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Rhythm and Aesthetics in Waterwork and Audiovisual Practice

Sandro Simon

Abstract

Mollusc gleaning in the Sine-Saloum Delta, Senegal is a multisensory practice unfolding in the amphibious in-between. Through the lens of aesthetics and by means of text and film, I trace the roles of mimesis and dressage in learning how to glean and how to film such gleaning. I show how gleaners mediate intensities, integrate change, and interrelate omission and engagement. Building on both skill and pathic attention, they create an individual but attuned rhythmicity of practice, providing orientation amidst an ever-changing environment. Audiovisual practice with gleaners, in turn, came to be caught up in various forms of co-rhythmicity and opened up a watery and muddy multispecies perspective into gleaning. The images and sounds produced and then assembled into an audiovisual sequence, as a patterned confrontation of unlike(ly) elements, can evoke visceral synaesthesia and imagination, and once again provide a sense of the interdependent power of aesthetics in the establishment and experience of rhythm.

Introduction

Mollusc gleaning in the Sine-Saloum Delta, Senegal is practice unfolding with, in, and around water in mudflats, on sandbanks, and along mangroves. Such waterwork is not about mastering the other but about mastering the self via a continuous attuning to the moving environment. For deltaic women, gleaning evolved from a rather occasional to the most important livelihood activity after an array of mostly terrestrial activities had become less feasible or less lucrative due to environmental, political, and economic change (see Simon, 2019/2020, 2021).

Gleaning's rhythmicity, on the one hand, relates to tides and seasons, characterized by the shifts of periods of activity and periods of pause (see Simon, 2021). Thereby, not only does gleaning remain anticipated and thus present in off-times, in periods of activity, too—where gleaning can be suspended for other pressing and often unexpected opportunities and obligations—gleaning constitutes an ongoing opportunity, a general backdrop to deltaic life, and a chance to rhythmise one's life.

On the other hand, gleaning is also rhythmic on a more micro level. To establish rhythmicity, gleaners employ different variations of technique in correspondence with the presences and the types of mollusc gleaned, but also other gleaners as well as tools, water, wind, and ground.

In this multimodal contribution assembling text and audiovisuality, I am largely concerned with such a micro-perspective. I focus on the practice of gleaning for cockles, the most ‘popular’ or abundant type of molluscs, and its sensuous dimensions as well as its correspondences with ethnographic and audiovisual methodology.

By drawing on a year of in-depth ethnographic research with a community of gleaners and especially with Aissatou, a longstanding interlocutor and, among other things, an experienced gleaner, I inquire mollusc gleaning as a multisensory practice providing orientation amidst an ever-changing environment. Through the lens of aesthetics as sensory experience and sensitive knowledge, I trace the roles of mimesis and *dressage* in learning how to glean and how to film such gleaning, and the ways rhythmicity unfolds in the navigation between skill and pathic attention. A yielding of such audiovisual attunement and experimentation, a (preliminarily cut) ‘mimetic’ sequence, shall allow for a sensuous exploration of the rhythmicity of gleaning from a multispecies perspective—and provide the entry to this contribution:

Please see HTML version for accompanying video

<https://vimeo.com/755616522>

Figure 1: Mollusc Lifeworlds, Sequence 1.

Rhythm and Aesthetics in Waterwork

Mollusc gleaning is not a formalised or standardised practice; it often goes without many words and is considered to be learned (and learnable) largely by oneself. Gleaners draw on considerable dexterity, physical stretchability, or strength acquired from other (gendered) practices such as care work or agriculture (compare to Spittler, 2016). Yet, trying out gleaning is also often part of childhood. Most seasoned gleaners I met had done at least some gleaning as children, mostly with female relatives. And today, too, children are requested to help their mothers and their larger kin with certain tasks, such as carrying home part of the gleanings. Or they glean to earn some pocket money. Moreover, for children, gleaning can also be a playful leisure activity.

