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Abstract

This text translated here (first published in *Die Tat* in May 1921) is an early elaboration of Rudolf Laban's polyrhythmic ontology. The phenomenon of rhythm here takes shape through the manifold ways in which it resonates in the text (Ur-rhythm, Eu-rhythm, Kako-rhythm). Besides positing a fundamental co-dependency between rhythm, movement and space, Laban sees rhythm here also as the gateway to a socio-ethical dimension culminating in the Festival, or art of celebration.

Keywords

1920s, body, dance, polyrhythm, rhythmanalysis, ritual

'Eurhythmmy' is a term that has been used for thousands of years, and it originally meant 'a beautiful or harmonious flow of movement [*Wohlfluss*] perceivable through our senses'. The totality of all imaginable sequences of movement is rhythm in nature. But does anything exist that is not an outcome of movement? The easily definable, clearly visible good order [*Wohlordnung*] of sequences of movement is beautifully rhythmic, eurhythmic.¹ However, in the end does anything exist that is not well ordered, that is, perceivable as being composed of the basic elements?

Phenomena that were not recognized as aftermaths of movement – either because the movements involved in their formation and decay were too swift, too slow, too far or too near, or because they changed too rapidly or too silently – were called immobile, rigid, static. But

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also in those forms it is possible to perceive good order, and to define them as regular, symmetric and proportional (i.e. harmonic) as a result of the increasing degree of movement inherent in them.

Every phenomenon [*Erscheinung*], including those which are perceived by us as immobile, is in constant motion, and it is therefore intrinsically rhythmic: for it receives its unique quality – the hallmark of its unity – due to the resonance of specific nodal points [*Knotenpunkte*] of an infinite range of phenomena. But this resonance is nevertheless always movement. Every regularity, symmetry and proportionality and harmony is caused by forces [*Teilspannungen*] which, turbulently flowing into and around each other, generate structures [*Gebilde*] of clearly perceptible harmonious rhythm [*Wohlrhythmus*]. Good order in all forms, whether moving or apparently still, is also eurhythmmy.

When, as a consequence of deeper investigation and logical thinking [*Nacheinanderdenken*], we are able to recognize all phenomena as structures [*Gebilde*] that are intrinsically rhythmic, we might ask: where does eurhythmmy end and kakorhythmmy begin? In general, we identify as kakorhythmic those phenomena whose constituent sub-rhythms we cannot perceive as being regular or symmetric, or flowing into each other in good proportions.

The boundary between eurhythmmy and kakorhythmmy is, however, fluid. A subtly tuned organ of perception knows how to detect the rule, the order, the structure of the complexity – in short, the existence of harmonic flow even in the most apparently complicated kakorhythmmy. The civilized man [*Kulturmensch*] seeks, and is able to consciously recognize, what primitives sensed only unconsciously: all that exists and happens emerges from a more or less complex metamorphosis of simpler base rhythms [*Grundrhythmen*]. The origin of these base rhythms was always sensed as being Ur-rhythm.² The rhythmic metamorphoses follow regularly from a simple to a more complex and progressive chains of events. When our organs of perception perceive these chains of events with a spatial arrangement, speed, amplitude and intensity appropriate to their perceptivity, we gain the impression of something ordered, comprehensible and clear, and then we speak of understanding, beauty, positive flow – eurhythmmy. But if we are suddenly catapulted from extreme to

extreme and are even carried away outside the extremes, we then, in distress, call what we don't understand kakorhythmy.

The individual has two options in order to harmonize or connect their personal rhythm [*Eigenrhythmus*] with the rhythm of all other happenings. They can either close their mind to what is alien to them or beyond their level of development, that is, to whatever is kakorhythmic relative to their skills; they will hedge themselves around with rules and practices, impose technical schematas on what is natural, and install security measures in order to exclude what they perceive as kakorhythmic. Or they can aspire to increase their skills to the ultimate in order to comprehend, and thus experience as eurhythmic, as large a part as possible of the all-encompassing rhythm [*Allrhythmus*].

Human conscience – our sense of culture and aesthetics and our capacity to read the world [*Weltahnung*] – has always searched for means and ways by which to awaken the high moral sense within each individual, so that we can, at all times – in art as in life – independently and with a mind free from dogma identify the boundary between what is acceptable and what is not, between eurhythmy and kakorhythmy. This seems to me to be the essential meaning of *eurhythmic education*.

The *art of the celebration* [*Festkunst*]³ is freer than pedagogy, philosophy, the applied arts [*Werkkunst*] and all other forms of development grounded in everyday life. The art of celebration is meant to connect to the all-encompassing rhythm in its complete and infinite variability through dance. Essentially, the Festival knows no kakorhythmy. However, this type of art should not misuse its freedom, and should serve people's *hearts*, blending the inspiring with the astounding. Only when the Festival unveils the deeper eurhythmic meaning of what seems kakorhythmic by way of affectionate human guidance – only then has it accomplished its task as mediator of the experience of the all-encompassing dance [*Alltanzes*].

Art and education will be effectively eurhythmic, that is, they will sustain civilized man's perception of nature's fundamental eurhythmy, when they cease trying to extend or constrict the individual's horizons with any schematic quantitative principle.

Whoever sets boundaries, be they wide or narrow, merely obstructs, frightens, brings down to a level and confounds, and so generates kakorhythms, which are nothing but a web of human fears.

But whoever encourages others to look freely around, according to their ability and their mood, and helps to clear away the impediments to a free vision and perspective for themselves and others, that person advances the experience of eternal eurhythm of all movement, probably resulting in the greatest good fortune and the noblest aim of all human culture.

Translated by Paola Crespi

Translator's Notes

1. 'Eu' is, in ancient Greek, a prefix which expresses notions of 'good', 'well' and 'pleasing', as opposed to 'Kako', which has connotations of 'bad', 'wrong' and 'evil'.
2. 'Ur' is a German prefix which expresses the meaning 'original' or 'primitive'.
3. In line with other commentators, I have translated 'Fest' as 'celebration'.

Rudolf Laban (1879–1958), a Hungarian-born dancer, choreographer and movement theoretician, is generally recognized as the founding father of *Ausdrucktanz*, and the inventor of the most widely used system of notation of bodily movement (Labanotation).

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