

Fishing¹

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Please note that the fieldwork data has not been cleared for general circulation. Kindly do not copy or further transmit this paper.

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Fishing



Figure 1: 'there are quite a lot of fry down there'

'In the corner of the white hall there's a place where the water drains away. ... You can see the white filter turning – and it is very noisy. ... Gro has gone to look at the filter ... [and she] has discovered ... that there are quite a lot of fry down there [that have escaped from the tanks]. If I say there are three hundred, this is a wild guess, perhaps it's only 150, but either way there are surprisingly many of them.

'You can help me' she says. And then she retrieves a bucket and two nets, plus ear muffs, and we go fishing, on our hands and knees. As I kneel down I think: well I used to do this when I was a kid.... we do our fishing, kneeling on either side of this opening, sometimes almost poking each other in the eye. The fish are very good at hiding under the lip of the inlet pipe, or in the shallows right under the place where I am kneeling. They are good at riding along beside the filter too. But after five or ten minutes of fiddling about we get most of them out – plus quite a bit of paint (because this tank, presumably made of concrete, has been painted white). There they are, swimming around in the bucket, with a good deal of debris. We put the slats back down and then we retreat and drop them into tank number 39. Time for lunch.'²

Fieldwork

I'm lucky in my fieldwork. It puts me in the interdisciplinary company of lively anthropologists. It takes me to the fjords of Norway which sets all my childhood romanticisms about a particular version of nature resonating. It puts me alongside friendly people like Gro, most of whom speak English very well, and who turn out to be happy to answer my questions as I help them. It sets me puzzling about the intricate technologies involved in farming fish, all those pipes and tanks and filters and inscription devices and markets and feed-flows and forms of breeding. It forces me to think about the intimate but endlessly shifting divisions and relations between 'nature' on the one hand, and 'culture' on the other, and to revisit and ponder on the processes of 'domestication'. (That's the official reason for the project: it's called 'Newcomers to the Farm'. The reasoning is that if

² The excerpts come from field notes recorded on (and immediately after) 18th March 2010. Real names have been changed.

people and goats or sheep became companion species 6,000 years or more ago, the comparable time-frame for salmon is around 40 years. It's all been telescoped by a factor of 100 or more). And last but not least, it helps me to think about – or play at being – 'baroque'.

How much my version of the baroque has anything to do with the denunciatory label retrospectively pinned to seventeenth and eighteenth century artists and composers, and then resuscitated as a good by more recent commentators, historians of art and ideas, is clearly uncertain³. What it has to do with Deleuze, or Benjamin, or Whitehead, or Leibniz I don't quite know either. Something, I am sure, but when I first started thinking about this piece I got myself bit bogged down by weighty intellectual responsibilities to figures such as these. To slough off the latter, I take refuge in the joys (but also the important uncertainties) of fieldwork and of method.

Uncertainties

It isn't the practicalities of the fieldwork that are uncertain. My colleague, anthropologist Marianne Lien, dispatches those with exemplary efficiency. Neither does it have to do with the always tentative business of meeting and striking up relations with new people. It certainly isn't the business of working alongside those who care for fish, because mostly our attempts to help out seem welcome, and sometimes we really do help too. The old double fieldwork problem – ethnographic dazzle on the one hand, and boredom at the mundanity on the other – this is a little more problematic, a source of greater uncertainty. But the real issue, at least for me, is methodological. It is about what to do with the fieldwork. What to make of it. What to turn it into. And this is why I've started with a fieldwork excerpt. Gro and I were on our hands and knees in the filter room for fifteen minutes at most, and I've offered you two short descriptive paragraphs taken from my field notes. The next question is: what to do with this? How to work on and with it? How to *story* it?

I haven't done the count, but I guess that Marianne and I have a couple of hundred pages of field notes, all neatly laid out in Word files. This is our common resource, a shared record of our (still unfinished) time in the field. We've also got hundreds of photos. There are scanned documents, some audio files, and various resources from the web as well. So there's a lot of material, and if you ask me: 'what are you going to do with this?' then the answer is mostly, not a lot. Most of the notes will never see the light of day. I at least (I shouldn't speak for Marianne), will never do anything explicit with them. Perhaps all research practice is like this. Surely almost everything disappears, whatever the method. Perhaps, alternatively, what's being revealed is *methodological laziness*. Then again, perhaps how this works also has something to do with *styles of intellectual practice*. Let me play with the last of these possibilities.