Observing children in their first steps of gleaning, I came to grasp that not being explicitly taught meant that children relied not only on their own experimentation but also on mimesis, often afforded by close bodily contact with their peers, mothers, and larger kin. For instance, the youngest daughter of Aissatou would lean on the leg of her mother or sit between her mother’s legs and drop molluscs in her sieve with loud splashes, mimicking the splashes of her mother. Or she would mimic her mother carrying a bucket or sieving and might thereby also search for attention and recognition. Mimesis here is thus, similarly as Taussig (1993, p. 21) has pointed out, both a copying or imitation and a palpable, sensuous connection between the bodies of perceiver and perceived.

For gleaning, *dressage* (Lefebvre (2004), meaning the way one bends to the ways of the craft one acquires (Dobler, 2016, p. 875), and the “(...) entrainment and repetition through which rhythm is learnt and becomes evident in the body over time (...)” (Lyon, 2019, p. 24) thus partly relates to mimesis and has deep ties to the biographies of gleaners.^[4] Moreover, aesthetics is also at play: relating to *aisthesis*, i.e., sensory experience of the world and sensitive knowledge of it (Meyer and Verrips, 2008, drawing on Aristotle); the formation of aesthetics of and through social gleaning fosters a sense of becoming self in correspondence with others. It is a way into a community of

practice and of becoming with and within a shared deltaic lifeworld. In a reciprocal relation, social gleaning and its rhythmicity shapes, transports, and helps to give expression to aesthetics, and is, at the same time, informed by it.

For the grown-up male anthropologist new to the gleaning and the delta, mimesis, *dressage*, and aesthetics took another route. Approaching the practice for me initially meant observing from a certain distance and trying out gleaning myself. From this, I first learned about work sequences. Gleaners were standing and bending over, squatting, kneeling, or sitting with their legs stretched forward and spread. In all these positions, they stretched out and then used their hands to transfer mud and shells into the sieve placed close to their body. Thereby, with their hands more or less covered by water according to the shifting tide, they rapidly moved all their fingers while pulling, almost as if they were tickling the ground. This helped them to detect sharper, dead cockles and leave as many as possible of them be.

To fill their sieves, gleaners rotated their upper bodies and then pulled lane after lane circularly around themselves. Tracks formed around them like rays of sunlight. However, each lane did not have to be next to the other; they could also skip and start again, for example, if there were not so many molluscs in one place. The women recognised this through haptics and visual observation, depending on how high and how clear the water was. Whereas the movements underwater brought little sound to the surface and, even when the water receded, the pulling or picking was quiet, the mud splashed loudly into the sieves. It indicated quantity beyond the need for visual confirmation. One would hear when the sieve was full, and others would hear so, too. Sound thus figured as a marker for (shared) competence (van den Berg, this issue).

Then, gleaners adjusted their posture to sieve and separate molluscs, soil, and water. The sieve needed to be moved back and forth quickly, with parts of it in the water and parts of it in the air, emitting a distinct and widely recognisable sound. Hereafter, under close observation and by quick hands and fingers, dead molluscs, or shells, were picked out and thrown away. Finally, the molluscs were thrown into the bucket. Every now and then, when a bucket filled up, it was emptied into a rice bag, which served as a depot. Being at the end of a pattern of work sequences, this was also an in-between moment that came with a shift of focus and a 'pause', often used for communication with others, stretching, or orientation. And it was a moment to decide where to glean next. Determined once more by the height of the water and its transparency, gleaners used a combination of eyes, fingers, and feet to determine if the spot they were at was favourable in terms of the water, whether it (still) held a good amount of molluscs—or whether they needed to move slightly or comprehensively shift their location. Moreover, they would move in relation to other gleaners and keep some distance from them. Together, yet in individual paces and trajectories, they proceeded in a loose swarm.

During a day of gleaning, this pattern of work sequences was repeated over and over again in variations. Gleaners tried not to take a break but to maintain rhythmicity by making work lighter, more playful and joyful: they adjusted performance and mediated the intensity of their gleaning practice through changing speed, postures, or technique, and eventually diverted their attention through singing, whistling, listening to others talk or engaging in conversation themselves.^[2]

