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# Qualitative Inquiry

## Surrender, catch and the imp of fieldwork

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## Surrender, catch and the imp of fieldwork

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### Abstract

We build on the work of Kurt Wolff to capture some distinctive aspects of ethnographic fieldwork. Drawing on the sociology of knowledge and phenomenology, Wolff introduced and developed the idea of surrender-and-catch in order to encapsulate the twin processes of engagement and reflection. While Wolff's ideas were not developed exclusively in relation to ethnography, he grounded them in his own community study. But he extended the general idea to encompass virtually any aspect of sociological or phenomenological analysis. We extend the idea to incorporate what we call the 'imps' of ethnographic fieldwork. For neither surrender nor catch are themselves predictable or perfectly under the ethnographer's control. While fieldwork is itself unpredictable, there may be many unanticipated 'catches'. Moreover, there is often an ethnographic 'imp' that intrudes itself, questioning the very desirability or good sense of the fieldwork itself. The imps arise unbidden but can pose searching, sometimes unwelcome – though ultimately productive – questions. We illustrate the paper from a brief fieldwork encounter with the world of studio photography.

### Introduction: surrender-and-catch

There are many ways to capture and summarise the tensions - personal and academic – of ethnographic fieldwork. Likewise, there are many ways of reflecting on the emotional and intellectual experiences of ethnographic fieldwork. For key discussions of the general issues see: Coffey (1999); Watson (1999); Wengle (1988); Young and Goulet (1994) All treatments are in fundamental agreement: the conduct of fieldwork and the iterative process of analysis call for a reflective practitioner, who can simultaneously engage with her or his chosen field and develop an analytic perspective. Fieldwork and analytic reflection demand a characteristic kind of ethnographic imagination. The ethnographer's intellectual, personal and even existential selves are implicated (Atkinson 2014). The emotions of a fieldwork experience can be as significant as conceptual development. The outcomes of ethnographic fieldwork are unpredictable, as are the personal consequences. Ethnographic fieldwork can have a transformative effect on the researcher. For many, such personal consequences are

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3 unintended, deriving from unforeseen and unforeseeable encounters in the field and their  
4 personal impact. For some the personal transformations are intended: a number of  
5 ethnographers have deliberately sought out process of conversion or socialisation in the  
6 interests of anthropological or sociological understanding. Examples of such conversion  
7 experiences include: Carr (2015); Hagedorn (2001).  
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12 We do not seek to review all of those aspects of fieldwork here. Rather, we adopt one  
13 perspective in order to illuminate a key aspect of the fieldwork enterprise. We deploy the idea  
14 of surrender-and-catch, developed and expanded upon by Kurt Wolff (1976). He derives the  
15 idea in part from his own fieldwork experience during a community study of 'Loma', New  
16 Mexico (Wolff 1964), although he acknowledges that the explication of his approach post-  
17 dates his work at Loma and the publications that flowed immediately from it. Indeed, on  
18 reflecting on his fieldwork experience at Loma, Wolff documents a frustration with himself –  
19 that his fieldnotes failed to capture the embodied, aesthetic and poetic contours of the field  
20 and his relationship to it (Wolff, 1976). His subsequent work, with its emotion-laden, self-  
21 analytic insight, and its philosophising and poetic quality espouses and exposes the  
22 phenomenology he deemed 'surrender and catch.' Thus, in Wolff's hands, surrender-and-  
23 catch is spun into an idea that extends much further than the narrow confines of ethnographic  
24 fieldwork.  
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### 34 **On surrender**

