



ARTICLE

Video footage and the grain of practice

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In his essay on the cockfight, Clifford Geertz charted a now familiar course in anthropological argument. He showed how the minute details of a practice can dramatize cultural ideas about it. Many anthropologists since have been persuaded that “practice” matters, that carefully examining the conduct of events is bound to reveal something about the status of such events in cultural life. This article reflects on the role of video footage in this equation, arguing that footage is useful for, among other things, tempering assumptions that all practice is thick with reflexive meaning relevant to its overarching type. Through an extended example drawn from my research on gambling in Laos, I suggest that, when squinted at in the right way while writing and thinking, video footage can be a heuristic for countering the urge to reduce practice into a cultural gestalt, in which all interactional details carry the same meaningful architecture.

Keywords: video-recording, multimodality, practice theory, face-to-face interaction, methodology, type/token, Laos, gambling

It was 7 a.m. in Luang Prabang, Laos, and Dii was getting married. We were waiting at his parents’ house for the Mercedes convertible Dii was borrowing from his boss. Everything else was ready for the parade that would transport him to his new in-laws’ home. We drank and practiced belting out the *luuk4 kheej3* (“son-in-law”) song. The song begins boldly: “Mother-in-law! The son-in-law has arrived!” (*mèè1 thaw5 qeej3 luuk4 kheej3 maa2 lèèw4*).¹ When the Mercedes finally got there, Dii took his place in it. It was the jewel of a string of cars and trucks. The parade departed with a flurry of sound. The vehicles tooted out a steady backbeat on their horns—*é-1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . rest*—while thirty or so riders drummed their empty beer bottles, umbrellas, and hands against whatever resonated loudest. Some leaned out car windows, others stood or sat, bouncing on the edge of truck beds and atop motorcycles, draining glasses of beer and shouting. The procession chugged along a circuitous route, passing locals and tourists alike, a few of whom turned to gape. The group savored its winding trip around the city, and when those who were in the front momentarily sped up, one man—knowing not to rush a strut down a catwalk—shouted for everyone to slow down.

Dii’s parade flooded the street with a visible, sonorous festivity (cf. Chau 2008). It was “fun” (*muən1*) on parade. This is how all good wedding processions (*hèè1 kheej3*) are imagined in Luang Prabang. The caravan never rushes; it plods along the main roads, reveling. Car horns beep rhythmically, and friends and family scream out to the world. Bystanders passed along the street sometimes smile or join in with a shout, but more often they stare back, detached, an unexpected audience. From a sidewalk or a storefront alongside the road, the whole event can seem a momentary flash of someone else’s joy.

During Dii’s procession, I sat in the bed of a truck, balancing a digital video camera on a tripod (see Figure 1). I joined in too and remember shouting along with everyone else. But the bouncy footage looks less affectively monolithic than I expected it would. It was not *all* fun, even if fun was the overall picture, what we might think of as the gestalt of the event. The men in the truck appear joyous at times, but in moments they also appear awkward and reflexively committed to producing signs of joy for others to witness in a way that betrays a faint artificiality. For stretches, they glanced at cell phones and blankly stared at the slowly passing roadside. One man shouted loudly and then immediately looked to another to laugh at himself. The group made fun of another man

1. I transcribe Lao following Enfield (2007). Numbers represent lexical tones.





Figure 1: A still from the back of a truck in Dii's procession.²

for the lilt of his screams. Everyone forgot the words to the son-in-law song and was left to repeat the first line. As the celebrants cruised the streets, an awkward self-consciousness dragged along with them.

Wedding processions are prototypically joyous events. But, in my camera's SD card, the joy seemed more mitigated than this reputation suggests. Rewatching the footage made Dii's procession appear disjointed to me—cracked and emotionally pixelated. The footage was disenchanting and disillusioning in the way that feeling self-conscious about any big event can be. It surfaced the artificial.

In this article, I reflect on the granular view of the wedding parade that the footage gave me, and I suggest that digital video recordings—which are increasingly a part of the general anthropological toolkit—can be a useful methodological strategy for providing a similar perspective for anthropologists generally (on such methodological strategies, see Throop 2003: 235). Through an

2. All images in the article are stills from video recordings. Those with visible faces have been digitally modified to protect anonymity.

extended example drawn from my research on gambling in Laos, I argue that, when squinted at in the right way while writing and thinking, video footage can make a researcher more alive to the capriciousness of events.

Of course, such a lens is not always desired. And more to the point, digital footage is not the only way to see such capriciousness, as many keen ethnographers have shown (see Kapferer 2010 for discussion of "the event," for example).³ Nor, as many ethnographic films with clean story lines attest, does using footage automatically lead to seeing things in this way. But, with these hedges in mind, watching and consulting videos months, years, or decades later, *can* be a way to self-administer hesitation and skepticism about how things

3. Of course, other methods of semiotic capture and inscription—like audio recordings of interaction—also afford many of the same things that digital video recordings do, even as they have their own modality-specific idiosyncrasies. On ideologies concerning what the visual component of video might add, and the relation between language and "the image" more generally, see Barker and Nakassis 2020, and contributions therein.

occurred and tend to occur. When used with care and collected with ethnographic imagination, it can offer a view onto the roughness of fact that precipitates most smooth ethnographic vignettes and the polysemy of notions like “practice” and “action” that anthropologists use. Most broadly, footage can serve to break apart the holistic analyses of social life that anthropologists often seek. And it can help us learn more as we cobble these analyses back together.

Research footage

Digital video recording is easy and inexpensive. In the 1970s, Margaret Mead (1975: 5) wrote that all one needed to know to film ethnographically was to “load a camera, set it on a tripod, read an exposure meter, measure distance, and set the stops.” Now one only needs to know how to operate a smartphone. With a tap on a screen, many anthropologists are incorporating video recording into their research practices in small and large ways.

