

Gloves, headphones and soap

.....Elena Azais Tatistscheff.....

ABSTRACT

This article is a creative reflection on the simple act of washing dishes, encouraging readers to grasp the sensory complexity of acts that are part of our daily life. I have identified five sections of analysis: location, touch, hearing, movement and time perception. To explain these I use different methods including diagrams, vignettes and photographs. Through the use of visual representations I hope to transmit my sensory experience of washing dishes as closely as possible.

In this essay I will analyse my experience of washing dishes at my Univeristy flat. Just as eating, drinking and walking are all integral parts of my daily life so is washing dishes. There are several aspects to this act that I will study: the location of the sink in my flat, my wearing of rubber gloves, listening to music and dancing. As this list suggests multiple senses are stimulated during the act of washing up: the sink's location determines what I look at as I do the dishes, wearing gloves alters its sensation and listening to music effects what I hear as I do so.

LOCATION

My kitchen sink is placed in the kitchen, which also serves as a living room, and faces a window. This window looks onto a courtyard and the inside of the other houses surrounding this courtyard. As such, many of my neighbours' kitchens are visible from my own, it even happens that as I wash the dishes my neighbours are doing so simultaneously. While this occurs less frequently, I am almost always washing dishes while being visible to my neighbours. This impacts how I carry myself as I stand in front of the sink: I behave in such a way that I am happy to be seen. This example illustrates the tension between individuality and society which the space of the house represents (Gauvain and Altman 1982: 28). While my flat is a place where I feel free to act as I want and express my individuality, there are moments where I come in contact with my community of neighbours in ways that restrict this, as is the case with noise pollution. When washing dishes, I perceive the presence of my neighbours and move my body mindfully of this, even as I break into dance.

TOUCH

When washing dishes I have gotten into the habit of always wearing rubber gloves. While I really enjoy cooking with my bare hands and the sensation of handling ingredients, I really don't enjoy washing dishes without my gloves. This is heavily linked to notions of purity and dirt, which transform the food that recently held the status of nourishment into food waste. My perception of food as waste means that I am reluctant to use my hands to pick it up and throw it away: instead, a fork or knife are often used to scrape a plate clean. Using gloves makes me feel a lot freer to use my hands which I find to be more practical, while not being worried about getting them dirty. All the same, I am aware that the food I am handling has not changed from when it was on my table and that the categorisation of dirt and cleanliness is culturally dependent (Douglas 2003). Choosing to wear gloves renders me aware that, like any other sensation, the sensation of dirt is palpable.

The transformation of food into food waste made me reflect on the way washing dishes acts as a ritual inferring the status of clean and useful to objects that prior were cast-off as dirty. Washing dishes has water as its central element and requires the use of soap and sponge to be successfully performed. Additionally, my personal practice developed over time is accompanied by the use of gloves and music. As such, I find that washing dishes is a very ritualistic act.

HEARING

As I wash dishes, I often listen to music. This is not to cover up any existing noise but rather to motivate myself to undertake a chore while feeling tired: this is especially true in the evening after a long day. Tia DeNora's insights have helped me reconceptualise the relationship between the body and music. If before I would have found Diagram 1 to be an acceptable representation of the relationship between the body and music, now I find it insufficient. That is because Diagram 1 categorises the body and music as two separate entities that upon coming into contact do so in a unilateral manner. In contrast, Diagram 2, inspired by DeNora, accounts for the ways in which music alters the composition of the body itself into a different state.

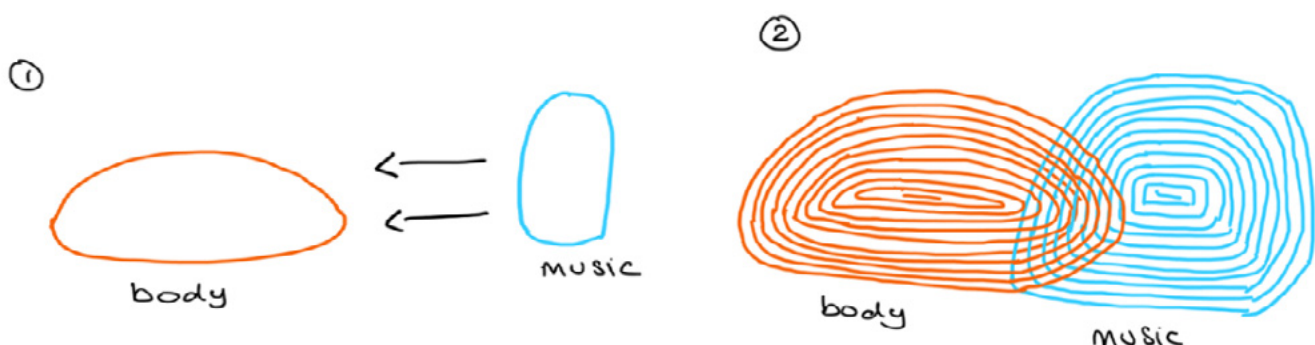


Figure 1: Music and the Body

Diagram 2 requires a rethinking of the definition of the body itself. Instead of perceiving it as being separate from “nature, culture and technology” it suggests that the body is a “socialised entity” resulting from their intersections (DeNora 2008: 75). As such, when music and the