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37 On surrender, Wolff writes, 'to surrender means to take as fully, to meet as immediately as  
38 possible whatever the occasion may be. It means not to select, not to believe that one can  
39 know quickly what one's experience means, hence what is understood and acted on' (Wolff,  
40 1976: 20). He refers to surrender as a form of 'cognitive love' both embracing and  
41 apprehending the experience of the field as an ethical, aesthetic and embodied encounter.  
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45 Five core features are implicated in this surrender:  
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- 48 1. Total involvement, the differentiation between subject, object and act disappears
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- 50 2. The suspension of received notions – existing categories, theories and concepts are
- 51 suspended, put into abeyance – neither denied nor affirmed.
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- 54 3. The pertinence of everything –awareness, alertness, presence and attunement to the
- 55 phenomenon.
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3 4. Identification – not ‘with’ individuals, but with the act of surrendering, its occasion,  
4 moment, objects and subjects. In the catch this identification necessarily wanes in order to  
5 understand, conceive and tell others about the learning gained.  
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9 5. The risk of being hurt – not only in the experience of surrendering, but acting on, creating  
10 and espousing the catch.  
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13 On first reading, concepts like ‘cognitive love’ may strike us as unduly Romantic, but Wolff  
14 is drawing attention to a myriad ways of knowing which are dependent upon a sensibility of  
15 active surrender. His written form and works attest to the ties he conjures between aesthetic,  
16 embodied and experiential knowing as forms of ‘cognitive love’. For cognitive love is  
17 understood as openness to knowledge, a love for knowledge and its quest. Wolff does not  
18 constrain himself, unlike other phenomenologists discussed below, with a purely ‘rational’,  
19 disembodied, ahistorical and asensorial form of knowing. For Wolff, the mess and miracle of  
20 the field are only encountered by the fullness of surrendering.  
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27 Wolff’s notion of surrender-and-catch is attractive. The imagery of surrender implies an  
28 unconditional commitment to the field or object of our inquiry. It calls for personal exposure;  
29 it leads to risky and precarious identities. Surrender means that a chosen field of experience  
30 enfolds us, as we embrace it. That is not merely a prerequisite or a preliminary to real  
31 research and analysis. It *is* the creative research process, or at least it is a moment of it. In  
32 terms of traditional fieldwork, our participant observation means that we participate  
33 wholeheartedly. It is at once a personal, even existential, commitment and an intellectual one.  
34 Surrender means that we launch ourselves into unanticipated events and towards as yet  
35 unknown others. In the act of surrender we necessarily suspend our taken-for-granted,  
36 common-sense ideas, in order to recapture a renewed understanding of a social world about  
37 us.  
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46 Wolff’s formulation owes much to the phenomenologists. But it also adds something. Social  
47 phenomenologists like Alfred Schütz (1964) also emphasised the need to approach a given  
48 social domain as a ‘stranger’. The process of estrangement implied the suspension or  
49 bracketing of everyday assumptions, of our ‘thinking as usual’. This *epoché* means that while  
50 our own common-sense is bracketed out, we can treat common-sense, practical knowledge as  
51 a topic of inquiry. But there is a profound difference in the two formulations. The implied  
52 social researcher in Schultz’s version remains at a cognitive level. He or she may find the  
53 process discomfiting, but that always seems to be a loss of intellectual poise. The  
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3 phenomenologist who brackets her or his own cultural categories is at a loss, until the new  
4 field of experience is grasped through the intersubjective engagement with the host  
5 community. Ethnographic surrender is totally different from the detached, wry and ironic  
6 observations of the flâneur/se (Tester 1994; Elkin 2016). The flâneur can never surrender,  
7 except perhaps to her or his *own* self-absorption. In observing the passing scene, the flâneur  
8 ultimately celebrates her-or himself, in a self-congratulatory display of cultivated  
9 indifference. However apt may be the flâneur as a model or metaphor for urban observation,  
10 and for the observant navigation of a given social scene, the flâneur remains fundamentally  
11 untouched, unmoved. S/he always withholds rather than engaging with any given social  
12 domain. Wolff's researcher is a more existential explorer. It is not merely the loss of  
13 common sense that marks or initiates the process of surrender. It is closer to being a loss of  
14 self. It certainly can imply a loss of control. It is an affective as much as a cognitive  
15 exploration.

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18 As Wolff (1976) himself acknowledges, 'surrender' can seem to imply what used to be called  
19 'going native'. That is the loss of analytic distance, and the loss of anthropological or  
20 sociological perspective. But it is clear that such a form of surrender is not intended, and it is  
21 not in that sense that we employ the term here. Wolff helpfully draws a distinction between  
22 overwhelming and unexpected 'surrender' and the work of a sensibility which he deems,  
23 'surrender-to'. This is the frame within which we operate here. In surrender-to, metaphysical  
24 submission becomes disciplined and transformed into methodology. Of the epistemological  
25 sensibility of surrender-to, Wolff (1976:26 his emphasis,) writes, 'I can try to surrender to  
26 something or somebody. To surrender-to is to concentrate, to dedicate or devote oneself, to  
27 pay utmost attention'. Thus, cognitive love can be a willed love, a worked-at and crafted  
28 sensibility.

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31 Surrender-to implies something different from and more than simply the intellectual  
32 suspension of the ethnographer's own preconceptions and taken-for-granted categories of  
33 knowledge. We think it means something more akin to an appreciation – in the fullest  
34 possible way – that for the participants, the here-and-now of their everyday activity is the  
35 paramount reality. It means, therefore, an engagement – however temporally bounded – in the  
36 work of making that reality happen. It means experiencing that when we observe a social  
37 scene, *nothing else can matter so much at that time*. It means an openness to one's fellow  
38 women and men that encompasses, to the full, the spirit of *empathy*.

### The Catch

If surrender means an impulsive and creative imagination, then catch implies the rational and reflective or analytic capture of experience, of knowledge gained, of theorised understanding. The catch is a deliberate metaphor – the net which on surfacing brings together intricate glimpses, moments, ideas, and revelations. The catch is not simply the ‘outputs’ of research – monographs and papers - but can include moments of clarification, the creation of a question, the production of what Coles and Thomson (2015) call ‘in-between writing’- harried notes, sketches, descriptions. Indeed, this paper is itself testament to the varied forms the catch may take.

In terms of Mead’s social psychology, surrender is a commitment of the impulsive I, while catch is the prerogative of the socialised Me (Mead 1934; Atkinson and Housley 2003). For Mead, understanding, including self-awareness, derives from the internal dialogue between the I and the Me. They are not separate entities. They are aspects or moments of the generic process of engagement with the world and our fellow social actors, through which self-consciousness emerges. In the same way, surrender and catch are not separate phases of inquiry, or methodologically distinct moves. They are dual aspects of a process of engagement and reflection. The social explorer surrenders to a social world, to fellow women and men, while the catch is an emergent process of reflection (often itself tacit) that is a necessary moment in any such encounter or activity.

