

Seeing Things, Feeling Rhythm

Daniele Barbieri

Accademia di Belle Arti di Bologna

Rhythm is a form, albeit a particular form, characterised by iterativity¹. Like any form, it can be invested with meaning, both as regards the structure of the rhythmic cell and as regards the frequency of its repetition. Considered in this way, it is certainly addressable in traditional semiotic terms, and particularly in terms of semisymbolism.

However, the dimension in which rhythm normally appears, that of the background, tends to neutralise the components of meaning. It is always possible, of course, to recover them through the analyst's artificial attention ; but normal use tends to leave them, too, in the background, focusing rather on what is on the foreground, on what strikes the attention.

In these pages I would like to explore the semiotic specificity of the rhythmic dimension, in particular as it differentiates from the phenomena that we traditionally consider linked to the field of meaning.

¹ We are far away from the definition of rhythm as *form of flow* that is given by H. Meschonnic in *Critique du rythme. Anthropologie historique du langage* (Lagrasse, Verdier, 1982), a definition that he arbitrarily generalizes starting from the philological reconstruction of Benveniste in *Problems in General Linguistics* (Coral Gables, University of Miami Press, 1971, pp. 281-288), but which nevertheless has correspondence in the musical field, where often the term *rhythm* is used roughly in this sense. In the following pages we will understand rhythm as *repetition*, as it is used in expressions such as “the rhythm of day and night”, “circadian rhythms”, “rhythmic obsession”... Meschonnic's book remains undoubtedly interesting (beyond its poorly documented critiques of semiotics) but generally deals with a theme that is only partially overlapping with ours.

1. Tension and tendence

A first observation, still of an introductory nature, concerns the relationship between rhythm and tension. The field of rhythm is different from the field of tension. There is perhaps tension as long as the rhythm is instantiating itself, that is, the rhythmic cell is appearing for the first time or it is starting to repeat itself. But then the tension disappears : the rhythm is based, in itself, on the satisfied *tendence*. When the tendence is not satisfied, the rhythm breaks down and *tension* comes into play — but in this case we are no longer faced with a rhythm, that is, no longer faced with that specific form, but with its disappearance or alteration, a fact certainly significant, certainly worthy of attention, certainly in the foreground. The rupture of rhythm is therefore also a form, which can be analysed semisymbolically ; but it is no longer rhythm in the strict sense.

2. Cognition and comparticipation

By systematically contrasting a series of key notions of Western thought with another series of Chinese thought, François Jullien compares two attitudes, which he calls *cognition* and *connivance*². Western thought privileges the former, Chinese thought the latter. But it is not that one characterises Westerners in an exclusive way and the other the Chinese : these attitudes characterise in general the interaction of man with the world, and the difference lies in the priority accorded by each of the two systems of thought. Semiotics, in general, was no exception to the tendency of Western thought, however, essentially qualifying itself as a discipline of the cognitive side³.

To understand what *connivance* is, it is necessary to take a step back and talk about *Stimmung*. *Stimmung* is, in German, the chord, or the tuning, but it is also the mood, the atmosphere ; in economics even the trend. In the studies on orality and literacy it was used for the first time (as far as I know) by W. Ong⁴. We will use this word in the following pages to indicate the phenomena of attunement, such as when the strings of a musical instrument vibrate in sympathy, as when the dancer is tuned to those around him/her through music, as when participating in a well-known rite. We will also talk about *comparticipation* when the *Stimmung* involves subjects, and *connivance* (following Jullien) when one is aware of one's own *comparticipation*⁵ (following the attitude of Chinese thinkers). In the following pages, therefore, the words *Stimmung* and *comparticipation* will be used substantially as synonyms, while *connivance* will refer to a composite attitude : the cognition of a *comparticipation*.

2 Fr. Jullien, *De l'Être au Vivre. Lexique euro-chinois de la pensée*, Paris, Gallimard, 2015, pp. 107-114.

3 Languages, and representation, are among the main traditional themes of semiotics. They have been explored mainly for their cognitive properties. The concept itself of *meaning* is a cognitive one.

4 W. Ong, *The Presence of the Word*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1967. It. tr. *La presenza della parola*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1970, p. 146.

5 The whole D. Barbieri, *Testo e processo. Pratica di analisi e teoria di una semiotica processuale* (Bologna, Esculapio, 2020) deals with these themes. See it for a more detailed approach.

It is important to understand the fundamental link between the notion of comparticipation and the dimension of doing, because comparticipating is still a doing. In Charles Sanders Peirce's pragmatist perspective, doing is certainly already a semiotic activity : the world is in any case *interpreted* by doing, regardless of whether this is mediated by knowing⁶. Even the determined action — and certainly not attributable to a subject of the will — of a stream that digs its own course can be understood as an act of interpretation, since the stream is preparing a *habit*, or a disposition to a certain doing ; and the *habit*, for Peirce, is in any case the final interpretant of a sign⁷.

Comparticipation does not need cognition to exist, nor vice versa ; nevertheless, as we will see shortly, there are comparticipations based on cognitive elements (such as eminent rhythms⁸) and cognitions based on comparticipated elements (such as connivance). Although these are different phenomena, they are always deeply intertwined.

