



Volume 5, Issue 1/2

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Keywords: rhythm, aesthetics, practice, multimodal ethnography, audiovisual anthropology

Recommended Citation: Cook, I. M., Hänsch, V. and Simon, S. (2022). 'Rhythmic Aesthetic Formations: Multimodal Explorations', *entanglements*, 5(1/2): 199-207



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Introduction: Rhythmic Aesthetic Formations: Multimodal Explorations

Ian M. Cook, Valerie Hänsch, Sandro Simon

Abstract

Rhythm is a way of being with/in oneself and with/in the world, bound up in the current of time. Emerging through aisthesis (sensory experiences and knowledge of them) and again giving form to it, rhythm provides orientation and tacit meaningfulness to one's doing. As repetition with difference, it is fundamentally about agency and one's room for manoeuvre within a given context. Moreover, it engages a sense of community. Yet, rhythm is not a given. Skilled practices, routinised actions, and work are instrumental for its becoming. And together with improvisation and creativity, they are crucial to overcome ruptures and breaks from rhythm, too. Assembling ethnographic studies from Namibia, India, Sudan, and Senegal, this special section employs a variety of multimodal approaches to explore the relationship between rhythm, sensory experiences, and skilled practices, routinised actions, and work. It inquires how aesthetics influence and shape rhythm, and how rhythm in turn shape sensory experiences; traces the role of absence or arrhythmia of action and asks how visibility and sound relate to each other in the establishment of rhythm. Thereby, it demonstrates and reflects on how multimodal anthropology can explore and mediate bodily experiences of movement and complex rhythmic patterns of everyday life. The multimodal use of photographs, sounds, text, films and their combination are evocative beyond abstraction and aesthetic forms in themselves. In their combination, they are particularly suitable for conveying multi-sensory experiences and rhythmic patterns.

Skilled practises, routinised action and work provide temporal orientations and produce familiar sensory experiences and engagements with the world. Their rhythmic repetitions bring forth difference and multiplicity (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; Lefebvre, [1992]2004), bridge planned and situated actions (Suchman, 1987), and mark moments of movement and pause. For humans, experiencing rhythm is thereby about the perception of an order of a repetition combined with the demand, preparation and anticipation for something to come (You, 1994, p. 363, drawing on Susanne K. Langer). Rhythm is thus grounded in the now, yet always future-oriented. To constitute such forward-bound rhythmicity, aesthetics is key.

By bringing together ethnographic studies from Namibia, India, Sudan, and Senegal, this special section engages with various multimodal formats to explore, discuss and present the connection between sensory experiences, work and rhythmicity. It is guided by the following questions: How do

aesthetics influence and shape rhythms and how, in turn, does rhythm shape sensory experiences? How does the absence or the arrhythmicity of action shape these processes and experiences and how do they inform and translate into audiovisual production? How do visibility and sound relate to each other in this respect? And how can we approach the sensuous-experiential dimension of rhythmicity through multimodal forms?

To answer these questions, we need to develop our existing conceptual tools so as to better take into account this intersection of rhythm and aesthetics. Taking earlier discussions on social, cultural and work rhythms as a point of departure (cf. Bücher, 1899; Dobler, 2016; Evans-Pritchard, 1939, 1940; Ingold, 2000, 2013; Lefebvre, [1992]2004; Lyon, 2019; Mauss, 1934, 1979; Spittler, 2008), this special section focuses on the aesthetics of rhythms and how they are analysed, comprehended and mediated through various modalities. In this short *Introduction* to the special section, we take the first steps in this direction, outlining a rhythmic conceptualization of everyday aesthetics based as sensual perception, before moving on to explore some of the ways in which individuals and groups act on and through rhythmic patterns, and finally highlighting some of the ways in which multimodal anthropology can be especially useful in such lines of enquiry.

A Moving Sense of the World

Building on recent anthropological debates on aesthetics—that move away from a narrow understanding of aesthetics confined to art and conventional notions of beauty and instead draw on the Greek notion of *aisthesis* (sensory experiences and knowledge of them)—helps to locate aesthetics more broadly in the realm of everyday life and its routines. Aesthetic experiences of the everyday, such as the textures of soil, the smell of food, the sound of a workplace, the shape of a building, or the wetness of the sea, structure the way of being-in-the-world and induce affective resonances. Working in or moving through well-known, embodied environments thus creates feelings of familiarity and ease (Haapala, 2005).

