



EMERALD POINTS

THE SENSE OF RHYTHM

A Semiotic Investigation of a
Fundamental Device

GIULIA CERIANI

TRANSLATED BY SHANNON SANTANGELO



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A Semiotic Investigation of a
Fundamental Device

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Il senso del ritmo. gravidanza e regolazione di un dispositivo fondamentale
by Giulia Ceriani

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW EDITION

This book first appeared in 2004. It was for me then the culmination of a research project, in respect of which this publication permitted to establish a provisional standstill, a momentary halt to a long-standing questioning, which saw in the ‘rhythm question’ one of the most challenging issues in terms of semiotics. And I rightly call it *semiotics*, that is the interface between signifying forms and content matrices, with the added complexity of a morphogenetic anchoring that made it, at the time, a difficult object to handle with a legitimate basis in a rigorously structuralist perspective.

This was, however, my interest in a research at the crossroads of humanities and natural sciences, albeit limited by my lack of that specific scientific area. I would like to express my gratitude to the rigorous guidance of Jean Petitot who invited me to explore those territories as part of my doctoral studies, giving me the courage to do so; of course, I am fully aware that I am the sole responsible for any mistakes I may have made along the way.

The theoretical premise, or at least the underlying question, was (and still is) nevertheless interesting, and all too ambitious: how to justify the ‘coercive’ nature of a regulatory device which, starting from a system of groupings and repetitions, invests the sensitivity of the perceptive and emotional substratum of the subject of the enunciation, thus producing a double level of discourse? How to do this according to a cogent circularity of extremely high pathemic efficacy, never objectively explained, if not, very partially and only from a linguistic, or literary, point of view – within the analysis of poetic discourse?

And again, how can this be done without surrendering to the overly narrow perspective of discursive rhetoric, cognitive psychology, musicology and embracing instead that interdisciplinary gaze that only semiotics, understood as the principle of order and understanding of a system of signification, allows?

If we have come to a new edition, it is because those questions are still alive today: the answer this book has offered is well-intentioned, albeit partial. We can say we made a decent attempt. But we can equally say that this challenge does not seem to have been particularly taken up by others, for a course of study that would engage in alternative proposals; and my own subsequent

research has rather been oriented towards analysis relating to issues that certainly imply a rhythmic process (trends, advertising effectiveness, fashion mechanisms) but – *mea culpa* – without giving sufficient space to insights of a decisively more conceptual matrix with regard to the specific responsibilities of the device itself.

I therefore believe that some of the questions left unanswered by the (non-) conclusions of this book are still open, and deserve to be re-launched through this new edition: in particular, there are at least three thematic tracks on which I would like to bring the debate back to light, following the developments of the last 15 years (both on the front of the semiotic discipline and on that of communication practices):

- (1) The theme of the *regulative efficacy* of rhythm, such that we can define it as a ‘device’ in a privileged way
- (2) The theme of *pathemization* resulting from the sensitive recognition of the rhythmic structure
- (3) The theme of *transcoding*, i.e. the figural holding of the rhythmic formant, as a guarantee of the inter-textual relationship/conversion.

Nothing too new under the sun, except that, as concerns the first theme, the notion of ‘device’ has entered into common usage in an extraordinary and widespread way to indicate something else, namely tools concerning technology. What really matters is the shared pragmatic connotation, which stipulates the need for a paced/cadenced (and for this very reason rhythmically groupable) temporal dimension that interrupts the continuous connection flow guaranteed by those same *devices*, and makes it knowable. This is a question I had not yet been raised back in 2004, and which, in my opinion, adds illuminating stimuli when reaffirming the inescapability of rhythmic discontinuity, its systemic relevance, the need for a punctuation of its own to make the flow of digital continuity categorizable (i.e. knowable, graspable).

Of course, this efficacy based on the correspondence between the morphology of the world and the syntax of discourse (as already addressed by Paolo Fabbri, 1991), becomes increasingly complex in its modalization possibilities (theme 2), where morphology is anything but static in the light of digital interfaces – virtual, augmented or ‘real’ as you like – and the trivialization of discursive categorization that is invested in them is, if anything, more static. But rhythm has a component that cannot be subdued, and much of its charm lies in this provocative nature, and if its syntax becomes repetitive, it drastically loses its symbolic efficacy and its empathetic abilities.

This is the dimension of esthesia, and it is the one with which we deal in theme 3. Driven by the need to find a point of convergence between the different forms of textuality that contemporary society poses to us, it is here that rhythm seems overbearingly relevant, insofar as one wants precisely to consider its figural formant, the deep pattern regulating the exchange between underlying narrative and surfacing figurativeness.

