

RHYTHM

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It. *Ritmo*; Fr. *Rythme*; Germ. *Rhythmus*; Span. *Ritmo*. The term comes from the Greek *ruthmós* (ῥυθμός, from ῥέω, 'to flow'). Its original use goes back to atomistic philosophy, where ῥυθμὸς designated the path atoms take within the void determining the shape of the emerging aggregate. According to the French linguist Émile Benveniste, atomistic rhythm should be understood as "a particular manner of flowing" applicable to "the pattern of a fluid element, of a letter arbitrarily shaped, of a robe which one arranges at one's will, of a particular state of character or mood" (1971: 286). Plato offered a related and very influential definition of rhythm as "order [τάξις] in movement [κίνησις]" (*Laws* 664e-665a). This conceptualization stresses the tension that constrains the origin of movement to the point of organizing it as it unfolds in time and space (Serra 2009). Aristotle's pupil Aristoxenus (354-300 BC) provided a more constrained definition of rhythm as "something arranging the rhythmized object in a certain way or in another way and making it thus or so in respect to time intervals" (Marchetti 2009: 65). This notion of rhythm is based explicitly on time and number and has little to do with pre-Socratic considerations of rhythm (Barletta 2020: 38).

THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

The current debate on aesthetic rhythm will be divided into two main groups: (A) pervasive and encompassing theories of rhythm that explore the connections between human and natural rhythms, and (B) theories focused on measurable and divisible aspects of rhythm that emphasize its connections with order and repetition.

(A) Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) developed an account of rhythm clearly influenced by his training as classical philologist. In *The Gay Science* [*Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*] (1887), he claims that "rhythm is a compulsion; it engenders an unconquerable desire to yield, to join in; not only the stride of the feet but also the soul itself gives in to the beat –probably also, one inferred, the souls of the gods!" ([1887] 2001: 84). According to Elaine P. Miller (1999), Nietzsche regarded rhythm as a heterogeneous phenomenon consisting of two aspects that often interact. On the one hand, there is a repetitive time-rhythmic component; on the other hand, a more barbaric affect-rhythmic side that is connected to the rhythms of

nature. Nietzsche's argues that humanity in general, and artists in particular, have attempted to impose a certain degree of order upon the original raw rhythmicity that we all carry within ourselves, "to take advantage of that elemental overpowering force that humans experience in themselves when listening to music" ([1887] 2001: 84).

The American pragmatist John Dewey (1859-1952) offered a comprehensive account of rhythm in his book *Art as Experience* (1934). He argues that the existence of rhythms in nature is a precondition for the aesthetic aspects of general experience and for the existence of the artistic form. He defines rhythm as a "ordered variation of manifestation of energy" ([1934] 1980: 170). This has nothing to do with repetition. In fact, Dewey argues, "[r]epetition of uniform units at uniform intervals is not only not rhythmic but is opposed to the experience of rhythm" ([1934] 1980: 174). Natural rhythms such as the phases of the moon, the turning and returning of seasons, the tides but also shorter ones such as ponds moving in ripples or the waving of branches in the wind are rhythmic because they present an order that emerges from opposing forces engendering different kinds of variation. For Dewey, these natural rhythms grabbed our ancestors' attention and constrained their habits while also stimulating their imagination. Humanity had to understand and, to a certain degree, anticipate these natural rhythms. The more humanity explored, observed, and came to appreciate the rhythms of nature, the more human beings realized how to condense these rhythms to convey specific dynamics, emotions, and qualities to experience in sociocultural practices through rituals and objects. The rhythms of nature were the raw materials with which humanity started making art. For Dewey, "rhythm is a universal scheme of existence, underlying all realization of order in change, it pervades all the arts, literary, musical, plastic and architectural, as well as the dance" ([1934] 1980: 156).

Susanne Langer (1895-1985) has also worked on an aesthetic notion of rhythm. In her book *Feeling and Form* (1953), she claims that "rhythm is the setting-up of new tensions by the resolution of former ones" (1953: 127). She attaches the highest importance to rhythm, because "[t]he most characteristic principle of vital activity is rhythm. All life is rhythmic" (1953: 126). For this reason, even if Langer usually refers to rhythm in music, she argues that the understanding of rhythm as "the semblance of life [...] makes that term literally applicable to spatial and temporal forms" (1953: 64). As was the case with Dewey, Langer suggests that when we think of rhythm as repetition we are being influenced by our first-hand experience of respiratory and cardiac regular patterns: "the obviousness of these repetitions has caused people to regard them as the essence of rhythm, which they are not. The ticking of a clock is repetitious and regular, but not in itself rhythmic" (1953: 126).