3. Rhythm and attention

Following the rhythm is not necessarily a conscious phenomenon. Sometimes we realise that our foot is autonomously beating the tempo of the music that is in the air. When we read poetry, we pay attention to the meaning of the words, not to the prosodic rhythm or to the return of the rhymes, which are also acting on us : symptomatic is the fact that we become aware of these recurrences only when they happen to break. When we read comics, we do not count the panels present on a page, or along which a scene develops. The analytical attention of the critic is therefore different from that of the normal user, and its analyticity also consists in bringing to the attention, that is, on the foreground, what in normal use remains in the background.

One of the main difficulties in addressing the issue of rhythm is that rhythms are essentially background phenomena. When you focus them, bringing them to the foreground, they can become something different. A focused repetition, in fact, typically induces *saturation* effects that a background repetition, i.e. a rhythm, does not induce at all. As Leonard Meyer already noted, speaking of music, the foreground is the place of development, and an obsessive return of the same induces tension because development appears blocked : this is the effect we call *saturation*⁹. In other words, the foreground is the dimension from which we expect a series of cognitive acquisitions that lead us to an overall understanding of the text (or, in general, of the situation) ; or, if one prefers, the foreground is the dimension on which sense is organised, starting from the assumptions reaffirmed by the background : on the foreground the repetition will therefore

6 For details, see D. Barbieri, *op. cit.*, pp. 5-38.

7 See C.S. Peirce, *Collected Papers*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA), 5.492.

8 See below paragraph 5, or D. Barbieri, *Nel corso del testo. Una teoria della tensione e del ritmo*, Milano, Bompiani, 2004, pp. 78-81.

9 L. Meyer, *Emotion and Meaning in Music*, Chicago & London, The University of Chicago Press, 1956, p. 135.

appear as a delay, which perhaps we will be able to cognitively recover in a more abstract way, but perhaps not, and in any case not immediately.

In general, what by analyzing the background we identify as *tendence* (the expectation, soon satisfied, of something that is about to arrive) can be transformed into *tension* (the expectation of something that is about to arrive, that is not yet finding satisfaction, and that it is not said that it will go to find it) when it is transferred to the foreground. The *tendence* characterises the dimension of the *known*, of what we can tune in because it goes as expected ; *tension* characterises the dimension of the *new*, what it is necessary to understand in order to continue and arrive happily to the end.

From this point of view, an aesthetic text (a story, a poem, a piece of music, etc.) always configures a path ready for our comprehension activity ; and this clearly distinguishes it from a normal fragment of the world, with which we can perhaps still feel in tune and proceed to understand it successfully, but it was not created for this purpose. Aesthetic texts too are fragments of the world, but they are also organised in order to produce a happy experience for the user, even in cases where they force him to go through absolutely dysphoric phases. The happiness of this experience is that of attunement and understanding, even when they occur in the face of a tragedy : the story of *Œdipus Rex* is certainly not a happy one, and far from happily ending ; but the experience of the spectator who crosses and participates in it is truly happy, because he/she can share and understand deep and terrible emotions without really suffering the consequences, but rather almost dancing on the wings of the narrative and discursive rhythms of the text (together with all the other rhythms that may be at stake).

4. Dialectic of repetition

Thus we find ourselves with two series of coordinated notions, although not completely overlapping : on the one hand *comparticipation* (or *Stimmung*), *background*, *known*, *tendence* ; on the other, *cognition*, *foreground*, *new*, *tension*. The fruition experience always takes place on both dimensions, and an analytical attention that brings the rhythms to the foreground (in order to observe them) must not forget their background nature. But it must also be ready to understand when the same or similar repetition is autonomously changing levels, and this understanding is not necessarily so simple.

For example, we know that the ancient Germanic metric is accentuative-alliterative : the same number of main accents occurs in each verse, but since this is not a sufficiently strong condition of unity, the unity of the verse is also reaffirmed by the use of alliterations¹⁰. The insistence on alliteration in Germanic poetry is therefore a rhythmic phenomenon, and therefore a background one, which will not normally be focused, and will not produce saturation : the ten-

¹⁰ See M. Gasparov, *Očerk istorii evropeiskovo sticha*, Moskva, Izdatel'stvo Nauka, 1989. Tr. it. *Storia del verso europeo*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1993, pp. 81-85.

dency to repeat the alliterate consonant will be happily respected within each specific line. Italian metric, on the other hand, is syllabic, and does not in itself require alliterations : consequently, the obsessive recurrence of a consonant with alliterating function will create an unbalanced situation (of saturation), with tension towards the return of a normal variety of consonants — and this tension can be cognitively exploited, producing particular emotional states in the user (perhaps to the advantage of a further rhythmic level, which we will discuss below). In this case the difference between the two situations is clear, but the opposition has not in any case the same evidence, and it will not always be easy for the analyst to decide whether a certain system of repetitions should be considered background (i.e. known, expected, and therefore substantially not significant for development purposes) or foreground (i.e. new, unexpected, and therefore significant)¹¹.

