

Rhythm

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To study the rhythm(s) of creativity – this sounds like a novel idea! Especially if we don't confine the notion of rhythm to music alone. The rhythm of creativity, as I discuss it here, doesn't refer to the melodic quality of accomplished compositions but, rather, to the rhythmic nature of our creative movement in the world (Glăveanu, 2020). Did you ever consider the movement and sounds one hears in spaces where creative work is performed – not only art studios, scientific laboratories, but also schools and streets, squares and markets? Some are very noisy environments, others mostly silent but, in all of them, one can distinguish a certain regularity of activities and sounds, a rhythmicity of doing and perceiving, of acting and being acted upon. This regularity is paired with uniqueness, the distinct quality of each 'melody' of living and creating. The universe of sound we are immersed into often escapes us, when focused too much on the visual world (Hendy, 2013). And yet sounds, and the rhythms they create, are the essential markers of what makes our existence dynamic and temporal: *continuous movement*.

Rhythm is movement. At least, the etymological origins of the word tell us so. The Greek *rhythmos* referred to 'measured flow or movement', the Latin *rhythmus* to 'movement in time',¹ and most associations of these terms point to proportion, symmetry, arrangement, order, and so on. Since rhythm includes both structure and its transformation in time, it became a very important notion for the 'arts of continuity' such as music and poetry. For them, rhythm is a recurrent or repeated pattern, a beat, or an accent. But the same applies to movement outside the sphere of art. Our daily life has its own rhythm, as also do the activities of a society. The latter are often translated into social, economic and political indicators and are typically expressed using larger temporal units such as decades or generations (e.g., think about the recurrent patterns of migration around the world and their wide spectrum – from seasonal to permanent). In contrast, the micro-rhythms of everyday life are more rarely documented, despite their vital significance for shaping our existence and our trajectory through the social world. A study of the life course in terms of rhythm, styles and motifs is necessarily, at one and the same time, holistic and developmental, individual and social (see Zittoun et al., 2013). Finally, there are other types of rhythms, from biological to astronomical, that frame the movement of people and societies. The fascination for their cyclical nature has been a dominant feature of pre-history and antiquity and survives, to this day, albeit in different forms, within religion and myths, collective practices and rituals, philosophy and art (see Meyer, 2023, for an insightful analysis of the link between ancient rhythms and human possibility).

Human culture is defined by rhythm as a dynamic system that moves and changes along irreversible time (Valsiner, 2013). This rhythm is the essence of creativity, understood here not as a unique feature of special individuals but as a widely distributed process of making, transforming and renewing cultural forms (Glăveanu, 2014). To associate rhythm and

creativity means to recognize the interdependence between biology and culture, each defined by their own cyclicity, as they shape the creative work of individuals and societies. This is well reflected by examining human activity. All activities – including those deemed ‘creative’ – are based on movement and movement itself involves different forms of repositioning, from physical and social to psychological (see also the chapter on Perspective). These acts of repositioning are fundamentally patterned inasmuch as they involve position exchange, shifts of perspective, and a back and forth between action and perception, or what Dewey called “doing” and “undergoing” (Dewey, 1934). Recognizing the rhythmic nature of these processes helps us on several accounts. First of all, it situates actions and activities within a wider cultural context. To act rhythmically means to connect to, to reflect on, and to co-participate in the rhythmic movement of people and ideas at a specific time and in a specific space. Second, it makes our understanding of creative action much more developmental in nature. Rhythms have a history that is, at once, societal and personal. This turns the exploration of how people come to acquire, share and transform certain courses of action a key concern. Last but not least, rhythms cut across the divide between the psychological and the material. Action is always embodied, even when it seemingly takes place only ‘in the mind’ (Wertsch, 1998) and the rhythms of creative action reflect this attribute particularly well given their emphasis on doing and making.

As such, my focus in this chapter will be on the creativity of the cultural rhythms of human existence, both individual and collective; to illustrate them, I will draw on three different examples from Japan. This allows me to explore an expanded understanding of rhythm as movement and, in turn, capture three of its central characteristics: *regularity*, *uniqueness*, and *emergence*. It is particularly this last ‘property’, coming out of the intersection and coordination between multiple rhythms, in their regularity and uniqueness, that is a defining feature for creativity (see also Montuori, 2003). Indeed, to create is considered in this chapter to be a rhythmic movement though culture, a movement that is, simultaneously, deeply personal, highly expressive, and fundamentally shared.