Rhythmic Sense

Gleaning, these descriptions show, is all about rhythm, or, productive repetition that brings forth difference and multiplicity (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; Lefebvre, [1992]2004). Beyond fixed quota, objects to produce, tasks to be fulfilled, or strict time periods (see Simon, 2021), the etic dimension of gleaning rhythmicity relates directly to how gleaners individually structure their work within the

environment. Moreover, the emic dimension of rhythmicity relates to the sensory experience of one's own work. A certain indeterminacy or openness gives room for agency. It allows for establishing 'contact' between doing, world, and self, and a feeling of being competent to bridge plan and situated action (cf. Suchman, 1987; Spittler, 2016). Moreover, gleaners often recount feelings of flow, ease, or peace of mind. This points towards how rhythmicity, when achieved, gives '(...) aesthetic meaning to the working process, diverts workers' attention from necessity, and lets them experience work's performative aspects instead' (Dobler, 2016, p. 865). Gleaning rhythmicity hence opens up the way into a tacit meaningfulness of one's doing. Such being in rhythm means to be with/in oneself and at the same time with/in the world.

To forge a gleaning rhythmicity, kinaesthesia is indispensable. Then, sometimes vision comes to the foreground; sometimes hearing, vision, and haptics align as guarantors of sensory certainty. Or, indeed over the longest periods, it is haptics combined with some hearing but beyond the prerogative of the visual that drives gleaning. Running hands and fingers through water and mud or sensing the availability of molluscs with one's feet, haptics orients itself along the similarity of parts—the molluscs—and this supports the development and maintenance of rhythmicity (Dobler, 2016, p. 876). However, omission is also part of gleaning and intricately related to engagement. Gleaning is never 'perfect' or 'complete'; there are always molluscs that slip, only to be found another day. Furthermore, one has to detect the signal in the noise and mediate intensity: the mud affords many sensations. Thereby, dead, sharp shells cause the strongest stimulus but should be left, if possible, otherwise one risks being cut. Many dead shells might end up in the sieves anyway and then need to be sorted out, but one should try to reduce them and not go with the strongest 'beat', so to speak, and thereby risk getting out of pace. Indeed, in trying out gleaning as a novice, this mediation was difficult and I not only ended up with cuts in my fingers but, amidst this abundance of signals and intensities, also struggled to fall into a rhythm of practice.

Successful gleaning furthermore hinges on bringing together the shifting environment and the mobilities of other gleaners while gleaning 'along' molluscs. For this, also the pathic is required. Pathic is derived from *pathos*, referring to sensitivity, sentience, affectability, and suffering, and can include being exposed to something excessive and unexpected (Elo, 2018, p. 50, drawing on Waldenfels, 2002). As such it draws from aesthetics as sensory experience and sensitive knowledge and its socio-cultural embedding. Translated to the realm of rhythm, gleaners could be perceived as pathically exposing themselves to and engaging with their surroundings (e.g. molluscs, moving water, soil, etc.) and 'leaning into' the thereof emerging co-rhythmicity, which then carries action forward (cf. Dobler, 2016). Taking up the rhythmicities of tides, daylight, and so forth, and forging a work rhythm in attunement to them, is thus a question of both experience and skill as well as exposure and attentionality (Ingold, 2016, drawing on Manning, 2016).

This, too, proved difficult for me, the anthropologist new at gleaning: because I needed to focus strongly on one thing—for instance, the molluscs—and thereby reoriented my sensorium, I struggled to be attentive to other phenomena such as the receding water and, for instance, ended up getting stuck in the mud (see Simon, 2021). Also in this respect, I had difficulties creating a rhythmicity for myself.

My muddy and initially arrhythmic trial and error approach was supported by the encouragement of gleaners to 'find one's own way'. At the same time, however, I was indeed observed and occasionally commented on by them. They would remark on my advances along different indicators, such as my movements in relation to the tides, the amount of pauses, the consistency in days I went out gleaning with them, my level of back pain and exhaustion, or the amount of molluscs I amassed in a day. They would show care but also challenged me: 'Attention, don't get stuck in the mud again', 'today you filled many buckets', 'don't overdo it, take a break', but also 'you lazy one, are you

writing today or coming to do some real work with us in the water?', 'now you know the pain we feel all the time in our backs' or 'today you tried', and so forth, I would hear from Aissatou and the others. This, for me, was conducive to striving to earn trust and respect from gleaners and attuning to a work ethic that values hard and consistent work.