Synopsis?

I have colleagues who can assimilate data broadly and offer an overview or survey of whatever it is they are looking at. I find this extraordinary and in many ways quite admirable. This is a form of research practice, synoptic in vision and strategy that lies pretty much beyond my reach. But leaving aside the personalisations, there also seem to be intellectual techniques, tools, devices and habits that go with synopsis. In a pre-electronic era I remember one intellectual historian telling me that he

³ I learn about the historical baroque rather indirectly from Bal (1999), Deleuze (1993), Hills (2007) and Kwa (2002), and I am particularly grateful to Chunglin Kwa since it was the last of these pieces that inspired me to set out on a journey of discovery about the baroque which first took form in Law (2004b).

put all the documents he collected in a box, before laying them out. The writing results were a marvel. I know a social scientist who puts everything he reads into a data-base. Even more remarkably, at least to me, he can retrieve it when he needs it. Then again, in a different mode, sociological tools such as the sample survey seem well adapted to, indeed perhaps purpose-built for, synopsis. Statistics and spread sheets aren't essential, but they represent plausible techniques for achieving overviews.

The desire for overview and the availability of practices for achieving it no doubt feed imputations of methodological laziness. They also generate— and presuppose – two further effects. First, they imply particular kinds of *authoritative subject positions* and the practices that go with these. The character of such subject positions deserves debate, and no doubt these are variable. But presumably synthesis is at a premium, together with generality and an ability to sift and to sort in ways that are capable of distinguishing the wood from the trees. Second, it implies a kind of *common-sense realism*. It assumes, I suggest, that there *is* a real world endowed with a more or less definite form, and that, technical limitations aside, it's a reasonable aspiration to seek to describe it⁴. Perhaps, indeed, there's a kind of duty to do just this. To bring this down to fishy practicalities, if I'm working on aquaculture, then it's not unreasonable to be expected to field questions about the state of salmon farming, its environmental implications, its economics, its technological arrangements, its breeding programmes, and/or its long-term sustainability.

So this is a particular family of *synoptic* intellectual styles. I suppose I shouldn't say that it's hegemonic, but it sometimes seems that way, at least in the academy and in the world of policy. Implicit in what I've just said about wood and trees, it also follows that this is an intellectual practice that operates to generate *details* – by which I mean to say that 'details' are distinguished and made to stand in contrast with or reflect one version or another of a 'bigger picture'⁵. The synoptic style is thus to tell us that it's the bigger picture that's important, and that it is this that we should be going after. Synopsis, then, is a set of intellectual practices that render most events – or fieldwork notes about events – insignificant in a very particular way. It is like alchemy in reverse: it works to transmute specificities into base details.

Specificity!

So where does this leave the ethnographic story about the White Hall fishing expedition? No doubt there are various possibilities, but on the face of it, it looks very much like a candidate 'detail'. In synopsis it might disappear completely, or it might be used as an illustration of some larger or more general pattern. (One can imagine narratives, for instance, about professionalism or economics.) No doubt we could work on this, but offhand I can't immediately think of a way in which it might cast off its label as a 'detail'.

But if we shift styles to what I label in my head as '*the baroque*' then the pieces on the board shift and matters get recast. Mundanely and most probably, the White Hall fishing story will *still* get lost. But if it turns up at all, then it will no longer because it is an illustrative 'detail'. Instead it will have been rendered into what I have just called a *specificity*. It will stand, so to speak, in its own right, as

⁴ I've wrestled with the notion of common-sense realism in Law (2004a).

⁵ 'It is an anthropological axiom that however discrete they appear to be, entities are the product of relations; nothing is not embedded in some context or worldview that gives it its special shape' (Strathern: 1992). I thank Marianne Lien for drawing this citation to my attention.

an event or set of relations deserving of attention, and it will do this in at least two ways. First, it becomes a moment that is pregnant with *possibilities*. The challenge is to discover and explore at least some of those possibilities – and to do so in interesting ways. And second, it is, in addition, also imagined as *doing* something: it is profoundly *performative*⁶. Again the challenge is to discover and explore the character of parts of that performativity – and again to do so in significant ways. These two challenges, the discovery of *interesting possibilities*, and the discovery of *significant performativities*, are no doubt closely related. They have nothing to do with detail, but everything to do with specificity. And such is a key movement in what I code up for myself as a *baroque empirical sensibility*.

