

Photographs and Film Recordings as Valuable Documents in Sports History Research

Authors' contribution:

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ABSTRACT

Photographs and film recordings have not been commonly used as source material in sports history research. However, every moment and every movement captured in photographs tell us things that researchers could have seen if they had been on the spot when the picture was taken. I suggest that photos and films can be read in the same way as any sign systems, such as writing or maps. The points of departure for my analysis of movement in photographs and film recordings are kinesthetic empathy and the idea that the meanings of most body movements are established to the extent that they are part of our cultural heritage and contain signs and symbols we can relate to. Furthermore, observations made from these documents can be analyzed with the help of theories from other research fields. Using the methods of dance research, such as Rudolf Laban's movement analysis, Janet Adshead's dance performance analysis, Marcel Mauss's habitus concept, and John Martin's dance analysis, styles, movement languages, and conventions of exercise and sport in photos and films can be identified. In addition, in accordance with photographic research by Roland Barthes, I will reflect on the fringe conditions of the use of photographs as research material, the kind of opportunities they offer, and the kind of limitations they set for the researcher.

KEYWORDS

methods of sports history research, photographs and film recordings analysis, dance research and photographic research

In sports history, some key questions about exercise and sports, such as ways of moving and qualities of movements, programs and performances, are studied very little. However, it is essential to clarify what the sport itself and the bodies of the people who are exercising have been like. I became interested in these research issues while studying the history of Finnish women's gymnastics. Difficulties arose in this work because movements are transient, and it is hard to say anything about them using traditional methods and documents. In this article, I will describe how styles, movement languages, and conventions of exercise and sports can be studied through documents such as photographs and film recordings.

Traditionally, recording history has primarily been based on literary sources, as literary material has had a special position in high culture and science in the West. As a long-established field of study, historical research was well underway before the photograph was even invented. Consequently, photographs and film recordings have not been commonly used as source material in sports history research. In research reports, photographs have mostly been reduced to the role of simple illustrations, to portray important people, or as supplementary material and decoration. This is strange because these documents are in many respects

undeniable from the point of view of their evidence, and can tell us something unique or express something special about movement patterns and sports performances.

Not too long after photography's debut in 1839, O. W. Holmes described the new technology as a "mirror with memory". This phrase speaks of the camera's ability to faithfully and accurately reflect what is placed before it (Raiford, 2009, pp. 112-113). I suggest that it is possible to make such observations from photos and film recordings that do not come to mind on the basis of literary materials. In addition, these documents can tell us something about such features of exercise that are hidden in other documents, or that simply have not been recorded in them. For instance, photos convey to us the idea of the surroundings, equipment, apparatus and clothes used in the movement, plus the bearing of the person who is exercising and the other people in the picture, such as teachers and spectators.

There is, however, among historians a widely held preconceived idea that these materials do not yield much information and it is hard to shape them into a literary or conceptualized form. I suggest that photos and films can be read in the same way as any sign system, such as writing or maps. Barthes gives a name to two messages to be found in photographs. The denotative (actual, objective) message is a picture recording reality. The connotative (additional, giving values) message contains cultural meanings associated with the actual message of the photograph. Both these layers, the denotative and the connotative, exist in every picture (Barthes, 1990, p. 26). Furthermore, observations made from these documents can be analyzed with the help of theories from other research fields, such as dance research and photographic research. In the article, I will introduce methods with which these documents can be conceptualized and transposed into literary form. Studying photographs and the evidence they provide is not without problems, however. Leigh Raiford (2009, p. 119) emphasizes that historians tend to use photographs as illustrations, as evidence, as a mirror that accurately reflects the past. But we do not apprehend photography as a social practice, fully exploring the practice of looking or the history of the photograph itself. In this article, I will also reflect on the kind of limitations these documents set for the researcher.

Kinesthetic empathy as the point of departure for the analysis

Every moment, every incident that is captured in the photograph tells us things that researchers could have seen had they been present when the picture was taken. In addition, the photograph can even record details that the researcher would not have noticed. I consider photographs to be mirrors that reflect the characteristics and qualities of different kinds of sport and exercise, because there is no movement without the moving person who is performing it. Movement is the means of moving and the intentional body its source. The object, seen as a movement, cannot be separated from the person who is moving. Thus the body of the person becomes the object of the analysis. We recognize, for instance, how gymnasts influence their movements and posture through their age or body build, and in what respect the movements of an ordinary gymnast and an elite gymnast differ.

