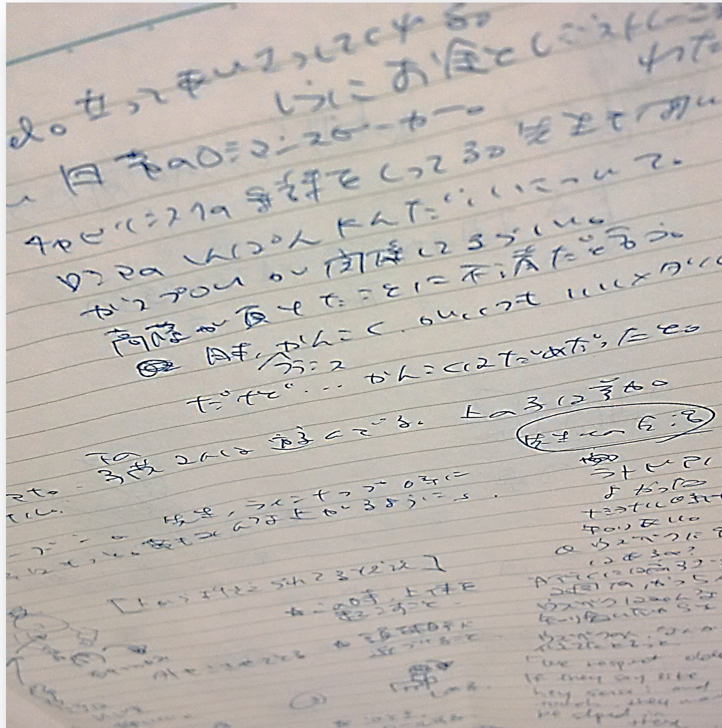
Shaky footage from the field – envisioning a new terrain with film-based inquiry



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Above is a page from my field notes. The hand writing is extremely shaky, due to a combination of being written partially on bumpy subway rides and with a forearm sore from judo training at the dojo (gym) where I was conducting my field work. In the tangled, dishevelled writing, I tried to pour out all my recollections from my participant observations at the dojo that day. Adding to them, I also jotted down notes for my own learning of the techniques – by drawing images of the body and body parts changing positions, angles, with notes on power, speed, and rhythm, drawn together with the opponents' body, in order to remember what I learned that day.

Normally, we do not expect academic works to be composed of solely such field notes. They are distinguished from the end product of fieldwork, namely journal articles, books, and those academic outcomes which went through analyses and provoked theoretical discussions. Field notes rather, are data that are separated from academic products, as each of them are differentiated as separate, independent works (see, Van Maanen, 2011). The field notes, thus remain as background to academic representations.

As a result of this separation, academic products we can encounter today including this chapter, appear as neatly aligned symbols on your screen or on paper in your hand. No matter how hot it was in the field, the papers in the published book would

not drip with the researchers' sweat. No matter how thick a speaker's accent was, it would disappear from the lines of interview transcripts. No matter how shaky the researchers' hands were in the field, typewriters and all the mechanical iterations will magically hide, amend and decollate it. This article is no exception. In this "Gutenberg Galaxy" (McLuhan, 1962), we are receiving academic outcomes in universal, reproducible, articulated formats, giving the appearance of expanding the gap between field experiences and academic products.

However, such comforts, dependent on the separation of field and representation, or data collection and analysis, are interrupted by using a digital device. A device such as the video camera unavoidably reflects researchers' corporeality in the field. Here, through portraying the context of taking up a video camera and my own filming engagement in the field, this paper brings focus back to the line between field and academic products, which has long been taken for granted in socio-cultural inquiries.

Beginning of this research

> I approach my apartment door. My sport bag is almost dragging on the floor. It feels much heavier today, which should not be solely from my sore forearms. I spend some time fumbling with my key, inserting it in the keyhole and taking it out again. I open the door, and try to find a spot to put down the bag. I take off my heavy winter coat and half-wet boots, open the bag and pull out a damp double weave judo *gi*. With the feeling of moisture still left in my hands, I then pull out a brand new camera bag. I rescue the camera from the damp, and carefully open the screen, hearing the camera turn on. I open a small cover and slide out the memory card. I move to my desktop computer in the corner of my living room and slot in the memory card. I drink a glass of cold-brewed tea. Clicking the mouse a couple of times, the screen starts to show people in blue and white moving around. My throat becomes dry and my pulse quickens... the footage is too blurry, and some parts are too shaky! I cannot hear well what the guys are saying while grappling each other in *newaza* (ground techniques of judo, in this case, practising it in sparring). Instead, I can hear my racing breath behind the camera.

