

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

Sunday 11 July 2021, by [Pascal Michon](#)

Sommaire

- [Literature as Rhuthmic Practic](#)
- [Art as Bridge Between Smooth](#)

[Previous chapter](#)

Literature as Rhuthmic Practice of Language

As we can see, most of Deleuze and Guattari's historical reflections on art were devoted to the visual arts and to music. But we find also in *A Thousand Plateaus* a few discussions devoted to literature scattered in different chapters. As a matter of fact, by contrast with Lefebvre, with Foucault at least since the end of the 1960s, and with Serres and Morin, Deleuze and Guattari attached great importance to the latter. Even if it was not without limits, this concern made them closer to Benveniste, Barthes and Meschonnic than any other members of the rhythmic constellation.

We remember that Chapter 4 offered a critique of "linguistics" and the contours of an alternative theory of language. Deleuze and Guattari targeted four "postulates" which they discussed thoroughly. Against the third one, which affirmed that "there are constants or universals of the language [*la langue*] that enable us to define it as a homogeneous system" (pp. 92-100), they cited William Labov's variationist sociolinguistics but they also presented literature as a counterexample to this holistic postulate. Even if they still used the overworn concept of "style," the details of their description are worth citing. In fact, "style" was not, they argued, "an individual psychological creation" but "an assemblage of enunciation," a "procedure" to implement "a continuous variation" and produce "a language within a language."

What is called a style can be the most natural thing in the world; it is nothing other than the procedure of a continuous variation. [...] Because a style is not an individual psychological creation but an assemblage of enunciation, it unavoidably produces a language within a language [*une langue dans la langue*]. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 97)

To support their case, Deleuze and Guattari listed a series of authors "they were fond of": Kafka, Beckett, Gherasim Luca, Jean-Luc Godard. Each one of them, they noted, gave to the German or the French language a whole new look—or better, a whole new sound. Each had "his own procedure of variation, his own widened chromaticism, his own mad production of speeds and intervals," in other words, his own manner of making his own language flow, which they characterized as "stammering, whispering or ascending and descending."

The essential thing is that each of these authors has his own procedure of variation, his own widened chromaticism, his own mad production of speeds and intervals. The creative stammering of Gherasim Luca, in the poem "Passionnement" (Passionately). Godard's is another kind of stammering. In theater: Robert Wilson's whispering, without definite pitch, and Carmelo Bene's ascending and descending variations. It's easy to stammer, but making language itself stammer is a different affair. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 98)

Each author invented his or her "own language - *sa propre langue*," by giving it new "values and intensities." The language then seemed to become "secret" or private but it actually remained open to ever new uses, performances and interpretations.

It was Proust who said that "masterpieces are written in a kind of foreign language." [...] That is when style becomes a language [*que le style fait langue*]. That is when language [*que le langage*] becomes intensive, a pure continuum of values and intensities. That is when all of language [*que toute la langue*] becomes secret, yet has nothing to hide, as opposed to when one carves out a secret subsystem within language [*dans la langue*]. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 98)

Consequently, there was no such thing as a set of linguistic constants which one varied, as in structuralism, or a set of linguistic norms according to which each figure of style was considered a deviation, as in rhetoric.

It is possible to take any linguistic variable and place it in variation following a necessarily virtual continuous line between two of its states. We are no longer in the situation of linguists who expect the constants of language [*les constantes de la langue*] to experience a kind of mutation or undergo the effects of changes accumulated in speech alone [*la simple parole*]. Lines of change or creation are fully and directly a part of the abstract machine. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 99)

On the contrary, each discourse set up a particular tension which occurred through "tensors." The latter could be "atypical" or "agrammatical" expressions, as Cummings' *he danced his did*, or more simply a repetitive use of the conjunction AND.

