

“Let’s bring it up to b flat” – What Style Offers Applied Ethnographic Work

RICK E. ROBINSON

Continuum

Ethnographic and design work share, deeply, the challenge of conveying the truth of the work we do to interlocutors from very different backgrounds. Writing is hard work even with the shared culture that an academic discipline or a single firm can draw upon. How, then, to write well for broad and varied audiences? By writing like novelists. Literary critic James Wood encapsulates the central tradition of the novel as: “Truthfulness to the way things are [...] Life on the page, life brought to different life by the highest artistry.” (2008:247) It is hard to conceive of a better description of what most of us would like to achieve. “Truthfulness to the way things are” gets nicely to all of the important moments of what we do—observation, description, interpretation, inscription. In this paper, I try to move ‘style’ up the ladder of importance in how we think, write, and talk about the work we do.

“Only he who loves can sing.”
St. Augustine

WORKING WITH STYLE

How hard is it to convey the essence of the work we do? I’m talking here about particular instances of work, work in projects, in cases, in fieldwork and findings, more than the more generic process, method, and overview blurbs and slideshows that get used to ‘sell’ or introduce the work. It’s hard. We rely, often, on close collaborations and shared experiences to bridge across organizational boundaries and disciplinary backgrounds. We don’t expect folks to “get” the work by reading a report, and probably with good reason. At last year’s EPIC an entire session was devoted to rethinking representations of our work in media and practices other than writing (Sunderland 2008). Writing’s role in our work sometimes seems like an ancillary skill. There are, of course, the bullet points in the PowerPoint files and the notes which accompany talking-head video snippets and internal ‘DO NOT CIRCULATE’ research reports. Occasionally a case study will find its way to a company website, comprised of the (unfortunately) near-standard formula: problem-method-insight-solution, “real people,” and a product glamour shot. And there are the four years of EPIC and its proceedings, which, for as good as both are, are still a long way from the scale and variety of the AAA or ACM journals and proceedings. I’m willing to go a bit retro in this paper and suggest that writing, more than anything else, continues to be

Redefining What Is Core

the most important vehicle for communicating among ourselves and especially, to wider audiences and other interested parties.

Discussed in person, and for some researchers presented from the podium, ethnographic research work comes alive. But as a rule with few exceptions, it is hard to say the same of research writing. Picked, not quite at random, from an EPIC proceeding (2007):

Our research objectives were to uncover the needs of non users in the low income community, how they might use or adopt mobile and Internet services, and how to design technology based on people's needs, constraints, and aspirations.

This is not “Call me Ishmael.” Nor is it exceptionally bad. It’s our normal for proceedings and journals. We learn to write this simply and clearly, this unostentatiously. We are, for the most part, taught to avoid “Call me Ishmael” in professional writing, to understand style and personal voices as violations of the objective, scientific frame. Were we only reporting results, there would be good reason for such a limitation. But we aren’t only reporting. We are creating alternative interpretations, opening up ways of thinking differently, imagining new futures. We have good reasons to understand what style brings to communication and to learn to work with it in the work we do.

We can do better than reportage. We *should* do better, not only for ourselves and for the field, but for those for whom we create the work in the way that we do; for the participants whom we must respect, and for our ‘clients,’ whether internal or external, immediate or imagined. There are other models out there which can help with this. And peer-reviewed science journal writing is not at the top of that list.