The point of departure for my analysis of movement in photographs and film recordings is kinesthetic empathy. Many movements are instinctive, but some are learned or even special skills. It is common to attach experiences to other people's body movements when we value the weight, dimensions, resistance, strength, or qualities of their movements. We can recognize the different ways movements are performed: for instance, flawlessly, precisely, or clumsily. Experience shows that we can even read the intention of those who are moving through their body technique. According to Rudolf Laban, human beings study the meanings of other people's conscious and unconscious movements throughout their lives (Laban, 1991).

The ability of other people to analyze movement is based on the fact that we respond muscularly to the strains in the action of other people's bodies. Our kinesthetic sense communicates information about the activity and loading of the somatic sensory system. We can develop an emotional response to anything we see even before we are consciously aware of it (Wegner, 2002, pp. 37-38, 58). The changes brought about in the body by the observation are a natural organic part of the observation. This also applies when the object is only thought about or remembered, or in this case, examined in a photograph. The reason for this is that

when we think of an object, we reconstruct our memories. The memory archive, which is formed from a once-seen object or event and which contains the motoric rules of movement, is formulated to implement previous observations and emotional reactions (Damasio, 2000, pp. 147-148, 153).

Roland Barthes has conceived the body as a sign that can be read as a “text”. According to John Martin, a well-known dance researcher of the 1930s, movement is akin to language but more universal. Body language consists of signs, signals, and symbols common to human perception and experience. The human body always contains references to behavior, mental state, motive, function, and feelings (Barthes, 1978, pp. 170-178; Martin, 1969, pp. 53, 136). According to Laban, the meanings of most body movements are established to the extent that they are part of our cultural heritage and contain signs and symbols that we can relate to (Laban, 1966, pp. 3, 29).

Photographs and film recordings as mirrors of exercise

Developments in the technology of photography made it possible to eternalize a fleeting moment, an entirely new phenomenon at the time. Sporting pictures usually show the peak moment of the performance; they record the culmination of the event (Pitkänen, 2011, p. 143). It is often thought that the quality of old photos is not good enough for historical research. However, the technical quality of these documents matters little in this kind of analysis, as in sporting photographs the event is more important than the aesthetic or technical quality of the picture. Different methods of dance analysis are well suited to the analysis of movement in photographs.

By applying Rudolf Laban’s movement analysis, it is possible to name and conceptualize observations of movements in photos while also describing the specific quality of each movement in relation to its intensions, dimensions, and qualities. Laban is the best-known dance theoretician of the 20th century. He is of Hungarian descent, but he published his literary output mainly in England. After World War II, Laban worked at the University of London. An institute called the Laban Centre, named after him, was later founded at the university. At the institute, his views are still studied and adapted to movement therapy and anthropology.

On the basis of his empirical observations, Laban examined moving as acting in the space allowed by the body. “Body space” (Raumkörper) is the space around the body, upright, from right to left, both in front of the body and behind it. The limits of body space are reached with outstretched limbs without shifting from the body center. The body space is wide when one’s movements are trying to reach the ultimate points (Laban, 1991, pp. 64, 66).

According to Laban’s definition, a movement combines the human’s intention in relation to the surrounding world; in other words, human movement is a link between intentions and their realization. Laban called human movement intention “effort” (or “dynamics”). He named eight basic efforts into which all movements can be classified. They are: dabbing, flicking, floating, gliding, pressing, punching, slashing, and wringing. Combining the efforts gives us a more precise grouping. Besides, in each movement every part of the exerciser’s body can be given an effort of its own (Laban & Lawrence, 1947).

In addition, it is possible to interpret the quality of the movement. According to Laban, every movement has its own special way in which time, space, weight, and flow are used. Each movement contains four movement factors: 1. Weight - heavy/light; 2. Flow - bound/free; 3. Space - direct/indirect; 4. Time - sudden/sustained (Laban & Lawrence, 1947).

Using Laban’s concept, it is possible to recognize and name the particular culture, period, genre, or style to which the exerciser belongs. The people in the photographs of exercise can be compared with the movements of contemporaries to obtain some idea of the status of the performers. This way it is also possible to compare the movement languages of different events. This is interesting, for example, when studying the characteristic language of movement of a specific period or a specific culture.

With photographs taken at different points of time, it is possible to study how the movement language, style, and conventions of an event have developed. The next pair of photos can be used to analyze the movement language of Finnish women's gymnastics. The photos date from the 1890s and the 1950s.

