Rhythm in Mysteries – Mysteries of Rhythms.
The Great Dionysiac Fresco in Villa dei Misteri, Pompeii.

In the beginning was rhythm…

Torill Christine Lindstrøm, Ph.D. prof. emer.
University of Bergen

We find rhythms everywhere: in the body, in dance, in music, in patterns in nature, in days and nights, in the seasons, in textiles, landscapes, and many other places, – ubiquitous!

Still, I was surprised when I discovered a rhythm in the ancient fresco: The Fresco in Villa dei Misteri, located close to Pompeii (Fig 1, 2). This fresco is one of the largest and most famous paintings from Roman antiquity. It has been, and still is, studied and analysed, and interpreted from various perspectives: in particular history of art and history of religion, and even psychology. – I will take a step outside these perspectives, and identify the rhythm, and speculate on why it was made, and what it may have meant.

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- Insert Fig. 2 about here -

The Villa dei Misteri (Villa of the Mysteries) and its Fresco

The Villa dei Misteri (Villa of the Mysteries) was originally a Samnite rural house, situated somewhat outside the northern city-wall around Pompeii. But particularly after the Roman colonialization of Pompeii in

89 BC, and when general Lucius Cornelius Sulla "founded" Pompeii as a Roman colony in 80 BC (Potter 1987, 83), this house underwent several refurbishments and changes, including painted wall-decorations in several rooms. The painted decorations on the walls of the two *triclinia* (dining-rooms) are particularly beautiful. But the most famous one, is the Great Fresco, often called the Dionysiac Fresco (Fig. 3. 4).

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- Insert Fig. 4 about here -

When this Dionysiac fresco was painted, is discussed, but the period between 60 – 40 BC seems to be the most likely (Gazda 2000, 13); and it is painted in the Roman painting Style II phase 1b (Beyen 1938, 86 sq). The *triclinium* (dining-room) where the fresco is painted, is situated at the south-western end of the house, and is probably the least accessible room in the house. It had a beautiful view. This may mean that the room was reserved for special occasions and for special guests.

The fresco is traditionally, and by most researchers, seen as being composed of 10 scenes, with 29 persons (human, semi-divine, and divine) and 2 herbivore animals. (Here, the persons are labelled P1 to P29 in the text and on the figures). However, there is no absolute consensus regarding what persons belong to what scene, because there are no visible, distinct divisions between the scenes. And many persons in one scene overlap with persons commonly regarded to belong to the next scene. In this way, the whole fresco has a certain "flow" and close interconnections. The interconnection between the persons is also evident in that many of them co-operate quite intensely, or look at each other. (Fig. 5, 6, 7, 8).

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- Insert Fig. 7 about here -

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The fresco is called "Dionysiac". This is because the god of wine and vegetation (and a lot of other areas), Dionysos, is depicted, together with a female companion (most likely his wife, Ariadne, but possibly his mother, Semele), in the middle of the central, eastern wall. This wall is thus at the end of the room, but is most likely to be perceived first by anybody who enters the room through its main door, whereas the longer walls, to the north and south, are on the sides. The walls, and then the fresco, is only interrupted by a large window (to the south), and the large entrance door. Yet, there is also a small door in the north-western corner of the northern wall, but this door does not "interrupt" the fresco, the fresco to the right of this door is, (by most researchers), regarded as starting point of the fresco and its themes. The fresco covers all four walls of the room.

In addition to Dionysos' central position, factors that add to the Dionysiac label of the fresco, is the fact that there are several other persons and animals, that are closely connected to Dionysos (two representations of Silenos, four satyrs, a buck (male goat), and a fawn). All these factors have led most interpreters to conclude that the fresco not only show typical Dionysiac scenes and figures, but also that the scenes show Dionysiac initiation ceremonies (Bradway 1982, Maiuri 1931, Seaford 1991, Sauron 1998, and many others). Other popular interpretations are the Jungian one that claims that a woman's maturation-process is shown (Fierz-David 1988), and a psycho-analytical interpretation (Benvenuto 1994), that it shows a woman's natural stage transitions (Reis 1991), and that a bridal preparation is taking place (Veyne 1998), in particular a pre-nuptial initiation of a bride and prophesying in that connection (Little 1972); and finally, it is suggested

that the fresco shows initiations of both males and females into the Dionysiac mysteries and inclusion into a Dionysiac *thiasos* (congregation) (Seaford 1991). Dionysos was an exceptionally popular god, he had numerous epithets (describing and attributing names), and Dionysiac motifs are found all around Pompeii, Campania, and in the Greek-Roman world in general. The Dionysiac worship, rites, cults, and ceremonies varied a lot, from orgiastic feasts, (factual or overestimated), to processions, theatre performances, sacrificial rites, to meetings in closed social circles and congregations (*thiasoi*).

The persons in the fresco have close to natural size, considering the average height of people at the time when it was painted. This size of the persons thus defines the fresco as a megalography (Sauron 1998). The style is typical Hellenistic, shown among other things by some of the persons showing vivacious movements, and in that some persons seem to be "stepping out of" the painting, almost as "coming into" the room itself. This creates a strong feeling of closeness between the persons in the fresco and the onlooker.

