” repetitive lines (p. 323). Music appeared now only as a kind of stepping stone or an introduction to a much larger concern. This must be noticed because commentators interested in music often cite only the first few lines of the chapter without mentioning their broader context. In fact, Deleuze and Guattari stated that “these are not three successive moments in an evolution. They are three aspects of a single thing, the Refrain” (p. 312). The term “Refrain,” which was now capitalized, actually covered all aspects of a general theory of the constitution of “territory.” By a certain number or repetitive behaviors (mainly singing, walking, and gestures), every singular or collective living individual delimited, for its own sake, a “territory” in which he lived and interacted with other singular or collective individuals.

The role of the refrain has often been emphasized: it is territorial, a territorial assemblage. Bird songs: the bird sings to mark its territory. The Greek modes and Hindu rhythms are themselves territorial, provincial, regional. [...] Sometimes one goes from chaos to the threshold of a territorial assemblage: directional components, infra-assemblage. Sometimes one organizes the assemblage: dimensional components, intra-assemblage. Sometimes one leaves the territorial assemblage for other assemblages, or for somewhere else entirely: interassemblage, components of passage or even escape. And all three at once. Forces of chaos, terrestrial forces, cosmic forces: all of these confront each other and converge in the territorial refrain. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 312)

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## Footnotes

[1] We borrow the term, which is not used by Deleuze and Guattari themselves, from [an inspiring study](#) by Andrea Mubi Brighenti and Mathias Kärrholm (2018).