WHY “HOW FICTION WORKS” WORKS

Last year, I had occasion to remain prone for most of eight weeks, during which time I read a lot of fiction, watched a lot of movies, and listened to a lot of music. I came out of that with a renewed energy for work that I could not put down to the surgeon or the medications. A month or so after that, however, I began reading literary critic James Wood’s “How Fiction Works,” (2008) and light broke through the clouds, bells rang, pennies dropped, and scales fell away. It is a brilliant little book. It is, as one might expect from a *New York Times* literary critic, beautifully written; at once authoritative, playful, and subtle. Smart. It made me think differently about much that I had already read, and sent me to the bookstore to find novels I’d passed by. But I carried it around, dog-eared its pages unmercifully, and underlined it with the abandon of a first-year graduate student, because I read *How Fiction Works* as a figure of thought, an analogy for much of the work that we do. It made me think, hard, about why

Redefining What Is Core

research reports don't absorb you the way that fiction does, about why we rarely sing at conferences. In the reading and watching and listening I'd done I was often moved, but hadn't thought very deeply about how and why that was. What Wood brings beautifully to the fore is that the core of the novel form isn't its fictive or imaginative nature, but the way in which *style* particularly connects reader, author, and character. How that works for the work we do, is the focus of this paper.

Wood is a scholar-critic. He isn't writing a "how to" for novelists, but rather elucidating both why some fiction is so much better than others, and how the technical means to make it so have developed over the history of the form. The "Works" in the title is as much evaluative as it is mechanical. Wood's encapsulation of the central tradition of the novel is the grounding analogy for me:

Realism, seen broadly as truthfulness to the way things are [...] cannot be mere verisimilitude, cannot be mere lifelikeness, or life sameness, but what I must call *lifeness*. Life on the page, life brought to different life by the highest artistry." (Wood 2008:247 emphasis original)

Replace "realism" with "ethnography" and it is hard to conceive of a better description of what most of us would most like to achieve in our work. "Truthfulness to the way things are" gets nicely to all of the important moments of what we do—observation, description, inscription, interpretation. But in that last, crucially active phrase, "brought to different life by the highest artistry," there is perhaps more room between author and page than we are comfortable with as scientists, as researchers. Most of "How Fiction Works" is focused on that gap, for although the creation of a slight mismatch between what character or narrator understands and what the reader should understand is the very definition of irony, (according to Wood, at least), it is also where style is embodied, where the work of fiction "triples" to encompass a reality, its immediate perception, and reflective commentary on both of those.

I'd like to move 'style' up the ladder of importance in how we think, write, and talk about the work we do. Like most of my generation, I was trained to understand 'style' (in writing, at least) as something to be followed, to be adhered to. First, Strunk & White's "*The Elements of Style*", then Kate Turabian and the "*Chicago Manual of Style*" as finishing school. Turabian was, after all, the head of my university's Dissertation Office, through whom every thesis and dissertation—whether in Cosmological Physics or Cognitive Psychology—had to be processed, scrutinized, and approved. Style in this sense isn't connected to 'reality', but to readability, to enabling communication through formal standards. I am not suggesting that we abandon good punctuation or citation formatting (and why, after all, would we? There are free websites such as bibme.com that will take a fragment of a title, hunt it down, and format the citation in APA, Chicago, or MLA style in less time than it took to write this parenthetical observation). Style in the sense Wood intends does something different for us. Wood's question,

Redefining What Is Core

“What distinguishes great work from grinding genre prose?” (Wood 2008:196) seems perfectly applicable to the work of research communication.

Wood opens up a different approach to how we write about the work that we do, how we “get down to business” among ourselves and for all the readers we *could* have: the notion of *style* applied to the work of ethnographic description and communication. Wood’s book provides us with a clear and often beautiful set of constructs for not only understanding “how fiction works,” but also to see the gap between simply conveying “findings” (our version of basic genre prose) and great writing. I think it allows us to see how the work of design and the work of understanding are, in ways both substantive and formal, creative. It provides us the structure and the latitude to do more with our material.

This paper is an examination of what the notion and the elements of style can do for ethnographic communication: an argument in support of doing the hard work of communicating not just with clarity and fidelity, but with some of the flair, imagination, and voice of the best in fiction.