Gleaners were trying to go out gleaning day after day as long as the tides were right, then took some days off before going out again. It was, however, also possible to take a break or start late, or cut such gleaning periods short (e.g. for funerals or care work, but also opportunities for other paid work) (see Simon, 2021). Moreover, as described, gleaners tried to uphold a rhythmicity by adjusting performance and mediating the intensity of their practice, and by eventually diverting their attention.

In this context and at this early stage of my enskilment, I did not want to 'break off' from time to time, resorting to taking notes or using a camera. Rather, I tried to align to the larger rhythms of working days and pauses as well as to gleaners' working rhythms, slowly establishing my own rhythm that was somehow productive for myself and perceived as appropriate by others. Aligning to and establishing rhythm here thus also related to intersubjectivity and, as a liminal phase, promised an entrance into a community of practice. With time, however, I felt that I had proven myself and gained a certain communal standing, and that the use of a camera might provide a next step in my learning about gleaning.

Rhythm and Aesthetics in Audiovisual Practice

Gleaning as work is oriented towards an aim that lies outside of itself (cf. Spittler, 2016), yet is, at the same time, very much situated in the world. An audiovisual approximation to gleaning, in turn, needs to balance between being in and about the world, or, between aligning to gleaning and to the aim of producing ('good') data, possibly supported by a cinematic or 'photographic gaze' (Eberle, 2014, p. 314).

To account for this, as well as for the deltaic fluidity and the sociality of gleaning, and in order to establish an ethically sound, experimental, and partly co-creative audiovisual practice that also reaches beyond the human, I first made some distinct choices in equipment. I was recording with a waterproof action camera set to linear mode and small boom—as well as lavalier microphones either attached to the camera or the part of my body that stayed above water. This set-up would allow me to move with the gleaners in the water and mud, not worry about breaking things and remain flexible beyond coming to set up a scene in which the action should then unfold. Moreover, an action camera is, as Bégin (2016, p. 112) notes, '(...) a recording device that emancipates the sensitivity of human and non-human bodies from the intelligible discourse normally expressed on their subject by an interpreter's gaze'. It can thus allow for both non-anthropocentric angles and an embodied perspectivity, as if the body is the eye (Dowell, 2013, cited after Unger, 2017, p. 8), giving expression '(...) to the experience of a world that is both gripping and grasped by the body of the filmer' (Bégin, 2016, p. 109). As such, it also promises to transpose a distinct audiovisual haptics gesturing towards the haptics of gleaning (compare to Marks, 2002).

On the first days with the camera, I sat with one gleaner, remained for some while at some meters of distance, and then went on to another gleaner. The camera came to figure as an attention device, helping me to vitalise my attention in a broad way. Without depth of field, I usually recorded one protagonist plus other gleaners in the background. The sounds of their gleaning practices reverberated far across the water surface, mingled. I, the 'silent' and rather immobile audiovisual practitioner, thereby felt connected to this community of practice, especially via sound, yet rather in a passive way.

Before recording, I had sat and moved with Aissatou and the other gleaners for months. We had been bodily co-present in increasing proximity, both silently and in conversation; we got to know each other well, also in everyday life outside of the water and mud. When I asked to film, I was welcomed. I then shifted between gleaners and, when sitting with one of them, only filmed in periods, alternating it with observation and gleaning myself. Yet gleaners sensed my high attention, vitalised by the camera. When filming them, in the beginning, they would turn away from me from time to time, working in other directions, then, when ready, turn and move back towards me. Initially, feeling transgressive, I asked if I should stop or just put away the camera, but gleaners usually encouraged me to go on for more time. If they then felt they had enough, they would tell me to film someone else or to glean myself, often by joking that filming, similar to observation, would not be real work and I would be lazy. On the other hand, I was sometimes also called to film someone. Gleaners thus came to co-mediate their presence in and their familiarity with my audiovisual project by slightly altering their practice or by telling me more or less directly when to film and when to stop.