Aesthetic patterns or forms that emerge through rituals, designs of buildings or work practises interact with emergent routinised actions and form a specific ‘social aesthetic’ that is not just a symbolic expression but a way of perceiving, feeling and being-in-the-world (MacDougall, 2006, p. 97). With Birgit Meyer, we understand aesthetics as the ‘total sensory experience of the world and our sensitive knowledge of it’ (Meyer, 2009, p. 6). This approach highlights embodied and sensory experiences as well their affective resonances. In her discussion of religious practises, Meyer (2009, p. 7) coins the term ‘aesthetic formation’ to capture ‘processes of forming subjects and the making of communities’ through shared aesthetic forms. While aesthetic forms certainly bear strong emotional attachments and bind people together and structure experiences, in this special section, we explore how everyday aesthetics contribute to the formation of rhythm and, in turn, how rhythmic patterns shape bodily and sensory experiences.

We argue that routine has a form, and these forms have aesthetics. These ‘rhythmic aesthetic formations’ are felt and embodied, reveal how we experience familiarity and strangeness, and are produced at different spatio-temporal scales. We use the term rhythmic aesthetic formations to highlight the way in which the perceived environment is co-created through the practices of those who move through it, to point towards the shape of the patterned sensory experiences.

Rhythmic aesthetic formations have affective resonances; we know it, we are familiar with it, and we feel it. The form of the environment, the shared characteristics of something—like the shape of a mourning ritual or the flow of a cinematic experience—is created through and interacts with emergent routinised interaction. This is to argue that aesthetics happens through engagement, in

the in-betweenness of everyday life, through interactions of people, their regularities and their rhythmic environment.

It also happens through the body, a body which is historically and culturally produced through relations of class, race, upbringing, experience, habitus, gender and so on: whether or not something 'feels' right or wrong is often a rhythmic expression of whether a person feels as if they belong in a particular context, and a large part this relates to how the body has been (un)conditioned to move in any given environment. Bodily conditioning, or 'dressage' (Lefebvre, [1992]2004), can be seen in extreme forms in military drills or the training of animals through repeated tasks, but can also be seen more widely in both the common social aesthetics of closed communities such as schools (MacDougall, 2006) and more broadly in techniques of the body (Mauss, 1934), such as the way groups walk at certain times and places (Vergunst, 2010). Thereby, different conditionings might overlap and inform each other (Spittler, 2016). However, as we will return to below, repetitive movements need not be understood in terms of how the environment impinges itself on the body but rather as an avenue to understand repetition and agentive change through action. The point is rather that, in sensing the rhythmic aesthetic formation through the body, we need to be cognisant of how social rhythmic patterns have shaped the body over time and conditions of often unequal power relations.

For the most part, we move through everyday environments unaware of how we are being formed by it and without being sensitive to its particularities; we have made it familiar by making it our own, by creating webs of significance and meaning and through the formation of relationships over time (Haapala, 2005). Yet, even a familiar environment is far from static; rather, it is alive with patterned cultural movements, and thus, as we go about our everyday life, we need to stay in rhythm by continually attuning our doing in response to an ongoing monitoring of the emergent task, or, to keep perceiving and doing in relation (cf. Ingold 1999, drawing on Nicholai Bernstein). If it is through 'perceptual habit' that we 'come into possession of a world' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 153), then routinization and the corresponding enskillment are a key part of this; they allow one to create or maintain rhythm patterns in relation to the wider rhythmic aesthetic formation.

Familiarity thus breeds anticipation: each rhythmic moment is a confirmation of a pattern that stretches into the past, and the creator's anticipation of its continuation (Abraham, 1995). The body is squeezed between confirmation and anticipation, between the future and the past; bodies are incarnate continuation laced with change, and have the possibility for creative appropriation of rhythms (McDonald, 2014).