Beyond the urgency posed by these three major thematic strands, it must certainly be emphasized that much has changed on the front of semiotic research in a direction that has made the relatively heretical connotation that this research on rhythm had at the time of its first publication laughable. The interest in substance, in the subject and its perception, brings with it the dimension of what Fontanille (1995) had already called an ‘epistemological leap’, which is all the more necessary when body language is finally re-actualized by the overall human sciences, in confronting different levels of ‘reality’ that make universally evident the semiotics of the natural world on which Greimas (1968) had based his own theoretical approach. The alternation that provides moments of conjunction followed by moments of disjunction at the base of the rhythmic group, founds the inter-actantial principle of what will later be inter-subjectivity, introducing an aspectual dynamic to manage the very first level of tense space. In this way, that natural signification of which Greimas had already laid the foundations corresponds to phenomena of discontinuity of a physiological nature (which the body knows in accordance with what is, for example, the flow of circadian rhythms, sucking, breathing, to name but a few) easily read from a semi-symbolic point of view, colored by modulations/figurations of a passionate nature.

But that is not all. If semiotics is more than ready to welcome studies on rhythm that go beyond prosodic normativity, the communication system as a whole has evolved over the last 15 years in a direction we could hardly have imagined, and which in turn puts the question of rhythm back at the core of the matter in a different light. We think, here, of the digital media scenario and the increasing multifunctional nature of the interfaces displayed, and at the same time, of that socialization of communication that emphasizes the phatic and conative functions, in spite of any other implication. Changing the substance of the expression and changing the substance of the content, for forms that primarily aim at involvement on both fronts, thus focus on the management of the relationship, rather than on its quality.

And let us consider, on the other hand, the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) in our daily lives, which calls for a definite articulation not only of the alternation of contacts but also of content itself according to its knowability and ability to manage the inter-subjective (and first and foremost

inter-actantial) dynamics. If big data is pure flux and continuity, small data is in the hands of those who know how to give plausible figurativeness and tense scope to its potential sense effects. We believe that, in addressing AI-related issues, rhythm can provide the advantage that comes from the unquestionable schematic nature of its binary and periodic proposal, which makes it crucial in the design, and parallel reading, of predictive sequences. However, beyond the formal dimension, what in our opinion is still of greater utility and potential for future development is the unique and physiological matrix of rhythm itself, founded on an alternation of primary Gestalten (tension/distension) ready to be invested narratively in programmes of disjunction/conjunction.

Talking about future research, Greimas wrote as early as in *Dictionnaire II* (1986, p. 191) that it should try to find the presence of a rhythmic Gestalt for the recognition of rhythm as a pregnant form that already comprises a precise content immediately grasped through the semantic universals of knowledge, which are universals of the human mind.¹

It seems to us that this is precisely the purpose of this research, which attempts to bring the excessively boundless mass of big data back to an identifiable and usable dimension, with the sole aim of establishing a readability that can make the least possible claim to universality.

Here, then, are several, and perhaps not all the reasons for this new edition, which we hope will open up a new front for study, in a more productive way than the first edition did. Compared to the first edition, changes have been slight but hopefully significant: a few minor corrections in language, some bibliographical updates, the deletion of the chapter on natural rhythms, which in my opinion is not sufficiently adapted to the developments made over the years by science in these areas: better then, we believe, to consult the sources directly (see the relevant bibliography, given at least in part below), and stick here to what we can justify in terms of semiotic intelligence.

1 *La recherche future devrait essayer de retrouver la présence d'une Gestalt rythmique pour la reconnaissance d'une forme pregnant 'rythme' comportant déjà un contenu précis immédiatement saisi à travers des universaux sémantiques de la connaissance, universaux de l'esprit humain.* A.Greimas, *Dictionnaire II* (1986, p. 191).

THE RHYTHMIC 'DEVICE'

NOT EVERYTHING IS RHYTHM

Rhythm is, on the one hand, the mere recognition of a harmony, external to us as perceivers, and inscribed on the objects of our perception; on the other hand, it is a complex structure that affects our entire system of order and balance.

The dialectic between continuous and discontinuous, on which rhythm *mechanics* is based, is universal. Rhythm is an intimate component of our nature and our deepest inclinations: the search for criteria to recognise and attribute rhythmic structure seeks to establish rhythm as a 'device', a tool of analysis that can account for some of the most delicate intersections between perception and discourse, sensibility and semiotics.

A device is a functional tool, which serves to activate processes and manage interactive mechanisms, no matter whether human or artificial; and it is precisely the redefinition of rhythm as an *active mediator* that interests us.

FROM THE INEFFABLE TO THE MORPHOLOGICAL

Paul Valéry (1973/2000) defines *rhythm* as a difficult notion to analyse, and the usual subdivision of the relations of time seems to him as insufficient, since one is limited to the subsequent and the simultaneous, but between these two there is an intermediate intuition, namely the intuition of rhythm (p. 22).

Paul Valéry is correct when he reproaches the word 'rhythm' for its lack of clarity. But above all, he is right to urge us to adopt a definition that is as simple and transversal as possible; basing it upon the observation of simple phenomena to grasp its intrinsic nature.

In any case, rhythm is certainly not an *ineffable* phenomenon, but rather a *complex morphology*¹ which requires us to consider the congruence of its manifestations.