Wolff is clear on the epistemological relationship between surrender, catch and the social researcher, writing that man is a ‘mixed phenomenon’ there is no ‘escape’ from the social. Rather, that in the act of surrender, the reasoning generated is situated and contextual – specified not ahistorical. Surrender is a serial condition. There are multiple, co-existing and overlapping social worlds. Surrender to the paramount reality of one may be complemented by surrender to a parallel, contrasting social reality. Consequently there may be a palimpsest of surrendered-to social worlds. On the ‘world’ of surrender, Wolff writes (1976:169), ‘our worlds, including their boundaries, thus our modes of being, are called into question.’ This is the world of commitment, of suspending received notions, of the pertinence of everything and it may well be a disorienting as well as illuminating experience. In moving between the ‘world of suspension’ (surrender) and the everyday world of the catch, the ethnographer is ‘thrown back upon oneself’ demanding the reflexive quality we display here. As Wolff describes (1976: 170) it is the movement between these ‘worlds’ which provides the liminal

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3 sense of being lost in transit, of having to begin again as we oscillate between encounter,  
4 reflection and analysis. We think it is this existential space which gives rise to the Janus-like  
5 quality of the Imp.  
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### 8 9 **Surrender and the imp of fieldwork**

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11 There remains, however, the open question: Is surrender ever total? Irrespective of whether –  
12 for the moment – we regard surrender as normatively desirable, is it ever achieved with the  
13 engagement and commitment that surrender implies? There is often a form of resistance that  
14 comes between the self and the field, such that surrender is partial or interrupted. We identify  
15 a distinctive interruption of the inner dialogue between the impulsive I and the reflective Me,  
16 between the moment of surrender and the process of catch. That interruption we identify as  
17 the Imp of fieldwork. (We are grateful to Anna Lisa Tota: a comment of hers prompted these  
18 reflections.) The Imp means that surrender is, in many cases, only provisional. It is not the  
19 equivalent of the analytic, reflective ‘catch’ of Wolff’s formulation. But it can have impact  
20 directly on both the fieldwork itself and the process of analytic reflection.  
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29 Many fieldworkers will recognise the Imp, or something like it. It is a voice that interrupts  
30 both surrender and catch, as it impertinently questions and undermines the very enterprise.  
31 The Imp voices occasional resistance and continuing scepticism. The Imp interrogates us  
32 even in the process of immersion and surrender. It prompts us: Why are you doing this? It is  
33 that small voice of grudging common sense. Why, after all, are we – in one case a retired  
34 professor – putting ourselves through the exacting regime of fieldwork, or even of learning  
35 new skills or concepts? Why are we not safely in our own office or study at home? Would  
36 life not be simpler were we to content ourselves with yet another exegesis of a dead white  
37 male ‘theorist’? Those are the kinds of things the Imp drops into our inner ear. But as we  
38 shall see, the Imp is capable of more than intellectual resistance. It can encourage us to  
39 confront our motives and our commitments – personal and intellectual – in the field.  
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48 The Imp, after all, arises directly from precisely those personal and existential commitments  
49 that make fieldwork possible – and rewarding – in the first place. The Imp owes its existence  
50 and its force because we make certain kinds of commitment. We voluntarily place ourselves  
51 in a position of vulnerability and potential unease. Our presence in the field is always  
52 conditional, however unconditionally we commit ourselves to its realities.  
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3 We shall develop these comments through a concrete fieldwork exemplar. We illustrate the  
4 topic from a brief foray into the world of photography – particularly art-nude studio  
5 photography. It will display some of the contingencies of surrender-and-catch, while the Imp  
6 of fieldwork simultaneously makes problematic and productive the ethnographic process.  
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### 10 **Photography and surrender**