The atypical expression constitutes a cutting edge of deterritorialization of language [*de la langue*], it plays the role of *tensor*; in other words, it causes language [*la langue*] to tend toward the limit of its elements, forms, or notions, toward a near side or a beyond of language [*de la langue*]. The tensor effects a kind of transitivization of the phrase, causing the last term to react upon the preceding term, back through the entire chain. It assures an intensive and chromatic treatment of language [*de la langue*]. An expression as simple as AND . . . can play the role of tensor for all of language [*tout le langage*]. In this sense, AND is less a conjunction than the atypical expression of all of the possible conjunctions it places in continuous variation. [...] Tensors coincide with no linguistic category; nevertheless they are pragmatic values essential to both assemblages of enunciation and indirect discourses. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B.

Massumi, 1987, p. 99)

Deleuze and Guattari emphasized that this tensive and creative power was not limited to “poets, children, and lunatics.” It was actually the normal form of language activity, even in the most ordinary speech.

Some believe that these variations do not express the usual labor of creation in language and remain marginal, confined to poets, children, and lunatics. That is because they wish to define the abstract machine by constants that can be modified only secondarily, by a cumulative effect or syntagmatic mutation. But the abstract machine of language is not universal, or even general, but singular; it is not actual, but virtual-real; it has, not invariable or obligatory rules, but optional rules that ceaselessly vary with the variation itself, as in a game in which each move changes the rules. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 99)

Therefore, performing a discourse, what Deleuze and Guattari called an “assemblage of enunciations,” was not simply using the tongue (*la langue*), “the abstract machine,” in a more or less distorted way. It was not a violation or even a distortion of the language norm. It entailed “a come-and-go between different types of variables,” which “effectuate[d] the machine in unison, in the sum of their relations.”

We should not conclude from this that the assemblage brings only a certain resistance or inertia to bear against the abstract machine; [...] There is indeed braking and resistance at a certain level, but at another level of the assemblage there is nothing but a come-and-go between different types of variables, and corridors of passage traveled in both directions: the variables effectuate the machine in unison, in the sum of their relations. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 100)

Although sometimes in a somewhat obscure way, these analyses rightly pointed to phenomena that had been observed by many writers and a few theoreticians. In literature, but it is also partly true in ordinary situation of speech, the language is used, or better yet, made flowing, each time in a new way. Each writer, each speaker, invents his or her “own language” by giving it new “values and intensities.” His or her language may thus seem to become private but in fact it remains open to re-actualization, allowing intercommunication and interaction.

Benveniste in an interview dated 1968, in which he also commented on Chomsky’s generative linguistics, underlined the fact that, contrarily to Chomsky’s claim, “all men invent their own tongue [*leur propre langue*] at the moment and each one in a distinctive way, and each time in a new way.” This fundamentally regenerative process concerns sentences, as well as words, down to the most banal locution as “hello!” Against all structuralist views, Benveniste insisted that, in real pragmatic situation of communication, it is “no longer the constituent elements that count” but “the complete organization of the whole, the original arrangement.”

We apparently use a number of models. But, every man invents his language [*sa langue*] and invents it all his life. And all men invent their own language [*leur propre langue*] at the moment and each one in a distinctive way, and each time in a new way. Saying hello every day of your life to someone, this is each time a reinvention. A fortiori when it comes to sentences, it is no longer the constituent elements that count, it is the complete organization of the whole, the original arrangement [*l'arrangement original*], the model of which cannot have been given directly and, consequently, must have been made by the individual [*que l'individu fabrique*]. (Benveniste, 1974, p. 18-19, my trans.)

