

MODERN ARISTOXENUSIAN: UNDERSTANDINGS OF RHYTHM, BEYOND REPRESENTATION? – BAKHTIN, LEVINUS AND KRISTEVA

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Abstract: Levinas's "Reality and Its Shadow" is the only monograph on the condition of aesthetics in art and its use in society among his writings. His key terms are 'resemblance', 'morality' and 'rhythm'. Levinas warns that 'resemblance' in art is immoral when accompanied by the enchantment of rhythm. To understand Levinas's arguments on the ethical condition of art, it is useful to reference Bakhtin's concern about the condition of rhythm in terms of the single subject (spirit/id) and in relation to others (soul/super-ego), and how these co-exist. Kristeva's understanding of Plato's 'chora' provides theoretical grounds for consideration of the role of rhythm and the independent condition of aesthetics and art, which she argues in terms of rhythm's pre-linguistic (pre-symbolic) importance in the developmental stage of the soul. This paper will address how the condition of the artwork has been taken for granted; how naive (or disingenuous) the proponents of modern art have been by advocating an 'independent' status for art in social life. For Levinas, the critique of modern art's dominant condition is requisite for the possibility of post-Holocaust art practice. Aesthetic judgements independent of ethical overtones are not so much useless as harmful for the basic human condition. If we follow Levinas's prescription of the condition of art, the question arises: is it still art without subjective aesthetic judgement? Everything is a 'text' if all human activity occurs within language. Is art not an exception?

Keywords: rhythm, Levinas, Bakhtin, Kristeva, aesthetics, Plato, chora, representation

Rhythm, based on Aristoxenian theory of rhythm, is the continuous interconnection: combination of *arsis* and *thesis*. Mikhail M. Bakhtin wrote: “the parting is the *arsis*, the promised meeting is the *thesis*; death is the *arsis*, yet there will be a meeting, nevertheless — the *thesis*.”¹ Lionel Pearson wrote in his essay “The Greek Theory of Rhythm; Aristoxenus and Others”:

There must be some regularity in which we can trust, some logic of movement that we can understand, before we feel invited to respond to a series of sounds by making some movement ourselves with feet, hands, or head.²

With its origins in ancient Greek epistemology, the Western tradition of rhythm theory consists of a strong association between both physical and intellectual notions of rhythm. The Aristoxenian theory of rhythm is concerned with there being a perceptible shape of time-lengths accompanied by an anticipated physical aspect. Aristoxenus depicts this in the form of one set of regular movements (*arsis* and *thesis*) which, being a foundation of its perception, underlies the understanding of the logic of rhythm’s movement. Thus Aristoxenus’ theory of rhythm consists of both somatic and intellectual aspects. In the very earliest part at the start of *Elementa Rhythmica*, Aristoxenus claims that there is a division between rhythm itself and the medium which is to be ‘rhythmizable’ (he called *rhythmizomenon*):

“We must recognize rhythm [ruqmou] and the rhythmizable medium (*rhythmizomenon*) as separate notions and separate natures, related to one another in the same kind of way as shape [schma] and shapable material.”³

Rhythmizomenon and *schematizomena* are analogous to a lump of clay or other material capable of being ‘shaped’ into a cup or figure or other such object. They are like the random words and phrases⁴ which, when ordered correctly, compose a sentence.

Bakhtin’s understanding of rhythm is insightful from the point of view of both the modern and ancient Greek senses. First, Bakhtin clearly differentiates the main element of the rhythmic compound: meter and rhythm. By “rhythm” Bakhtin means not metric pulse, but a consequence of provisional expectation of recurrence of patterning. Second, he illuminates the important traits of rhythm: “openness” and “closure”, “parting” and “meeting”. Openness (or parting) in rhythm is due to its remoteness from the object itself, which also relates to ‘the others’ and death. Its ‘closure’ is the promised meeting. Since “Openness” implies remoteness from the object, rhythm is independent from the object in which rhythm manifests itself by reacting to the object, although not in a direct way. For early Greek thinkers, especially Aristoxenus, it was argued that an understanding of rhythm should come first and that its counterpart, physical reaction, would follow.