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12 Paul has taken classes in glassblowing, woodworking, silversmithing and life-drawing  
13 (Atkinson 2013a). As well as their intrinsic interest as examples of skilled activity, they also  
14 bring together the ethnography of craft and the craft of ethnography (Atkinson 2013b). They  
15 are therefore methodological as well as substantive exercises. They all involve the researcher  
16 learning embodied skills, in activities that he had never undertaken previously. Embodied and  
17 practice-based ethnography is premised upon its reflexivity: to ‘know’ the phenomenon of  
18 life-drawing or silversmithing is to surrender to the practice and to catch the knowledgeable  
19 and embodied doing. There is a close relationship between knowledge, technique, the body  
20 and the culture of those engaged in practices of doing, making and creating (Atkinson 2014).  
21 In exploring these creative practices we must attend to the centrality of the body as a source  
22 of knowing – a sensory, tacit and embodied form of knowledge which can only be attained by  
23 doing. We ‘know’ through the senses (Strati, 1999), we *are* bodies (Merleau-Ponty, 2002).  
24 Feeling, corporeality, aesthetic categorisation and experience are to the phenomenologist, and  
25 to Wolff, not the ‘object’ of one’s attention, but the instruments, the ways of seeing that  
26 attention.  
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39 Having undertaken an intensive four-day course in life-drawing, Paul wanted to try nude art-  
40 photography in a studio, an aspect of photography he had never tried before. The four-day  
41 course he embarked on with a professional tutor (‘Stefan’) had several components: a day re-  
42 learning the elements of the digital camera, a day of outdoor photography, a day learning the  
43 basics of post-production, and a day in the studio with a professional model. Here we do not  
44 attempt to do full justice to the overall learning experience, and we focus on the studio  
45 session. The session is described through extracts from Paul’s fieldnotes.  
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51 It was an attempt to study and learn photography *per se*. In other words, it is informed by a  
52 phenomenological commitment to examining the phenomenon itself. It follows the  
53 phenomenological and ethnomethodological critique that too many sociological studies lose  
54 the phenomenon, because they want to look behind, through or beyond the phenomenon itself  
55 in search of something ‘social’ (Garfinkel and Sacks 1970; Lynch 1993). Here we treat  
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3 photography as a topic in its own right. It is not primarily a research resource, as a means of  
4 data-collection, nor is it a resource whereby to study something other than itself (race, class,  
5 gender, poverty). This approach requires a commitment to the activity itself. It thus calls for  
6 Wolff's surrender. Equally Wolff's argument that the field of vision both expands (the  
7 pertinence of everything) and retracts (abeyance of received notions) speaks to the  
8 simultaneity of epistemic practices when encountered directly – in this case of the  
9 photographer, photographic practices, and the ethnographer. This is important as otherwise  
10 one would become preoccupied with one's own position in the field, rather than focusing on  
11 learning and practising practical technique. It calls for something like surrender, a thorough  
12 commitment in the everyday sense that, for the time being, it is engrossing. In the street or in  
13 the studio, the activity of photography must define the primary reality of the action. One  
14 cannot take a landscape photograph, capture a candid portrait, or take photographs in the  
15 studio in an offhand manner. It calls for care, concentration and commitment to the moment-  
16 by-moment action. One may not be able to equal the 'definitive moment' of the classic,  
17 iconic photograph, but failing to work with serious intent will result in more-or-less random  
18 snaps rather than purposeful photographs. The intentionality of the act demands focused  
19 attention (see Eberle, 2017 for a parallel essay on the phenomenology of photography itself).  
20 As we have already noted, when embracing surrender-*to*, attention goes beyond purely  
21 observational, analytical and 'rational' knowledge, and is open to affective, aesthetic and  
22 embodied forms of knowing.  
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37 Consequently, this is an approach to photography that examines some of the 'whatness' that  
38 makes photography a concrete activity. It is grounded in the technology of photography itself  
39 (backgrounds, lights, cameras), and the interpersonal encounter that makes a series of  
40 photographs possible. It also derives directly from the processes of learning and applying  
41 technical, embodied technique (Mauss 2006, 2007). If one is to learn technique – whatever  
42 the specific skill or craft – then full attention and concentration are called for. Surrender to  
43 the encounter and the social world it reflects means that one must be committed and open to  
44 learning the craft, embodying the skills, and applying the knowledge. Like the rehearsal  
45 studio (Atkinson 2006), the photographic studio is an intensely focused space. For the  
46 duration, it is an enclosed space that physically and phenomenologically commands complete  
47 involvement. So surrender in and to the studio is imperative. For the duration of the session  
48 what 'matters' is what occurs between the participants, the techniques, the lights, the camera,  
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3 and the images that emerge. Surrender, in Wolff's sense is therefore a necessary orientation  
4 to the situation.  
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### 6 7 **Fieldwork**

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9 The fieldwork in this setting, as in the other craft settings studied, follows a pattern. First,  
10 Paul, as fieldworker, participates in a class, as a learner. Some such classes involve small  
11 groups of learners, while others – including the photography sessions – involve one-to-one  
12 tuition. Participation is complete. During the classes, Paul is totally absorbed in trying to  
13 learn the new techniques, and to achieve an appropriate level of practical competence. This  
14 implies full concentration and embodied commitment. One cannot hope to learn if such  
15 commitment is lacking; half-hearted participation will not yield the sort of cognitive and  
16 embodied learning that is sought. At the end of each day he dictated a detailed text. Each  
17 day's lesson would typically yield several thousand words. These could, of course, be classed  
18 as 'fieldnotes', but they go beyond the style even of detailed, processed notes. They  
19 incorporate reflections on the fieldwork itself and on emergent analytic themes. They are,  
20 therefore, best thought of as intertexts, or 'inbetween-texts' (Coles and Thomson 2016) in  
21 that they mediate between the 'field' and the 'analysis'. They are liminal, looking back to the  
22 concrete work of embodied learning, and projecting forward aspects of analytic reflection. In  
23 that sense, therefore, those inter-texts inscribe the twin aspects of surrender and catch. They  
24 document the embodied, aesthetic and practical engagement with the field (surrender), while  
25 incorporating the attempt to reflect, sometimes critically, on the fieldwork and its  
26 implications. Between the concrete and the reflective is found the space of the Imp. That is, a  
27 third voice that intrudes, unbidden, to confront the ethnographer in the very process of  
28 conducting the fieldwork, contributing to the complexities of methodological and analytic  
29 reflection. Like grit in the oyster, the Imp challenges us to justify to ourselves how and why  
30 we are conducting our fieldwork. It can mediate between the I of the fieldwork and the Me  
31 of reflective analysis. The series of successive learning exercises, and their documentation, is  
32 primarily a methodological exercise. It is a sustained attempt to engage with an embodied,  
33 phenomenological analysis of practical pedagogy and embodied learning. Learning as a  
34 novice can help to render visible otherwise tacit knowledge and skills. The enterprise is,  
35 therefore, intended as a contribution to the ethnography of knowing and to our understanding  
36 of the ethnographic enterprise (Atkinson and Morriss, 2017).  
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### 56 57 **Surrendering-to aesthetic knowing**