Regularity

The patterned ways of rhythms, as they unfold, reveal their regularity. This regularity is associated with a relative stability over time, something that makes patterned movements distinguishable and invests their rhythms with an identity function. Ceremonials are a great example of re-enacted rhythms of great cultural significance. In the case of the tea ceremony in Japan, rituals go beyond a simple pastime for small social groups and become a national symbol (Surak, 2012). I had the pleasure of being introduced to such a ceremonial at the teahouse of the Hama Rikyu Garden in Tokyo. My friend and I ordered the traditional powdered green tea – *Matcha* tea – which arrived in a beautiful bowl with a small confection and wooden stick on the side, as well as a brief information leaflet. The contents of this leaflet explained to us the proper manners of tasting *Matcha* tea (for more on constraints and possibility see Valsiner, 2023).

The manners of tasting Matcha tea

<The tea ceremony is not performed>

The spirit of the tea is at the heart of hospitality.

What should you taste first? The confection or the tea?

The confection is all eaten before drinking the tea. It is because the taste of the tea becomes better. <Don’t taste them alternatively>

How do you eat the confection?

Bring the confection toward you by putting it on the packet of paper (Kaishi). Cut it with small wooden stick and eat one piece after the other.

How do you drink Matcha tea?

Take the bowl with your right hand and place it on the left palm. In order to avoid the front of the bowl, turn the bowl clockwise twice. Then drink all the tea in three or four sips (the number of times is not important). When it is served, the visitor's side is the front of the bowl.

What do you do for the place where the mouth touched the bowl?

After drinking the tea, wipe the place where you drank from with your right thumb and index finger. Wipe your fingers on your Kaishi. Then turn the bowl back twice so that the front faces you and place the bowl in front of you <It is not necessary to perform them here>

And, with a feeling of gratitude, you look back at the bowl before returning to the place where the host served.

What appears to be a highly regulated activity reveals, in fact, the parameters of a cultural rhythm of serving and drinking tea. The places, times, behaviour, and attitudes of a tea ceremony are specified in advance and they gain 'thickness' through repetition, observation, and practice (see also the chapters on Rules and on Silence). However, the movement itself, for as conventionalised as it is, will never be identical for any two people drinking *Matcha* tea, or for the same person at different times. And this is because rhythms are regular and shared but they also bear the mark of uniqueness. This was certainly the case for me and my friend, both foreign to this ceremonial and, to a certain extent, to the cultural universe of rhythms that surrounds it. While we did our best to respect the instructions given, we also (creatively) appropriated them and infused the entire ceremonial with our own rhythm, a mixture of what we learned there and our past experiences of drinking tea. The regularity of a rhythm doesn't have to be prescribed explicitly within a culture; it most often accumulates over time through constant processes of socialisation (see also Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*; Bourdieu, 1984).

Uniqueness

The appropriation and personalisation of rhythms are unavoidable in the case of any cultural practice and the example of the tea ceremony can be complemented, in this regard, with another one concerning the use of votive pictures in Shinto shrines and, sometimes, in Buddhist temples. These votive plaques, called *ema*, have a long history in Japan (see Ashikaga, 1954; Reader, 1991), dating back to the early 8th century. The small wooden plaques, ornamented on one side, are the support on which visitors write their wishes in order to make them known to the gods or local deities. The motifs placed on an *ema* vary, but they can include a figure of worship, a religious or a cultural image; e.g., one of the signs of the 12-year zodiac cycle. Traditionally, the *ema* depicted a horse (which is also what the name in Japanese suggests), since in the Nara period a horse used to be donated to the shrine by supplicants. But, since this practice was not feasible for most of the population, a wooden, clay or paper representation of a horse became a popular offering in later centuries. Nowadays, visitors buy plaques at the shrine, write their wishes on them (usually not on the ornamented part), and leave them on shrine ground in specially designated places (see also the chapter on Space). An illustration of this practice is offered (see Figure 16.1) from the Inari shrine in Kyoto, where the fox is a popular symbol, something visible also on the votive plaques.

The cultural rhythm of visiting a shrine or temple, the ceremonies performed there, the buying, writing, and hanging an *ema* are all common to locals and attract curious foreigners

(such as myself). What caught my attention most, however, was the uniqueness of each votive plaque I saw at the Inari shrine. Despite some fairly common wishes written on the back of the plaques – mainly by students praying for academic success (see also Reader, 1991), the front of the *ema* encourages people to draw their own motifs within the space of a stylised fox face. From smiley eyes to anime-like drawings and even the depiction of heroes such as Spiderman or famous actors, these votive plaques evoke, first, the creative aspirations of their authors, incorporated within a broader cultural rhythm – wish-making at the shrine or temple. This is not only an expression of individuality within regularity (after all, *ema* do have a pre-defined spatial and symbolic place in the life of the community), but also a vivid illustration of how patterned activities, including rituals and ceremonies, draw not on one but on multiple cultural and personal resources (see also the chapter on Craft). This multiplicity supports the last and most important feature of rhythms – their emergent quality.