The beginning of my film-based inquiry was catastrophic. With little experience handling a video camera, except on several occasions doing some amateur filming of wedding ceremonies for my friends, I struggled with fully utilizing my Sony HDR-CX900. The functions are too broad, and the settings I needed to go through appeared, to me, overwhelming. The quality of images and sounds are far more sensitive than what video functions of cell phones can provide. But yet, the images I would bring back home were always significantly different from what I see in documentary films.

I could keep debating those technological and technical difficulties surrounding the making of an academic product from this film-based inquiry. However, the focal

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point of this discussion rather is located in the engagement of filming itself. To begin, it would be worthwhile to start by briefly explaining how I came to pick up a video camera and ended up bringing it into my fieldwork.

Tacit knowledge?

I started training judo at a dojo in north Toronto in the winter of 2014, partially pursuing the apprenticeship of learning physical movement for my research project, and also for my personal physical urge; to satisfy the need to get away from heavy readings for university course work, and do some kind of physical workout through which I can achieve qualitative change of my physical ability. The dojo is owned by a family of immigrants from the Ukraine (more specifically, the Crimean Peninsula), and most of the adult class participants are from diverse linguistic backgrounds.

As the training went on, I gradually came to find that the instructor teaches techniques often without presenting their technical names. In martial arts such as judo, there tends to be a highly systematized nomenclature for each technique[i]. With my own limited experience of learning judo within the physical education curriculum in Japan, it appeared to me as an irregular approach. Is it because the instructor forgets the names? Or perhaps he does not even know the names? These questions were eliminated during later sessions, as I heard him mentioning the names of the techniques at other times during training. Is it because this is his teaching approach? Am I experiencing something similar to what Eugen Herrigel experienced while learning Japanese archery a long time ago, facing different ontology and epistemology of physical cultural practice (Herrigel, 1953)? No matter what the reason behind it is, the learning practice in the field continues to take place, and the techniques students learn are eventually demonstrated more or less in the way the instructor directed.

Here, picking up a video camera might appear as a natural choice, in thinking of the multi modal character of a video-based approach to grasp complex physical movements in flow, which words and still images have difficulty with (Laplantine, 2015; Vannini, 2015). The linguistic diversity of the dojo also provides incentive to adapt visual images and sounds as the medium to address non-discursive, non-linguistic practices. It is simple to characterize the non-descriptive learning at the dojo as the practice of "tacit knowledge" (Polanyi, 1958). Addressing the tacit dimension can link well with so called visual methods that scholars adapt to overcome the logo-centricity of academic inquiry (Grasseni, 2004; Heider, 2006; Pink, 2007; 2011; Banks and Ruby, 2011). The use of images and sounds has become an effective way to examine indescribable matters. Images and sounds can serve to enrich representation of multi-sensory contexts, especially through the use of film that can include all forms of verbal communication in performance, such as accent, speed, and gestures (Henley, 2004).

While this paper shares the centering of the issue of logo-centricity as a methodical limitation with those studies adapting visual methods, my intention to pick up

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a video camera, however, was differently directed. In contrast to those common views that expect "visual methods" to convey nuances and senses that textualized representation cannot fully express, or as the medium to enable data collection as well as for analysis and representation (see Rich and O'Connell, 2012; Liegl and Schindler, 2013), my intention was, first and foremost, to destabilize the taken for granted notion of "knowledge" that is inserted in our understanding of physical movement and learning without examining its methodical limitations.

Through experiences in the field, I started wondering whether presupposing knowledge, either in its tacit or explicit dimensions, prior to undertaking research, misses the reality of practice itself. It is the degree of description in a sense, but not the matter of describability. After observing that the instructor could describe the names or the practice in detail in another language (in this case, Russian), or that pupils could describe what they learned in their own ways, the cognitive issues of whether the "knowledge" assumed to be there is describable or not receded from importance. This different way of understanding the learning of a practice in the field began to shift my perspective; the notion of tacit/explicit is just a methodological framework largely accepted today, based on the firm understanding of knowledge as a rigid concept. However, if we perceive it as merely a type of methodological framework which steers our academic approaches (Mol, 2002), there are other possibilities for illustrating reality without relying on the framework. These questions guided me to further pursue modality of learning in the form of practice, without depending on the category of describability.

Shape of knowing– MacDougall's ethnographic film

For this methodological challenge of illuminating the modality of learning without depending on the concept of knowledge, MacDougall's film ethnographic approach provides guidance for pursuing the very shape of knowing that people engage with:

> Seeing, hearing, and other forms of sensory knowledge are accordingly located in individual experience or in cultural and historical collectivities. They are seen as extending the reach of the discipline without fundamentally altering it. Methods that directly address the senses, such as photography and film, tend to be treated similarly – that is, chiefly as adjuncts to formulating knowledge at a higher level of abstraction. In accepting this, historians and anthropologists preserve the value of knowledge as meaning, but they miss an opportunity to embrace the knowledge of being (MacDougall, 2006, 6).