Meschonnic, for his part, documented a similar phenomenon, this time at the text level, in his *Écrire Hugo, Pour la poétique IV* in 1977, a phenomenon whose theory he was soon to elaborate in details in his *Critique of Rhythm: Historical Anthropology of Language* in 1982. To oppose any temptation to separate between linguistics and poetics, Meschonnic first argued against Austin, who considered poetry as “a parasitic use” of ordinary language (1962, pp. 21, 104), insisting for his part on the continuity between ordinary and poetic language. Having secured this relation, Meschonnic described how each author “re-produces” the language – *la langue* in which he or she writes in a way that is entirely specific to him or her, while still being fully sharable. Just as Deleuze and Guattari, who explained this rather surprising effect by the use of “tensors,” which escape linguistic categories, establish “pragmatic values essential to assemblages of enunciation,” and “effectuate the machine [of the language] in unison, in the sum of their relations [*toutes à la fois [...] d'après l'ensemble de leurs rapports*],” Meschonnic described it as a particular form of “enunciation” which produces “values specific to one discourse and only one” through the global organization of its “prosodic and rhythmic system.” Although the example of “agrammatical expressions,” given by Deleuze and Guattari, actually still respected the banal rhetoric criterion of deviation from norm, Meschonnic could certainly have joined with them on their second example, “expressions as simple as AND,” which clearly pointed at the way of flowing—at the *rhuthmos*—of the discourse. Indeed, for him as we will see in another volume, the “signifiante” of a poem is not carried only by the words articulated through syntactical forms but by the entire system of signifiers and the global resonance it entails. It is the result of a linguistic activity that doesn't separate between the signified and the signifier.

Poetic enunciation is not just a use of personal pronouns. It pertains to the whole discourse. This is why the analysis begins with prosody and rhythm, because what we already reduce by calling it the “materiality” of words is a semantics of the whole language [*de tout le langage*], a generalized signifiante which produces its paradigms as much as its concatenations [*enchaînements*]. The privilege accorded to prosody and rhythm does not make them distinct “levels” of “meaning,” a meaning then confused with lexicon, nor one of the functions of language [*du langage*] that would overcome the others, for example syntax. But, by encompassing the separate categories of syntax and lexicon in a new conception-distribution of the signifiante, prosody and rhythm are taken as the general functioning of value and poetry [*de la valeur et du poème*]. (Meschonnic, *Writing Hugo*, 1977, vol. 1, p. 216, my trans.)

As we can see, Chapter 4 contained a series of remarkable insights into the linguistic activity which did not separate between ordinary and poetic language and which therefore shed a bright light on literature. These conclusions were in fact developed even further in the next section devoted to a discussion of the fourth “postulate of linguistics” which affirmed that “language [*la langue*] can be scientifically studied only under the conditions of a standard or major language.” To prove their

case, Deleuze and Guattari argued this time that literature was basically about making one's language become "minor" by placing it "in a state of continuous variation" and by "stretching tensors through it." It was like becoming a "foreigner" in one's own tongue.

One must find the minor language [*la langue mineure*], the dialect or rather idiolect, on the basis of which one can make one's own major language minor [*sa propre langue majeure*]. That is the strength of authors termed "minor," who are in fact the greatest, the only greats: having to conquer one's own language [*leur propre langue*], in other words, to attain that sobriety in the use of a major language [*la langue majeure*], in order to place it in a state of continuous variation (the opposite of regionalism). [...] Minor authors are foreigners in their own tongue [*sa propre langue*]. If they are bastards, if they experience themselves as bastards, it is due not to a mixing or intermingling of languages [*mélange de langues*] but rather to a subtraction and variation of their own language [*de la sienne*] achieved by stretching tensors through it. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 105)

Strikingly, these ultimate analyses drove Deleuze and Guattari towards a theory of language based on "prosodic, stylistic, or pragmatic features" which clearly parted from the traditional semiotic and linear views. Here again, they were not far from Meschonnic's global theory of rhythm—although they did not mention him. "All elements of language" were placed "in a state of continuous variation, for example, the impact of tone on phonemes, accent on morphemes, or intonation on syntax."

For nondistinctive features, whether prosodic, stylistic, or pragmatic, are not only omnipresent variables, in contrast to the presence or absence of a constant; they are not only superlinear and "suprasegmental" elements, in contrast to linear segmental elements; their very characteristics give them the power to place all the elements of language [*de la langue*] in a state of continuous variation—for example, the impact of tone on phonemes, accent on morphemes, or intonation on syntax. These are not secondary features but another treatment of language [*de la langue*] that no longer operates according to the preceding categories. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, pp. 103-104)

Strikingly too, once again the musical model replaced the absent theory of poetic rhythm. The beneficial effect of the reference to literature on the theory of language was partly suppressed by the obscuring effect of the reference to music.