This aspect of Bakhtin’s (and Aristoxenian) rhythm is elaborated further in the thinking of Emmanuel Levinas. To Levinas “the idea of rhythm ... designates not so much an inner law of the poetic order as the way the poetic order affects us.”⁵ And moreover, the idea of rhythm is a “closed whole whose elements

1 M. M. Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov, trans. Vadim Liapunov and Kenneth Brostrom, Austin, 1990, p. 215

2 Aristoxenus of Tarentum, *Aristoxenus, Elementa Rhythmica, The Fragment of Book II and the Additional Evidence for Aristoxenian Rhythmic Theory*, ed. & trans. Lionel Pearson, Oxford, 1990, xxiii

3 Aristoxenus, *Elementa Rhythmica*, Book II § 3, *ibid.*, p. 3

4 Aristoxenus referred to this as the *lexis*. *Ibid.* § 4

5 E. Levinas, “Reality and Its Shadow”, in: *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Seán Hand, Blackwell, Oxford & Cambridge, 1989, p. 132

call for one another like the syllables of a verse, but do so only insofar as they impose themselves on us, disengaging themselves from reality.”⁶

According to Emmanuel Levinas, sound is the shadow of the object and “its relation with the substance from which it emanates is not inscribed in its quality.”⁷ “Sound is the quality most detached from an object”, but “the image of sound is most akin to real sound.”⁸ Thus, “to insist on the musicality of every image is to see in an image its detachment from an object.”⁹ Sound, or the timbre of an object is “submerged in its quality, and does not retain the structure of a relation.”¹⁰

For Levinas, rhythm’s function is to fix this ‘image’ and protect it from being brought back to real time and space, where its relationship with the other or an object has its own reality. This is an ethical problem (especially in terms of art criticism) for Levinas and this double-remotion from reality in rhythm is the fixer of the concept of art as myth, where “there is something wicked and egoist and cowardly in artistic enjoyment” (Ibid., p. 142). However, there is no space here for the argument of rhythm, ethical problem of art and the role of the art criticism.

Rhythm has a positive function in the human mind. Rhythm engages with this reality by way of its function as structuring relations between one proto-resemblance (image or sound of an object) and another proto-resemblance. Rhythm is the ‘structure’ (or the ‘schema’), and, as proto-status of ‘the musicality of every image’, which double-detached (‘structure’ is elicited from musicality and musicality is the organization of sounds) from the object and has dream-like imaginary power which implores participation on the part of the viewer or listener.

To Levinas, rhythm does not belong to the sort of reality which an ontological dimension urges us to capture. Rather, rhythm belongs to the sort of the reality which occurs in an imaginary dimension, where the elements of closed wholes “imposed themselves on us without our assuming them.” Rhythm’s effect on us is not limited to the intellectual process of discriminating each element of a poem from a “closed whole”, but to the way “our consenting to them is inverted into a participation”.

This description recalls Eliot’s phrase, in which as listeners we “become the music”, an observation which is substantiated, in the context of rhythm, by Levinas’ comment that: “The subject is caught up and carried away by rhythm”¹¹ and that “the subject is part of its own representation.”¹² More radically still, Levinas proposes that “in rhythm there is no longer a oneself, but rather a sort of passage from oneself to anonymity.”

To feel rhythmical is to lose the sensibility of self. Levinas continues, “It [“a sort of passage”] is a mode of being to which applies neither the form of consciousness, since the I is there stripped of its prerogative to assume, its power, nor the form of unconsciousness, since the whole situation and all its articulations are in a dark light, *present*.”¹³

Rhythm works in presentness, like in “a waking dream”. The mode of rhythm, however, does not occur in unconsciousness but in a special condition of consciousness: “The particular automatic character of

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid. p. 133

8 Ibid. pp. 133–4

9 Ibid. 134

10 Ibid., p. 133

11 E. Levinas, *op. cit.*, 1989, p. 133.

12 Ibid., p. 132–133

13 Ibid., p. 133

walk or a dance to music is a mode of being where nothing is unconscious, but where consciousness, paralyzed in its freedom, plays, totally absorbed in this playing.”¹⁴

In both Bakhtin’s and Levinas’s observations, the direction rhythm evokes is not one of mere ‘disinterestedness’. Disinterestedness erases the ‘image’, for it excludes freedom. Levinas wrote, “An image is interesting, without the slightest sense of utility, interesting in the sense of *involving*, in the etymological sense — to be *among* things which should have had only the status of objects.”¹⁵ In rhythm “we have really an exteriority of the inward”¹⁶ like in dreams, “which describes a sphere situated outside of the conscious and the unconscious”¹⁷. Thus, for Levinas, the discerning of reality by way of images (like shadows) “belongs to an ontological dimension that does not extend between us and a reality to be captured, a dimension where commerce with reality is rhythm.”¹⁸

For Bakhtin, rhythm is not expressive. Rather, rhythm is a double-fold reaction to object and meaning. In this reactional act, rhythm necessitates ‘the agent’, by which rhythm is rhythmized. The agent necessitates the form or object, which is the receptacle of rhythm (*rhythmizomenon* as Aristoxenus advocates) and of which rhythm is independent. In the sense of what has so far been examined, Bakhtin can be regarded as a Modern Aristoxenusian. However, Bakhtin’s modernness resides in the isolation of ‘the agent’ from the self: that is, the agent is the other within oneself. In Bakhtin’s understanding, the happy connection between self and the agent (as with Aristoxenus) has already been nullified, and the self is vulnerable to the influence of the other or agent, which is originally an alienated self. Thus, for Bakhtin, “rhythm is an embrace bestowed upon the axiologically consolidated or ‘embodied’ time of another’s mortal life.”¹⁹ Here Bakhtin introduces two essential factors of rhythm in modernist understanding: the meaning of the ‘present’ or ‘living’ time, and of ‘the otherness’ in rhythm.

