

## JAVIER PADILLA / The Rhythmic Course: A Trajectory in Four Movements

I know not what to call this, nor will I urge  
that it is a secret, overruling decree, that  
hurries us on to be the instruments of our  
own destruction, even though it be before us,  
and that we rush upon it with our eyes open.

—Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*

Our ignorance only has this  
incontestable effect: It causes us to *undergo*  
what we could *bring about* in our own way, if  
we understood.

—Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share*

### I

These days our rebels are flagrant culprits, confused athletes, luxuriant caliphs, consummate narco-traffickers, and facinorous investors. Driven by an ever-increasing degree of rhythmic acceleration, today's machinic spectacle is highly synchronous and omnipresent; it is mobile enough to accommodate rebellions. This rhythmic trajectory not only promotes self-regulating activities, but also anticipates counter-rhythmic attempts at mastering the contrapuntal surround. And yet, "Woe to those who . . . insist on regulating the movement that exceeds them with the narrow mind of the mechanic who changes a tire" (Bataille *Accursed* 26).

## II

Already by the end of the 19th century Nietzsche writes about the accelerated rhythm of what was then an incipient “breathless haste,” one that now seems to have exhausted the planet after its conquest. “One thinks with a watch in one’s hand . . .” grieves the philologist, “one lives as if one always ‘might miss out on something.’” The philologist’s nostalgia for a pre-lapsarian *otium* comes across as naïve, and yet Nietzsche’s diagnosis is compelling because of its rhythmic etiology: “Just as all forms are visibly perishing by the haste of the workers, the feeling for form itself . . . [is] also perishing” (para 329).

Writing during the convulsive first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the French linguist Émile Benveniste argues that the notion of rhythm traces a “vast unification of man and nature under time, with its intervals and repetitions . . .” Benveniste’s etymological excavation outlines the variety of ways one can define rhythmicity: as a kind of form, a particular order, or more tentatively, as a configuration of signs. He concludes that this abstract notion of rhythm “required a long consideration of the structure of things . . . in order for the principle of cadenced movements to be recognized and given a name.” Succinctly then, “rhythm” as an abstraction seems pervasive in our world of hyper-kinetic overload, and as such “we have difficulty in believing that people were not aware of it more from the very beginning.” (Benveniste 287–88). Now that the exuberance of rhythm surrounds us, we can unravel its historical trajectory in the spiraling echoes of past rhythmic arrangements and modalities.

## III

Even more sinister than Nietzsche’s projected loss of form, what confronts us today is an all-consuming oscillation between cycles of exuberance and recession. These destructive forms of governance and commerce creep up on us—their compliant users.

The very technologies that increase our heterogeneous understanding of rhythm also impose their own meter and regularity. As Claus Pias explains, in the interface between user and computer “rhythm becomes established as the ‘success of form under the aggravating conditions of temporality.’” Rhythm is reduced

to a relation between sender and receiver, and instead of “losing the feeling of form,” contemporary technologies demand “timeliness, rhythm, or control.” This injunction for presence or duty “marches to its own rhythms. It is a transversal phenomenon in that all of its designated aspects are dynamic but it cannot be reduced to any of them” (Pias 180). Rephrased in Bataille’s economic framework, this technological trajectory “has meaning only from the moment when the ordered reserved forces liberate and lose themselves for ends that cannot be subordinated to anything one can account for” (Bataille “Notion” 180).

#### IV

But the deleterious effects of this blind techno-scientific drive need not fully circumscribe our rhythmicity. Processes that at first hand might appear beyond our control often depend on our responsible observance for their continuous operation. Inviting us to recognize this kinetic pattern, Peter Sloterdijk describes the concept of “mobilization” as modernity’s rhythmic signature or collective frequency. Following an ethical trajectory, he asks, “Why hasn’t this most obvious thing been given attention long ago?” He limns an answer by conceptualizing this “obvious thing” in terms of rhythm and movement—“the trivial fact that kinetics is the ethics of modernity” (Sloterdijk 36–43). That we follow a rhythmic trajectory mapped out in retrospect, a background of purpose, a phonetic trail,

And though one says that one is part of everything,

There is a conflict, there is a resistance involved; And being part is an exertion that declines: One feels the life of that which gives life as it is (Stevens 460).

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