It is thus why ruptures are both jarring and openings to the creation of new possible patterns. Rupture troubles the senses, leading to perception and embodied knowledge going out of sync (Hänsch, this issue). As Jackson (1983, p. 328) writes, 'when our familiar environment is suddenly disrupted we feel uprooted, we lose our footing, we are thrown, we collapse, we fall [...] but such falling [...] is not [...] a mere manner of speaking: it is a shock and disorientation which occurs simultaneously in body and mind'. However, similar to how repetitive, dressage-like training is vital for preparing pilots for emergencies, such as engine failure (DeLyser, 2012), so too can being rhythmically attuned to one's environment allow for orientation amidst change (Cook; Simon, this issue).

Ruptures are, of course, not all alike in either their duration or power to reconfigure existing patterns and how we sense them—a death is not a power cut in a cinema, a late arriving boat is not a highrise being constructed. This necessitates paying attention to spatial and temporal scales of rupture and change, or, to phrase this in terms of rhythmic aesthetic formations: what processes can produce transformative change in other rhythmic patterns, for how long, how sustainable are the

changes, in whose interests are they being brought about, how long will it take individuals and groups to develop new patterns in response? For instance, think of how long it takes the body to recalibrate after a long-haul flight when our bodies are out of sync with the natural rhythms in our new environment, or how pre-colonial pre-Christian rituals and patterned religious practices persist. Paying attention to how the large-scale structuring rhythmic changes create, recalibrate and dominate everyday patterns, and how new patterns are formed within, against and afresh from these, is key to understanding how sensual strangeness works its way into aesthetic formations.

However, this is not to suggest we are dominated by rhythmic patterns over which we have little control, but rather that we act with, through and on rhythms. Rhythmic structures and interwoven patterns form aesthetics of the environments through which practitioners move, and thus structure the possibilities for action. Mollusc gleaners, mourners, boatmen, housing agents, and deliverymen pay attention to their surroundings as they go about everyday life, but they also act through the attention-intention dialectic.

Crucial for such rhythmic intention is a feeling of competence, of being able to actualise one's skills and knowledge and coming to experience tangible results of one's doing (Dobler, 2016). Actualising competence and falling in rhythm then means to bridge plan and situated action (cf. Suchman, 1987), with the inner logic of action that emerges weaving patterns into moments where plans are changed (Dobler, 2016). Actualising competence towards rhythmicity can also be supported by technology (Simon, this issue), just as by cooperation and shared activity. Sound, thereby, can act as a marker for such a shared competence (van den Berg, this issue). Once rhythmicity is achieved and one experiences it, gets caught up in it, attention can divert away from the necessary to the performative (Dobler, 2016). Feelings of flow, ease or peace of mind emerge and give tacit meaningfulness to one's doing. Beyond mechanical repetition, rhythm is thus fundamentally about agency and one's room for manoeuvre within a given context, such as when the environment is radically changed but, rather than accepting displacement, communities seek to find their own new ways to rhythmically inhabit their surroundings (Hänsch, this issue).

Being able to act upon and through rhythm also seems to speak to an actor's ability to be attuned to the multiple rhythmic patterns in their environment and when and how one can slide in and out of them (or forge ones anew). This might mean synchronising the patterns of work with the patterns of leisure (Grennan, this issue), or being aware of how the different temporal desires of buyers and sellers can be matched against one another and how this feeds into large scale desire for a different individual and societal futures (Cook, this issue).

Aesthetics, Rhythm and Multimodal Anthropology

The authors of this special section experiment with different multimodal forms to explore the sensuous-experiential dimension of rhythmicity and to evoke more-than-textual multisensory worlds. Bodily experiences of movement and complex rhythmic patterns of everyday life can be captured by audio-visual methods 'as a means of doing rhythmanalysis' (Lyon, 2016, p. 2). The multimodal use of photographs, sounds, text, films and their combination are aesthetic forms in themselves and are particularly suitable for conveying multi-sensory experiences and rhythmic patterns as they have the capacity to generate both feelings and sensations that even exceed those contained in the images. The 'evocative power' (MacDougall, 2019, p. 77; Strecker, 2013, p. 53) of audio-visual works and images help to share and create experiences beyond texts. Multimodal anthropology thus offers possibilities to both explore and mediate sensory experiences and rhythmic feelings that are not easily graspable in language or, when expressed in language, and thus abstracted, take on different meanings than in the immediate experience.