From both sides [the conjoined tendencies to impoverishment and overload or proliferation in so-called minor languages] we see a rejection of reference points, a dissolution of constant form in favor of differences in dynamic. The closer a language [*une langue*] gets to this state, the closer it comes not only to a system of musical notation, but also to music itself. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 104)

In short, on many points Deleuze and Guattari came quite close to Benveniste and Meschonnic's analyses of ordinary language as well as of poetic language, which, in fact, in retrospect, throw a revealing light on some of their suggestions, which have been rarely noted by their followers. This is

why it is so unfortunate that they did not take into account the contributions of their contemporaries concerning the particular ways of flowing of language, which they were precisely trying to understand.

Art as Bridge Between Smooth and Striated Space?

As we can see, Deleuze and Guattari's contribution to the theory of art was quite significant. They provided a set of remarkable descriptions of the *rhuthmic* aspects of artistic practices ranging from architecture and painting to music and literature. However, we will see now that they could not bring these notable intuitions to full completion.

Chapter 14—which was the last one of the book—was supposed to tackle the question of the “complex” relations between what Deleuze and Guattari called “smooth space and striated space,” that is to say “the nomad space and the sedentary space,” or the space “in which the war machine develops and the space instituted by the State apparatus” (p. 474). In other words, they wanted to propose “a certain number of models” that could account for the different types of interaction between the two opposite kinds of spaces, ethics and politics that had been defined earlier. At stake was obviously the need to overcome both dialectics and hermeneutics and to replace them with what we might call a *rhuthmic* temporal and historical logic describing the various forms of interactions between “smooth and striated spaces.”

This raises a number of simultaneous questions: the simple oppositions between the two spaces; the complex differences; the de facto mixes, and the passages from one to another; the principles of the mixture, which are not at all symmetrical, sometimes causing a passage from the smooth to the striated, sometimes from the striated to the smooth, according to entirely different movements. We must therefore envision a certain number of models, which would be like various aspects of the two spaces and the relations between them. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 475)

Deleuze and Guattari devoted large sections to what they called the “maritime model” (pp. 478-482), the “mathematical model” (pp. 482-488) and the “physical model” (pp. 488-492), in which they discussed the question in a rather technical way. But they also presented other models which were inspired by art, whether music, fine art or simple craft, which could constitute a sort of bridge between the smooth and the striated space.

Let us start with Deleuze and Guattari's discussion of the theoretical contribution of Pierre Boulez (1925-2016). The latter had been indeed “the first to develop a set of simple oppositions and complex differences, as well as reciprocal nonsymmetrical correlations, between smooth and striated space” (p. 477). The main difference, according to Boulez, was between “nonmetric and metric multiplicities,” that is to say between a space-time in which “one occupies without counting” and a space-time in which “one counts in order to occupy.” The point here was the opposition between regular and irregular distribution of space-time.

In the simplest terms, Boulez says that in a smooth space-time one occupies without counting, whereas in a striated space-time one counts in order to occupy. He makes palpable or perceptible

the difference between nonmetric and metric multiplicities, directional and dimensional spaces. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 477)

In other words, duration was “susceptible to two kinds of breaks: one [was] defined by a standard, whereas the other [was] irregular and undetermined, and [could] be made wherever one wishes to place it.”

At a second level, it can be said that space is susceptible to two kinds of breaks: one is defined by a standard, whereas the other is irregular and undetermined, and can be made wherever one wishes to place it. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 477)

Likewise, frequencies could be “distributed either in the intervals between breaks, or statistically without breaks,” i.e. as elements of an arithmetic scale or independently of any scale.