With this in mind, we set ourselves a twofold objective as of now:

- To avoid any metaphorical use of the rhythmic paradigm in order to always trace it back to the criteria of structure, periodicity and movement.
- To maintain methodological coherence and comparability of results, even for those areas of rhythmic relevance furthest removed from the humanities.

On the other hand, the *fundamental ambivalence* of rhythm had already been emphasised by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1964/1990, p. 16), who established a parallel between music and mythology in his ‘Overture’ to *The Raw and the Cooked*:

We can say that music operates according to two grids. One is physiological – that is, natural: its existence arises from the fact that music exploits organic rhythms and thus gives relevance to phenomena of discontinuity that would otherwise remain latent and submerged, as it were, in time. The other grid is cultural: it consists of a scale of musical sounds, of which the number and the intervals vary from one culture to another.

Rhythm, in fact, directs the timing of the physiological grid, and induces the aesthetic pleasure of those who experience it through subjection to a double periodicity:

[...] that of his respiratory system, which is determined by his individual nature and that of the scale, which is determined by his training. (op.cit., p. 17)

Many are, therefore, the questions that run through the complexity of the rhythmic phenomenon, culminating in the question that motivates all our research: what is the reason for the evident poignancy of rhythms?

Can it be explained exclusively by a correlation between organic and cultural? And what are the parameters that structure this correlation? And again, are they universal and practically independent of the substance of expression

¹ The extensive research carried out by Charles Morazé (1986) shows, in our opinion, the opportunity to conceive of a geometric-topological paradigm, a pre-mathematical form fed by the natural Gestalts selected by our perception and ecological configuration.

and content, or do they change (at least in part) depending on the sphere they 'shape'?

REPETITION AS PRELIMINARY HYPOTHESIS

Let us therefore assume as a preliminary hypothesis the consideration of rhythm as a structure of repetition.

Repetition can itself be an agent of symmetrical or asymmetrical morphologies, operating on a multiplicity of interval, temporal and spatial dimensions. According to Gilles Deleuze, the repetition of events that characterises a structure of repetition can come in the form of a *repetition-measure* or a *repetition-rhythm*,

[...] the first being only the outward appearance or the abstract effect of the second. (1980/1987, p. 21)

Repetition-measure identifies an isochronous return of identical elements, while repetition-rhythm identifies duration, a succession of irregular intervals. In fact, if /difference/ means the repetition of the non-identical, then rhythm tends more and more toward difference rather than repetition. Along with Félix Guattari, Deleuze further writes on this subject:

It is the difference that is rhythmic, not the repetition, which nevertheless produces it. (op.cit., p. 314)

RULES AND CONSTRAINTS

No rhythm, and consequently, *no constraint*: rules allow not only the recognition, but also the reproduction of a rhythmic structure, regardless of the subject matter of the expression in which it is realised.

Rhythmic repetition can be defined as an initially *natural phenomenon*, which then becomes a *semiotic phenomenon* and remains *physically grounded*. It would thus be a peculiar example of 'embodied semiotics' (cf. Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 1991): a form of the natural world that is, at the same time, a form of the constructed world. The notion of emergence, as elaborated by Jean Petitot (1985/2004), will help us in this regard. But let us also formulate the hypothesis – which our work undertakes to confirm or disprove – that rhythm can be equated with a conceptual structure, a mental link

between the natural world, the perceived world and the world put into discourse.

THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL QUESTION OF TIME

It is to Paul Ricœur (1983–1984–1985/1990) that we owe one of the most important observations of the notion of time and its phenomenology: we think it is important and necessary to briefly explore it in order to situate, in parallel, the rhythmic phenomenon.

Ricœur takes up two major ‘debates’, between Saint Augustine and Aristotle, and between Husserl and Kant, to which he adds a discussion of Heidegger’s conception of time. In doing so, he compares cosmological time (the instant) to phenomenological time (the present), and comes to regard this dialectic as the necessary *aporia* for any speculation on temporality.

For St Augustine in his *Confessions*, the possibility of measuring time resides in the ‘*distentio animi*’, i.e. in the extension of the spirit – making abstraction of any external reference to the movements of the Cosmos; Ricœur reproaches Augustine for his failure to replace a *psychological* conception of time with a *cosmological* one.

We have only dismissed that the extreme thesis that “time is constituted by the movement of a material body” [...]. But Aristotle had also refuted it by affirming that, without itself being movement, time was “something of movement”.

(Ricœur, 1983/1990, p. 15)

Augustine seeks to find, in expectation and remembrance, some measuring principles independent of the world, and therefore opens the way to absolute relativism.

On the other hand, Aristotle, in *Physics IV*, argues that time ‘is not movement, but that by which movement can be numerically estimated’ (219b). He postulates that change (i.e. movement) implies time, but that time is also in everything and everywhere, while movement experiences speed and acceleration. Furthermore, according to Aristotle, succession is something to which one is submitted, rather than something imposed as an ordered form on things, since the before and after exist in time well before anteriority and posteriority, according to a logical and narrative sense. When he introduces the notion of ‘number’ and defines time as ‘number of motion in respect of “before” and