The ease of recording and distributing video has led to a broader interest in visual and multisensory anthropology, which itself builds from decades of discussion about the role of photography and ethnographic films in anthropology (see the journals *Visual Anthropology* and *Visual Anthropology Review*, for instance). There has now been an explosion of experimentations with new multimodal ways of presenting research. The result is a large and rapidly evolving field, with innovative online journals that are tinkering with how research can (and should) be experienced (see, for example, the online journal *Sensate* at <https://sensatejournal.com/>; for discussion of these issues, see also Cox, Irving, and Wright 2016). At the center of much of this work is attention to the politics of representation, which non-written materials seem especially apt to bring into explicit focus (see, e.g., Peterson 2013; Dattatreyan and Marrero-Guillamón 2019 and sources therein).

But the presentation of video recordings and the politics of that presentation, as important as these subjects are, is not my focus here.⁴ Rather, I am concerned with what video footage can offer in the process of analysis. That is, without drawing too sharp a boundary between the two kinds of practice (Henley 2013: 102–103), I am

interested in *research with footage* here instead of research that uses footage for *video representation* (Pink 2013: 185).⁵

This distinction is relevant because many of—perhaps the majority of—the contemporary anthropologists who use digital video recordings as tools of semiotic capture are unlikely ever to present their materials in video form. Their cameras instead work like notebooks or audio notes: as ways of recording events that can be reconsidered later. This is what I have mostly done in my fieldwork (see Figure 5, below). Without any ambition to make a film, I carried cameras to snooker halls and markets, I set them up on tripods at games and gatherings. I usually let them alone. I sometimes jumped in front of them; I rarely stood behind them. The resulting hundreds of hours of footage serve as parallel fieldnotes, an “alternative form of note-taking” (Pink 2011: 143), which captures both the many details and dynamics of my participant observation—including signs of how people received and perceived me in the course of countless interactions—and those moments where people became engrossed in other things, and I seemed not to matter.

Such footage can obviously complement written fieldnotes, documents, photographs, and ethnographic experiences, and be used as heterogeneously as these more traditional anthropological materials. But what, exactly, does video footage help us see? What does it do? For one, it raises new ethical dilemmas and opportunities for collaboration and ethnographic accountability, often related to but distinct from those concerning the politics of representation in multimodal materials used for presentation (see, e.g., Ennis 2020). Navigating these dilemmas can itself offer insights into the limits and selectivity of one’s data. It can also give a sense of local understandings of the forms of media people use day-to-day and their ideas about them (Worth 1980; Gershon 2010). If nothing else, recording footage creates important opportunities for anthropologists to review materials with their interlocutors in the field and to discuss how those interlocutors want to be represented later in writing or video (Pink 2013: 119–21).

Research footage also offers opportunities for review by the anthropologist: the question is, of course, what

4. Nor am I concerned here with the analysis of professionally produced films. For a discussion of a new “linguistic anthropology of cinema,” see Nakassis 2020, 2023.

5. On the history of anthropologists using footage for research, see Ruby 2000: chapter 1; on the role of recording technologies in analyses of psychoanalytic interaction in the 1930s to the 1960s, see Lempert 2019.



we are seeing when we look at it.⁶ Many anthropologists writing about video rush to remind readers that no camera is disinterested, that footage is never an objective hologram of the world (James, Hockey, and Dawson 1997: 11; Grimshaw and Ravetz 2005; MacDougall 2005; on “matters of fact” see Sandall 1995). Few would now agree with Regnault’s contention that “only cinema provides objective documents in abundance” (cited in Ruby 2000: 44). But many of those who recognize the always limited objectivity of the camera nevertheless argue that some ways of filming can be more helpful for reflecting on scenes of social life than others (for discussion of techniques, see Heath, Hindmarsh, and Luff 2010; Enfield 2013; for an attempt to standardize filming, see Prost 1975). A steady camera on a tripod with a wide, stable shot, for example, is preferred by most who study interaction, as it allows one a broad view of a scene, no matter the momentary whims of the filmmaker. As interactions and events morph throughout the course of a long shot, cameras on tripods can also productively end up staring at an interaction sideways—centering on turned heads or the edges of interactions in ways that might make for an interesting perspective later. This can offer a helpfully clunky, interpretively “thin” or counterintuitive view of an interaction, which does not so much aim to reproduce the vision of a participant, but to subvert it, allowing one to see more of what might otherwise have been swept under the rug of consciousness.⁷ The stable tripod also allows the anthropologist to step out from behind the camera and join in the interaction.

But there is no consensus on how to handle a camera for research footage, and what some see as an advantage of one method others see as a weakness. Gregory Bateson derided a steady “grinding” camera on a tripod as “disastrous” (Mead and Bateson 2003: 265), arguing that “the photographic record should be an art form.”⁸ I

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6. For a rich discussion of different approaches, see Feld and Williams’s (1975) programmatic piece.
 7. Barbash and Taylor (1997: 78) write that “the essential point of research footage is that it be as unselective and unstructured as possible—in other words, that it provide less *discourse about* social life than an *objective record* of it.”
 8. On this, Jean Rouch (2003: 38–39) writes: “For me then, the only way to film is to walk with the camera, taking it where it is most effective and improvising another type of ballet with it, trying to make it as alive as the people it is filming.”

disagree with Bateson: the photographic record *can be* an art form. But the chief concern for anthropologists filming for their own later consultation at a desk or in a coffee shop is not always whether their raw “footage”—a set of moving images never to be cooked in editing programs or sliced together with other shots (on “footage” see MacDougall 1978: 406)—is aesthetically satisfying. Their primary concern is often whether that footage is helpful for understanding social life; if its artistic qualities help achieve that end, if the footage ends up being compelling in its formal qualities, that is something of a bonus.