Once gleaners had grown accustomed to me filming them and we had communicated, I shifted from this more stationary, broad observational approach to more proximity-in-movement and focus. Working without zoom and with a decentered but directed camera, I would try to align to the described pattern of work sequences and gestures of gleaners over and underwater in close proximity to their bodies. The camera here drove me towards mimesis (cf. Wartorp, 2018)—remember children mimetically learning how to glean—and furthered a more palpable approximation to the emic dimension of gleaning's rhythmicity.^[3]

This also required, however, some anticipation: in what direction would the next stretch go, when would the posture be changed, and so forth. Aligning to the rhythm of gleaners thus needed a forward bound attention as their movements were not mechanical but had a certain emergence and difference. To do so, I was drawing on my own bodily gleaning experience and my foregone observational, more distanced filming. And I could not limit myself to the display of the camera and see the world only through the camera's frame—I also needed a broader view. I thus oscillated between looking at the screen of the lowered, decentered camera and directly ahead. Thereby, the relation with the camera was largely characterized by different graduations of *embodied relation*, whereby the camera acquired a 'partial transparency' and mediated my experience of the world through the extension and reduction of sensory perception (Grasseni and Giesser, 2019, p. 10, drawing on Ihde, 1990). It was like this that I was trying to balance between a pathic attentional-protention (the *that*) and an intentional-anticipation (the *what*) supported by a cinematic or 'photographic gazing' (Eberle, 2014, p. 316, drawing on Schütz, 1967).

For the evolvment of rhythm, competence is deemed to be key (Dobler, 2016, p. 878). Feeling competent thereby can hinge also on the experience of a situated, tangible result of one's doing. In my case, competence, however, played a distinct role: the becoming of my work with the camera, or how 'good' the result turned out, was not part of the immediate experience and not crucial to the doing. Only by rewatching footage would I get a gist of how 'good' the recorded material was and how successful my audiovisual practice had been. Rather, the camera mediated my senses and afforded a feeling of immediate competence as performance informed by my accreted knowledge of what cameras can do and my skill in handling it—but also its functioning with a relatively high degree of independence from my actions. By delegating some of my skill and action to the artifact, my situated agency widened and I was able to establish a certain rhythmicity.

In this proximate encounter, over time, gleaners came to oscillate between just going about their practice, sometimes silently, sometimes in conversation with others or me, and moments of interaction with the camera, whereby they, for example, turned and moved their hands directly

towards it. In these moments, we were both 'leaning into' the emerging co-rhythmicity between their gleaning practice, my audiovisual practice, and the moving environment. Their competence allowed them some leeway to alter their performance, but it was crucial for them to maintain their gleaning rhythmicity, and crucial for me not to interrupt them or keep them from work.

Successively, gleaners then engaged directly with the camera and thereby made their gleaning practice more playful, too. For instance, they sometimes intentionally bumped their hands into it underwater, which again led to laughter between us. Moreover, gleaners and I started to use the camera underwater to film molluscs and our hands. Or, especially with Aissatou, we put it in sieves, buckets and bags and let it swirl around, while Aissatou or others went on with their work so that it quite directly and indeed turbulently transduced their movements into audiovisual data (cf. Helmreich, 2007). During this, we laughed a lot, felt excitement, and were curious about what happened to the camera. Both gleaning and audiovisual practice became more social as well as playful and joyful.

Relying on a certain co-creativity and a more-than-human perspective, a partial independence of the camera from human control met with play and indeterminacy, highlighting the camera as both an autonomous actor and as connected to the materiality of the deltaic world as well as human and non-human bodies that move therein (cf. MacDougall, 2006). This provided further access to the multispeciesness of gleaning beyond the common human experience, although, for me, not in an immediate rhythmic way (apart from the rhythmising effect of doing something and overcoming observational passivity). Rhythmicity in place only developed with repetition of the same experiments that unfolded along a limited number of variations.

In this process, the larger relation with the camera became less *embodied* and more *hermeneutic* (Ihde 1990). It provided a view of the world in its own specific way, figured as an actor in its own right that was 'inscribing' itself into the recording (cf. Rubinstein, 2020), and had a directedness towards the world as well as a constructive character (cf. Verbeek, 2005, 2008). This again fostered the becoming of its own peculiar and patchy filmic truth (cf. Rouch, [1973]2003).