Furthermore, the repetition can sometimes move from the background to the foreground, or go back from it. In music it is easy to identify phenomena of this type : in a jazz or rock piece it may happen that the melodic instruments at a certain point become silent and the underlying obstinate of the bass and drums emerge. That rhythm was present even before this happened, but then it was a simple background, as crucial as unheard ; while now it is in the foreground, and, if it lasts too long, the wait for the resumption of the melody becomes stronger and stronger, the situation more and more tense. When the melody resumes, the bass line returns to the background, and disappears from attention. However, it does not disappear from perception, still being the rhythmic base on which the *Stimmung* rests.

The dialectic between known and the new, between background and foreground, between tendence and tension, between comparticipation and cognition, is crucial for any aesthetic text. Repetition, and therefore rhythm, is one of the fundamental ways to produce the background. Of course it is not the only one : there are also non-iterative procedural forms to which we adhere, and which also allow the *Stimmung*. When we participate in a well-known rite¹², for instance, we agree to it even without repetition. But it is no coincidence that repetition also characterizes many ritual phenomena, because it still facilitates comparticipation.

11 In passing, it can be observed that this position strongly limits the scope of the so called *principle of parallelism* (projection of the paradigmatic on the syntagmatic, stated by R. Jakobson ; see *Essais de linguistique générale*, Paris, Minuit, 1963, p. 205 and R. Jakobson-C. Lévi-Strauss, “Les Chats’ de Charles Baudelaire”, *L’homme. Revue française d’anthropologie*, 2-1, 1962). According to Jakobson, in fact, a parallelism on the level of manifestation entails a similar parallelism on that of meaning, so that the presence of the rhyme creates implicit semantic links between the words that form it. In our perspective this will be true only in those cases in which the rhyme does not constitute a rhythmic, background phenomenon in that context : if it has no perceptual emergence with respect to the background, the rhyme remains in the background, and its role, even semantic, is certainly different, and minor, than what it would have if emerging on the foreground.

12 See also below, paragraph 8.

5. Passages of level

We must not think of comparticipation and cognition as separate worlds. They are different phenomena, but one is always based on the other, even if I don't know how much one can be defined as fundamental to the detriment of the other. It is true, for example, on the one hand, that in order to *feel the rhythm* of the panel sequence in comics, one must have *recognised* the white spaces that separate them, and therefore some cognitive level is already in motion (although not focused by attention) ; but it is also true, on the other hand, that the *Stimmung* is also a physical phenomenon that does not need the living to be produced (as when it occurs between two strings of the same musical instrument), and one cannot exclude that at some level something similar is also produced in us — even going so far as to hypothesise that knowledge itself is a consequence of this. Such a dispute on the foundation, nevertheless, would probably be sterile. More interesting, it seems to me, is to proceed in the opposite direction, upwards, observing how every cognitive acquisition can become, in the appropriate situations, a reason for comparticipation (perhaps rhythmic), and also observing how every rhythmic configuration (and in general every background form) can be brought to attention, becoming significant, and therefore re-entering the cognitive dimension. This mechanism can be repeated on numerous levels, virtually endless.

For example, in a piece of cultured music, such as a movement of a Beethovenian symphony, there are certainly basic rhythms, starting from the simple metric pulsation on the basis of which, perhaps, our foot beats time even without we notice it. But there are also much more complex recurrence systems : the concept of *thematic development*, crucial for the music of the time, implies that the listener must understand, step by step, the successive transformations of the motifs, through expectations, surprises, satisfactions, disillusions¹³. There is undoubtedly a strong cognitive component in Beethoven's music. But also the cognitive acquisitions can in turn delineate recurrences, and therefore rhythms. These rhythms constitute a new background layer, because they are based on the recurrence of cognitions. Our attention as listeners is not directed to them, but to the musical phenomena to be understood. And yet, these too are rhythms, or recurrences, on which it will be possible to play : if *development* stops, or accelerates, we perceive a rhythmic variation, and the rhythm itself advances towards the foreground, towards the dimension of the new, of the meaningful.

Likewise, in a narration, there are basic rhythms. If the narration is verbal, there is the recurrence of words, propositions, periods. If the story is in comics, there is the recurrence of figures, panels, pages (as graphic organisms). And so on. But the understanding of the story, which is certainly a cognitive phenomenon, inevitably ends up producing what we perceive as *relief* moments (the crucial events of a narrative, or even the crucial events in the understanding of the overall meaning), and the sequence of the relief moments builds up a

¹³ See the whole L. Meyer, *Emotion and Meaning in Music*, *op. cit.*

rhythm, which can, in turn, speed up or slow down. The rhythms at this level, which we have called *eminent rhythms*¹⁴, are what we typically refer to when we use expressions such as “an overwhelming rhythm”, “rhythm drop”, “crescendo” (or *climax*), “calando” etc.