The assumption of “thick practice”

To explore one way that footage might be especially helpful, I begin with an ethnographer writing without a video camera: Clifford Geertz. Geertz’s essay on the Balinese cockfight is a classic, a work that most anthropologists have read closely and discussed at some point.⁹ Because I did my doctoral research on gambling, it has long loomed especially large in my own conversations and thinking.

In the early days of my fieldwork, Geertz’s essay gave me a sense of what I might find if I filmed gambling events. Geertz did not film cockfights, but he was one of anthropology’s most cinematic writers. He depicts the cockfight as if he had a camera. The raiding policemen “swing their guns around like gangsters in a motion picture” (1973: 414). The crowd “mov[es] their bodies in kinesthetic sympathy with the movement of the animals, cheering their champion with wordless hand motions, shiftings of the shoulders, turnings of the head, falling back en masse as the cock with the murderous

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9. Like many classics, it has, of course, also faced much critique. William Roseberry writes that Geertz “seduced” anthropologists, and, in the process, obscured his ethnography’s too tidy, aseptic foundation. For Roseberry (1989: 1027), Geertz’s essay on the cockfight was vivid but flawed. Geertz, he argued, neglected the socioeconomic and political structures that infused the cockfight. In distilling the cockfight into a “text,” Geertz extracted culture “from the wellings-up of action, interaction, power and practice.” In the landmark volume *Writing culture*, Crapanzano likewise argues that Geertz uses his essay’s opening vignette of fleeing from the police—a metamorphosis from invisibility to rapport—to woo us. The essay “attests,” Crapanzano (1986: 75) writes, to Geertz’s “having been there and gives him whatever authority arises from that presence.”



spurs careens toward one side of the ring . . ." (1973: 423).

Geertz contrasts the cockfight's "center" and "side" bets in the same vivid way: "The first is a matter of deliberate, very quiet, almost furtive arrangement by the coalition members and the umpire huddled like conspirators in the center of the ring; the second is a matter of impulsive shouting, public offers, and public acceptances by the excited throng around its edges" (1973: 425).

Geertz's depictive writing engages readers, but it also does substantive work by way of description. The contrastive dispositions with which Balinese gamblers offer and accept center and side bets resonate with—almost look like—the distinct statuses of types of bets in Balinese society. Gamblers enact the social importance of center bets with secretive, solemn sounds and gestures; they enact the crass economic interest of side bets with equally apposite shouts and hand-waving. The two dispositions evidence the distinct moral and economic ends of the two types of bets.

This focus on the bet types was not Geertz's main point, but in treating the linguistic, gestural, and affective performance of betting as itself performative of the values associated with it, Geertz charted a now familiar course in anthropological argument, in which the minute details of practice are shown to dramatize culture. This argumentative structure works, in part, because it makes intuitive and experiential sense. Not everyone agrees with it,¹⁰ but many anthropologists seem to expect that the manner in which an action is done will tacitly depict the ethical or performative presuppositions and purposes associated with that action—that if you look closely enough at any social practice, you will find little hints of the broader social meaning of that practice in its details. Describing Nancy Munn's ethnography, Graeber (2001: 81–82) makes a version of this idea ex-

10. Appadurai (1986: 57, emphasis removed) writes, for example, that "politics (in the broad sense of relations, assumptions, and contests pertaining to power) is what links value and exchange in the social life of commodities. In the mundane, day-to-day, small-scale exchanges of things in ordinary life, this fact is not visible, for exchange has the routine and conventionalized look of all customary behavior. But these many ordinary dealings would not be possible were it not for a broad set of agreements concerning what is desirable, what a reasonable 'exchange of sacrifices' comprises, and who is permitted to exercise what kind of effective demand in what circumstances."

PLICIT: "the most elementary cultural definitions of value are reproduced every time one gives a guest, or a child, food. Implicit in even such a simple gesture lies a whole cosmology, a whole set of distinctions."

Countless anthropologists have made parallel arguments, arguments that depict practice as invariably "thick," cosmologically and reflexively dense. Note, for instance, the way Chu (2007: 23) distinguishes how customers in a Chinese market pay in the national currency (RMB) versus USD: "In contrast to the combative tit-for-tat of RMB exchanges, where people eyed the money and goods changing hands with equal suspicion . . . [T]he giver [of dollars] typically did all the counting and handling of dollars, while the receiver humbly and unquestioningly accepted the money." Or take how Zaloom (2006: 111) describes the exchange of futures on the trading floor: a visitor's "ears are filled with loud noise . . . her shoulders are smashed by the flailing bodies of traders in garish attire, and her balance is threatened as traders shove their way into the action." In the "volatile atmosphere of the trading floor," risk-taking is linked with physical fighting and "trading often erupts into contests of shoving and swearing" (2006: 105).¹¹ In their corporeal practice, Zaloom (2006: 111) continues, the "traders bring to life a particular form of economic man—aggressive, competitive, fiercely independent, and often crude—that dramatizes taking profits from the hands of their friends and colleagues."¹²

In a nod to Geertz, I call the expectation underpinning such examples *the thick practice assumption*. But please do not read too much into my associating this idea with Geertz. The assumption—i.e., that the manner in which an action is done enacts broader ideologies about that action—could be traced through many different (sub)disciplinary genealogies beyond Geertz (for example, the methods of ethnomethodology, James Scott's notion of the usually not-quite-"hidden transcript," and, closest to my own work, the focus on metapragmatic density

11. Geertz (1973: 426) coincidentally compared the cockfight to stock traders: "Rather than the solemn, legalistic pactmaking of the center, [side bet] wagering takes place rather in the fashion in which the stock exchange used to work when it was out on the curb."