The interpretations of the fresco are still being discussed, and no absolute conclusions has been made. And it is possible that this fresco was intentionally made multivocal, with several possible "readings". – Be that as it may.

The rhythm of the Dionysiac Fresco

In each scene there is one person who detaches him-/herself from the others (first described by Wesenberg 1997). Without referring to, or being restricted to, the traditionally defined "scenes", one can claim that there is repetitiously one figure who detaches themself from the group of other figures that they are spatially, thematically, or activity-wise co-located with. Each detaching person or figure walks away or looks away from, or beyond, their surroundings, and always in the same direction: towards the right. This phenomenon seems to serve two functions: It serves to direct the onlookers' attention towards the next activity (scene),

and it serves to make connections between the various activities, activities that are traditionally conceived of as belonging to different "scenes".

Based on this observation, I will claim that the figures form a rhythm, a minuet- or waltz-like ¾ rhythm, (1-2-3-**4**), with the person on the "fourth stroke" leading the spectators' gaze onto the next activity. This rhythm also contributes to create a unity in the fresco. This pattern is repeated throughout the whole fresco, apart from the divine couple (Dionysos and Ariadne), which is the centre, and one might say, is the axis, of the whole fresco.

This rhythm does not quite follow the traditional division of the freso into ten scenes. While transcending some of the traditional scenes, there are also a few adaptations to the ¾ system: Silenos (P8) with the lyre functions as the forth figure ("the forth stroke") in Scene II, despite that he is often regarded as belonging to Scene III. In Scene III ("Silenos and a pastoral scene") one must count the suckling fawn or the standing goat as one of those who takes part in the ongoing activities of the scene, and add "The woman running" (P11), who is commonly regarded as a separate scene. She functions as "the fourth stroke". In Scene V, "Silenos and satyrs", one has to count the mask as one of the scene's "persons". Finally, in Scene IX, "The toilet of a bride", it is the third person, P27 (a woman doing her hair, commonly called "The bride"), who looks out of the scene, who represents the fourth stroke, whereas the Eros (P28) represents the third stroke. In the case of Scene IX this adaptation was obviously necessary since this second Eros (P28) is located across the corner, if he was not placed there, that part of the wall would be left undecorated, and the three-dimensional effect of the corner would be lost. In addition, given his role as a person who shows the conventional meditative posture connected to listening to divinations (De Grummond 2000, 2002), he must look towards the others in that scene (Scene IX).

So, in each activity, there are four figures. In each activity, only three of the figures fully take part in, or observe the activities. The fourth has, or also has, the function of connecting the activity (scene) that he or she is

regarded to be located within, with the following activity (scene). This is done partly by two-directional movements and partly by divided attentions:

- Insert Fig. 9 about here -

Starting with Scene I, (traditionally called "The reading of the ritual"), P1, P2, and P3 are engaged in the activity of reading (or chanting) and listening to it, and thus seem to have some contact, whereas P4, usually defined as belonging to this scene, walks away from it. Her body slightly overlaps with P3, thereby giving her a connection to the activity of Scene I, and she turns her head as if being attentive to what goes on there, but by following the direction of her gait, the onlooker's attention is led on to Scene II. And, the fact that P4 is carrying a tray or plate makes her fit in better with the activities of Scene II which contains various other household utensils, as also noted by Pappalardo (2004).

In Scene II, (traditionally called "The Sacrifice"), the women (P5, P6, P7) are engaged in an activity together. Silenos (P8) who is often regarded as belonging to the next scene, is so close to the three women in Scene II, and considerably overlaps with P7, that he can also be seen as belonging to Scene II. He is turning his back to the women's activities and looks in the direction of Scene III. So, his body is spatially situated in Scene II, but nevertheless he is often regarded as belonging to Scene III with the bucolic idyll with satyrs, into which he, as Silenos, more appropriately belongs. The direction of his gaze and body draws the onlooker's attention over to Scene III.

In Scene III, (traditionally called "Silenos and a pastoral scene"), the two very young satyrs (P9, P10) and the suckling animal form a unity of activity and there is eye contact between them as P9 looks at, or towards, P10. But right next to them, and overlapping the satyr P10, is a woman running (P11), traditionally called "The horrorstruck woman". She is

actually closer to them than Silenos (P8) is, who is said to belong to their scene. Still, she is usually defined as representing a scene of her own, Scene IV, but in this connection, she functions at "the fourth stroke" of the rhythm of the activity in Scene III.

In Scene IV, (traditionally called "The horrorstruck woman"), P11, as mentioned above, overlaps one of the small satyrs (P10) of Scene III. She is moving in their direction, but her attention is directed in the opposite direction, towards the scenes on the next wall, (across the corner), most probably Scene V. She may actually be seen as exchanging looks with the Silenos of that scene.

- Insert Fig. 10 about here -

On the eastern wall, in Scene V, (traditionally called "Silenos and satyrs"), one may count four figures as: Silenos (P12), two satyrs (P13, P14), and a theatrical mask. The essential actants are Silenos and the satyr looking into Silenos' bowl (P13). The other satyr's function in the scene is (at least) to hold up the mask, but his eyes and attention is directed towards the next scene, so he connects Scene V with Scene VI. Here, his divided attention is a bit subtle, but is still there.