MacDougall is one of the few researchers who produces ethnographic film instead of written texts as most ethnographers do (Pink, 2009). In contrast with using film as a method situated within the major disciplinary frameworks, his approach elaborates the reassembly of knowledge by shifting the methodological approach itself. He notes:

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> What is thought is only implied, unless it is appended in writing or speech. Some would say that images, then, are not in any sense knowledge. They simply make knowledge possible, as data from observations. But in another sense they *are* what we know, or have known, prior to any comparison, judgement, or explanation (MacDougall, 2006, 5).

Considering that methodological difference lies between film and writing (MacDougall, 1997; 2006), this chapter particularly focuses on the discussions around how shaky footage is produced from my film-based inquiry.

Shaky footage from the field

Watching shaky footage might be like reading bad handwriting, making you impatient in deciphering every single word, image, or sound. In thinking of the end product of video filming, I became very careful about dealing with shaky footage, along with many other problems I encountered along the way.

I was filming while also training. Sometimes the camera was in my hands, usually approaching pupils and the instructor from a short distance. By holding a camera, I was disturbing the space as people tried to avoid crashing into the camera and myself. When detailed demonstration by the instructor occurred, students lined up across the room in front of the instructor, repeating the techniques and addressing common mistakes he found and pointed out. This was one of the safe moments during training when I could hold the camera and look into the screen without being worried about interfering. Sometimes the camera was on a tripod, or directly on the tatami mat. Most of the time, footage was captured while I myself was training. The camera was left standing in an available space which would not disrupt the learning practice or the viewers, such as parents, outside the training area.

The resulting footage tended to get shaky when I picked up the camera right after finishing a training set. For example, it was notable after groundwork training (sparring in particular), which often exhausted my grip. This ended up making the footage shaky, as well as recording my racing heart beat in the form of my rough breathing behind the camera. Eventually, my corporeality in the field is reflected directly in the footage, which contrasts sharply with field note taking. Unlike descriptions that can only refer to the moment afterwards (what was there, and how things were in motion), the end product of filming directly reflects my corporeality and the way I was holding the camera in real time.

In the field with a video camera

Video filming has become far more usual in this evolving media environment of present day and general attitudes toward visual mediums (Banks and Ruby, 2011), which surely

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in turn affects how filming is carried out. As some members of the dojo bring cameras or cell phones from time to time, my use of the camera is without any obvious challenges.

However, there were some impacts of using a hand held camera, or setting up a tripod near the wall. People tried not to crash into the camera when it was on a tripod. When I am holding the camera, I myself find ways to avoid crashing into people which characterizes the interplay between the practice of learning judo and the practice of filming. Furthermore, the function of filming also provokes further interactions, such as some adults starting to ask me to film their performance so that they could check their skills with their own eyes. Contrary to those direct reactions, younger kids were surprisingly paying less attention to the video camera than I expected. This can partially be explained by the fact that at the dojo, photos are taken by staff members from time to time to upload to their social media accounts, and the kids are requested not to react to cameras during their trainings. Even still, I see in the footage that the video camera captured those kids' eyes following the lens from moment to moment, and the effort behind their ignorance of the camera. This is also related to those who avoided getting within the view of the camera. While most of the members at the dojo agreed to and accepted my film taking, some of them preferred not to be filmed. To accommodate the requests, or to avoid disrupting their learning, I myself carefully manage what the video camera is filming.

In this sense, it is not only those actions with the camera that are perceivable dramaturgically (Goffman, 1959), but also how things are not filmed equally sculpts the filming practice. Such actions are continuously woven into the field itself, enmeshed with each other, together with this presence of recording equipment, my practice of filming, and all other actions in the background.

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Weaving with the lens

One example showcases how the field is woven continuingly.

> After finishing lunch, there was no one left in the dining hall. After greeting Lara and Tana, who were cooking in the kitchen at the back of the hall, I grabbed a chair close to the open window where the cool breeze was coming in. Nikita and Sasha sat down next to me on my left. I opened my laptop, and started looking up a particular piece of filmed footage from the previous session of training. Nikita starts leaning towards the screen filled with thumbnails of footage, while Sasha started to open the lens cover of my video camera on the table, putting his eye through the lens.

Sasha and Nikita, age 11 and 12 were attending a summer judo camp organized by the dojo. After finishing lunch, they asked me to show them some footage from the training session in the morning. They wanted to check their performance, as they knew I was filming them training as a pair.