12. I use these examples not to imply that Chu or Zaloom depict these scenes inaccurately, but because their quite compelling arguments exemplify the logic I am here trying to describe.



in linguistic anthropology).¹³ I use Geertz here because his essay is a paragon of the analytical habit I am calling into focus, because of his familiarity to readers, and because of the parallel between his materials and mine. But my argument is not against Geertz or his current influence. In the decades since *The interpretation of cultures*, we have in large part walked away from Geertz's at times totalizing view of social life (Clifford and Marcus 1986). But something like the thick practice assumption, which Geertz's cockfight essay exemplifies, has meanwhile become prevalent.

The thick practice assumption is now, I suggest, one of several commonsense views in cultural and linguistic anthropology: people dramatically reproduce cultural ideas as they live them.¹⁴ The contention is that social life—like a passage from James Joyce or a scene from *Eraserhead*—is littered with reflexive hints as to its own significance. And, as many have found, at times this assumption is borne out. For example, anthropologists have repeatedly shown that ritual practice often unfolds with a dramatic thickness, as it “involves exceptionally dense representation of spatiotemporally wider categories and principles in an interactional here-now” (Stasch 2011: 160). In my own work, I have also documented thick practice in this sense, arguing that sessions of drinking beer together in urban Laos often contain hypertrophic signs of “mutual consumption,” signs that underline that mutuality as it unfolds (for example, people often clink glasses repeatedly and encourage the synchronous chugging of drinks; see Zuckerman 2023).

Uncovering such thick practices is crucial work for understanding the layered reflexivity of social life, and sometimes video can help to bring this reflexivity to light. Nevertheless, footage is also useful for undermining the assumption that thick practice is everywhere. This is my point.

Put this way, my argument fits with how many anthropologists have talked about the promise of practice theory (for a foundational account, see Ortner 1984).

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13. In linguistic anthropology, a focus on the implicit metapragmatics of practice, a core line of research in the subfield (see Silverstein 1993), has led to an ensemble of logically analogous arguments, in which, for instance, authors show that the way that people tend to talk during market exchanges hints at the stereotypical ends of such exchanges (Kapchan 1996; French 2000; Bauman 2002; Orr 2007; cf. Keane 2008; Yount-André 2016).
 14. On how something like this assumption relates to the analysis of “ordinary ethics,” see Zuckerman 2022.

The shared hope is that a focus on practice will draw us away from treating social life as an automatic consequence of “structure” or “culture.”¹⁵ But sometimes accounts of practice, informed by practice theory, have failed to fulfill this promise. Many have, as Frederick Erickson (2004: 138) puts it, treated practice “too globally,” and subsequently leaned into, rather than pushed against, the assumption of thick practice. They have portrayed actors negotiating structures, contesting meanings, or acting agentively in generic ways, as if all practice were routinely and predictably maverick. The word “practice” is ambiguous like this. As Stanton Wortham (2012: 131) writes, “one sometimes hears the word invoked as if we knew the fundamental level at which social life operates,” but we do not, and we use “practice” to characterize events with different spatiotemporal and semiotic properties. We can call both a video recording of a single event and Geertz's description of the cockfight “representations of practice.” But these representations lean in different directions. Geertz uses his representation to exemplify. I am suggesting here that, when we need to, we can use video footage to do the opposite. Footage of practice can “defamiliarize” (Shklovsky 1917), and thus help maintain what Roger Sandall (1972) describes as a “passion for the specific.” This is what practice theory promised: to move us way from the presumption that the everyday is always routine.

Two kinds of Lao bets

The illegal but pervasive betting is almost as ferocious as the kicks and punches.

William Klausner (1960: 351) describing Muay Thai

In June 2011, Sak, a minivan driver in his forties, invited me to play pétanque, a French game similar to bocce and lawn bowling now very popular in Luang Prabang. On the motorcycle ride there, Sak said that we would be wagering beer. After we played a few games with another team, we sat, ate snacks, paid, and drank the wagered

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15. One of Bourdieu's innovations, for example, was to reinfuse events with the experience of contingency that he saw “science” bleaching out. Into the analysis of this or that moment, he injected the uncertainty that comes with experiencing an event not merely *post festum*, as the “scientist” does, but through time, “with its rhythm, its orientation, its irreversibility” (Bourdieu 1977: 9). In events in time, one can see strategy and negotiation.





beer with the men who beat us. On the ride back, Sak said that because we ate, drank, and paid the bill together, he and I were now like brothers (*qaaj4 nòng4 kan3*).

The next afternoon, I found another pétanque court where people were gambling for money (see Figure 2). I wrote in my fieldnotes that I had “stumbled upon a gambling den of sorts,” adding, “I saw a few people playing and yelling at each other in a way that I don’t normally see.” A few days later, I reflected that “gambling for beer seems very different [from] gambling for money.” When I wrote this, I was already contrasting the two types of gambling in the ways people in Luang Prabang did: wagering beer builds “solidarity” (*saamakkhii2*); wagering money makes people “argue” (*thiang3 kan3*) and “fight” (*tii3 kan3*). In the following years, over more than fifteen months of research in Luang Prabang, I filmed many pétanque games, and I played in and watched countless more (see Zuckerman 2018).

When I began to investigate footage of money bets on pétanque courts in Laos, I was guided by something like the thick practice assumption. I predicted that offers to bet money would, like the “outside bets” in Geertz’s essay, exhibit a multimodal assortment of special effects that underlined the aggression associated with money gambling. I expected my footage to be filled with the sort of acts I remembered observing from the side of the money-gambling court: flails of the hand, pointed fingers, and extended palms pressuring others to seal the deal; loud and prosodically marked speech; verbal af-

fronts about whether an opponent was afraid of losing his money or being scolded by his wife. I seemed especially likely to find such thick practice because of how people talked about money gambling in Luang Prabang. I often heard gamblers and nongamblers alike stress that money gambling was fundamentally antagonistic, and that this antagonism was evidenced by sensory qualities of communication (see Harkness 2015), namely “strong,” loud speech (*vaw4 hèng2*) and “noisiness” (*khwaam2 nan2*). People used “noise” in particular as both a descriptor of sonic volume and a diacritic of social discord. One court owner told me that before pétanque became popular, the police would allow people to gamble at her court only if they did not get “noisy with each other.” Later, she was almost forced to shut down because her customers were shouting “too loudly” for the children napping and studying at the school next door. She put up signs asking everyone to please be quiet, but the situation became untenable when men began playing for even higher stakes. The bets were said to be so big that gamblers could not control themselves from yelling. Frustrated by weeks of telling everyone to keep it down, the owner screamed back at a few of the loudest men—reportedly calling them “dogs.” She lost much of her customer base as a result, but the bickering, the insolence, the “noise,” she told me weeks later, it was all just too much.