IRONY AND STYLE

Irony is usually a subject of investigation; a topic, a potential explanation. Wood offers it to us as the central structure of style, and through it, an intriguing notion of discriminating reading and writing. For me, Wood reclaimed irony from the reduced circumstances it found itself in after the debilitating period of time it spent linked to consumption in the nineties. Shockingly, it seems that the work of irony is not always wry, or mocking, or superior; nor was it invented only late in the last century.

“[In] free indirect style, we see things through the character’s eyes and language but also through the author’s eyes and language. We inhabit omniscience and partiality at once. A gap opens between author and character, and the bridge—which is free indirect style itself—between them simultaneously closes that gap and draws attention to its distance. This is merely another definition of dramatic irony: to see through a character’s eyes while being encouraged to see more than the character can see.” (Wood 2008:11)

Especially wonderful is that Wood follows this definitional passage immediately with a perfectly chosen example not from Don DeLillo or David Foster Wallace, but from Robert McCloskey’s classic children’s story *Make Way for Ducklings*.

McCloskey places us in Mr. Mallard’s confusion; yet the confusion is obvious enough that a broad ironic gap opens between Mr. Mallard and

Redefining What Is Core

the reader (or author). We are not confused in the same way as Mr. Mallard; but we are also being made to inhabit Mr. Mallard's confusion. (Wood 2008:12, emphasis original)

"To inhabit Mr. Mallard's confusion." I think this is when I began to understand that *How Fiction Works* is, if anything, larger than its immodest title suggests. Wood characterizes the tension between a represented reality, the experience of that reality (by characters & narrators), and the interpretation of the whole which we read in the discrepancies or the parallels between the two, as the ground upon which style builds "life on the page, life brought to different life by the highest artistry." Irony, understood this way, is what creates the tension that holds a novel together. The figures which create an "ironic gap" do double duty, encoding a part of at least one reality while they point to a gap between it and other positions in and outside of the work itself.

Isn't this what we purport to offer to our clients, to our audiences? A level of understanding the subject that is so close as to "inhabit" their way of being in the world? Coupled with a way of reaching directly for our clients, knowingly and carefully bringing confusion (or joy or shame or habitualness) to life for them? Allowing them to consider it, know it, and ultimately, to value it, respect it, even as we offer to change it?

The different ways in which that structuring and skinning gets done are the 'technologies' of the novelist. I'm not suggesting we appropriate them wholesale. But the clarity of the relationship between the elements of style Wood illuminates can certainly be a model for the delivery of ethnographic work to design, business, strategy, product development—any of our central audiences. Understanding and reflecting on the tensions between reality and its perception—if that is not our business and our value, I'm not sure what can be.

Issuing some sort of edict—"Write with style!" is not particularly helpful. The style guides we (ought to) keep ready-to-hand while we write are probably less than half of the vocabulary we need to master. The constructs of our disciplines are another. And the concerns of our clients and the language they use to express them are more yet. Style is not, in the way I'm reading Wood here, reducible to any of those. Let's think of style, in our context, as the control and expression of ironic tension. That kind of style is clearly more than either individual expression or flair devoid of substance. It is, instead, a kind of structure, a requirement, a framework requiring that we give each of those tensional corners clear and distinct treatment: in detailing in what this particular reality consists; in the curation of specific and consistent voices for the characters we represent; and finally, in the development of a voice for the person, the team, or the company behind that analysis—one specific to the research goal(s),

Redefining What Is Core

and which is clearly rooted in—and articulates if need be—the values which inform every research undertaking.

But I think it important to look briefly at why we haven't been working more explicitly with the notion of style all along. An omission particularly odd in a field that counts design and designers as both central practitioners and important interlocutors.