I opened a file, and enlarged the screen, fast forwarded through the footage and searched for an orange belt and blue judo *gi* – the visual markers of these two judoka. Nikita is looking at the shot of himself throwing Sasha by manoeuvring his legs.

Nikita says "we are doing like – "...

Before Nikita finished his sentence, Sasha cut in, " – horribly", his one eye still looking through the camera lens and the other eye closed.

Nikita adds " – yeah".

After I noticed Sasha filming, I started to expect Sasha to film the screen of the laptop on the table. I was imagining that if he does so, it could possibly be interesting footage which would show how they are recalling and remembering the judo techniques they learned in relation to my film-based inquiry. With this idea in mind, I reached over and moved a piece of camera equipment that was on the table, which I thought might have been interfering with Sasha's filming of the laptop screen.

I did not observe whether he actually filmed the screen or not, and just continued watching the footage with Nikita. I do not know whether or not Sasha noticed my intention itself, as I did not ask him anything nor did he make any comment. I did not even see how and where he filmed, as at that moment I thought I should keep trying focus on sharing footage with them which is what we had set out to do in the first place. Later in the day, I went through the footage and found Sasha's approximately two minutes of extremely unfocused, shaky footage. It captures the kitchen and Tana cutting vegetables, zooms in to the side of my face, my hands, some watermelon on a table, and the screen of the lap top we were looking at, right after the moment I moved the piece of equipment.

The video camera definitely plays a significant role here. The entire engagement around Sasha's capturing of shaky footage illuminates how the field came to be woven together by a web of actions of the people in the field, including my "ontological commitment"(Ingold, 2014, 388) through participant observation.

Now, I need to note that the description of how Sasha's filming occurred above does not fully illustrate how the footage appears or how exactly the filming was going on. I am fully aware that descriptions will be not be as complete as the footage itself, and it is not my intention in this chapter to examine the insufficiency of descriptions. Rather, by focusing on the physical engagement of filming in the field, there are three methodological implications that arise.

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Past or present

By relying on description, field experience and field notes or end products of description, are distanced from the actual moment itself, as it always comes after the written has happened. This, "ethnographic present" as Pink puts it, (Pink, 2014, 413) is an outcome

always referred to in the past. Thus, by going through editing iterations, including theoretical discussions, the end products become far removed from the real time in the field which Ingold criticizes as “temporal distortion” and “retrospective conversion” of researchers’ engagement in the field (Ingold, 2014, 386).

Filming stands as a vivid contrast to describing. Filming as an inquiry needs to be embedded in a web of actions in the field. The key point here is the temporality-congruency of the filming, especially of the present. In filming, the moment of filming is directly reflected in what is captured through the lens. It is the outcome from the ongoing present-moment engagement, through the practice of participant observation that cannot separate participation and observation. It is always facing the present, and picturing it, without the intention of reporting something as a past event.

As we see from the discussions above, when filming, both with me handling the camera, and the camera operating from a stationary tripod, I was sensitive to what was going on around the camera in every single moment. For example, to avoid the video camera crashing into the people moving around in the dojo, I needed to read which directions the training pairs were moving to at the moment. Especially during Randori (sparring), the direction is not so predictable, and the pressure of myself trying not to disrupt peers’ learning practice required an additional focus and attention. My eyes went back and forth from the monitor to the people and their movements, while listening to the sounds behind me so as not to hit anybody or anything. Eventually, I needed to be aware that whatever the end products would look like, I needed keep recording things in the very moment, continuingly.

All those experiences are temporal, based on the past (memory) while anticipating the future, enabled by engaging in the temporal present. If we pay attention to the process of filming, rather than the end product of filming, the present-congruent nature of its process becomes clear. The process of filming highlights that the time-congruent nature that filming brings in the field is sharply set apart from description-based approaches that can only refer to the past.

Inseparability

The present-congruent nature of filming further elaborates the point that the present moment is sculpted by enmeshed actions rather than by independent subjects or elements.

The filming experiences produced shaky footage that was woven together with many actions in the field. Those were more than the collectivity of single actions of independent actors such as humans, or non-humans, which create networks. Rather, there are no single actors waiting to be recorded simply by virtue of being there, but there are actions involving materials, environments, memories, human bodies and other movements constantly enacted. Ingold calls this *meshwork*. As opposed to a network which is assembled by independent actants making relations as points, in the sense of

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space, Ingold emphasizes the temporality of lines that are continuingly moving and growing, with time and duration (Ingold, 2013, 132).