We can see that the movement language of gymnastics has changed a lot, but in what way? According to Laban's concepts, in the older picture, the gymnasts use their body space widely, whereas in the second

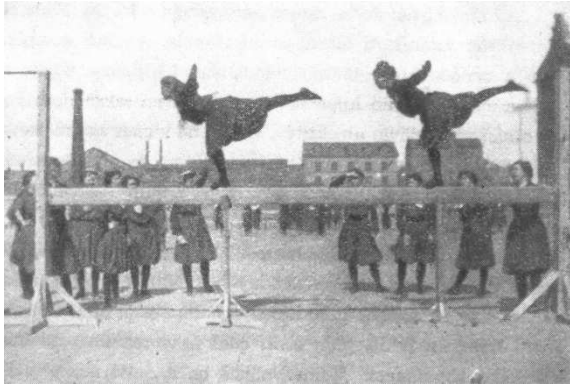


Figure 1. Members of The Finnish Women's Gymnastics Union in 1904
Source: Varala Sport museum.

picture the gymnast uses her body space quite narrowly. In the older picture, the movement of the gymnasts is a gliding motion that is sustained and heavy, but at the same time very bound and direct. In the newer picture, the movement of the gymnast is a floating motion that is quite light, free, sudden, and indirect.

In addition to the fact that movement is spatial, it also happens within a space. Laban has conceptualized how moving persons pay attention to the space in which they move; how they identify the directions or points, etc., in the space; how they use spatial patterns, pathways and lines; and what their tension with the environment is like (Thornton, 1971, pp. 34, 42). The relationship between movement and the surroundings, the significance of the

environment in relation to the person moving, and the way in which people approach their environment and behave in it can also be analyzed from photos and films. Film recordings show us how people who are exercising move within a space, their movement combinations, such as those used in gymnastics or high jumping, and movement designs or group exercise, such as games and play.

Using the method developed by the famous British dance theoretician Janet Adshead (1988) and her team, it is possible to get a detailed picture of a performance in space. Adshead's analysis of dance is rooted in a description of the characteristic movements and formal structure of the performance. The method is demanding, however, for it takes a large number of details into consideration. When using film recordings of sports performances, the method should be simplified according to the purpose of each analysis.

In the aforementioned model, a performance is studied from four points of view: context, basic elements, form, and values of exercise. Level 1 determines the kind of genre and the kind of context to which the exercise in question belongs. Level 2 outlines the basic elements of the exercise. These are the movements, the exercisers, and the visual and aural effects of the performance. Level 3 studies the structure of the performance; in other words, how the movements and the visual and aural effects are combined in the performance. Level 4 shows the values by which the performance in question has been appreciated by those performing the exercise. Although these values are included in the other levels, recognition of them shows what aspects of the exercise in question have received special attention of those performing the exercise.



Figure 2. An elite gymnast training the new Finnish women's gymnastics, in 1955

Source: private collection.

The analysis of social, cultural, and historical context of motion

Photograph and film recording analysis can be deepened by social, cultural, and historical information. In addition to dance and sport history research, fields of history that deal with people's everyday lives could

benefit from this kind of analysis concerning the body, habitus of a person, and ways of moving and existing in space.

Barthes (1972, p. 11) criticizes the “naturalness” which constantly dresses up reality that is determined by history. The body and the motion in a photo should be disengaged from their “natural” habitat and reconstituted as part of a cultural and historical situation, as bodies are formed through participation in a given discourse of motion. For instance, every sport and exercise tradition has its own rules at any given time, and they leave their traces on the person exercising through the appreciation they contain.

According to French anthropologist Marcel Mauss, body and movement are influenced by the surrounding culture and the social and historical context. In his classic work *Les techniques du corps* (1934), Mauss pays attention to ways of moving, body positions, and clothing; in his words, the *habitus* of the representatives of different cultures. The habitus is molded by education, morals, sex, influence, and fashions (Mauss, 1979). For example, a movement such as running, where the performance would appear to be similar in each case, nevertheless varies in style according to the habitus of the person running. We can use photos to analyze the habitus of the person moving, which is borne out of social, cultural, and historical factors. We can pay attention to the function of the costume of the exerciser, what social class or group it represents, what its fashion, quality and condition are, and to what extent it is supposed to expose or cover. Moreover, we can study what the quality and intentions of the exerciser’s movements tell us about the sports culture in question.