In modern life, according to Bakhtin, the self necessitates ‘the hero’, with which the self can dance. Rhythm clothes one’s requiem in a ‘heroic’ tone: “Rhythm takes possession of a life that *has been lived*: the requiem tones at the end were already heard in the cradlesong at the beginning.”²⁰ The death of the self as agent is, for Bakhtin, the death of the author. This relates to the death of ‘the spirit’, which is the other half of the composite ‘self’.

Bakhtin explains the distinction between the ‘spirit’ and the ‘soul’:

“Spirit describes I-for-myself, my experience of myself from within, and it possesses no firm points of consummation. Consummation belongs to soul, a consequence of I-for-others. Others must partake in the process of engendering soul out of me for themselves, which means that soul is inevitably partial and purposeful. Depending on particular instances of outsideness and specific acts of finalization performed by others, my soul always responds to someone else’s concrete need.”²¹

The phrase *my soul* must therefore be seen as a sort of paradox or oxymoron, because soul results from a complex process in which others finalize me and I incorporate their finalization of me. That is

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 134

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 120

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 131

²¹ G. S. Morson and C. Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Poetics*, Stanford, 1990, p. 193

why my soul is simultaneously “social” and “individual.” My soul is a moment of my inner, open-ended, task-oriented self (my spirit) that some other consciousness has temporarily stabilized, embodied, enclosed in boundaries, and returned to me “as a gift [*dar*]” “The soul is a gift of my spirit to the other²². ‘The spirit’ (I-for-myself) is private self realization, but this self realization is only consummated by ‘the soul’ (I-for-others), which is the other half of the ‘self’.

It is the public and ‘the other’ living within the self: “my soul always responds to someone else’s concrete need.”²³ Thus, following Aristoxenus, the role of agent which understands, trusts, and activates rhythm within the agent itself, is fused within oneself. The modernist spirit is undetermined and ‘open’ to being swayed by the hand of ‘the soul’ of the other. This understanding of rhythm is also shared by Levinas: “in rhythm there is no longer a oneself, but rather a sort of passage from oneself to anonymity.” (Levinas, *Ibid.*, p. 133). Only in facing death can the spirit be energized and be rhythmized and live a ‘present’ living time. However, the promised meeting (*thesis*) in the future is also at the mercy of death. Thus Bakhtin describes the power of rhythm:

“To be sure, the unfreedom, the necessity of a life shaped by rhythm is not a *cruel* necessity, not a necessity that is indifferent to value (cognitive necessity), rather, it is a necessity bestowed as a gift, bestowed by love.”²⁴

To Bakhtin, to be rhythmized is to be embraced by the mercies and vicissitudes of “necessity” and is axiological process but becomes helpless to distance from it. It is an axiological process in the sense of rhythm’s “relievedness of the pressure exerted by the irresolvable seriousness of meaning.”²⁵ For Bakhtin, acting on rhythm is a process whereby “me myself” is possessed by rhythm, to belong to the “past of meaning”, and is therefore not a creative process: “The creative act (experience, striving, action)... is in principle extrarhythmic,”²⁶ since “to be active aware of me myself is to illuminate myself with the yet-to-be meaning confronting me; outside of meaning, I do not exist for myself.”²⁷

Thus, ‘the hero’, which is the envoy (or conqueror) of death and conferrer of meaning in a public sense, substantiates the spirit within the self. Moreover, the spirit “cannot be the bearer of a plot or storyline, for the spirit is not present, it does not exist. Thus, in the Modern time of the death of ‘the author’ (or the spirit), the spirit is “incapable of being the bearer of rhythm,”²⁸ which is semi-public (rhythm is “the axiological ordering of what is inwardly given”²⁹) and within the hand of the other which valorizes and determines meaning. Bakhtin emphasises another important understanding of rhythm, the third point in his understanding of rhythm: rhythm is outside of the terrain of ‘meaning’ and resides in the self as the ‘soul’, an understanding which is particularly emphasised in the writing and thinking of Julia Kristeva. Kristeva treats rhythm, applying Plato, as an agent which functions at the threshold between being ‘with-

22 *Ibid.*

23 *Ibid.*

24 M. M. Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov, trans. Vacim Liapunov and Kenneth Brostrom, Austin, 1990, p. 119