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3 This is not only Paul's first attempt at art nude photography. It is also his first experience  
4 with studio lighting since he used old-fashioned photoflood lamps in aluminium reflectors  
5 fifty years previously. So he has to be instructed in that basic technique.  
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9 Stefan explains that we shall be using flash – which gives an instantaneous, powerful  
10 burst of light. I have certainly never used studio flash before. It will be interesting. It  
11 will also help me, as it overcomes camera-shake – a problem that has become more  
12 obvious as I get older. I had thought that at least some of today's work might be using  
13 the camera on a tripod. I point out to Stefan that I have brought the cable-release for my  
14 camera. But he says I shan't need it. And in the event, we both use the cameras hand-  
15 held. Looking back, I wonder if I would have had a very different approach to the  
16 photography had I used the camera mounted on a tripod. It would have slowed down  
17 the entire process. One can but speculate that it might have changed not only how I  
18 took the photographs, but it might also have slowed down the model. She – as I shall  
19 describe later – tended to move a great deal, almost dancing. So that none of us spent  
20 enough time thinking about the relationship between her body and the light. Perhaps  
21 too I was thinking of my old Rolleiflex, and hankering after work with a Hasselblad,  
22 with a 1960s self-perception (David Bailey or Terence Donovan?) to go with it.  
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33 As the session progresses, speed and control take on more significance. Paul and Stefan  
34 discussed taking high-key and low-key photographs. High-key refers to photographs where  
35 the background is white and the model is brightly lit; low-key pictures have dark or black  
36 backgrounds, and the model is only marginally illuminated. He had succeeded as a student in  
37 taking some high-key portraits and was hoping to achieve something good in low-key too. It  
38 lends itself to a more abstract approach to the body – the light spilling onto shoulders, breasts  
39 or hips, the face lit from behind or from the side. It is a minimalist emphasis on light and  
40 form.  
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47 The arrival of the model creates a greater sense of urgency to the proceedings: one cannot go  
48 on talking *about* cameras, lights and technique. The imperative to put some of it into action  
49 becomes more pressing. She has a professional name ('Belle'). She is dark with long straight  
50 hair, wearing spectacles. Her skin is pale. She is about 5'9" tall. Naked, she is slender, with a  
51 particularly small waist. Paul attempts to maintain the everyday courtesy of civil inattention  
52 to her nakedness when not photographing her, or when she is undressing.. The nakedness of  
53 the model is taken for granted, becoming a seen but unremarked-upon feature of the  
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3 encounter. Everyday prurient interest in the unclothed body (irrespective of gender) is so  
4 often secondary to the demands of crafting an image. The personal body is translated into a  
5 different array of preoccupations.. In the photographic studio, the camera takes the ‘likeness’,  
6 but similar issues of seeing and image-making are there – the play of light and shade, the  
7 volumes and contours of the body.  
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12 We begin by simply setting up two lights and we both take some basic photographs of  
13 Belle simply standing in front of the background, so that we can check for exposure  
14 values and set the cameras . She is standing in a relaxed, informal way. In the few  
15 pictures I take of her, she looks ‘normal’, in the sense that her hair hangs loose over one  
16 shoulder, and her body is not tensed. The lighting creates no particular effect, and the  
17 resulting photographs have no special merit, other than showing Belle in a natural  
18 manner, with flat lighting, and in natural colouring (as opposed to the high- and low-  
19 key modes).  
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26 The model’s skin is pale, but in the rim-lit shots, it looks perfectly dark. I take some  
27 abstract shots. Abstract here means nothing very intellectual. In fact it really means  
28 concentrating on and focusing on isolated aspects of the body. It means paying close  
29 attention to how the light falls on the body’s contours – inevitably in this case,  
30 shoulders, breasts, hips and buttocks. The low-key images are also pleasing, as Belle  
31 stands with her body relaxed, looking pensive, with no visible strain. The images feel  
32 unobtrusive, and even close-up shots do not give the impression of trespassing on the  
33 model’s privacy.  
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40 As the day progresses, Stefan changes the lighting so that most of the images are in high key.  
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43 Belle poses more overtly. When standing she is almost always on tiptoe. At one point I  
44 say to her that it really isn’t necessary for her to be en pointe, but she says she actually  
45 feels better doing it. I agree with her that it certainly creates very different lines,  
46 because it puts her legs, back and torso in tension. The overall result of course, is the  
47 same anatomical effect as that of high heels.. In preparation for high-key pictures, Ion  
48 asks Belle to oil her skin.... She stood by an open curtain at a window with her back to  
49 us and her dressing-gown loosened from her upper body, hanging loose behind her. As  
50 the cool natural light from the window spilled round her, I took a casual photograph of  
51 her on my phone.... Her pale skin and the natural light meant that in many ways it was  
52 the ‘best’ pictures of the day.... There is good reason for oiling the model’s skin.  
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3 Under the lights it enhances any natural sheen. Belle's pale skin looked almost  
4 translucent, like white alabaster, and it emphasised the effect of the lights. The sheen is  
5 artificially beautiful, perhaps, but then it is all a matter of artifice.  
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9 Here, then, aesthetic surrender leads to a direct - unavoidably gendered - appreciation of  
10 the model, enhanced by the fact that she is not 'modelling'. It is a 'candid' shot of a quiet,  
11 private and 'natural' moment. The very writing of the notes moves towards a direct  
12 apperception of the model's skin and the light that falls on it. The socio-materiality of  
13 bodies and light and oil is captured here as the researcher pays attention to the sensory-  
14 stimuli within which he is immersed. The surrender to the light and to the body, the  
15 aesthetic connections and the intent focus on the present, coalesce - producing an  
16 'arresting moment' (Shotter, 1996) of heightened awareness. In the net of the catch,  
17 Wolff's commitment to 'the pertinence of everything' bears fruit. The hours of focus, of  
18 drawing in preliminary emotion and the fumbled grasp for the language of technique  
19 culminates here in a unity that pervades the entire experience, almost overcoming its  
20 constituent parts which are nonetheless noted as part of the immersive surrender. It is in  
21 the conviction of the harmony of qualities which underpins both the years of training in  
22 the studio Stefan brings, and the distinctiveness of aesthetic experience itself. The catch,  
23 whilst not foreseeable, is set in train by the state of high tension and concentration, of the  
24 essence of ethnographic practice – paying intent attention.  
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### 35 36 **Embodied knowing: The Imp and the body**