In photos and films, people’s appearance, posture and movements, grouping in space, and distance from other people can communicate many aspects about individuals and their group relations. Moreover, the space where the exercise happens may communicate something about social structures and social values, as people who are interacting socially are always individuals acting in physical space (Lefebvre, 2002, pp. 11-12, 40, 191, 225). Michel Foucault has conceived the body’s placement within a system of power relations and its concomitant role as a locus of ideological commentary. Body and motion are the creation of social forces and involve the indication of such things as status, class, and gender (Foucault, 1987). Each culture organizes the use of space taking place in social interaction. Correspondingly, a performance always contains inner unity: features, conventions, means of expression, and regularities. According to Martin, each performance of a dance is affected primarily by the body, race, and costume of the performer. He also considers the geographical and social environment, culture and belief, not to mention the historical background and period, to be equally fundamental to the way dance takes shape (Martin, 1936, p. 112).

Interpreting photographs and film recordings is not without problems

Despite methods of analysis, interpreting a photograph or a film recording is not easy. When using photographs as historical evidence, the same problems emerge as with the analysis of any other historical source. First, they belong to the discourse of their own period or their own culture, and the interpretation of this is possible only if we recognize the other factors that influence this discourse. Problems arise from such simple things as the difference between the intention of the photographer and the interpretation of the researcher, who is influenced by the information in his or her possession and by his or her own experience, cultural background and value system. Furthermore, cultural codes of seeing the ways in which people see the world are not historically permanent but instead are the result of the interaction among economic, social and cultural factors (Pitkänen, 2011, pp. 110, 113).

In addition, the photos and films that reach a researcher have already been manipulated in many ways. The researcher has to understand the material practice of photography. It is important to trace how the picture was seen at the moment and in the context in which it was taken, i.e., where it was taken, for whom it was taken, and for what purpose. The photographer may have, consciously or unconsciously, arranged and analyzed his object so that he has included in it the values he wanted, for instance, ethical or ideological norms like emancipation or nationalism. It is not only performances by the photographers with their own particular aspirations, but the subjects of these photographs that are themselves traces of the historical past.

The photographer's "gaze" is represented by the camera, which is limited by the direction in which the lens is pointed. The researcher is only able to see that part of the view the camera has viewed. Thus the viewer only sees what the camera shows. From the point of view of historical research, it is essential to know that the picture has not been manipulated after it has been taken (Gibson, 1979, p. 275; Pitkänen, 2011, pp. 143, 146, 151).

Alan Sekula has argued that the taxonomic tool par excellence is not the camera but the filing cabinet. He emphasizes the importance of material practices of storage whereby photographs are kept for the future and made available to the later public (1987, p. 351). It is perfectly true that archive collections dealing with exercise and sport are often rather narrow or distorted and made through the social relations, values, and emotional investments that they embody. The pictures have been cropped and chosen from among a number of pictures according to certain special intentions, such as athletic, professional, social, political, commercial, etc. Elizabeth Edwards has also pointed out the complex ways in which institutional environments, museums, private and public collections, and so on militate for or against, or otherwise influence the way in which historians will access and ultimately use photographs, tracing the ways in which photographs circulate through multiple contexts of use, display, and meaning. Boxes in archives are arguably invisible players in historical analysis. However they are not neutral spaces. Their forms are part of the very nature of their institutional existence and part of the constitution and meaning of the archive. They are not merely pragmatic tools of taxonomic performances, but they are entangled in shifting sets of values derived from and embodying specific institutional and affective engagements with users (Edwards, 2009, p. 146). Correspondingly, photos in old books and newspapers are carefully selected. For instance, Pierre Bourdieu has written about the power of the press in manipulating culture with photographs and influencing what is performed and produced, e.g., in the field of sports (Bourdieu, 1998, pp. 69-75). Every one of us has probably noticed how women's exercise magazines use pictures to create an idea of the "right" kind of modern woman.

Finally

The indifferent attitude of historical research concerning photographs and film recordings comes mainly from the idea that photographs do not tell stories. In this article, these materials were, however, considered as valuable documents in sports history research, but they should be investigated, interpreted, and approached within the framework of specific parameters. Gourevitch and Morris have distilled the quintessential nature of this kind of document as evidence of something beyond itself. According to them, "... a photograph can best be understood not as an answer or an end to inquiry, but as an invitation to look more closely, and to ask questions" (Gourevitch & Morris, 2009, p. 148).

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