At yet another level, it can be said that frequencies can be distributed either in the intervals between breaks, or statistically without breaks. In the first case, the principle behind the distribution of breaks and intervals is called a “module”; it may be constant and fixed (a *straight* striated space), or regularly or irregularly variable (*curved* striated spaces, termed focalized if the variation of the module is regular, nonfocalized if it is irregular). When there is no module, the distribution of frequencies is without break: it is “statistical,” however small the segment of space may be. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, pp. 477-478)

Significantly, rhythm was not immediately mentioned in this particular discussion and we can easily understand why. Since Boulez’s contribution was radically antimetric, it could not fit the usual musical definition of rhythm which had imposed itself from the 19th century. Instead of a regular metric distribution of time, only mitigated by a few elements of rubato around regularly recurring time points, Boulez advocated the massive introduction of “smooth space” and “continuous variation” into regular music—without, in fact, prohibiting either any use of “striated space” with which the former was to “communicate” and “meld.” As a matter of fact, the very possibility of coexistence and interaction between smooth and striated space made the musical example quite evocative.

The smooth is a nomos, whereas the striated always has a logos, the octave, for example. Boulez is concerned with the communication between the two kinds of space, their alternations and superpositions: how “a strongly directed smooth space tends to meld with a striated space,” how “a striated space in which the statistical distribution of the pitches used is *in fact* equal tends to meld with a smooth space.” (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 478)

Moreover, we must relate this first idea with that already presented above in passing which related the opposition between “nonmetric and metric multiplicities” to the opposition between “directional and dimensional spaces” (see first quote from p. 477). In short, this meant that metric music was unfolding according to measured dimensions, in melody as well as in harmony, while nonmetric

music was directional, i.e. carried by free movements crossing the metric dimensions, so to speak, in “diagonal.” Consequently, the latter’s way of flowing could not be grasped if observed in a kind of metrical space, but was to be conceived as a “production of properly rhythmic values” carried out by “vectors.” However, the reverse remained possible. Metric music could naturally be represented from a directional and vectorial space.

The striated is that which intertwines fixed and variable elements, produces an order and succession of distinct forms, and organizes horizontal melodic lines and vertical harmonic planes. The smooth is the continuous variation, continuous development of form; it is the fusion of harmony and melody in favor of the production of properly rhythmic values, the pure act of the drawing of a diagonal across the vertical and the horizontal. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 478)

Had they recognized Benveniste’s contribution for its true value, Deleuze and Guattari could have used here the concept of *rhuthmos*. Indeed, what they were aiming at was something like the particular way of flowing of contemporary music described by Boulez, which included nonmetric parts defined by “continuous variation” or “continuous development of form,” as well as more traditional metric organizations. As a matter of fact, they used again, in this occasion, the term “rhythm” to designate the “properly rhythmic values” which result from “the continuous variation, continuous development of form.” This could have been the base for an extension of their own concept of “rhythmic personage.” However, like in Chapter 7, where it was limited to biology and ethology, this redefinition of the term rhythm remained within the framework of music. It was only and vaguely defined as “the fusion of harmony and melody,” a definition that was not entirely clear and that in any case could not be extended outside of its original framework. Something was close at hand, but Deleuze and Guattari could not grasp it.

Unfortunately, this limitation of reasoning was to be further reinforced in the second example analyzed by Deleuze and Guattari, that of textile production. According to them there was an opposition between “fabric,” which could be defined “as a striated space,” and “felt” which, by contrast, implied a “smooth,” “unlimited” and “non-centered” aspect. Instead of assigning “fixed and mobile elements,” the latter “distribute[d] a continuous variation”; instead of “intertwining the threads,” it entangle[d] them on “microscales.”