In the interplay of gleaners, me, the molluscs, sieves, mud, and water, and the camera and its microphones, no 'perfect' footage was recorded. Yet, the camera's and microphones' own limitations, or materiality, in the form of blur, hiss, over and underexposure, etc., became tangible. In the tension between the artifacts' 'promises' and their limitations, technology and its materiality became audible and visible (cf. Rubinstein, 2020)—and so did the materiality of its deltaic surrounding. It is through montage, then, that the corresponding coming into being of the images and sounds, and the coming into being of gleaning as well as of audiovisual practice amidst a muddy and watery multispecies world, are transformed into a new, palpable rhythmic assemblage. Coming to the end of this contribution, you are invited to explore it once more:

Please see HTML version for accompanying video

<https://vimeo.com/755616522>

Figure 2: Mollusc Lifeworlds, Sequence 1.

Conclusion

Mollusc gleaning a waterwork is all about repetition with difference and builds on continuous attunement to a moving environment. While the similarity of parts (the molluscs) is crucial for the establishment of a rhythmicity of gleaning, gleaners also mediate intensities, integrate change, and interrelate omission and engagement. Building on both skill and pathic attention, which again draw from aesthetics as sensory experience and sensitive knowledge, gleaners are able to productively engage with an amphibious world in flux. Thereby, they experience agency and create an individual but attuned rhythmicity, which can then again translate into feelings of flow, ease or peace of mind.

Becoming a successful gleaner relates to longstanding *dressage* and childhood mimesis, and is about learning to maintain rhythmicity over periods and through days of gleaning. For this, enskilment, but also variation, or adjusting one's work performance, is instrumental. For a fieldwork practice, this meant that I, too, tried to align to and create and maintain a gleaning rhythmicity and thereby undergo a certain *dressage*. Audiovisual practice as a variation and adjustment of fieldwork performance then extended this endeavour.

Audiovisual practice with gleaners, informed by mimesis and supported first by 'delegating' competence to the camera and then letting the camera 'loose' to become more of an actor in itself, came to be caught up in various forms of co-rhythmicity. Through this, it afforded deeper knowledge of and embodied relations to the etic and emic dimensions of gleaning rhythmicity. The yielding of such practice, assembled into a rhythmic audiovisual sequence that mimics the rhythmic pattern of work sequences, shall allow for a sensuous exploration of these two dimensions of rhythmicity. It shows how gleaners are emplaced within and rhythmically navigate the amphibious in-between and its more-than-human multiplicity. By the means of a watery and muddy multispecies perspective, it reaches beyond our common optical unconscious (Benjamin, [1931]1999, p. 510, 512) and gestures towards the partiality of knowledge and the 'imperceptibility' (Lynteris and Stasch, 2019, p. 6) of the world, but also to the infinite web of viewpoints (Merleau-Ponty, [1945]2002, p. 79). At the same time, the images and sounds assembled and unfolding in a sequence, as a patterned confrontation of unlike(ly) elements, can evoke visceral synaesthesia and imagination, and once again provide for a sense of the interdependent power of aesthetics in the establishment and experience of rhythm.

Notes

^[1] Lefebvre ([1992]2004, p. 39) writes 'To enter into a society, group or nationality is to accept values (that are taught), to learn a trade by following the right channels, but also to bend oneself (to be bent) to its ways'. However, Lyon (2019, p. 27) stresses that Lefebvre more implicitly recognizes the contingent nature of *dressage* and the immanent possibility of resistance by observing how the rhythms of tourists and city workers are at odds with one another. *Dressage* could thus be understood as not only an act of reproduction but also a source of change in the sense that an '(...) undergoing always overflows doing, to the extent that whatever you do takes into itself something of the experience of what you did before, and is in turn carried over into what you do next.' (Ingold, 2022, p. 7, drawing on Dewey, 1987). Transformation then comes from within, the acting is inside the undergoing in the sense that we become our doing and our doing does us—which is, as in walking (the example of Ingold) so in gleaning, 'animated by rhythm' (Ingold, 2016, p. 9).

[2] Performance thus relates to situated action and flow as opposed to plan (Dobler, 2016) as well as to the execution of work as opposed to, or as an actualisation of the competence or ability to work (Spittler, 2016).

[3] Close bodily engagements had only limitedly been possible before and were not necessarily marked by mimesis. At some point of familiarity I for instance I had been able to put my hands on gleaners' hands to learn more about their gestures and their movements of fingers under water and in the mud.

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