So here's the question that follows: *how to foster this sensibility* in a world in which it is the routine fate of specificities to be flattened into details? To think about this I want to go back to the field work notes.

Ceremony

Gro and I were fishing in the morning, but now it is the afternoon.



Figure 2: 'Eirik opens the valve'

'There's excitement in the air. ... they are going to move the first fish into the first tank in the new building. ... There is general cheer at lunch. And then we all troop out. Everyone, almost everyone, is there to watch. So all we need now is some fish....

Everyone is gathered waiting and milling about. There is a keen sense of anticipation. Håkon and Gro ...are wielding a camera. Then, we hear the noise of the fork-lift truck and its flashing orange light appears. Torben ... manoeuvres it past the front door and deposits its load on a set of pallets ... He gets out of the fork lift and attaches the pipe to the outlet valve of the [fish container]. ... People gather round, photographs are taken, and Eirik [the owner] opens the valve. Suddenly we can see fish swishing along the translucent part of the pipe. There is a shout from the people who can see the tank. The first fish have emerged, and the building has been inaugurated. Except that there is no building. There's just a bunch of tanks

⁶ I've inserted the weasel word 'profoundly' here because in synopsis local practices may also feed back into and feed larger patterns.

and unfinished concrete work. The building won't be ready for ages. 'Come back in a year', people tell us. Then you will see the building when it is complete.



Figure 3: 'the first fish have emerged'

... everyone is talking and laughing and congratulating one another. ... Håkon produces a small pack of rather large cigars – another source of amusement since they are Cuban – and passes one to Eirik and sticks a second in his own mouth. There is a good deal of huffing and puffing as they try to get them lit – and finally they succeed, and pose for yet more photographs.

[Then] Eirik reappears carrying a cardboard box. He puts it down and opens it. And it turns out that he's bought twelve bottles of rather good wine.... But the party isn't over yet. ... Torben has been sucking up more salmon down at the other end of the site. The fork lift truck appears again, and deposits its second load of salmon on the pallets. This time it is the turn of the visiting vet, Simone. She is given the ceremonial task of repeating Eirik's task, and the second load of salmon is on its way. People are still standing on the edge of the building site, looking down at the tanks. Everyone is cheerful, Håkon is joking and slapping everyone across the back, and Eirik can't keep the grin off his face.'



Figure 4: 'Everyone is cheerful'

Ritual

I said this already: I work with anthropologists, and I find anthropology good to think with, even (perhaps especially) since I'm an amateur. It's not that I necessarily *have* to go there. STS, my own discipline, does interesting work with its own specificities, and I'll come to these shortly. So what do I learn from working around anthropologists? The answer is: all sorts of things. But here's one slightly old-fashioned answer. Give an anthropologist a ceremony, and she is likely to see this as an event that *condenses* a great deal. Some of this, perhaps disturbingly, may have to do with the 'core values' or the 'culture' of a society, though contemporary anthropologists are more likely to discover diverse values and tensions⁷. At any rate, whatever's going on, in anthropology a ceremony is never a 'detail'. It's pregnant with discoverable *possibilities*, and it's *performative* too. It's hard at work *doing* things (perhaps including the transmission of core values.) All this suggests that if we want to foster the sensibilities of the baroque in fieldwork, then an anthropological attention to ritual might be one place to start. So, here's the question, what kinds of things is this ceremony *doing*?

Here are some thoughts, in no particular order.

