

Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari and the *Rhuthmoi* of Territory - Part 2

Wednesday 14 July 2021, by [Pascal Michon](#)

Sommaire

- [From Musical Rhythm to Ecologi](#)
- [From Ecological Rhythm Back to](#)

[Previous chapter](#)

From Musical Rhythm to Ecological Rhythm

Now, let us see how this extension of the concept of refrain to the issue of territory affected that of rhythm. The concept of “territory” should not, Deleuze and Guattari insisted, be reduced to the biological or sociological concept of “milieu” (p. 314). The latter only denoted “a block of space-time constituted by the periodic repetition of the component.” A “milieu” resulted from the mere mechanical implementation of a code.

Every milieu is vibratory, in other words, a block of space-time constituted by the periodic repetition of the component. Thus the living thing has an exterior milieu of materials, an interior milieu of composing elements and composed substances, an intermediary milieu of membranes and limits, and an annexed milieu of energy sources and actions-perceptions. Every milieu is coded, a code being defined by periodic repetition. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 313)

However, the milieus were not entirely constant. Due to the drift of the codes, they were affected by a slow transformation.

But each code is in a perpetual state of transcoding or transduction. Transcoding or transduction is the manner in which one milieu serves as the basis for another, or conversely is established atop another milieu, dissipates in it or is constituted in it. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 313)

Moreover, the milieus were both “essentially communicating” and constantly “open [in the/to] chaos, which threaten[ed] them with exhaustion or intrusion.”

The milieus pass into one another, they are essentially communicating. The milieus are open [in

the/to] chaos [*dans le chaos*], which threatens them with exhaustion or intrusion. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 313, my mod.)

To confront the risk provoked by the exterior chaos, each milieu could not rely only on the periodic repetition of a code. Morin had already emphasized this fact. It had to adjust, to be flexible according to circumstances, that is, to communicate with other milieus and to match up with different “space-times.” Therefore, the milieus’ answer to the threat of chaos was, Deleuze and Guattari suggested, “rhythm.”

Rhythm is the milieus’ answer to chaos. What chaos and rhythm have in common is the in-between—between two milieus, rhythm-chaos or the chaosmos [...] In this in-between, chaos becomes rhythm, not inexorably, but it has a chance to. [...] There is rhythm whenever there is a transcoded passage from one milieu to another, a communication of milieus, coordination between heterogeneous space-times. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 313)

Rhythm matched perfectly what was needed to overcome chaos. Indeed, it was not, Deleuze and Guattari emphasized, “meter or cadence.” Meter, whether regular or not, assumed “a coded form” and always concerned a “noncommunicating milieu.”

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 [...] (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 313)

By contrast, rhythm was “the Unequal or the Incommensurable that is always undergoing transcoding.” It was “critical,” it tied together “critical moments,” it operated between “heterogeneous blocks” of space-time. More simply, it was the supple link between communicating milieus.

[...] 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. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 313)

Naturally such assertion was not sufficient to overcome the risk of unwillingly reintroducing the metric paradigm. Wasn’t the rhythmic difference a difference *from* the meter, i.e. defined ultimately according to it? This had been the problem of the 19th century musical critique of metric which thought that mere *rubato* or supple interpretation of the written score could by itself free music from the metric paradigm.

Rhythm is never on the same plane as that which has rhythm. Action occurs in a milieu, whereas rhythm is located between two milieus, or between two intermilieus [...] This easily avoids an aporia that threatened to introduce meter into rhythm, despite all the declarations of intent to the contrary: How can one proclaim the constituent inequality of rhythm while at the same time admitting implied vibrations, periodic repetitions of components? (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 314)

To avoid such naiveté, Deleuze and Guattari placed rhythm on an abstract level opposed to the material that was actually rhythmized and firmly attached it to “difference” instead of “repetition.”

A milieu does in fact exist by virtue of a periodic repetition, but one whose only effect is to produce a difference by which the milieu passes into another milieu. It is the difference that is rhythmic, not the repetition, which nevertheless produces it: productive repetition has nothing to do with reproductive meter. This is the “critical solution of the antinomy.” (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 314)

Rhythm was therefore the flexible line going through and associating heterogeneous milieus in a chaotic environment. As in ancient cosmogonies, chaos generated milieus organized according to metric implementation of codes, which in turn were loosely associated to each other by rhythms. Rhythm unfolded according to circumstances with no premeditated or calculated plan and associated heterogeneous space-time entities.