The contributions to this special section were first presented at the panel ‘Rhythm, Sight and Sound: Work in Times of Uncertainty’ at the RAI Film Festival Conference, 2021. The development of the contributions was done in a collaborative fashion through discussion and debate with both the authors featured and the other presenters at the panel: Schuyler Marquez, Montse Pijoan and Jack Warner. In the collaborative style of the panel discussion, we used different multimodal tools to explore and expand on the notions of sensory experience, rhythm, work and audiovisual practice. To reflect and visualise our debates, we used a Miro board during the panel. This secured archive of reflections helped us to further develop our thoughts and discussions into this special section.

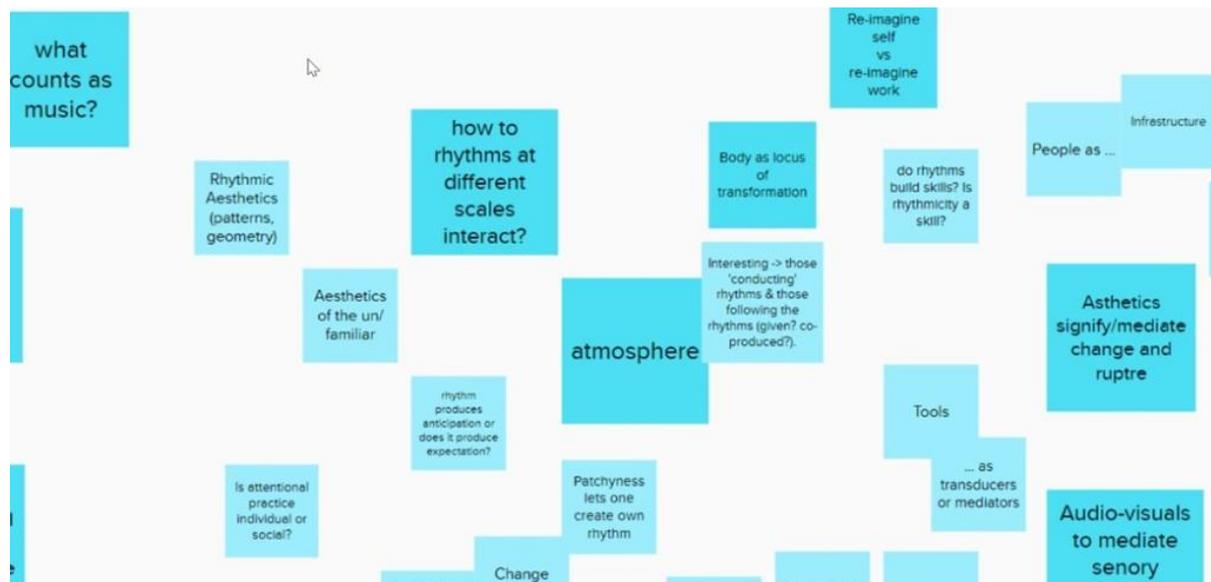


Figure 1: Part of the Miro board, used to reflect and visualise our ideas during the panel

In his contribution, van den Berg shows how rituals of mourning in North Central Namibia, Oukwanyama, are patterned and build on existing knowledge and shared imagination as well as social roles and norms. Their temporal progression, condensations and stretches, however, are guided by the enactment and experience of familiar sounds, the communal singing, wailing and praying. Sound is instructive and invites those present to partake in and contribute to an evolving rhythm of ritual—also for the anthropologist, for whom sound recording fostered attunement and intersubjectivity beyond the disruptiveness of the camera or notebook. Carried by sound and its experience, the ritual’s purpose shifts and becomes intrinsic; people mourn for the sake of mourning and not for future benefit. Over time, routines then channel individual responses to grief into a communal endeavour and allow for an overcoming of liminality through personal transformation as well as societal reintegration. Through reading text while listening to audio recordings, the transformative rhythmicity of the mourning ritual becomes graspable in layers, both sensuous and cognitive.

Hänsch, in her contribution, traces naval navigation across the newly dammed and slowly flowing River Nile in Northern Sudan. Dwellers’ senses are troubled as they experience a rupture between perception and embodied knowledges when their homes and routes start to submerge. Turning from a terrestrial to an aquatic perspective, they explore new ways of mobility by boat and continuously re-skill their vision to orient themselves on their different trajectories across the changing water. Vistas of the known or remaining, be it submerging palm groves or mountain tops,

thereby help to bring a world lost back into possession. Combining text, images and a short video, the experience of disturbed sensory attention becomes tangible. The video takes the viewer on a boat trip to explore routes in a radically changing environment.