body come in contact, this affects “the constitution of the body and its physical processes”, including oxygen levels in the blood and heart rate (DeNora 2008: 76–79). This bodily response to music can be replicated and manipulated, as in my case of washing dishes. When doing so, I play upbeat music to produce the bodily state of excitement, motivation, amusement and to delay to bodily state of fatigue. This is a process that I replicate every time I wash dishes, and even though its effectiveness depends on the given day, it is a process I now rely on. This brings me to my second point: over time, a bodily state becomes associated with certain music – such as sad songs – and the memory of music’s effect helps to reinforce both the association and its ability to recreate that bodily state. When washing up, music always cheers me up and makes me feel more energised so I anticipate that result as I put on my headphones.

MOVEMENT

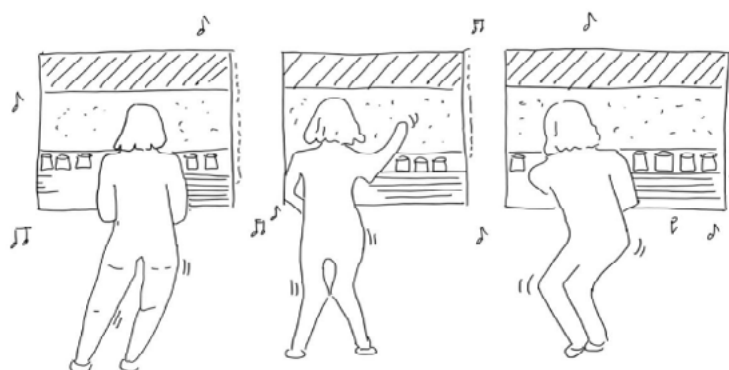


Figure 2: Dancing Vignettes

Additionally, as I do the dishes, I do not limit myself to listening to music but often break into dance: how much I boogie depends on the given day. In the drawing above, I have illustrated some of my statement moves.

DeNora distinguishes between two aspects that dancing consists of: being “entrained rhythmically” and engaging in “stylistic manoeuvres” (DeNora 2008: 78). More simply, dancing comprises of the body moving to the music’s rhythm and how it chooses to do so. In the case of washing dishes, I mostly dance on the spot using my legs and hips so that I can keep cleaning as I dance. Nevertheless, I often take breaks to use my arms to dance more expressively. As I move my body, I feel carefree, happy and more connected to the music as I move along with it. In fact, it appears to me that dancing is merely an extension of attentively engaging with the music and letting it alter my bodily state. The amusement I feel as I dance originates in the difference between the dance movements I make and how I normally move my body. Breaking away from the conventional manner in which I carry myself causes me to feel release. The latter explains why fear is associated with dance, as it can challenge the messages and issues surrounding the body (Sansom 2011: 37).

TIME PERCEPTION

Another implication of washing the dishes is the marking of the passing of time. Every morning, I unload the dishes from the drying rack into their respective designated places, endowing them with the status of clean useful objects once more. In this way, a new day begins for the mugs, cutlery and plates as it

does for me. Below is an image of the empty drying racks in my kitchen on a sunless St Andrews morning.



Figure 3: Spotless Sink

Similarly, before sleep, I clean what I used during dinner and any other accumulated mugs, making order from the mess of the day and saluting the day in doing so. In this way, washing up is an empowering action wherein I restore order and cleanliness and positively mark the passing of time.

CONCLUSION

Washing up is an easily overlooked activity which occupies a small but distinct part of the daily routine of most students. This analysis of my experience takes a closer look at some of the different layers of this activity through the senses it stimulates. Nonetheless, I recognise that the division of the senses that I used is not entirely accurate as these are much more interlinked than their categorisation accounts for. As Ingold states: “looking, listening and touching...are not separate activities they are just different facets of the same activity” (Ingold 2000: 261). Separating the singular activity of washing dishes into separate categories such as touch, movement and hearing undermines just how connected they are to each other. In the case of hearing and movement, it’s clear how connected they are. For the sake of the essay, categorising the senses was useful to offer a structure to my argument although I remain critical of it.

Lastly, I hope the images and drawings included stimulate the reader’s imagination and help them to better visualise my surroundings.

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All diagrams are drawn by the author.