From chaos, *Milieus* and *Rhythms* are born. This is the concern of very ancient cosmogonies. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 313)

This analysis clearly and explicitly opposed the Platonic metric paradigm: rhythm was no longer meter, it was not developing according to codes in a milieu closed upon itself. On the contrary, it involved a supple temporal organization, a *rhuthmos*, between communicating milieus, which allowed pure difference, bifurcation or novelty, and which had nothing to do with the refrain—this must be underlined because many commentators confuse them erroneously. This was a remarkable rhythmological suggestion that should be noted.

From Ecological Rhythm Back to Musical Rhythm

However, despite this noticeable intuition, rhythm was only, for Deleuze and Guattari, a middle-range factor for understanding the main problem they were interested in: the constitution of “territory” by the use of “refrain.” The territory was “not a milieu nor a rhythm” but both “the act that territorialized them” and “the product of their territorialization.” In other words, the concepts of “milieu” and “rhythm” were just middle terms used to introduce to those of “refrain” and “territory” which received the most attention.

Still, we do not yet have a *Territory*, which is not a milieu, not even an additional milieu, nor a rhythm or passage between milieus. The territory is in fact an act that affects milieus and

rhythms, that “territorializes” them. The territory is the product of a territorialization of milieus and rhythms. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 314)

Here we find a strange bifurcation in Deleuze and Guattari’s reasoning. While they had introduced the concept of rhythm to denote the supple communication and transformation of milieus into each other in a chaotic environment, they used it now to designate a repetitive behavior used for marking a territory within a milieu.

There is a territory precisely when milieu components cease to be directional, becoming dimensional instead, when they cease to be functional to become expressive. There is a territory when the rhythm has expressiveness. What defines the territory is the emergence of matters of expression (qualities). (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 315)

Rabbit, monkeys or brown stagemaker *regularly*, “each morning” for the latter, mark their territory by dropping excrement, showing their colored sexual organs, or laying down leaves picked from the tree in which they live, then turning them upside down.

We know what role urine and excrement play in marking, but territorial excrement, for example, in the rabbit, has a particular odor owing to specialized anal glands. Many monkeys, when serving as guards, expose their brightly colored sexual organs: the penis becomes a rhythmic and expressive color-carrier that marks the limits of the territory. [...] The brown stagemaker (*Scenopoeetes dentirostris*) lays down landmarks each morning by dropping leaves it picks from its tree, and then turning them upside down so the paler underside stands out against the dirt: inversion produces a matter of expression. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 315)

In this sense, Deleuze and Guattari asserted, the constitution of a territory is “an act of rhythm that has become expressive.” However, since they probably felt that there could be an inconsistency between the two uses of the concept of rhythm, they insisted that “the marking of a territory” was “not a meter” but “a rhythm” and that it had, for this reason, “the most general characteristic of rhythm, which is to be inscribed on a different plane than that of its actions,” which was a rather vague justification and did not erase the fact that this kind of “rhythm” was *de facto* based on a more or less regular repetition.

Territorialization is an act of rhythm that has become expressive, or of milieu components that have become qualitative. The marking of a territory is dimensional, but it is not a meter, it is a rhythm. It retains the most general characteristic of rhythm, which is to be inscribed on a different plane than that of its actions. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 315)

As a matter of fact, since rhythm was now tightly joint with melody in producing the refrain which would be “territorialized” or “territorializing,” it tended to retrieve its most usual musical meaning

as metric or para-metric temporal organization.

The refrain is rhythm and melody that have been territorialized because they have become expressive—and have become expressive because they are territorializing. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 317)

The rest of the reasoning was entirely organized according to the traditional musical couple of “rhythm and melody.” Deleuze and Guattari distinguished between “territorial motifs” which expressed “*the relation of the territory they draw to the interior milieu of impulses*,” and “territorial counterpoints” which, by contrast, expressed “*the relation of the territory they draw to the [...] exterior milieu of circumstances*” (p. 317). Dogs going through “motions of smelling, seeking, chasing, biting, and shaking to death with equal enthusiasm whether they are hungry or not” illustrated the “territorial motif.” Birds singing when “an enemy approaches or suddenly appears, or rain starts to fall, the sun rises, the sun sets” exemplified the “territorial counterpoint” (p. 317). The former constituted “*rhythmic faces or characters*,” while the latter formed “*melodic landscapes*” (p. 318).