In Scene VI, (Dionysos and Ariadne), the divine couple are attentive only to each other. The scene consists only of this couple. The rhythm stops at this point, again a signal of the centrality of this scene; yet the ¾ rhythm of the fresco continues in the next scene.

In Scene VII, (traditionally called "The unveiling of the mystic vannus"), again there appears to be four persons, as the most accepted count of figures is to see two females (P18, P19) behind the woman (P17) who appears to unveil a phallos. Her right foot is overlapping the podium under P16, giving her a touch of connection with Scene VI. The fourth figure, the winged female (P20), is again the one with divided attention. Her lower body is turned towards P17, and her left hand makes a

gesture towards her (or the phallos), but her upper body and head is directed towards the next scene, and her whip-stroke is also clearly directed towards it, and towards P21 who will receive it. As the following scene is located on the next wall, the vigour of P20's directedness towards it, has the effect of binding the two scenes close together. In addition, it makes the spectator want to see what, or whom, her whiplash is directed towards (Fig. 11).

- Insert Fig. 11 about here -

On the southern wall, in Scene VIII there are again four female figures. Two, P21 and P22, are not looking at each other, but are having physical contact. P24 (a dancing woman, commonly called "The maenad") overlaps with P23 (a woman holding a *thyrsos*-staff), thereby giving the impression of, at least, spatial contact between them. They may seem to be interacting, but P23 is actually more attentive to the whipping-scene than to the dance, both in the directedness of her body and of her gaze, making her more part of that interaction. And again, the fourth person's attention (P24, dancing woman, "The maenad") is directed towards the next scene. In this case, her face is mostly hidden as she is seen from behind, but her head is clearly turned to the right, towards Scene IX, located at the other side of the window. She seems not to be interested in, or aware of, the activities to her left.

- Insert Fig. 12 about here -

Scene IX, the scene that the woman dancing (P24), is turning her head towards, also contains four persons (P25, P26, P27, P28) (Fig. 11). Three of them are situated on the southern wall, and one Eros (P28) is placed across the corner, on the eastern wall (Fig. 12). If anything might be interpreted as having the function of "filling in of vacant space on the wall" (as some claim Scene IX and Scene X to be), it could be him. Still, he still clearly is connected to Scene IX. He is looking towards that scene,

and he has a "colleague" there, another Eros. And as mentioned above, he is suggested to have a particular role in the divination process and pictorial composition. It might be argued that the ¾ rhythm is broken in this scene, as it is not the figure situated to the farthest right who looks towards the next scene. In this case it is the third person, P27 (a woman doing her hair, "The bride") who connects to the next scene (Scene X). I regard this as an adaptation to the corner of the room. She may be listening to whatever P26 is saying, but with regard to where she looks, she appears inattentive to all the other figures in her scene. She looks away from the Eros to her left, who could be seen as trying to attract her attention to the mirror or picture that he holds up, and she looks beyond the second Eros (P28) towards Scene X.

- Insert Fig. 13 about here -

On the western wall, scene X ends the cycle of , and the cyclic viewing of the fresco. There P29 (a seated woman) closes the cycle by looking back towards Scene IX, perhaps looking directly at P27, (a woman doing her hair, "The bride").

Why a rhythm?

One may ask why there should be a rhythm in this fresco, when a rhythm, to my knowledge, is not a characteristic of other Roman paintings. There is one possibility: the rhythm may be an illustration of, or inspired by, the rhythm of a dithyramb.

The dithyramb (διθύραμβος, *dithyrambos*) was a hymn in honour of Dionysos (Harrison, 1997). It was sung by a vocalist and a chorus, and frequently accompanied by an *aulos*. A dithyramb was not only sung, but also danced to, and its tradition was very ancient in Greece. The connection with Dionysos is also shown in that Dithyrambos was also

used as an epithet, (one of many), to the god. An *aulos* has two pipes at an angle, joined only at the mouth-piece, and was very often used in Dionysiac contexts, as shown in numerous representations (such as paintings, sculptures, reliefs). Yet it is absent in this Dionysiac fresco.

The term dithyramb is believed to have a non-Greek origin. An old hypothesis suggests it to be Phrygian or Pelasgian and literally meaning "four-step", which would be interesting, as it would match the rhythm of this fresco, yet is not likely. Anyhow, whatever the rhythms of various dithyramb-songs and dances, rhythms were essential elements in the various Dionysiac performances, theatre, processions, singing, and more.

So, to conclude, although the connection between dithyramb and the rhythm of the fresco is very vague, still, it is possible that the phenomenon of the *dithyrambos* might have inspired the painter to make a rhythm in this fresco.

Whatever the reason for it: The Dionysiac Fresco in Villa dei Misteri has a distinct rhythm, a minuet- or waltz-like ¾ rhythm, with a stress on the fourth stroke: 1-2-3-**4**, 1-2-3-**4**, 1-2-3-**4**…

You may dance to it…..
You may dance it!

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