6. Frontal and immersive

There is another important opposition that should be placed aside with those already listed. The *frontal / immersive* opposition qualifies the difference between a way of relating to the world that tends to be similar to that of sight, classically cognitive, through which we are *faced with* (*in front of*) the percept, and a way that tends to be similar to that of hearing, classically comparticipatory, through which we are *immersed* in the percept. Of course, even if the visual perception tends to be frontal and the sound perception tends to be immersive, things can then manifest differently case by case : we can immerse ourselves in the vision of a landscape (as the Chinese tradition teaches us according to F. Jullien¹⁵), and we can listen to the music in a frontal way (as in the structural listening theorised by Theodor Adorno¹⁶). In this dichotomy, rhythm is certainly immersive, and has a comparticipatory character much more than a cognitive / interpretative / frontal one.

The first function of rhythm is to immerse us in the *Stimmung*, to make us go in time, and in this way to make comparticipation with others possible. This immersive nature of rhythm is therefore particularly evident in sound phenomena (such as music and poetry), which generally have strong immersive components. But of course it is not excluded from visual phenomena, especially if they develop temporally (as in the case of audiovisuals), nor is it excluded from cognitive phenomena, which certainly can have their own rhythms¹⁷. In fact, the visual rhythms too work in the background, but they appear less immersive than the sound ones, and therefore less comparticipatory. It may be that the passage through the frontal (cognitive) dimension prevents or hinders certain comparticipatory dynamics. After all, even the rhythms of the content, more mediated by cognitive action, have less participatory intensity ; and perhaps this happens because cognitions can more easily follow different paths, and different meaning effects in different users can produce differences in rhythms.

14 In D. Barbieri, *Nel corso del testo. Una teoria della tensione e del ritmo*, op. cit., pp. 78-81.

15 In *Vivre de paysage, ou L'impensé de la raison*, Paris, Gallimard, 2014.

16 In *Der getrene Korrepetitor. Lehrschriften zur musikalischen Praxis*, Frankfurt am Main, Fischer Verlag, 1963. It. tr. *Il fido maestro sostituto. Studi sulla comunicazione della musica*, Torino, Einaudi, 1969, p. 102.

17 For this reason, the contagion mentioned by E. Landowski in *Passions sans nom* (Paris, PUF, 2004) is not a phenomenon that exclusively concerns bodies, although certainly the immersive dimension that naturally characterises sound situations favors the contagion and makes it potentially more intense. The contagion, in our terms, would only be the effect of a comparticipation. It can, in fact, also occur in the absence of the bodies of others (although perhaps with less force) : in the private listening to music or (even more weakly) in the private reading of poetry, the attunement with the rhythms involved is implicitly an attunement with other listeners or readers, who in different places and times do the same thing. This sense of comparticipation (albeit deferred) also contributes to the charm of the work. But see also, for other aspects of this same discourse, the final pages of this essay.

Like all known configurations, rhythms have a reassuring function, and therefore a virtually euphoric one. A work of art, such as a novel, a melodrama, a film, which tells a dramatic story based on a rhythmic tendency (as well as, of course, on its narrative structure, which is another known fundamental form) reassures us because in any case it inserts the drama into settled forms, somehow controlled. In the words of Jakobson (1963), the first and most fundamental function of rhythm is phatic; it guarantees contact, often with others who are coordinated with us in following it, or at least (in other cases) with the human, cultural dimension of what we are following¹⁸. In other words, rhythm, like everything known, is a marker of belonging to the community. Natural rhythms are too, since our community is not only human : even a natural rhythm appears to us as a recurring phenomenon, and therefore easily known, and therefore in any case comforting¹⁹, as it is more controllable in case of need.

In general, therefore, *you see things*, but *you feel rhythms*. And here the opposition between seeing and feeling is certainly the one between the frontal dimension and the immersive dimension, but also that between the new (to which we address ourselves with a cognitive attitude) and the known (with which the *Stimmung* can take place). When we get *to see* the rhythm, either the analyst's attitude is at stake, whose task is to see what is not normally seen, or something has changed and the repetition has risen on the foreground, losing the characteristics of the rhythm and acquiring those of the repetition on the foreground, with saturation effects.

7. Regularity

It is important to understand the nature of the regularity that instantiates a rhythm.

To have repetition, and therefore rhythm, we need a sufficiently identical cell that repeats itself with a sufficiently regular frequency. The vagueness of these two *sufficiently* is important. When we are on the beach of the sea, and we see the waves coming, we do not doubt that we are faced with a rhythmic phenomenon ; yet there is no wave equal to the other and yet the time interval that separates them is always different. This does not prevent us from perceiving recurrence and rhythm. However, if we used the time model of the waves as the basic pulsation for a piece of music, the effect would appear quite strange to us. Evidently, the value of *sufficiently* is not the same for the sea and for music. On the other hand, those who deal with music know well that its basic pulse is never really regular : indeed, often, the small difference between the pulse of a good drummer and that of an electronic drum makes us feel more alive a music made by human performers (and therefore slightly imperfect) compared

18 *Essais de linguistique générale*, op. cit.