It implies no separation of threads, no intertwining, only an entanglement of fibers obtained by fulling (for example, by rolling the block of fibers back and forth). What becomes entangled are the microscales of the fibers. An aggregate of intrication of this kind is in no way *homogeneous*: it is nevertheless smooth, and contrasts point by point with the space of fabric (it is in principle infinite, open, and unlimited in every direction; it has neither top nor bottom nor center; it does not assign fixed and mobile elements but rather distributes a continuous variation). (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, pp. 475-476)

In this context the question of rhythm was sidelined. Deleuze and Guattari mentioned the opposition between “embroidery with its central theme or motif,” and “patchwork” and “quilt” with their “piece-by-piece construction, [their] infinite, successive additions of fabric” (p. 476), whose “recurrence frees uniquely rhythmic values distinct from the harmonies of embroidery.” In quilt

technique, “rhythm” was thus partaking in smooth space, it had no center, no limits, however it was still composed by recurrence of a single element and was far from the “rhythmic personage” they had evoked previously on other occasions (see above Chap. 7). Moreover, quite inconsistently with the objective of the chapter, which was supposed to represent the complexity of the relation between “smooth and striated spaces,” this notion of rhythm could not prevent a strict opposition between “smooth” forms of textile, like felt and quilt, on the one hand, and “striated” forms like fabric, on the other hand. Contrary to what had been announced, there was no possible interaction between the two principles.

Its space is not at all constituted in the same way: there is no center; its basic motif (“block”) is composed of a single element; the recurrence of this element frees uniquely rhythmic values distinct from the harmonies of embroidery (in particular, in “crazy” patchwork, which fits together pieces of varying size, shape, and color, and plays on the *texture* of the fabrics). (A *Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 476)

The last artistic example provided in Chapter 14 to illustrate the complexity of the relation between “smooth and striated spaces” was meant to close the discussion and, in a way, the book itself—if we leave aside the conclusion which recapitulated their most important findings. This section was devoted to what they called “nomad art” and “its successors (barbarian, Gothic, and modern)” (p. 492). The Gothic, Romantic and Modern *rhuthmic* arts described in the last part of Chapter 11 were actually the continuations of an older artistic trend which had started with “Nomad art.” What they meant by this was the art of the “nomadic tribes” which, according to a view now dismissed by historians, entered already fully organized into the Western Roman Empire during the last centuries of its existence.

In this section, Deleuze and Guattari began by paying homage to Henri Maldiney (1912-2013), who was Deleuze’s senior colleague at the University of Lyon in the 1960s, and to his work on the Austrian art historian Alois Riegl (1858-1905), especially on his famous book *Late Roman Art Industry* (1905). But, Maldiney’s reflection was part of a phenomenological approach to art which was quite foreign to that of Deleuze and Guattari. This is why they immediately declared that they would “set aside the criteria proposed by Riegl (then by Wilhelm Worringer, and more recently by Henri Maldiney), and take some risks ourselves, making free use of these notions” (p. 493). Had they read directly Riegl, they could have discovered—probably with great pleasure and benefit—that his view was in fact not driven by phenomenological considerations and that he first of all conceived of the history of art in Antiquity as a large folding process of the “visual plane” under the pressure of an “artistic will” for “visual space,” which also was at the origin of a subsequent unwrapping of this pleated visual space in modern art. But because Riegl had been diverted by Maldiney and presented as a pre-phenomenologist, they unfortunately dismissed his peculiar approach (for a detailed analysis of his work and of his debate with Schmarsow, see Vol. 3, Chap. 8).

Instead, using some of Riegl’s most famous concepts, but in a way contrary to their original meaning, they developed a rather surprising dualistic interpretation of “nomadic art.” First, the latter was based, according to them, on “‘close-range’ vision, as distinguished from long-distance vision.” Second, consistently with this first aspect, it pertained to “‘tactile,’ or rather ‘haptic’ space, as distinguished from optical space” (p. 492). In other words, nomad art, which principally concerned jewelry, textile and domestic objects, was reflecting the consubstantial relation of the nomad groups to the smooth space, as opposed to the Roman and Greek art, which by contrast

would reflect the striated space instituted by the City-State. Nomad art substituted the Greek and Roman “long-distance vision” and “optical space” with “close-range vision” and “haptic space.”