Sasha's start of filming the computer screen can be articulated into the network between me and Sasha, along with other elements in the field. However, the way Sasha's filming was enacted is not so simple so as to be separated into what was responsible for causing it. Instead, there were confluent time lines, which the more I describe here, the more the description paradoxically ruptures the initial undivided entity into small pieces in the way that I can only describe. Such descriptive attempts eventually result in "process reduction" (Elias, 1978, 112) – that description naturally loses the flow and continuity of movements, noting that it is not solely a character of descriptions, as Vannini points out, but that the use of images also poses a similar risk (Vannini, 2015).

Here, by writing this chapter, I hesitantly inserted my field notes and described how Sasha was filming. This is out of concern that my very articulation demonstrates contradiction with what I am expecting from film-based inquiry. The words, categorizations, and separations by naming actors can destruct, pre-guide, and be a limitation for future audiences tracing the way I divided real time practice by my descriptions. It is like setting artificial stones in the wilderness; the stones become stepping stones for people, and wilderness becomes a trail. You might not get lost on the trail, and also never discover something new, nor even a new approach to see something new. Was it based on Sasha's will that he filmed the screen? Or was it me that navigated him to film it? Or was it something in between that made him do so? All these questions are rooted in seeking a single cause for the result of the event which is heavily dependent on the articulation of subjects and objects.

In contrast, if we can perceive Sasha's filming action as the matter of meshwork, the realities in the field can be understood as the web of actions taking place and overlapping with each other, without articulating things in the field. They are not the collective of parts already separated, individual actions, nor depending on subject and object, cause and effect, agency, and so on. Meshwork is ever continuingly woven, involving people, materials, memories, shaky footage, and many indivisible things in the field or what Ingold terms a practice of "correspondence" (Ingold, 2014, 389). Here, film-based inquiry suggests a different possibility for grasping reality – without dependence on dividing the original entity into discrete actors. This type of inquiry allows for focusing on the present experience without articulating it or sending it to the past, because it does not enforce severed identities upon that which is being observed in the field.

Engagement

The physical engagement becomes a crucial point here especially when filming is aimed to focus on non-linguistic features without assuming them to be translated into other forms of representations. The way the camera is held or set directly reflects the end

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products of the footage. Academic intentions, human dynamics in the field, material and environmental factors, and many other elements are continuingly enacted by a web of actions involving the camera.

Ingold points out that much like scientific methodologies have been immersed into the framing of human existence between being *in* the world and knowing *about* it almost as protocols, participation and observation are also perceived in a different realm (Ingold, 2014). As Ingold claims, participant observation is an action taking place between ontology and epistemology (Ingold, 2000), and not a technique to capture something that is externally there by itself in the field (Ingold, 2014). He underscores such nature of participant observation as a practice of "correspondence" (Ingold, 2013, 105–8), and urges that:

> "To practice participant observation, then, is to join in correspondence with those with whom we learn or among whom we study, in a movement that goes forward rather than back in time. "(Ingold, 2014, 390)

Film-based inquiry, thus, foregrounds how the temporal present plays a key role in the field that refocuses on the modality of, and further enriches the practice of participant observation. If we simply bring a video camera to the field, expecting to produce innovative, creative, multi-modal products by collecting data, and analyzing it, would result in following the conventional approach to *represent* reality we methodologically assume. However, as this chapter highlights, the implications of bringing a video camera into the field are, rather, found in how the field itself is enacted together with the video camera. With this approach, unquestioned methodological limitations, such as separating data collection and representation, field and analysis, or as Dewsbury (2010) points out 'know-and tell' politics within social sciences are destabilized by grasping a web of actions woven continuingly.

Horizon of film-based inquiry

Film-based approach provokes the distinction between field and representation as the methodological issue around how we engage time and temporality at the very moment in the field. It emerges as the issue in front of us, not within the research object, but within our hands. If the gap between field practice and the end-product is to be bridged by bringing a video camera into the field, it will never acutely address the issue above – by attempting to bridge the gap, the researcher already presumes the gap to be there ontologically, and is therefore still within the methodological framework

Here, film-based inquiry evokes a new methodological approach corresponding with the field in the temporal present engagement. At the very least, the filming in the field wove the footage, which provokes us to "open up our perception to what is going on there so that we, in turn, can respond to" (Ingold, 2013, 7). In this way, even shaky footage would be a valuable product from the field, since we can envision different methodological possibility by highlighting the temporal present and the inseparable meshwork of reality in the field.

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[i] The importance of learning the techniques in judo and the problems with naming them are characterized, for example, by the invention of the Kawaishi method by a Japanese instructor who taught judo in France in the post-World War II era. This method utilizes a numerical system instead of names.

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