19 I believe that, in general, the thymic dimension can also be related to the presence or absence of a tuning. A feeling of *Stimmung*, i.e. of harmony with the tendency of the world, is an euphoric feeling ; while the feeling of being out of tune is dysphoric. These feelings can be unconscious, and affect our behavior in a hidden way, but they can be aware too (connivance) and therefore thematised.

to computer-generated music, whose eventual pulsation irregularity is too small for us to perceive. If we pass from the field of music to that of poetry, the value of *sufficiently* involved changes again. Reading the *Divine Comedy* we easily perceive the rhythmic identity of the hendecasyllables, yet no one is alike, even only on a prosodic level. Giving for granted the identity of the number of syllables, which for the Italian metric is the basis for the verse, and some obligatory positions of the accents (10, and then either 4 or 6), everything else varies continuously. Despite this, we easily perceive the repetition of the lines, and even that of the trend of the accents in the individual lines. We add that even the common spoken language has its own rhythm, indeed each language has its own rhythm, with which we agree even before understanding the meaning of words ; but the regularities involved are even more loose than those of poetry : the prosodic rhythm in poetry (different language by language) is evidently based on that of the common language, making the identities of duration and rhythmic clause more rigorous.

Each rhythmic context, in short, defines the level of regularity and identity of the clause sufficient to perceive repetition as such, and in some cases these levels can really be very loose. I also believe that they are all the more loose the more we move away from the purely perceptive sphere and move towards rhythms on a cognitive and more abstract basis, where in particular the identity of the period becomes extremely uncertain²⁰. This observation goes in parallel with that, made in paragraph 6, on the lesser shared intensity of rhythms on a cognitive basis.

8. Rite

Understanding the importance of the Stimmung dimension, and therefore of the rhythms that in many cases make Stimmung possible, helps us to deepen some key notions.

The ritual, like the rhythm, is not a communicative activity in itself²¹. Of course it can happen that the phases of a rite, like everything, convey meaning, but the rite itself does not exist to convey a meaning. At least from this point of view, the semiotic functioning of the rite is not far from that of music. It is no coincidence that music itself is a frequent component of the ritual.

A rite is not a text, from which we can expect to convey a message. It is rather simply a regulated sequence of events, which — unlike music — are not necessarily punctuated by rhythmic phenomena. Participating in a ritual means already knowing the sequence, and consciously reproducing it with one's own action, coordinated with that of the other participants.

²⁰ But sea waves and the spoken language perhaps represent relevant counterexamples, of rhythms that are both perceptive and rather loose.

²¹ For many of my reflections on the rite, I am indebted to Roberto Tagliaferri, *La "magia" del rito. Saggi sulla questione rituale e liturgica* (Padova, Edizioni Messaggero, 2006) and several other books by the same author. But see also Roy A. Rappaport's fundamental study, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge UK, Cambridge University Press, 1999).

If with music the comparticipation is guaranteed by the common accord with a series of rhythms (an agreement facilitated by their iterative component) in the rite the comparticipation requires a cognitive competence, a know-how. In short, a rite must be learned ; and the only way for this to happen is to participate many times as a beginner, until the sequence of actions has become familiar to us.

Even if music can intervene in the rite, to facilitate the participation of the participants in the sequence of the requested actions, the comparticipation in the rite is always voluntary and conscious, as it is based on the explicit knowledge of the requested actions. In other words, comparticipation in a rite is always also connivance.

It is presumably to this conniving nature of participation in the rite that the close link between rite and religion (and between rite and power) is due. Those who participate in the rite are not only comparticipant, but also declare with their own participation that they are aware of what they are doing : not only are they part of the officiating community, but also a willing and aware part.

At this point, the symbolic nature of the rite turns out to be secondary — although not irrelevant. That the Christian Mass is a celebration of Christ's sacrifice, for example, certainly gives it greater value ; and yet the celebratory value of the rite exists apart from this. By actively participating, the faithful first of all declare with their own ritual gestures that they voluntarily join the community of believers ; and only secondly, since believers are believers insofar as they believe in Christ's sacrifice, does the rite publicly confirm the belief of each one.

By its very nature, the rite would therefore escape the dialectic between known and new that we have described so far. The rite is such, first of all, because it confirms itself. As a celebration, it is first of all a celebration of what is known, and therefore a reinforcement of the social rule against any deviations brought about by nature or by the individual subject. Analyzing a rite, not symbolic values should be sought in the first instance, but which shared social values are strengthened through shared and conniving action. These values will eventually have a further symbolic value, but this second level, although frequent, is not in itself necessary.

Rituals change over time, presumably, as shared social values change. The passage from Latin to the modern language in the Mass, decided by the Second Vatican Council, sanctions a de facto social and cultural transformation. For centuries, it was not considered a problem that the content of the words pronounced during the rite was incomprehensible to most people : formal adherence to the rite and its formulas was in fact considered a sufficient comparticipatory act. The passage of the liturgy to the modern language recognizes the social affirmation of an individual subject that could no longer be denied (Luther had arrived there four centuries earlier — and the resistance by the Catholic Church to change is certainly at least partly due to the difficulty in recognizing how right Luther could be) : nowadays it is also part of the rite to understand words ; and

the subject who participates in the rite is inevitably more conniving than before, as she/he is more aware of a comparticipation that has not, after all, changed.

In short, the transformation of the Mass goes in the direction of a general de-ritualisation of our society, increasingly made up of individual subjects and voluntary and conscious adhesions — the same direction of the Enlightenment and democracy. The ideal society suggested by this direction is one in which cognition completely replaces comparticipation, according to a basic scientist model.