(B) Contemporary aesthetic research, particularly from the so-called analytic perspective, has often focused on studying rhythm in those arts that directly involve duration and temporality – e.g., dance, music, poetry. Nonetheless, even in these cases, this is often regarded as an underexplored topic (Cheyne, Hamilton, and Paddison 2019: 1). In the musicological literature, Roger Scruton's metaphorical theory is among the most relevant contributions to the field. Scruton argues that "rhythm is something more than an experience of metrical structure" because "[t]o hear rhythm is to hear a kind of animation" between beats that "bring each other into being, respond to one another, and breathe with a common life", which

happens “when our own life speaks to us through the sound” (1997: 35-36). In other words, when we say of a rhythm that it moves in space, what we are doing is projecting metaphors of movement into our experience, because hearing music is hearing “unreal movement in imaginary space” (1997: 239). Malcolm Budd opposes this theory and claims that movement is an inessential, metaphorical, and eliminable feature of rhythm experience. According to Budd: “to hear a rhythm, a melody, a chord, a cadence is in each case to be aware of a form of sounds or a form in sound, and each form can be perceived without anything else being present to or grasped or thought of by the mind than sounds that are experienced in that form” (1985: ix). Another relevant account of rhythm is Andy Hamilton’s dynamic theory. He opposes both Budd’s static account and Scruton’s metaphorical theory of rhythm. For Hamilton, “rhythm is order within human bodily movement or movement-in-sound” (2010: 27). This definition, clearly indebted to Plato, presents rhythm as a phenomenon limited by kinetic chaos and kinetic continuum, but the gradations between these two extremes “form a continuum, and in some cases it will be undecidable whether rhythm is present or not” (2010: 28).

Accounts of rhythm in dance focus on the role of movement. For Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, rhythm is “first and foremost the result of qualities inherent in movement, specifically its tensional and projectional qualities” (2005). By tensional and projectional qualities, she refers respectively to “the intensity or degree of force of the movement” and “the manner in which force is released”. The way in which these qualities shift and change in the course of a sequence gives rise to a particular rhythm pattern. A more concise definition of rhythm in dance is that of Aili Bresnahan, who considers that it “refers to a regular, repeated pattern of beats and emphasis in movement” (2019: 91).

There has been attempts to apply some of these concepts of rhythm based on order and repetition to visual arts. Even if most researchers agree on the fact that viewing a picture takes place in time, the most popular perspective in analytic aesthetics, in contrast to the theories of philosophers such as Dewey and Langer, is that visual arts do not afford experiences with a sufficiently ordered temporal structure to have rhythm (Gaiger 2019).

NEW DEVELOPMENTS AND OPEN QUESTIONS

In recent years, there have been proposals that have brought new terms to the aesthetics of rhythm: entrainment and attunement. Entrainment can be defined as the process whereby two or more oscillatory processes interact with each other in a unidirectional or reciprocal way that leads toward a coordinated state in which the oscillatory periods become related. It has mostly been applied to discuss music. Justin London considers that “rhythmic entrainment is a dynamic form of ‘resonance’ between our sensorimotor systems and rhythms in our environment” (2019: 175), which makes part of an embodied response that “is active, not passive, as it causes the listener to interact with his or her auditory environment in a certain way” (2019: 176). Martin Clayton argues that we should also pay attention to interpersonal entrainment, because “[m]usical rhythm, then, depends on both endogenous rhythms and their expression in periodic actions, but also on a unique flexible capacity humans share for the mutual entrainment of such actions in joint action contexts” (2019: 189). He bases his affirmation on the empirically demonstrated “link between

entrainment and social effects, such as increased prosocial behavior, affinity and feelings of belonging to a group” (2019: 194).

Regarding entrainment and visual arts, Ingar Brinck contends that since “entrainment comes naturally and the inclination to entrain is strong and requires effort to control [...] [v]isitors to galleries and museums are likely to automatically entrain to the rhythm of any artwork that attracts the attention and match body or head orientation, posture, core affect, gaze, and/or state of arousal to it” (2018: 207). On the other hand, Gaiger argues that “[t]he capacity of entrainment [...] that plays such a central role in explaining our responses to musical rhythm seems to have no equivalent in relation to works of graphic art, and it is highly implausible to suggest that several viewers of the same painting could coordinate their actions in response to discernable rhythmic structure” (2019: 311).

The issue with entrainment is that, as in the case of order-based notions of rhythm, there seems to be some ontological tensions: what amount of repetition turns a pattern into a rhythm? What degree of coordination can be regarded as entrainment? The concept of attunement could be an alternative, or at least a complementary strategy, to advance a dynamic and embodied approach to aesthetic rhythm that regards it as a pervasive aesthetic aspect of experience. Attunement is the process by which two elements are brought into harmony, or the process by which something or someone becomes responsive to some relevant element. In an aesthetic context, attunement can be regarded as the quality of an experience where we perceive our actions, emotions, or thoughts as being shaped and shaping an interaction with the environment, in some cases owing to an underlying process of entrainment (Vara Sánchez forthcoming). In this regard, Shaun Gallagher has offered a new account of the aesthetic experience of the performer as a process of double attunement that is “one (unified) double attunement to what is happening and to how she is performing” (2021: 136). In philosophy of mind and cognitive sciences, the notion of attunement has been successfully applied to discuss skillful engagements with the environment (Bruineberg, Rietveld 2014). There could be scope for combining these perspectives.

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