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38 Belle did a lot of standing poses. She often posed like a dancer, and adopted somewhat  
39 theatrical poses. The issue of posing highlighted issues of *control*.  
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43 To put it at its simplest, I am (semi)conscious of not being in control of what is going  
44 on. I am not surprised by this, as of course I have no relevant experience. But I feel that  
45 the afternoon goes by as a pace that is too fast for me. Not that I want to potter along  
46 unduly slowly. But in retrospect I should have called for a pause to reflect on what we  
47 were doing and what I was learning. As Belle went on posing and as Stefan and I kept  
48 shooting pictures, I was the one with little or no control over what I was doing. To  
49 some extent, I realise, I was just firing the shutter more or less whenever the model and  
50 Stefan settled on a pose... As a result I now realise that I was not fully learning to look  
51 and to see. If I were thinking about the technicalities and the aesthetics again now, I  
52 would (ought to) be paying much more attention to the lighting: how the model's arms  
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3 were throwing shadows, how we might want to be moving the lights or changing a  
4 reflector to alter the overall illumination of the body and the background. And I ought  
5 to have been thinking much more about framing the shots. When I review the pictures I  
6 took I can see that some of the framing 'worked', in that I have those aspects of the  
7 model I wanted to concentrate on framed and composed as I would have liked. But  
8 sometimes, not least from being lazy and careless, I have screwed up, so that there is  
9 too much or too little space round her, or that the picture is poorly balanced.

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11 Sometimes, quite consciously, I just photographed Belle as she was posing with little or  
12 no concern for the background- not making sure she was always framed only against  
13 the white background – more as a documentary reportage of the overall set-up, and as a  
14 record of how Belle was using her body. This was particularly the case towards the end  
15 of our session together  
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24 In thinking about the day's activities in the studio, Paul had done some elementary homework  
25 on art-nude photography. In particular he had studied the images by Edward Weston,  
26 regarded as among classics of the genre. Such an awareness meant that it was impossible to  
27 confront the phenomenon in a completely unmediated way. That is, unlike Wolff's  
28 importuning – it is impossible, indeed problematic to suspend all received notions. One  
29 cannot confront the nude model without a thorough immersion – however tacit – in the  
30 history of painted, drawn and photographed images. Surrender cannot ever be perfectly free  
31 of such thoroughly sedimented cultural resources. Indeed, as we shall see, consciousness of  
32 such a visual history invites the Imp to intervene.  
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40 Earlier in the day I had shown Belle a few sketches I had made, some from my life-  
41 drawing class, and at least one from a classic Edward Weston. She said of the Weston  
42 'Oh yes, everyone wants that one', and I admitted that it was a classic. She also said it  
43 was nice to be shown sketches, as she was normally only given stick-figures. Anyway,  
44 during the afternoon we did some poses that were based on her sitting on the floor,  
45 including variations on the Weston pose. That naturally meant that I had to sit or kneel  
46 on the floor. It provides the right height for shooting, but my joints are not suited to  
47 such physical efforts, and it became quite difficult. Getting to my feet was not always  
48 easy. My knees hurt. My right hip was painful. There was, therefore, an ironic contrast  
49 between the model, moving and putting herself into a variety of poses, moving like a  
50 dancer, and me uncomfortably and awkwardly grovelling on the floor.  
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3 This is yet another example of the dynamics of control: control over the body, control over  
4 the setting, control over the equipment, control over the photographic image. In this case,  
5 it is more a matter of losing or ceding control. In research encounters, particularly those  
6 involving embodied practices, surrender may happen and the researcher may be aware of  
7 it. In this example, the materiality of the space – the hardness of the floor and the glare of  
8 the light, the sheen of contoured bodies – is noticed as the researcher ‘gives in’ and ‘over’  
9 to it. Through the commitment to surrendering-to, even to the extent of ‘grovelling on the  
10 floor’, the researcher reaches for a vocabulary developed through immersion in embodied  
11 knowing. The extracts themselves demonstrate how in the stream of embodied dialogical  
12 activity we relate to our surroundings, the materials and tools which comprise the  
13 artfulness of photography, how we make sense of them. Surrender by temporarily quieting  
14 of the impervious Imp of the ego reveals the importance of light, heat, height in  
15 accomplishing photographic studio work. So surrender is an important process of learning  
16 geared towards gaining insight and a shared idiom with practitioners.  
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19 The embodied Imp thus invoked the physical and the personal discomfort of the studio  
20 encounter. It also raised more fundamental questioning of the researcher’s entire activity in  
21 the course of his surrender to the studio, the model and the act of photography, as we  
22 elaborate on below.  
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### 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 **The catch and the Imp**