It seems to us that the Smooth is both the object of a close vision par excellence and the element of a haptic space (which may be as much visual or auditory as tactile). The Striated, on the contrary, relates to a more distant vision, and a more optical space—although the eye in turn is not the only organ to have this capacity. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 493)

The two most important traits of this type of art were that it was based on “continuous variation” and that it dismissed any ordered “ambient space.”

The first aspect of the haptic, smooth space of close vision is that its orientations, landmarks, and linkages are in continuous variation; it operates step by step. Examples are the desert, steppe, ice, and sea, local spaces of pure connection. [...] The interlinkages do not imply an ambient space in which the multiplicity would be immersed and which would make distances invariant; rather, they are constituted according to ordered differences that give rise to intrinsic variations in the division of a single distance. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 493)

“Nomad art” operated through “an infinite succession of linkages and changes in direction.” It was therefore one of the best visual and haptic equivalent of the “becoming itself,” of the “process” in its purest form, a “local absolute.”

There exists a nomadic absolute, as a local integration moving from part to part and constituting smooth space in an infinite succession of linkages and changes in direction. It is an absolute that is one with becoming itself, with process. It is the absolute of passage, which in nomad art merges with its manifestation. Here the absolute is local, precisely because place is not delimited. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 494)

By contrast, the art of the City-State supposed a striated space, that is to say, “the Encompassing Element,” the metric and homogeneous background “against which the relative outline or forms appears.” It was consistent with the Platonic definition of the notion of form as well measured, immobile and everlasting.

If we now turn to the striated and optical space of long-distance vision, we see that the relative global that characterizes that space also requires the absolute, but in an entirely different way. The absolute is now the horizon or background, in other words, the Encompassing Element without which nothing would be global or englobed. It is against this background that the relative outline or form appears. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 494)

Riegl, Worringer or Maldiney therefore rightly emphasized the development “in Greek art (then in Byzantine art, and up to the Renaissance)” of “an optical space merging background with form, setting up an interference between the planes, conquering depth, working with cubic or voluminous extension, organizing perspective, and playing on relief and shadow, light and color” (p. 495). But at the same time, they mistakenly confused the tactile or haptic space they observed in the Egyptian art with the original haptic space which existed only in nomad art. The so-called Egyptian “haptic space” was actually the first form of “striated space” which would later develop “from empires to city-states, or evolved empires.”

This perhaps explains for us the ambiguity of the excellent analyses by Riegl, Worringer, and Maldiney. They approach haptic space under the imperial conditions of Egyptian art. They define it as the presence of a horizon-background; the reduction of space to the plane (vertical and horizontal, height and width); and the rectilinear outline enclosing individuality and withdrawing it from change. Like the pyramid-form, every side a plane surface, against the background of the immobile desert. [...] Thus at the very beginning they encounter the haptic at a point of mutation, in conditions under which it already serves to striate space. The optical makes that striation tighter and more perfect, or rather tight and perfect in a different way (it is not associated with the same “artistic will”). Everything occurs in a striated space that goes from empires to city-states, or evolved empires. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 495)

Likewise, Wilhelm Worringer (1881-1965) in *Abstraction and Empathy* (1908), *Form in the Gothic* (1911) and *Ägyptische Kunst. Probleme ihrer Wertung* (1927) rightly accorded “fundamental importance to the abstract line, seeing it as the very beginning of art or the first expression of an artistic will.” But at the same time, he erroneously derived the “abstract line” typical of nomad and Gothic art from Egyptian art. This was a sheer inversion of priority due to the persistence of an obsolete historicist perspective inherited from Riegl. In its true nature, “the abstract line [was] fundamentally ‘Gothic,’ or rather, nomadic.”