Sociologists and anthropologists know well that this is a contemporary myth, which in turn justifies its own rites, and new models of comparticipation. At the limit, the rituals of a deritualised society can be reduced to very simple gestures, immediately filled with cognitive sense, at least in appearance. Think of the need to keep the conversation alive, in person, in writing or on social networks : you can say anything, as long as it is acceptable to the other and allows the conversation to continue. What matters here is the formalised act of participation, in which the comparticipation is manifested. And it is not certain that this comparticipation is really aware : the subject who performs it can very well focus on her/his cognitive contents, completely neglecting the comparticipatory component, which, however, is no less alive for this.

In this sense, therefore, the Jakobsonian *phatic function* would be nothing more than a rite reduced to a minimum dimension.

9. Beauty

The perception of beauty also seems to be linked to the sentiment of *Stimmung*. We perceive something as *beautiful* when it makes us feel connivance with the elements at play at the moment, whether it be a landscape²² or a work of art or a person's face or body.

Linking *beauty* to the sense of *Stimmung* means providing a description / definition that applies to both natural and artistic beauty. In all cases, a sense of comparticipation is built, and a connivance, which can now be a *Stimmung* with the world (the landscape, for example), now a real comparticipation with the trend of human feelings (a novel, for example) now even a comparticipation with a rational critique of the present (a conceptual work of art, from the Duchampian ready-mades onwards). We are not proposing here a criterion to distinguish what is beautiful from what is not. We propose the hypothesis that the perception of beauty is linked to the sensation of profound, presubjective harmony with something ; almost of identity, except that it is always an identity mediated by a *Stimmung* between a semiotic agent and a world trend.

In other words, beauty would be the sensation (cognitive, therefore) of a direct semiotic relationship with something, not mediated by the cognitive subject. Of course this something can also be the effect of a cognitive process, but once we have formed the image of it, beauty would be the feeling of the direct relation-

²² Like in Fr. Jullien, *op. cit.*

ship with it, and the cognitive process appears as solely functional to allow the Stimmung. Conversely, under normal conditions, a recognised Stimmung act is immediately reformulated in cognitive terms, that is, interpreted within a chain of finality. In order to have aesthetic awareness of the Stimmung, this finalisation must be put out of the game : in short, we must find ourselves in *the free play of the cognitive faculties* of which Kant speaks. The subject is no longer finalised : he/she is merely a witness to something that is happening independently of him/her, and which nevertheless concerns him/her. The subject has been suspended to momentarily become part of the world, but remains as a witness, and the beauty is this sudden feeling of harmony that the witness feels.

In order for this feeling of harmony to emerge, that is, for the feeling of beauty to emerge, the context must therefore be able to sufficiently exclude any cognitive-communicative purpose. As long as I interpret to know, I am deaf to beauty ; then maybe there is a moment when I suddenly recognize a harmony with something within me, and this tells me that “it’s okay”. We could say that beauty is a signal through which the world tells me “that’s okay”, a positive feedback, in short. But then would all the positive feedback be nice ? The great majority are trivial, obvious. The unexpectedly positive feedbacks are presumably nice. Even the finalised action (cognitive or not) needs confirmation : when this arrives we do not know more about the world, but we know that we are attuned, and through this we recognise our tendential euphoria.

In finding a piece of music beautiful, we certainly feel Stimmung with more rhythms at the same time. There is a basic regular pulsation, of a strongly immersive character, over which other systems of harmonic and melodic recurrences are grafted. But the more complex (the more cultured) the music, the more easily unpredictable situations appear in its progress, often in form of rhythmic ruptures at some level, requiring a cognitive action, that is, requiring understanding, interpretation, having to find meaning (not necessarily in the linguistic sense of the term). This process of moments of understanding is also articulated, and in turn constitutes a rhythm (an eminent rhythm) : a cognitive action is therefore paced, euphorically, on an underlying comparticipatory trend. This eminent rhythm also instances a Stimmung, particularly *human* as it is based on a particularly human cognitive activity. Thus, any interpretative difficulties encountered in the course of the text also end up contributing to an overall success. The experience of beauty is a happy experience, because it is the experience of success, at the completion of a cognitive path, perhaps even difficult ; but always accompanied by the comfort of a basic body Stimmung.

10. Laughter

Laughter is, in this perspective, a particularly complex phenomenon. Beauty, as we have seen, is fundamentally the awareness of a Stimmung with an object, which is accompanied by comparticipation with other subjects who live the same connivance. In this sense, in the phenomenon of beauty we have together the dissolution of the subject / object opposition, because they are tuned, and its

recomposition through the awareness of the tuning and the knowledge of the object. At a second level, we also have the dissolution of the opposition between different subjects, because they find themselves tuned, in comparticipation ; and the recomposition of this second opposition is possible (but not necessary) to the extent that the subject is aware of this level of comparticipation. In any case, the subject is *with* the object and *with* other subjects : beauty is therefore a universally inclusive phenomenon, which can potentially be shared with all subjects. All those who experience the same Stimmung with the object participate with me which am experiencing it.