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37 Surrender to the studio, to the camera, to the tutor, to the model, and to the situation implied a  
38 willing suspension of intellectual distance and critique. As we have emphasised,  
39 thoroughgoing commitment and engagement are called for. The truly participant observer,  
40 who wishes to acquire and use practical skills, will not achieve any kind of competence or  
41 mastery on the basis of resistance. In Wolff’s terms, surrender takes place *in* the field, and it  
42 also means surrender *to* the field. So having decided to try art nude photography and studio  
43 technique (in however preliminary a way), Paul had to undertake it without reservation. One  
44 cannot hold back without committing bad faith vis-s-vis one’s fellow participants.  
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51 So what is the catch in this case? Overtly, the catch resides in an explication of the techniques  
52 and practicalities of photography itself. It leads to a heightened awareness of the nature of  
53 light, partly as a purely physical aspect of illumination, and of exposure values, and partly as  
54 an aesthetic phenomenon. Light and the body interact. The direction and strength of the light  
55 transform the body into new shapes. Each body demands special attention. The turn of the  
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3 shoulders, the thrust of a hip, or the swell of a belly- these all demand attention if the  
4 photograph is not to be a photo-booth snap of anyone or everyone. The camera is never a  
5 completely inert medium. It calls for comprehension and some level of technical mastery.  
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7 The exposure is especially demanding of control. The combination of speed (ISO), lens  
8 aperture (f-value) and shutter-speed requires constant and repeated attention, not least when  
9 lighting conditions change. The choice of lens – specifically the focal length – also requires  
10 informed decision-making. The focal length implies a different perspective. In the studio, a  
11 short focal length can distort the figure. That can be creative: a shot along a recumbent figure  
12 can elongate the legs or the body relatively. Unthinking use can be especially unflattering.  
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19 Attention must be paid to the model's body too. The photographer must ask him/herself  
20 questions all of the time. Questions are of the sort: Is she casting a shadow across her own  
21 face? Do her arms get in the way? Where are her hands, and do they divert the viewer's  
22 attention? Is there a catch-light in her eyes? Are there trailing hairs across her cheek? How is  
23 the light spilling onto her? It is all too easy for the photographer to shift position – perhaps  
24 trying to capture or emphasise some particular feature, angle or lighting effect - but forget to  
25 make appropriate adjustments. If I move a bit to the right, do her eyes still have sufficient  
26 light? Does my change of position foreshorten something? If I position the camera lower, will  
27 that radically change the light and shade? Indeed, will that look too intrusive or  
28 pornographic? Will lighting her from the side or slightly from behind make the faint down on  
29 her skin look too prominent? Am I making her look hairy? Has she got goose-bumps?  
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38 The catch, therefore lies in a combination of practical and technical competences and  
39 judgements. These in turn form the basis for a close scrutiny of the practical accomplishment  
40 of embodied craft skills. They also furnish the resources for a phenomenology of looking and  
41 seeing, and of the twin-lens observation of the participant observer. But the surrender is not  
42 absolute, and the catch is not untouched by unbidden issues and ideas. The Imp of fieldwork  
43 interposes itself in the guise of such contingent, unforeseen, and sometimes unwelcome  
44 interventions.  
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50 The aesthetics of looking collapse any clear distinction between objective technique and the  
51 photographer's subjective engagement. The model is more than and other than an object to be  
52 observed and recorded on camera. Her age and appearance invite a particular kind of looking.  
53 The visual is always intrusive, while the proximity of the naked body simultaneously intrudes  
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3 on the photographer. Wolff's version of surrender always implies an embodied, aesthetic  
4 dimension, and the practice of art-nude photography amplifies that sensibility.  
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7 During the fieldwork and in writing up the fieldnotes shortly afterwards, Paul reflected:  
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10 Some of the images I take in low-key mode look quite pleasing when I look at them in  
11 the camera. At least, they look more or less how I would have wished. The model's  
12 skin is pale, but in the rim-lit low-key shots, it looks perfectly dark. I take some  
13 'abstract' shots. Abstract here means nothing very intellectual. In fact it really means  
14 concentrating on and focussing on isolated aspects of the body. It means paying close  
15 attention to how the light falls on the body's contours – inevitably in this case,  
16 shoulders, breasts, hips and buttocks. So herein immediately lies a central issue. In  
17 doing this studio exercise I am implicitly recapitulating a century of male photography  
18 of the female nude. Of course I cannot do it with any great degree of technical  
19 competence. But I am forced (or have volunteered myself) into a mode of practice that  
20 is at least questionable. I must inevitably think not just about 'the lighting' but also how  
21 the light falls on her breast or on her nipple. The 'abstract' images that I take are also  
22 decontextualised aspects of her body – her buttocks, her breasts. So is this just yet  
23 another expression of the cliché male gaze?. Here I am with a total stranger, her time  
24 paid for, looking at parts of her as dispassionately as I can. I do not feel embarrassment  
25 for either of us at the level of ordinary interaction. She is a professional, and I am an  
26 amateur learner. But the normal internal dialogue and acts of memory that are routine in  
27 fieldwork have another dimension.  
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40 The learner surrenders to the situation. He gives up control, and enters into the local activity.  
41 Control is surrendered: to the teacher, who manages the technical set-up of the studio and the  
42 lights, and to the model, whose posing is only minimally under Paul's control. If one is  
43 learning here, is one of necessity recapitulating the past work of others? So surrender risks  
44 merely recapitulating an objectifying gaze.  
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49 The Imp thus intervenes in the processes of fieldwork and reflection. It helps us to recognise  
50 the debts we have to those who have trod these fields before us and of the wisdom and  
51 mistakes made. It may also help us to keep our ethical commitments sharp.  
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## 55 **Conclusion**