To see the extent which the “noise” associated with gambling carried into real examples of the practice of gambling, in the field and back in the United States, I



Figure 2: A still of some money gamblers sitting at the edge of a pétanque court.



combed over my own experiences of and notes on these games. I also interrogated the details of my recordings, transcribing parts of them in ELAN,¹⁶ a free computer annotator that lets you slow down video and audio, and keep track of anything of interest. I marked offers to bet, moments where money physically exchanged hands, and the linguistic forms people used to joke with and heckle one another.

Part of this process involved disentangling two types of money bets: “bets-with” and “bets-against.”¹⁷ While these types are elided in most general talk among locals about money gambling, they are an essential part of how money betting is conducted, and gamblers often pull the two kinds of bet apart when organizing and discussing their bets. To bet with somebody is to join them, together against a third party, to “share” (*pan3*) or “eat with” (*kin3 nam2*) them, co-investing in their wagered risks and rewards. To bet against someone is to wager money against theirs, to enter a competition defined by wins and losses. Whether two people are “betting with” or “betting against” each other is said to be a function of social relations: friends or family who “love each other” do not bet against one another or “eat each other’s money” (see Zuckerman 2020, 2023). Bets-with presuppose and create intimacy; bets-against index social distance.

Many people talk about betting with another person as if it were both a sign of an existing relation and automatically productive of solidarity between bettors—not only during gambling by way of having a fleeting shared rooting interest, but also, when repeated over time, by virtue of two people repeatedly “being on the same side” and “trusting” one another’s skill (this is similar to how people talk about beer gambling; see Zuckerman 2020 for more detail). In contrast, betting against another person is said to be a sign of social distance, aloofness, and a lack of “love” and “solidarity” among gamblers. Almost every pétanque player distinguishes some set of people with whom they would not gamble against for money because of the possibility that resulting conflict would ruin their good relationships. One “older brother” (*qaaj4 hak1*) I had at the court, for instance, rejected my offer to bet money against each other by telling me that “eating”

my money would be *bòø-sèèp4*, or “not delicious”; the same man shared bets *with* me without compunction.¹⁸

To what extent does the manner of making bets reflect people’s generic descriptions of the two kinds of bets? Comparing the language and bodily communicative acts through which people made bets-with and bets-against appears a likely place to uncover thick practice. I expected that, when I looked closely, I would find offers to make a bet-against to be aggressive and noisy, while offers to bet-with, their apparent affective and moral opposite, would look more nonchalant, perhaps even “loving.” I was confronted with footage that was less neat. This is not to say that there were no differences, broadly, between how the types of bets looked. There were bets-against that were harsh and antagonistic, which appeared to congeal the ideology that gambling breeds violence and discord (see Figure 3). And the same “aggressive” features (see Zuckerman 2018 for details) occurred less frequently, if at all, in offers to bet-with. There were also other patterns that fit with how I imagined betting as a thick practice. All but one of the offers to bet with someone that I watched were eventually accepted, while the majority of offers to bet-against someone were not.¹⁹ More indicative still, while each offer to bet-with was addressed to a particular individual, many offers to bet-against were broadcasted to “anyone” or “whomever” was at the court. People seemed to target bets-with like one targets a dinner invitation, but they announced bets-against like they were looking for customers at their restaurants. This mirrored explicit statements about the sociality of such bets: bets-with were meant to be consummated with friends and other warm social relations, while bets-against were earmarked for undefined “strangers” (see related discussions in Evans 1990; High 2014).

But there were also many offers to bet against in the footage that upturned my expectations. Some were whispered, abashed, or made alongside nonsarcastic smiles, others were followed by declarations that the bet would foster “fun” (*muən1*) or “mutual love” (*hak1*

16. ELAN (2022). Nijmegen: Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics. <https://tla.mpi.nl/tools/tla-tools/elan/>.

17. This section relies primarily on one hour and twelve minutes of five video-recorded money gambling games filmed on separate days over the course of a year. I tracked every bet across these games.

18. Unsurprisingly, when people distinguish the two types they also often thematically parallel the distinction between “gambling for beer” and “gambling for money” (see Irvine and Gal 2000 and Gal and Irvine 2019 on the fractal recursivity of similar axes of differentiation).

19. The one offer to bet with someone that was not accepted was eventually, and somewhat reluctantly, transformed into an offer to bet against a third party who wanted to bet more money on the game.





Figure 3: A gambler dramatically extends a hand to shake on a proposed bet against.

phèng2 kan3; as in Figure 4). Because gamblers often omitted explicitly performative forms from their bet offers, such as words like “share” (*pan3*) or phrases like “[let’s] eat each other’s money” (*kin3 ngen2 kan3*), and instead preferred to offer bets by merely calling out the amount they wanted to wager or using curt phrases like “[do you want to] take [the bet]?” (*qaw3 qaq1*), I even found offers to bet that were fundamentally ambiguous as to whether the offerer was offering to bet-with or to bet-against (i.e., these offers were “performatively indirect,” Lempert 2012; see also the classic discussion in Austin 1975 about performatives). Those who were addressed then had to ask for more details.