It is Worringer who accorded fundamental importance to the abstract line, seeing it as the very beginning of art or the first expression of an artistic will. Art as abstract machine. Once again, it will doubtless be our inclination to voice in advance the same objections: for Worringer, the abstract line seems to make its first appearance in the crystalline or geometrical imperial Egyptian form, the most rectilinear of forms possible. It is only afterward that it assumes a particular avatar, constituting the “Gothic or Northern line” understood very broadly. For us, on the other hand, the abstract line is fundamentally “Gothic,” or rather, nomadic, not rectilinear. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 496)

In fact, one could add, as the great French anthropologist and paleontologist Leroi-Gourhan (1911-1986) demonstrated in his epoch-making book *Gesture and Speech* (1964-1965), the very first “lines” designed by human beings were not Egyptian but prehistorical. Moreover, they were not means used to overcome “a feeling of anxiety” through “striation,” but were in themselves “affect[s] of smooth spaces.” Surprisingly, Deleuze and Guattari noted Worringer’s double mistake but they did not cite Leroi-Gourhan’s reflection on rhythmic inscriptions, whose second volume was however entirely devoted to *Memory and Rhythms*. While he focused his attention on the repetition of parallel lines, they only used his remarks to advocate the idea that art was born through abstraction, forgetting the link, decisive for Leroi-Gourhan, between the latter and rhythm.

The abstract line is the affect of smooth spaces, not a feeling of anxiety that calls forth striation. Furthermore, although it is true that art begins only with the abstract line, the reason is not, as Worringer says, that the rectilinear is the first means of breaking with the nonaesthetic imitation of nature upon which the prehistoric, savage, and childish supposedly depend, lacking, as he thinks they do, a “will to art.” On the contrary, if prehistoric art is fully art it is precisely because it manipulates the abstract, though nonrectilinear, line: “Primitive art begins with the abstract, and even the prefigurative.... Art is abstract from the outset, and at its origin could not have been otherwise.” (quote from Leroi-Gourhan, 1964-1965, Vol. 2, p. 220-221). (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 497)

As in the case of the “haptic space,” the “abstract line” of the nomad had been tamed by the State. It had been converted into a more concrete form deprived of its fundamental freedom. But it was nevertheless the original phenomenon, “as much because of its historical abstraction as its prehistoric dating.”

That is why we believe that the different major types of imperial lines—the Egyptian rectilinear line, the Assyrian (or Greek) organic line, the supraphenomenal, encompassing Chinese line—convert the abstract line, rend it from its smooth space, and accord it concrete values. [...] The abstract line is at the beginning as much because of its historical abstraction as its prehistoric dating. It is therefore a part of the originality or irreducibility of nomad art, even when there is reciprocal interaction, influence, and confrontation with the imperial lines of sedentary art. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 497)

More generally, according to Deleuze and Guattari, Riegl, Worringer or Maldiney would remain within the same theoretical framework based on the supremacy of State art, whereas they advocated, for their part, to start considering all art from the viewpoint of nomad art which, in fact, was significantly repressed or downplayed by academic art historians.

It is not by chance that Riegl tends to eliminate the specific factors of nomad or even barbarian art; or that Worringer, when he introduces the idea of Gothic art in the broadest sense, relates it on the one hand to the Germanic and Celtic migrations of the North, and on the other to the empires of the East. But between the two were the nomads, who are reducible neither to empires they confronted nor the migrations they triggered. The Goths themselves were nomads of the steppe, and with the Sarmatians and Huns were an essential vector of communication between the East and the North, a factor irreducible to either of these two dimensions. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 495)

Although Deleuze and Guattari’s analysis made it possible to reassess a dimension of art that is too often underestimated, it led to a new dualism opposing nomad and state art that was utterly foreign to most of the testimonies of artists concerning their practice. Like Boulez, these mostly reject this kind of simplistic divisions. Very significant examples of this difference between the point of view of those who practice art and that of the many philosophers who only comment on it are provided to us by the discussions led by some of the most important poets of the 19th century (Baudelaire, Hopkins, Mallarmé) concerning the relationship between traditional metric poetry and the new forms of

poetry like “poetic prose,” “sprung rhythm” and “free verse” (for details see Vol. 2, Chap. 8).

[Next chapter](#)