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3 What we hope to have done in this paper is twofold. Firstly, to elucidate the continuing and  
4 under-acknowledged work of Wolff for understanding embodied fieldwork encounters. In  
5 exploring the challenges and joys of fieldwork by way of vignettes from a study of  
6 photographic practices we have highlighted sensorial, embodied and aesthetic forms of  
7 knowing. Secondly, we have taken seriously the challenge of surrendering-to the  
8 phenomenon, by way of the character of the Imp. The Imp intervenes in the reflective  
9 process. The Imp interrupts, questions, prods and pursues, reminding us of the oscillating  
10 tenor of fieldwork between worlds of comprehension and explanation; the immersion of  
11 surrender and the surfacing of the catch.  
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18 The Imp may be a destructive force – meddling with the commitment to surrender,  
19 interrupting the experience of the field, as the body does when it complains and aches.  
20 Conversely, it may provide the spur to continued engagement, the ego with which to  
21 continually begin again in the field. In the photographic studio, it asks: Why are you doing  
22 this? The answers (the catch) that it yields are multiple. On the one hand, the answer is  
23 pragmatic and analytic: in order to learn and document new techniques. But the Imp raises  
24 further, different, issues. The encounter is an aesthetic one, and it is hard to escape surrender  
25 to the erotic history of the nude model. The Imp draws attention to the struggles of total  
26 bracketing, of denying the influence of canonical works and of the importance of ethical  
27 awareness wrought by work on the male gaze and asymmetrical power relations in  
28 encounters. Where Wolff's determined Romanticism seeks to silence the Imp through  
29 exhorting both total involvement and the suspension of received notions, we argue that  
30 paying attention to our inner Imps spurs the emergence of the 'catch' of fieldwork and  
31 grounds our ethical awareness in the 'whatness' of the activity itself. Silencing our Imps runs  
32 the risk of blinding our ethical and aesthetic sensibilities: it may negate the ability to listen to  
33 our bodies as they interject through tiredness or pain. Silencing the Imp may undermine our  
34 capacity for reflexivity as we grapple with the 'inbetween-ness' of the Me and I, the  
35 materiality and intersubjectivity of the field and the production of our ongoing jottings and  
36 catches. The Imp itself may become the catch – the nagging sense of unease reveals the  
37 artfulness of civil disattention in the studio and its complex accomplishment; the  
38 discomforting heat of the studio light gives us insight to the control of the body exerted by  
39 models and photographers alike.  
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56 We have also attempted do show how 'surrender' is sometimes necessary, rather than the  
57 classic description of the ethnographer who reserves something of her/himself. Fully  
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3 participant observation is sometimes needed. Indeed, in many settings, one cannot be only  
4 partly engaged. One certainly cannot commit oneself less than fully to the multiple tasks of  
5 learning practical skills. The activities demand full attention, otherwise, there is no learning  
6 and hence no phenomenon. But surrender also demands the catch. Without the catch the  
7 surrender is idle.

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12 Ethnography always has a dual aspect. Participant engagement with a given social world is an  
13 existential commitment. Reflection and analysis are the concomitant processes of intellectual  
14 work. They operate iteratively and concurrently. As we have illustrated, Wolff's writing on  
15 surrender-and-catch portrays ethnography's distinctive imagination in a particularly forceful  
16 manner. Thinking ethnographically (Atkinson 2017) is necessarily informed by personal and  
17 disciplinary commitments. We move forward on both fronts, and as we do so the principle of  
18 reflexivity can conjure up the Imp of fieldwork. It troubles any complacency on our part, and  
19 it animates the necessary inner dialogue that animates ethnographic work. Surrender and  
20 catch together suggest ways in which analytic, realist ethnographers and evocative  
21 autoethnographers might find paths towards rapprochement.  
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