That the two types of bets could be confused like this refutes the thick practice assumption. It makes plain that the form of a bet offer does not necessarily embody ideological assumptions about how that type of offer tends to occur. If one can mistake a bet-with and a bet-against, that means the two bet types can resemble one another in moments. Rather than an unvarying pairing of demeanor and bet type, as Geertz rhetorically suggested in his analysis of the cockfight, the footage showed that the two kinds of bets often formed some-

thing like a gradient cline, along which the affective style of any bet might vary wildly.

To show what I mean, let me walk through two bet-against offers made in succession by the same man, Phuumii. The economic terms of the two offers are identical, but they have radically different affective components. On the day I was filming, Phuumii, a man in his mid-forties, and Saj were playing on a team against Taa and Laa. It was late morning, and the players were gambling for what at the time was a typical amount of money for an “inside” bet-against: initially 50,000 kip per person or 6 USD, but after a few games they raised the stakes to 100,000 kip per person. The games also involved significant betting on individual shots. I filmed with two video recorders, one on each side of the court, and a central audio recorder. The pair of offers I am interested in happened twenty-two minutes into my recording. Taa has just missed a shot, and, reemboldened by what the miss meant for his odds of winning, Phuumii offered to bet against Van, an audience member who was already invested in the game.

This new bet offer is done with flourish. As Phuumii makes it (in line 1.1 of Figure 5) he points at Van. His



Figure 4: A money gambler takes his winnings.

utterance is more imperative than interrogative. His speech appears louder than normal and prosodically marked. Broadly, the offer to bet-against—in all its multimodal glory—is a good example of a “strong” (*hèng2*) betting style. And Van, in fact, explicitly labels it as such in line 1.2. But although Phuumii’s offer was “strong” in its format and demeanor, its odds were weak and safe. In line 1.2, Van screams and howls in response, *paaa*, literally doubling over with laughter at the mismatch between Phuumii’s “strong” demeanor and his wimpy “even-odds” bet. The audience members on the surrounding benches, chairs, and a newly bought pleather couch mostly laugh too. As Van continues talking, Phuumii, in line 1.3, clarifies what he wanted to bet on the current round and then, in line 1.6, offers the same bet-against for a second time, this time in a contrastively *thammadaa3* or “normal” way. His offer is now syntactically formatted as a question, and one

that anticipates a negative response: *bòø-qaw3 qaql* or “[You] don’t want to take the bet?” Rather than pointing at Van as he did in the previous bet, Phuumii keeps his arms at his sides for this one and smiles wryly.

These two offers to bet-against offer the same economic action, with the same amount of money and same odds, but they are made with two markedly contrastive demeanors. This makes obvious what I argued above: it is possible to offer a bet-against without indexing aggression or “being aggressive.”²⁰ But beyond this, the footage of the two bet-against offers reveals that people like Van are themselves oriented to such dispositions. The way one makes a bet is not automatic; it is

20. This change in demeanor may in part be a function of where the second bet appears in the sequence: the bet has already been offered, it is merely referring to that offer. But many first offers to bet against are equally casual.

LINE	SPKR.	UTTERANCE
1.1	Phuumii	<i>qaw4 lin5 samee3</i> qii ^{k5} sèè ⁿ³ nù ^{ng1} nii ⁴ naq ¹ “Take it! Let’s play even odds, one hundred thousand more!”
1.2	Van	Paaaa vaw ⁴ bak ² hèè ^{ng2} hèè ^{ng2} lèqo-[samee ³ lee ^{j2} “Haaa! [You] are talking so strong, and you’re asking for even odds!”
1.3	Phuumii	[<i>lin5 taa3 nii4</i> “On this round”
1.4		OTHER PLAYER TAPS PHUUMII, LAUGHS, AND POINTS TOWARD GAME
1.5	Van	Paaa mù ⁴ kii ⁴ [Phuumii nii ³ thèè ⁴ nii ³ caw ⁴ “Haaa! But a second ago Phuumii... You really ran from that [other offer you made]”
1.6	Phuumii	[<i>bòe-qaw3 qaq1</i> “[You] don’t want to take the bet?”



Figure 5: The same bet done strongly and weakly.

part of the story of what happened. When Van points to the juxtaposition of Phuumii’s “strong” bet-against and his “even-odds,” he is pointing out a mismatch between Phuumii’s demeanor and the terms of the bet he wants to make (see Agha 2007 on cross-modal noncongruence and Sicoli 2020 on harmonic and discordant resonances). In highlighting the discordance, Van implicitly scales economic “risk” and “riskiness” with “strong talk”: the riskier the bet-against, the implication is, the more license a player has to say it in a “strong” manner. Making a “weak” offer to bet-against with “strong” language is notable, even sanctionable.

* * *

When I first encountered beer and money gambling in Laos, it seemed like I could look out onto pétanque courts and see the difference: one type appeared filled with toasts of beer, smiles, and high fives, the other with shouts, noise, and imminent violence. This assumption

that these practices would be uniformly thick with their cultural valences, my sense of the gestalt of the two scenes was, importantly, not mine alone. It paralleled how people in the city often talked about gambling, and it followed from how they sometimes gambled. But my footage helped me see how this “thick” view erased numerous variations in gambling practice (Irvine and Gal 2000).²¹

Confronted with such erasure, I might well have asked: Who cares? Does the chemical composition of a chair matter to how the average person sits on it? After all, the details are always more complicated and intricate

21. Gal and Irvine (2019: 204–205) write: “metapragmatic labels are a form of regimentation. They skew what will be offered in illustration, and what will be remembered. Memory culture erases the subtleties of nonstereotypical usage; so do the practices of outside observers who rely only on interviews and have little chance of observing behavior that does not fit the stereotype.”



when you start to scrutinize; any image becomes grainier and more pixelated when you zoom in closer. Yet my footage of gambling matters more than that. I will go so far as to say that the at times mild dispositions of money gamblers opens up a radically new understanding of the sociality of betting in Laos.