25 *Ibid.*, p. 131

26 M. M. Bakhtin, *op. cit.*, 1990, p. 119

27 *Ibid.*, p. 120

28 *Ibid.*, p. 111

29 *Ibid.*, p. 117

in' and being 'against' the linguistic system or semantics: a pre- and trans-logical rhythm.³⁰ She describes rhythm in the poetry of Mayakovsky and Khlebnikov as "that which, with Mayakovsky, hammered in sonorous thrusts within and against the system of language — that is, rhythm."³¹ Hammered sound is so concrete and closely relates to object status (e.g. sounds of iron), but when it becomes rhythm, it erases any reference and goes beyond representation and semantics. According to Kristeva, the 'chora', which means 'space' in Ancient Greece, provides to rhythm the space and time in which it operates in a dimension of reality where the function of remembrance is activated, while that of representation, which belongs to the symbolic system (language), is kept at bay.

Kristeva shares Bakhtin's description of rhythm as the "action of the other (or an object)" which thus implies 'a certain hopelessness with regard to meaning'. Kristeva and Bakhtin are not alone in regarding rhythm as outside of meaning. There is a substantial number of notable scholars who treat it in a similar way (for example, Hegel, Helderlin, Agamben, Scruton, and Wittgenstein). But Kristeva's location of rhythmic acquisition within the developmental stage of the infant, before the 'imaginary' and 'symbolic' stages, does not necessarily mean the total loss of signification of words (or the faculty of grasping non-sensical sequences of phonemes, as Roman Jakobson describes the extreme case of aphasia). For Kristeva, rhythm can be energized in situations in which difficulties are met: Only by vying with regulating and structuring phonemes of language does rhythm become a significant factor — proto-formulating and transforming semiosis around poetic significance.³²

CONCLUSION

Kristeva also finds similarity between the functions of rhythm and colour: "The chromatic apparatus, like rhythm for language, ... involves a shattering of meaning and its subject into a scale of differences".³³ Colour, for Kristeva, "is the shattering of unity"³⁴ and it is through colour that "Western painting begins to escape the constraints of narrative and perspective norm (as with Giotto) as well as representation itself (as with Cézanne, Matisse, Rothko, and Mondrian)."³⁵

"It is easy to see how color's logic might have been considered "empty of meaning," a mobile grid (since it is subjective), but outside of semantics, and therefore, as dynamic law, rhythm, interval, gesture."³⁶

Kristeva's *chora* is a pre-linguistic act (possibly) outside of the representational system. However, the representational system or system of signs resides deeply in the human mind. The textualist's contention that "in the human mind, language is everything" has yet to be properly refuted. Whether or not rhythm unfolds within the linguistic domain requires further subtle argument.

30 J. Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez, New York, 1980, p. 25

31 *Ibid.*, p. 30

32 *Ibid.*, p. 29

33 *Ibid.*, p. 221

34 *Ibid.*

35 *Ibid.*

36 *Ibid.*

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САВРЕМЕНИ АРИСТОКСЕНУСИЈАН: ПОИМАЊЕ РИТМА, ВИШЕ ОД ПРИКАЗИВАЊА? – БАКХТИН, ЛЕВИНАС И КРИСТЕВА

Резиме: Левинасова „Стварност и њена сенка” је једина монографија међу његовим списима која говори о стању естетике у уметности и њеној употреби у друштву. Његови кључни појмови су „сличност”, „морал” и „ритам”. Левинас упозорава да је „сличност” у уметности неморална када је прати чаролија ритма. Да би се разумели Левинасови аргументи о етичким условностима у уметности, корисно је упутити се на Бахтинову забринутост због стања ритма у смислу појединачног субјекта (дух/ид) и у односу на друге (душа/супер-его), и како они коегзистирају. Тумачење Платонове 'хоре' које износи Кристева, пружа теоријске основе за разматрање улоге ритма и независног положаја естетике и уметности, што она аргументује у смислу предјезичке (предсимболичке) важности ритма у развојној фази душе. Овај рад говори о томе како се условљеност уметничког дела подразумева; колико су наивни (или неискрени) били заступници модерне уметности заговарајући „независни” статус уметности у друштвеном животу. За Левинаса је критика доминантног стања модерне уметности неопходна да би уметност после холокауста уопште могла да постоји. Естетско просуђивање независно од етичких компоненти није толико бескорисно, колико је штетно за основне хумане претпоставке. Ако следимо Левинасов проглас о стању уметности, поставља се питање: да ли је то још увек уметност, без субјективне естетског расуђивања? Све је 'текст' ако се сва људска активност одвија унутар језика. Није ли уметност изузетак?

Кључне речи: ритам, Левинас, Бахтин, Кристева, естетика, Платон, хора, представљање