Figure 16.1 Votive plaques at the Inari shrine in Kyoto
Source: Photo taken by the author.

Emergence

A rhythm is patterned movement, shaped by society and the routines of everyday life, while being at the same time unique and the basis for creative action. How is this possible? The emergent or creative property of our daily rhythms derives from the fact that our movement is, simultaneously, personal and shared, unfolding within a complex environment marked by the rhythms of others (see also the chapter on Pathways). This might not be always obvious to us while engaged in our own activity since, particularly in cases of creative work, we often get to experience what Csikszentmihalyi (1990) famously referred to as '*flow*'. This is marked by complete immersion, focus on movement and the enjoyment of it. But flow is certainly not a solipsistic state. On the contrary, observing activities that lead to us to being in flow we often come to realise the importance of other people. Think, for example, about bands playing jazz, or research teams working together in a laboratory. More and more nowadays, research is concerned with networked or collaborative flow (see Gaggioli et al., 2013), in which relations and their rhythm come to the fore, articulating individual emotions and motivations. The emergence that is at the core of collaboration relies heavily on the articulation, intersection, and hybridisation of rhythms, where the whole is greater than the sum of parts.

The last illustration of this dynamic in a Japanese context takes us back to the nuclear attack on Hiroshima, on 6 August 1945, and the sad story of Sadako Sasaki, a child diagnosed with leukaemia after the bombing, who died at the age of 12 (Coerr, 1977). She became a well-known victim of this tragedy, remembered for her determination to fold 1,000 paper cranes, based on an ancient Japanese legend that whoever accomplishes this will be granted a wish. After her death, this became a symbol not only of the suffering, but also the hope for peace following the disaster and, in 1958, a statue of Sadako holding a crane was unveiled in the Peace Memorial Park in Hiroshima. One account of this story says that Sadako did not manage to finish the *origami* cranes and her friends continued her work. Today, children all over Japan commemorate her story by folding and sending paper cranes to the memorial (see Figure 16.2), in what became a small exhibition place used to display drawings and other small artistic products. Through them, people from Japan and abroad co-participate in a collective movement of great symbolic significance. The

particular rhythm of creating an *origami* shape, repeated thousands of times, gains new, emerging properties when it encounters the creations of others, when personal action becomes communal (see also the chapters on Memory and Reflexivity). This emergence doesn't stop at the level of meanings but also finds expression in the proliferation of artefacts produced and sent to the memorial. Through them, it is not only a rhythm that is being shared, but the possibility of creatively answering war, suffering, and death.

Figure 16.2 Paper cranes at the memorial of Sadako Sasaki in Hiroshima
Source: Photo taken by the author.

From rhythm to style

I have argued here that an exploration of rhythm is essential for understanding creative action in its patterned, unique, and emergent expression. The tea ceremony, the shrine votive plaques, and the Peace Memorial in Japan illustrate very well the simultaneously individual and cultural movements that contribute to building a shared, public life. From very mundane activities, such as serving and drinking tea, to sending one's wishes to the gods and hoping for a better, more peaceful future, the rhythms of individuals and communities intermingle, generating a complex picture of normativity and distinctiveness.

What these rhythmic movements ultimately generate is a style, defined by Baerveldt and Cresswell (2014, p. 60) as 'the *coherent deformation* of a norm or convention' (see also Baerveldt, 2013). Style is usually considered of great importance in art and every artist knows that, in order to be recognised, he or she needs to continue being creative within the (often self-imposed) boundaries of a coherent body of work. The same applies to our existence as social and cultural beings and to human action across domains. There are patterns of activity in producing scientific outcomes, designing new artefacts, and engaging with other people and material tools in the everyday. The style of our actions and interactions is something we at times get to reflect on, especially when we encounter obstacles or resistance, or when our style becomes at odds with the style of others. In those cases, we tend to try and reconnect with the rhythms we are familiar with, to find those resonances between our actions and the actions of others, to playfully engage with what culture has to offer us. Our style 'bends' according to the context we are in and this is one of its most important creative qualities – being able to change, to adapt, to surprise while, at the same time, remaining recognisable, understandable, and ultimately predictable, even if only in retrospect.

The rhythms of our life are both freeing and constraining; in fact, they allow us to be creative precisely because they are always related to the conventional. The notion of style helps us transcend the long-established dichotomies between individual and social, stability and change, sharedness and uniqueness (see also the chapter on Upcycling). While creativity is, in essence, movement, this movement leaves multiple 'traces' and crystallises in the form of style – accents within our own generative rhythms of being and creating.

Note

1. The Online Etymology Dictionary (<http://www.etymonline.com/>).

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