Pointing out that many offers to bet-against do not take an antagonistic form shows how it can be that money gambling is so pervasive in contemporary Luang Prabang, even as actual violent acts and arguments are rare. The pure aggression everyone in the city associates with money gambling is not actually that pervasive. Prototypical scenes of angry gambling are infrequent, and bystander intervention that precludes anything from getting out of hand is rampant. Rarely do gamblers erupt into almost-violence, let alone physical fighting. Angry, violent bets happen, but they stand out because they stand apart, the peaks along a vast plain.

If gambling for money always took the forms associated with it, if it always embodied the broader ideas people had about it, everyone in the city would assuredly gamble less.²² Games are shut down and quieted when they become “noisy”; bystanders step in, the police are called. Money games are more fun to watch than beer games, people say. This is surely in part because of the incipient tension that the desire to win money can create. But it is the possibility—not the inevitability—of angry, masculine dispositions that makes gambling for money so compelling to witness. In Henry David Thoreau’s book, *Cape Cod*, he writes that “one shark in a dozen years is enough to keep up the reputation of a beach a hundred miles long” (2010: 38; see Chivers 2021). Those occasional bets-against that are most angry, most embodying of conflict, hold the same power: they can anchor the ideology—the reputation—of money betting as inherently problematic, “noisy,” and antisocial.

The idea of a shark attack can influence a day at the beach on Cape Cod, but most people never feel the crush of shark teeth as they swim along the surf. Depictions of all bets-against as *those violent and aggressive sorts of bets-against* matter to how social life is lived, but they remain mostly fantasies, based on potential rather than statistical actuality. They are fantasies that people in Luang Prabang often describe and only occasionally live. They are fantasies that influence experience but never exhaust it.

22. On the related association of money gambling with practices of intentionally distracting athletes, see Zuckerman 2016: 299.

Shooting gestalt: Against technological determinism

There is a parallel between my experience with gambling and my experience with Dii’s wedding procession. In both cases, neat ideas about how the events would look and feel—ideas based on circulating ideologies about how events of those social kinds tend to look and feel—were fractured, more pixelated, when I started investigating video footage.

Video footage has properties that afford one to more easily see such pixelation, and that encourage what has long been the promise of practice theory. It can be re-watched, it can be slowed down, it can capture actions unmediated by linguistic categories (see, *inter alia*, Goodwin 1994, 2018; Streeck, Goodwin, and LeBaron 2011; Enfield 2013; Sicoli 2020: 27–28). When one looks at footage of an event while writing an article about the event, the footage can become an object of narration, it can be rhetorically reparsed from different angles, it can be watched in different dimensions, as it were, with attention to different parts. One can zoom in on the form of interaction: the rhythms and timing of nonverbal behavior (Erickson 2004), the microexpressions of the face (Birdwhistell 1970), and the meaningfully diverging orientations of a person’s neck and waist (Schegloff 1998). And one can explore apparently more substantive details, in and out of their unfolding in time: how many times the restaurant bill changed hands before someone paid it, the affect with which a police officer approaches citizens of different races, the moral mood with which a *shochet* kills and then butchers a cow. With video footage we can stare at these events and wonder through them again and again (see Figure 6). These affordances are obvious and simple and crucial to recognize in any frank assessment of the range of anthropological methods available to us.

But footage need not necessarily thin out our accounts of social practice. Indeed, video recording has historically been perhaps *the* mechanism for finding instances of thick practice. Many are drawn to use video because it offers this promise. In a footnote, Geertz writes that to truly capture the betting at the cockfight “motion picture recording . . . would probably be necessary” (1973: 428).²³ But what would a camera have added to his already vivid account? Without one, he has captured

23. He also adds that one would need multiple observers and someone fluent in decision theory.





Figure 6: One of two cameras recording a game of pétanque.

the look and feel of the cockfight, the facial expressions of gamblers, and the timbre of their voices. He recognizes the usefulness of a camera, but his writing style seems to obviate the need. Throughout his essay, Geertz hovers above the gambling omnisciently. While he goes into detail about how he, on one specific day, ran from the police, he sketches the cockfight itself generically, as a token of a type, combining “many observations, taken from many vantage points . . . into a single, constructed performance” (Crapanzano 1986: 75). The result is “the illusion of specificity” without a “specific temporal or spatial vantage point.” Ironically, footage of the cockfight might have helped Geertz not to make more exacting descriptions, but messier ones. When I compare his description of the cockfight with my footage of pétanque, I feel as if I am looking back and forth between Geertz’s Norman Rockwell and my Jackson Pollock—all splatters and lines.

Recently a group of ethnographic filmmakers have in effect made Geertz’s original essay more cinematic—bringing to life the Balinese cockfights of today—and

written about their experience in the pages of *American Anthropologist* (see Lemelson and Young 2018). They position their film (entitled *Tajen*), their interactive website, and their commentary about it, as an attempt to “expand—both methodologically and descriptively, on Geertz’ original understanding of *tajen*, or the Balinese cockfight” (Lemelson and Young 2018: 831).

As their companion essay makes clear, their goal was not to show how the cockfight may have morphed in the sixty some intervening years between Geertz’s fieldwork and their film.²⁴ Nor was their goal to deconstruct Geertz’s vivid depiction of how the cockfight occurred

24. Although they note, of course, that much has changed: “the 1965 mass killings, the rise of Suharto’s autocratic New Order, and the influx of millions of tourists as Bali has come to be known as a preeminent global destination for cultural tourism. All of these could plausibly have shaped or altered the practice of Balinese cockfighting since Geertz’s original fieldwork was conducted sixty years ago” (Lemelson and Young 2018: 831).



by juxtaposing heteroglossic, messy footage with his neat picture. Rather, they wanted to make the cockfight even more vivid, sensorially immersive, and singular in argument.²⁵ They conceived their story before filming and constructed a narrative “representative of cultural realities,” where “one man would stand in for the archetypal cockfighter” (Lemelson and Young 2018: 833).