Whereas in the cases from Namibia and Sudan rhythm is forged to create transgression and a return to stability, Cook, in his essay, shows how rhythm is also employed to be prepared for something new and be able to act fast. Amidst the polyrhythmic urban life of Mangaluru, India, successful real estate brokers follow strict routines to stay in pace, maintain social bonds and do not miss any openings that spring thereof. Repetitive formations, again, thereby create a sense of familiarity amidst rapid infrastructural change as actors are pulled forward by a vague desire for the modern world class city of their collective imagination. Using multiple split-screens and acousmatic sounds, this multimodal essay offers immersion into the multi-layered rhythmic patterns of religion, leisure and work in a fast changing city.

In the case of mollusc gleaning in the Sine-Saloum Delta, Senegal, as Simon inquires in his contribution, a rhythm of practice comes to be in attunement to and provides orientation in an ever-changing environment. In a macro-perspective, rhythmic gleaning provides a backdrop to deltaic life and an ongoing opportunity. Establishing a certain rhythm is crucial to entering into a gleaner sociality, yet, different from mourners in Namibia, gleaners do not strive to transgress a liminal state and return to a 'normal' state via rhythmisation. Rather, gleaners seek to make profits in the form of yields from maintaining rhythm and, similar to brokers in India, also act fast when new opportunities show up, before going back to gleaning. In a micro-perspective, too, gleaners strive to maintain continuity and uphold their gleaning rhythmicity through adjustments in performance rather than through pauses. They draw on longstanding dressage and childhood mimesis and situationally navigate between routinised skill and pathic attention. Audiovisual practice was one way of exploring and aligning to this rhythmicity of gleaning. Driven by mimesis and supported by 'delegating' competence to the camera, as well as letting the camera 'loose' and swirl around with the beings and materials of the delta, this practice yielded footage that gives access to a visceral multispecies perspective of gleaning and its rhythmicity.

For Indian workers going to and leaving the cinema when being called to work (and then often returning thereafter), Grennan, in her contribution, shows watching movies and working merge into a rhythmicity made up of both leisure and work. Indian cinema has been characterised as a 'cinema of interruptions' that does not aspire for seamless linearity and is composed of a known 'spice mix'. This is conducive to an agentive interaction with it. The interlocutors of Grennan favour some scenes over others, anticipate and predict such scenes, and try to align this with the erratic temporality of work duties (i.e. being called to work, for instance for quick deliveries). They piece scenes together to create an individual durational performance, or a 'piecemeal cinema', while their coming and going further punctuates the film after distinct scenes. On the one hand, the anticipation for work informs their viewing and makes it more exciting. On the other hand, their film experience then leaks into their work experiences, carries them emotionally and lets them measure duration of tasks in relation to scenes. Workers thus create rhythmicity from anticipatable, themselves rhythmic elements (film) and from erratic elements (work). Through the spatial montage of time, the short video consisting of found footage offers a sense of movement, and the strict boundaries between watching films in the cinema and working at the market become blurred. The cinema here, in resemblance to mollusc gleaning, figures as a rhythmic backdrop to larger life. Moreover, it is in the cinema, and in making one's own 'piecemeal cinema' in the tension with work, that workers experience agency. They thereby do not materially manipulate the films, but adjust their exposure to them, similar to how gleaners, boatmen, brokers and mourners seek to master not the other but the self in attunement to a changing environment.

In the Afterword, Lyon highlights the role of the body in grasping rhythms and in mobilising them to make one's own rhythmic aesthetic formations. She underlines how audiovisual tools are useful to capture rhythm, as it is both 'extensive and elusive' (Lyon, this issue), and how the multimodal contributions not only analyse rhythm but also evoke it. This speaks to a key aspect of rhythm analysis as postulated by Lefebvre ([1992]2004): one has to be grasped by rhythm in order to grasp it, be it as a practitioner, an ethnographer or a reader.

In this light, taken together, these contributions capture, analyse and evoke some of the ways in which rhythmic practices create the aesthetic formations through which people experience the world. Honing in on certain types of activities with pronounced rhythmicity, they thereby also open up new avenues for exploring the affordances of multimodal anthropology.

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