Unlike beauty, laughing appears as an exclusionary and only partially inclusive phenomenon. We usually laugh *with* someone (who can't be *everyone*) and *against* something ; but this is a *usually* and not a *necessarily* : not so much because one can laugh alone as well, since in truth even when laughing alone there are potential partners in my laughter ; rather, because there is laughter that is not *against* something.

We must observe, first of all, that the subject, rather than *laughing*, is *taken up by laughter*. A voluntary laugh is a false laugh, it is the simulation of a laugh. The real laugh is the one that takes us independently of our will : of course we can voluntarily repress it, but not voluntarily produce it.

Unless repressed, true laughter is a manifest phenomenon, revealing to other subjects that we are laughing. Precisely for this reason it is possible to simulate it. This differentiates laughing from feeling beauty : aesthetic emotion, when experienced, can produce manifest effects (such as a sufficiently evident emotion) but can also produce effects that are not perceptible or very little perceptible to others. The feeling of beauty is fundamentally private, while laughter is inevitably public.

Both beauty and laughter are euphoric phenomena, but on the one hand we have a private euphoria and, on the other, a tendentially public one. In fact, the contagion capacity that laughter has is known : when we are in a group where everyone laughs, it is quite easy for us to find ourselves caught up in laughter, even without knowing the reason (if there is) for this laughing.

At this level, laughing is therefore certainly a phenomenon of comparticipation, accompanied by an awareness and a comparticipation of awareness itself. Laughing within a group where everyone laughs is to declare conniving with the group (where everyone, in turn, is doing the same). Holding back laughter in the same situation is therefore implicitly refusing to declare connivance with the group ; or, at the very least, not really being in comparticipation.

Note that since it is precisely the physical and rhythmic nature of laughter that produces comparticipation, it will inevitably be limited to those who can physically perceive the laugh itself. For this reason alone, the inclusiveness of laughing cannot be as universal as that of beauty.

There are rites based on shared laughter, in yoga as well as in Greco-Roman antiquity. In these cases, the celebrant can open the rite with a false laugh, that is, a voluntary, simulated laugh, counting on the contagion effect, which will

produce true laughter in the audience, which in turn will also make the celebrant's laugh true. Thus one will laugh for no reason ; but, even without reason, the repeated connivance of everybody with the group will end up strengthening the bonds of the group itself²³.

Much more often, however, a reason to laugh is present : one laughs — at least initially — at something. Here we are in the field of humor, comedy, sarcasm, irony : all those textual phenomena, in short, which are linked to the onset of some form of laughing. Laughing *at* something means laughing *against* something : the laughing group reaffirms its cohesion, its harmony, against an enemy. It could be human stupidity, or that of a single subject ; of the greed of the powerful, or that of anybody ; you can even laugh at death or at God. The object of derision is a typical cognitive object, against which the *Stimmung* is declared impossible ; and it is precisely on this shared opposition that the comparticulation of laughter is based.

Laughter, therefore, unlike beauty, strongly emphasizes the distance between subject and object, while canceling the distance between comparticulating (and conniving) subjects. While we laugh, we are one with those with whom we laugh ; but we are very different from what we are laughing at. As we said before, the comparticulation of beauty is potentially universal, as is its basic *Stimmung*, and thus the consequent effect of connivance. Laughing, on the other hand, defines the precise group of co-laughers through opposition to something or someone else. If beauty tends to be universal, laughing tends to be tribal : its manifest nature makes it a powerful tool for local unification.

Speaking of music and dance, it can be noted how their rhythmic nature favors *Stimmung* and collective comparticulation : you dance by moving your body in tune with the music, and since everyone does the same you find yourself in comparticulation. The rhythmic phenomenon is also present in laughter, but here it is not an external agent such as music that forms the basis for the *Stimmung* : in dance, we all agree with the music, which is external to us. In laughing, laughing itself is produced by us and constitutes the rhythm on which we get tuned : in laughing we are both musicians and dancers ; we participate in a kind of general jam session in which there are no listeners but the participants themselves. Unmotivated collective laughter, without an object of derision, therefore has in itself something of music or dance ; although it is probably stronger, more intense, because the rhythm and the physical impact of laughing are always particularly strong.

When this shared euphoric intensity is discharged onto an object of derision, the sense of separateness from that, of diversity, of contrast emerges with a force similar to that of connivance with the group of laughing. Laughing at that object together, our very strong unity can appear to us a sufficient reason to laugh at it, that is to oppose it : in short, the object is bad, criticizable, wrong, because it is precisely the shared recognition of its malignant nature that guarantees the eu-

23 About *le fou rire*, see E. Landowski, *Passions sans nom*, Paris, PUF, 2004, ch. 6.

phoria of laughing together. There is no longer a need for explanations or proofs : our happy unity against it is proof enough. A laughter, in short, will bury it.

11. Sex

How can something fundamentally non-cognitive such as sexual activity, making love, come within a fundamentally cognitive conception of man like the Occidental one ? Of course, its fundamentally non-cognitive nature does not prevent sex from having cognitive implications, i.e., from being in some way an instrument of knowledge. There are two people carrying out a coordinated and strongly rhythmic activity, and this certainly favors mutual knowledge ; but this is only a side effect (however important it may be) of the need for a profound *Stimmung*, still upstream of the comparticipation — and therefore still upstream of the subjects.