Tajen the film, with its vivid, singular account, feels even further from my recordings of pétanque games than Geertz’s symbolically dense style. As such it manifests good evidence against any strong technologically deterministic reading of my argument. While footage can help anthropologists see the heterogeneity of experience and break up expectations, the use of it in anthropology is as underdetermined as the use of writing is. In fact, films like *Tajen* and the use of footage generally have often been critiqued from the opposite direction to the one I move in this essay, as weary anthropologists have attacked the camera’s tendency to install coherence, its proclivity to make, not destroy, gestalt. While reviewing the film, *The Rendille*, Paul Baxter (1977: 7) reflected on the “bossy one-eyedness and distorting beauty of film” (cited in MacDougall 1978: 418–19). “Film-makers . . . want life to be simple and issues to be clear,” he wrote, “whereas anthropologists are sure it is complicated.”²⁶

Developing footage

Taking apart gestalts, deconstructing assumptions about how things work and what people do, showing that actors in practice find cracks and weak points in the discursive structures that bind them—these habits have been core to anthropologists’ mission over the last decades. At times, in fact, it seems anthropologists have gone too far in this direction, entering what Bunzl (2008: 58) calls a “prison of specification,” wherein, “having conditioned ourselves to pounce on any and all generalities, we spend more and more time worrying about smaller and smaller things. Such observations may be truthful, but they often tell us very little about what really matters in the world.”

I am not here to reinforce the bars of this prison. I am not arguing that the camera’s lens, and the microscopic view of social life it can offer, should be our only lens. But a perusal of contemporary journals shows that some of the problem of the drive toward specification is that it has not always been undertaken with the right methods. It has ironically often left much of the generality of the anthropological vignette and the methods for producing it untouched. Individuals are specified, but the details of what those people do are often painted with a palette of memory, informed by cultural gestalts and designed to demonstrate thick practices rather than specific ones. The point of my argument here is not to suggest that we should dispense with all generality,²⁷ but rather, to caution not to take it too seriously. Sometimes we are lulled by the neat narratives we hear during fieldwork and the power of paradigmatic examples. In the intervening years between “the field” and the write-up, sometimes we forget how messy things are in the moment-to-moment details (on this, compare Erickson 2004: 162).

Video footage can help modulate these tendencies. Art students learning to draw as “realistically” as possible are often told to draw not from memory or imagination but from the surprisingly alienating details of shadows and light captured in reference photographs or present in the world in front of them. My fieldnotes and my footage have together become something like such references for me, to which I often return not in a quest for naïve realism but in a search for a new perspective. They jog my memory and carry my imagination away from whatever desk I happen to be writing upon. Much as manipulating how one constructs a transcript can change how one sees events (Ochs 1979), I find that looking at events on a computer screen, squinting at them with just the right sense of exploration, can help snap me out of an automatic way of seeing things.

Of course, that this messiness is often lurking does not undermine the finding that practice is, in fact, sometimes “thick” in the sense I have used that term here, that—even *in footage*—it is often evident that

25. <http://tajeninteractive.com/>

26. For a line of ethnographic filmmaking that shares many of the sensibilities that I outline here, see work on “observational cinema” (e.g., Young 1975; Grimshaw and Ravetz 2009; MacDougall 2018).

27. On this, we might ask: What are our other options? I cannot in these few pages teach you Lao and take you to Luang Prabang to watch the games and wagers that happened when I was there. We are trapped by generalization and summary (Zuckerman 2021a, 2021b), just as we are constrained by the need to avoid dizzying readers with specificity.



the manner in which some actions are done can reflexively encode, contest, or respond to some cultural ideal of it. That video footage allows us to see how this happens is perhaps its chief value for anthropology. My footage of gambling in Luang Prabang, for instance, documents that, at times, the way that a man offers to bet does display not only what kind of person he is, but also what kind of act he is claiming his betting to be: an act of masculine aggression, a gift, an enjoyable leisure activity. Such public, semiotic, and interpretively oriented reflexivity is uncontroversially present in most economic exchanges (Keane 2008), as in most meaningful action (Agha 2007), and recorders can document it from a different angle than a notebook can.

But recorders can also show, crucially, that this reflexivity is not always oriented to framing and establishing the image of social action that we might expect. During acts of betting, gamblers sometimes lean into assumptions about money bets generally. And yet, sometimes they lean in other directions. Their reflexive behavior is not prefabricated or baked into their actions as a function of those actions' bottom-line types (compare Bauman 2002: 59; for a detailed discussion of "abstractions and instances" see Hutton 1990). A money bet-against another is not always dressed as such. The very small things in interaction, as Graeber (2014: 89) puts it, can implicate larger cosmologies, but we cannot assume that they do; actions that appear to be of the same kind or ilk from one angle, do not always tell the same story.

Anthropology has been persuaded that "practice" matters, that carefully watching the unfolding of events is bound to reveal something about those events. Video footage allows us to explore such practice in often vivid detail, and in a different form than the written fieldnote. The camera's footage is sieved through the formatting of an SD card rather than words. The difference is valuable. By consulting events captured months, years, or decades prior, we can more carefully conceive of what we mean when we talk about how things happen. We can hedge our assumptions of how events tend to work, become alive to the unevenness of reflexive accounts of practice, and see those moments where things begin to fail or stumble. With the right outlook, video footage can be a heuristic for countering the urge to tidy this unevenness and to reduce practice to cultural gestalt.²⁸

28. For an amenable discussion of anthropological concepts as heuristics, see Candea 2016.

Then, looking down at the pieces and turning back to our arguments in lectures and publications, we can cobble everything back together again, this time a bit more carefully and with a better understanding of how the pieces fit together.

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