First it's celebrating an *economic arrangement*, a large investment; perhaps we might add that it's also celebrating *markets* and *private capital*. Second, it's celebrating *hierarchy*; it's Eirik, the millionaire owner, who opens the valve to let the first fish out and the vet's in slot number two; so rankings are being done. Third, it's also celebrating *egalitarianism*; Eirik's a millionaire, but in his jeans and high visibility jacket, and indeed in the way he talks, you wouldn't necessarily know it; old anthropology tells us that egalitarianism goes with inequality in West Norway where both are done together⁸. And then there's a celebration of *community* going on as well; yes, there are fissions, but not within the ceremonial script where everyone's gathered for a shared purpose; and, as a part of this (or maybe it's separate), so too is *company membership* (because some of the employees don't really feel that they 'belong' to the firm which only recently bought the site, but for an hour they're playing the part).

A real anthropologist might dispute the specificities here, or mention a whole lot more. But I've made this detour not because I'm a good anthropologist, but because I'm interested in drawing on a possible anthropological sensitivity to the performative specificities of ritual. My proposal is that this is exemplary if we're interested in a baroque methodological sensibility, and that it's an example of the kind of susceptibility that deserves cultivation if it is our concern to foster the baroque. With three reservations (with which, I guess, most anthropologist would agree).

One: any commitment to *core values* or cultures is long past its sell-by date. Indeed, the assumption of core values sounds suspiciously like synopsis by other means. Surely what's being performed may or may not be shared and cohesive, and it may or may not fit together. (Do the different forms of performativity that I've just listed in the ceremony fit together? And if so, then how, and for how long? Open questions both). Two, the *synoptic subject position* with its common-sense realism is also troubling. A baroque subject that is less centred, more mobile, and more relational is required if we are to break away from synopsis. There is never a single answer. And then, three, the inspiring

⁷ Durkheim's insistence on the importance of ceremony is sociological rather than anthropological, but the core cohesion of the social is what counts. See Durkheim (1915). For a popular anthropological account of the multiple forms of ordering being enacted in the UK's 2011 royal wedding see Tett (2011).

⁸ The argument comes from John Barnes (1954).

anthropological sensitivity to ritual clearly cannot be confined to that which counts as official ceremony. It also needs to be *extended to the mundane*. Or (if you prefer to put it the other way round) that which is mundane needs to be approached with all the sensitivity appropriate to a formal ritual.

Fishing again

With this thought in mind we can now ask what happens if we return to the fishing expedition in the White Hall. What happens if we treat it as a ritual? Clearly this does not count as an official celebration. As is obvious, we're in a low place physically and socially. There are no cigars, no onlookers, and no bottles of wine; just flowing water and lots of fish. But if we imagine it as a celebration, as a specificity, then we can ask: what are the possibilities? What is being performed? Here are some suggestions, and I offer them in no particular order

It's celebrating (and reproducing) *economic realities*. The act of retrieval may be small, but in a small way it enacts profitability and market relations. It's celebrating and enacting *animal welfare*, if only because it's removing fish from a place where they will probably be poorly fed to a somewhere where they will get plenty to eat. It's celebrating and performing human *health and safety*, because (for instance) we're wearing noise-cancelling ear muffs and waterproof gear. The practice of wearing ear muffs is also embedding and reproducing a version of *the human body* (high frequency noise is inimical to long-term hearing) within a version of *medical practice* that has researched hearing loss. It's performing *state health and safety regulations* which means that *the state* being enacted in one of its various manifestations.

Then, and differently, *sociability* is also being done. Gro invited me to help partly because I had asked her if I could do so. 'No', she'd said five minutes before, 'we have finished here'. But now, suddenly, with these escaped fish newly discovered, she has the opportunity to offer me the gift (?) of doing something useful. It's also the case that if two of us work at it, then it halves the time needed to do the job. But then, and as a part of this, versions of the *human body* are being celebrated too. I mentioned that the nets have long handles and we're at risk of poking each other. I nearly stab her eye out (I apologise and she insists that there is no problem), and she nearly pokes me in the groin a couple of times. As a result there are a couple of moments in which we tacitly acknowledge both male bodily vulnerabilities and the fact that these are not properly to be made explicit between a man and a woman working together but who otherwise scarcely know one another. So this is not just a matter of anatomy: it's the celebration of a particular version of *gender relations*.