Making love requires mutual tuning that cannot be based on an external medium, as happens with music for dance. There is probably a ritual component at play, but the amount of physical pleasure that is generated is unmatched in any existing ritual. The orgasm to which the couple tends is an overwhelming experience, which therefore has elements in common with the sacred and the sublime, and, just like them, temporarily suspends the subject ; however, it does not threaten to destroy it, and it would rather resemble the shared experience of beauty if we could emphasise its connivance, and therefore cognitive, aspects more than is possible. Furthermore, the pleasure of making love is produced by the subjects themselves, and by their own physical activity with reciprocal effect. In this respect, making love is rather like laughing together, without however its cognitive component of laughing at something or someone ; it would therefore, if anything, resemble ritual laughter, which, however, lacks both physical pleasure and the quasi-sublime component of orgasm.

In making love, lovers progressively suspend their subjectivity, until it is time to banish it. Physical pleasure comes to the subject from her/his own body and not from her/himself, through coordinated action with the other body. Even in masturbation, the path has characteristics of this type, because a rhythmic action produced on one's body, intended as an instrument, makes the subject perceive a pleasure that would otherwise not reach her/him. In short, even in solitary sex the subject progressively suspends her/his own subjectivity, up to banishing it for a moment ; but when this happens in a couple, and through mutual action, there is comparticipation of an experience in which everything proceeds from interaction and nothing from external or pre-established trends.

In this sense, a fusion effect of unparalleled intensity can be produced, because the subjects find themselves coordinated in a progressive suspension in which each other's bodies are the only elements in play. Before and after the crucial phases there is connivance, because there are the subjects, but this fades in comparticipation with the fading of the subjects, to the point of becoming simple *Stimmung*, to which the subject witnesses, almost from the outside.

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Résumé : Cet article porte sur divers problèmes concernant l’approche sémiotique du rythme, phénomène dont le propre est d’intervenir en arrière-plan, tandis que l’attention du sujet est orientée vers d’autres phénomènes signifiants. Dans l’opposition entre *coparticipation* et *cognition*, en gros homologable à la catégorie *connu / nouveau*, le rythme se place toujours du côté du premier terme. Coparticipation et cognition interagissent étroitement à divers niveaux et les mêmes structures itératives peuvent souvent accéder au premier plan, en produisant alors des effets de *saturation*, avec les tensions qui en découlent. Sans altérer les caractéristiques du rythme, la montée au premier plan transforme du tout au tout le rôle de la répétition. Nous examinons les modalités de cette transformation, les conditions dans lesquelles la répétition peut être reconnue comme telle et les fonctions que remplit le rythme dans des activités comme le rituel, la contemplation esthétique, le rire et l’acte sexuel.

Resumo : Este artigo aborda algumas questões relativas à semiótica do ritmo considerado enquanto um fenômeno que intervém num plano de fundo e, conseqüentemente, caracterizado pelo fato de que ao ele entrar em jogo a atenção do sujeito está focada em outro aspeto. Partindo da oposição *coparticipação / cognição*, aproximativamente superponível à categoria *conhecido / novo*, os ritmos são sempre colocados no primeiro lado. Mas *coparticipação* e *cognição* interagem em vários níveis, e as mesmas estruturas iterativas podem frequentemente acessar o primeiro plano, gerando então efeitos de *saturação*, com as conseqüentes tensões. Mantendo as características do ritmo, a ascensão ao primeiro plano transforma completamente o papel

da repetição. Discutimos as modalidades dessa transformação, os requisitos que permitem que a repetição seja reconhecida como tal e os papéis que os ritmos desempenham em diferentes atividades como ritual, contemplação estética, riso e atividade sexual.

Abstract : This paper addresses some issues concerning a semiotic approach to rhythm, a phenomenon characterised by its background nature and, consequently, by the fact that it proposes itself while the viewer's attention is focused on other phenomena and their significant nature. Starting from the *comparticipation / cognition* opposition, roughly superimposable to the *known / new* one, the rhythms are always placed on the first side. But *comparticipation* and *cognition* interact closely at various levels, and the same iterative structures can frequently access the foreground, however generating *saturation* effects, with the consequent tensions. While retaining the characteristics of rhythm, the ascent to the foreground completely transforms the role of repetition. In these pages we will discuss the modalities of this transformation, the requirements that allow repetition to be recognised as such, and the roles that rhythms play in different activities such as ritual, aesthetic contemplation, laughing and sexual activity.

Mots clefs : attention, *comparticipation*, repetition, rhythm, semiotics, tension

Auteurs cités : Theodor Adorno, Emile Benveniste, Roman Jakobson, François Jullien, Leonard Meyer, Walter Ong

Plan :

1. Tension and tendence
2. Cognition and *comparticipation*
3. Rhythm and attention
4. Dialectic of repetition
5. Passages of level
6. Frontal and immersive
7. Regularity
8. Rite
9. Beauty
10. Laughter
11. Sex