There is a rhythmic character when we find that we no longer have the simple situation of a rhythm associated with a character, subject, or impulse. The rhythm itself is now the character in its entirety; as such, it may remain constant, or it may be augmented or diminished by the addition or subtraction of sounds or always increasing or decreasing durations, and by an amplification or elimination bringing death or resuscitation, appearance or disappearance. Similarly, the melodic landscape is no longer a melody associated with a landscape; the melody itself is a sonorous landscape in counterpoint to a virtual landscape. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 318)

At first, rhythm seemed in this description to concern mainly body movements, while melody concerned mainly song modulations, but this did not change its definition. As a matter of fact, Deleuze and Guattari mentioned sometimes, as in the previous quote, the presence of “sounds” in rhythm. Rhythm was therefore as sonorous as much as corporal and bodily rhythm were thought to be organized according to the same pattern as musical rhythm, i.e. as a more or less measured distribution of time. Indeed rhythm was deemed “articulated,” while melody was “harmonized” by some birds more gifted than others.

What objectively distinguishes a musician bird from a nonmusician bird is precisely this aptitude for motifs and counterpoints that, if they are variable, or even when they are constant, make matters of expression something other than a poster—a style—since they articulate rhythm and harmonize melody. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 318)

Naturally, we understand that Deleuze and Guattari’s point was to describe the carving out by animals—and by extension by human beings—of dynamic territories in natural environment by the complex performances of bodily movements and sonorous expressions. It was a remarkable extension, mainly based on ethology, of their previous Tardean sociology to the ecological

coexistence of “members of the same species” and of “different species in the same milieu”—that is to say, if we apply this insight to humans, individuals and groups—through the dynamic and interactive constitution of their respective living spheres.

We must simultaneously take into account two aspects of the territory: it not only ensures and regulates the coexistence of members of the same species by keeping them apart, but makes possible the coexistence of a maximum number of different species in the same milieu by specializing them. Members of the same species enter into rhythmic characters at the same time as different species enter into melodic landscapes; for the landscapes are peopled by characters and the characters belong to landscapes. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 320)

The sociological concern of Deleuze and Guattari was manifested in their description of the emergence, from the dynamic territory they had just described, of “functional specialization” as well as “rites and religions.”

A territory has two notable effects: *a reorganization of functions and a regrouping of forces*. On the one hand, when functional activities are territorialized they necessarily change pace (the creation of new functions such as building a dwelling, or the transformation of old functions, as when aggressiveness changes nature and becomes intra-specific). This is like a nascent theme of specialization or professionalism [...] That other effect, which relates not to occupations but to rites and religions, consists in this: the territory groups all the forces of the different milieus together in a single sheaf constituted by the forces of the earth. The attribution of all the diffuse forces to the earth as receptacle or base takes place only at the deepest level of each territory. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, pp. 320-321)

Territory, which had emerged from a decoding dynamics of milieus, now unleashed “something that [would] surpass it.” New forces would soon intervene.

Territorializing marks simultaneously develop into motifs and counterpoints, and reorganize functions and regroup forces. But by virtue of this, the territory already unleashes something that will surpass it. [...] The essential thing is the disjunction noticeable between the code and the territory. The territory arises in a free margin of the code, one that is not indeterminate but rather is determined differently. Each milieu has its own code, and there is perpetual transcoding between milieus; the territory, on the other hand, seems to form at the level of a certain *decoding*. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 322)

However, apart from the fact that between animals and humans there is a language gap which was not taken into account in Deleuze and Guattari’s analysis, one wonders how one could compare a loose association of milieus, mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, and the repetitive marking of a territory, whether by bodily movements or by song performances, discussed in its second part? Although they contested in advance the objection linking marking or delimiting by repetitive behaviors, rhythmologically speaking, this was a real setback from their previous intuition. The

ethological metrics was insisting underneath the *rhuthmic* ecological perspective.

As a matter of fact, Deleuze and Guattari summarized their argument by recalling the concept of *ritournelle* – refrain with its implicit simpleness and repetitiveness.

The refrain moves in the direction of the territorial assemblage and lodges itself there or leaves. In a general sense, *we call a refrain any aggregate of matters of expression that draws a territory and develops into territorial motifs and landscapes* (there are optical, gestural, motor, etc., refrains). (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 323)

[Next chapter](#)