So *subjectivities* or personhoods are being done here. Persons as sociable beings with concerns (we want to get off for lunch) are being enacted. But *lively animal bodies and subjectivities* are being done too. It really isn't that easy to catch the tiddlers. They dart around, and hide under the brown inlet pipe: we can see their tails but not their heads, and we certainly can't get our nets under the lip of the pipe to scoop them up. Animals, then, these fry are being done as lively and sentient. They 'know' that we are trying to catch them and they do not want to be caught.

And, then, finally, the scene celebrates and enacts *the pragmatic* and (quite differently) *the elusive*. It's like this. After five or ten minutes we give up. I go on for a moment longer than Gro because there are still some fish there, and I think that I can scoop them up. But there aren't many – either

that or they are hiding very well. This, then, is *pragmatism*. But, as a part of this, nature (or salmon fry) is (or are) being redone as *elusive*. We can hold them, we can catch them, we can move them around, we can grow them, we can slaughter them, and we can eat them, *but there are limits too*. This is because *they also elude our grasp*. Even after we're through, some of them are still down there swimming in a kind of limbo place, just beyond the domestic but not yet in 'nature'. But the elusive can be considered in another way: as we go fishing we are *also* doing it. *The very act of ordering induces an underbelly of disorder*.



Figure 5: 'there are still some fish there'

STS

In my practice I have allowed the term 'the baroque' to become an emblem, a motto, and an inspiration for a particular set of concerns that have to do with the empirical. As I noted above, these include aversions to: (a) a common-sense realism that takes the world to be a particular and definite way; (b) a synoptic vision that turns the specificities of practices into components or details of a larger whole; and (c) a set of subject positions that imagine that it is desirable (and within technical limits) possible to know – and to know more or less explicitly – from particular privileged locations.

I have been trying to think about this in two ways in this paper. First I have turned to a version of the anthropology of ritual as a particular way of training the sensibilities, and I've tried to show that this sensibility applies just as much to moments of mundanity. But in revisiting the fishing trip I haven't just been playing at anthropology. I've also, in a second move, been drawing on the sensibilities of a material semiotic STS⁹. *Inter alia*, the latter opens itself to *relationality*, to *materiality*, to *non-coherence*, and to *heterogeneity*. To attend to 'heterogeneity' in turn implies two versions of sensibility. On the one hand, the social is experienced as a *web of materially heterogeneous and contingent associations* (people, fishing nets, health and safety procedures, rules, fish) rather than as a specific domain. This isn't 'society' in some Durkheimian mode, and neither is it 'culture' or

⁹ Material semiotics is a covering term both for feminist material semiotics and especially the writing of Donna Haraway (2007), and so-called actor network theory. It can be plausibly argued that actor network theory is inspired by a version of the monadological baroque. This is most elegantly expressed in Latour's (1988) *Irréductions*, and Latour has also enthusiastically argued that Gabriel Tarde represents the lost precursor of actor network theory (see, for instance, Latour (2001).) It is interesting to note that that the version of the baroque represented by Walter Benjamin, for instance in his *The Arcades Project* (1999) is not very well embedded in actor-network sensibilities.

anything like it (we are close to Geertz here and yet so very far¹⁰). On the other hand, the *forms* of association are also rendered heterogeneous. *Multiple* forms of ordering and disordering bubble up and boil over, and their relations are contingent, specific and uncertain¹¹. So that's the non-coherence. For it's a sensibility to *non*-coherence, not *in*coherence, that is being trained up here. No primordial order has been fragmented. This is *not* a world in which a cosmology has gone to war to vanquish chaos. And this is why I've tried to show that the fishing expedition carries and reproduces arrangements that range from animal welfare, through the state and medical science, to sociabilities and gender relations. How these fit together is uncertain: that's what's heterogeneity and non-coherence are all about. And, as I've also tried to hint, this investigation of the orderings of specificity is potentially limitless so long as we can craft tools for converting what were the 'details' of a monotheistic vision of synopsis, into a polytheistic richness of specificities. So long as we are willing to let things bubble up. Which is, I suggest, a particular sensibility or mode of apprehension cultivated in a material-semiotic STS¹².

Resonating

When I read the canonical texts of the baroque or visit its art I am both fascinated and bewildered. This is a world far distant. Nevertheless, there are some striking themes that recur, and I try to hold onto them.

For someone working on fish farming, there is a paragraph from Leibniz that is utterly irresistible:

'Every portion of matter may be thought of as like a garden full of plants, or as a pond full of fish. But every branch of the plant, every part of the animal, and every drop of its vital fluids, is another such garden, or another such pond.'¹³

Poetry aside (though I do not necessarily want to set poetry aside) the thought that the whole world might be found within is something that resonates with the methodological sensibility that I have been trying to characterise. One thing I therefore learn from Leibniz is that it is possible and worthwhile to turn up the magnification and look inside; that there is always more to be discovered. A second is that practices are scale independent, which means both that nothing can be safely dismissed as mere detail, and that interesting and important patterns may reveal themselves in ways that have little to do with synoptic versions of big and small¹⁴. And a third has to do with 'the fold'¹⁵ – the sense that there is no distinction between inside and outside. Or perhaps better, that if there is such a division then the two are also joined together, endlessly indivisible, and that it is best to treat them together. (Every time I think about this I return to the transcendence and the immanence of Bernini's 'Ecstasy of St Teresa'¹⁶).

Then again when Leibniz writes about how monads strive after the infinite but know this more or less obscurely, more bells ring¹⁷. The first is political or spiritual as well as intellectual, and it has to

¹⁰ Clifford Geertz (1993) locates us in *cultural* webs of significance.

¹¹ For this point in a disease context see Mol (2002).

¹² I tried to explore the double character of heterogeneity and it's non-coherence in Law (2002).

¹³ Leibniz (1998), paragraph 67.

¹⁴ Marilyn Strathern plays this 'fractal' game in her (1991).

¹⁵ See Deleuze' (1993) elaborate and self-exemplifying take on the baroque.

¹⁶ For a matter of fact (synoptic?) and illustrated description see Avery (1997). See also Hills (2007).

¹⁷ Leibniz (1998).

do with *hubris*. Can we know it all, in ways that can be drawn together and told? The answer is: surely not. We may *feel* it. We may *embody* it. We may *practise* it. We may move *through* it. We may find ourselves being *used* by it. We may simply be *carrying* it. But there are only small parts of it that can possibly be *told*, at any rate in a literal or descriptive form. There are, so to speak, limits to rationalism here. A second is methodological: if it is the case that explicit and articulable ways of knowing are set about with limits, then it may be wise to recognise that (for instance) bodily sensations or apprehensions may count, too, as proper ways knowing the world. Or (let me put the point in a less person-centered way) it may be wise to wonder what other forms of knowing that do without words might do, what these might be, and how they might be created or recognised. And/or, and perhaps this is a third point and surely it resonates with the historical baroque, perhaps it would be good to come to terms with the idea that knowing is a matter of allegory, and that while there is a place for attempts at the literal, the latter is nonetheless best kept in its place. There is something more, here, about hubris.

But there's another baroque metaphor at work too: that of *resonance*. Here's the argument I want to suggest. In this way of thinking, practices – including methods practices – include everything. It, everything, is *already* there, folded in, but it's mostly obscure. But then again, parts of it aren't. This is because *practices – again including methods practices – work by resonating with and amplifying very particular parts of the worlds that they include*. When this happens, the latter become detectable, visible, sensible, and perhaps, just sometimes, accountable. The thought I am left with, then, is that intellectual procedures or research methods are more or less artful assemblages of practices for resonating and amplifying variably faint signals in very particular ways. In what I've written above I have visited a version of anthropology and its sensibility to ceremony, and touched on material semiotic STS and its resonances with materialities and heterogeneous relationalities. I have worked on the assumption that these are two different (somewhat overlapping) sets of assemblages for detecting, resonating with and amplifying particular performative realities in particular practices; multiple realities; different realities; and sometimes faint realities, so to speak minoritarian realities, that might otherwise get drowned out.

Most of all I would like this sensitivity to the faint signals of specificity to flourish. That is why I take the baroque sensibility to be so important. And this, to be sure, is what I have attempted as I have worked with the resonances of the fishing expedition. It is possible to find the whole world in fifteen minutes in the corner of a building in Norway, hidden beneath the floorboards. It is possible to apprehend it, appreciate it, and examine it. All it takes is time, concern, and the sensibilities of an appropriate assemblage of methods practices

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