WRITING, READING, AND STYLE

The blurb from the *New York Times* on my 1979 copy of *The Elements of Style* says, “Buy it, study it, enjoy it. It is as timeless as a book can be.” Reading it again, I found this bit to be especially timeless:

The special vocabularies of the law, of the military, of government are familiar to most of us. Even the world of criticism has a modest pouch of private words (luminous, taut), whose only virtue is that they are exceptionally nimble and can escape from the garden of meaning over the wall. Of these Critical words, Wolcott Gibbs once wrote, ‘...they are detached from the language and inflated like little balloons.’ The young writer should learn to spot them—words that at first glance seem freighted with delicious meaning but that soon burst in air, leaving nothing but a memory of a bright sound. (Strunk & White 1979:83-84)

“*Escape from the garden of meaning over the wall.*” We have more than a few of them: once-useful terms such as “text,” insider turns of phrase like “always already,” and maxims like “speak truth to power” have been sanded very thin by master and apprentice writers alike. Granted, most have not been so harshly abused as to be entirely empty (or empty *and* wrong as, say, how “fleshed out” is constantly rendered as “flushed out” in business jargon), but we are close to it in this field’s most completely burst term, “insight.” Strunk and White included *insightful* in the “Words and Expressions Commonly Misused” chapter with the following note more than 50 years ago: “The word is a suspicious overstatement for “perceptive” ... usually, it crops up to inflate the commonplace.” (1979:50). Despite that warning, there are entire corporate departments denominated with some form of the word, and the gods only know on how many PowerPoint slides it appears. (One need *not* be a god to find that it gets half a *billion* hits in search engines).

What happens when all of the useful language has gone over the wall? We get what Wood wonderfully calls the “ruined argot” of a debased language. In trite phrases like ‘user need’ or ‘consumer insight’ we are dangerously close to ruining our argot, despite the equally dangerous fact that we haven’t yet fully developed it. The style

Redefining What Is Core

figure gives us an option other than ascribing this to bad writing or a lazy sink into marketing jargon.

I began work on this paper with the idea that it would be about bad writing. I started to work through conference proceedings and abstracts looking for papers that bored me or that bulged with jargon and trudged unhappily along with voiceless, monotonous prose. I know that I've skimmed many a journal page and written, under the guise of note-taking, letters to my college roommate in the rows of a conference auditorium—so I was sure bad writing had to be there. But it wasn't. Or at least not much of it. It takes work to find really awful work in the proceedings and journals for this field. But the good writing is good writing within, as Wood has it, a single register, and that register is the personless objective voice of most research writing and of academic journals. Rather than bad writing, it seems that the style question, at least in part, is a question of audience, of the readers we imagine. A painter friend of mine recently told me that she finds grant applications difficult because there is no clear person for whom she imagines writing them (in an academic journal, I'd have to footnote this as a dated personal correspondence). That's the core of it. In a slightly paradoxical fashion, exceptionally *good* writing, such as that in Genevieve Bell and Paul Dourish's collaborations, make this more clear than bad writing does.

Compare:

In the urban sphere, the user is pitched against a hostile world; in the domestic sphere, people find and celebrate a nurturing environment. [...]technology has a lot of hard-wired assumptions about where danger lurks in our complex world. To us, that seems dangerous. (Bell and Dourish 2006:39)

With:

In their work on information infrastructures, Bowker and Star [41] discuss the International Classification of Diseases, a common infrastructure for the collection and comparison of mortality statistics worldwide. Like other boundary objects [42], though, the ICD is less a stable platform upon which everyone can stand, and more a means by which different interests, groups, concerns, and activities can be brought into temporary alignment. (Bell and Dourish 2007:8)

The first is for the (quite cool) design/engineering magazine *Ambidextrous*; the second, for the peer-reviewed journal *Personal and Ubiquitous Computing*. In the magazine article, the tone is different, the language warmer (despite the topic). In it Bell and Dourish are present and they have opinions. In the second, they recede behind cool objectivity and lots of citations.

Redefining What Is Core

We come to this honestly. In the opening chapter of *The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work* (2009), Alain deBotton writes about the passions of “Ship Spotters” who keep detailed records of observations of the comings and goings of cargo ships in major ports around the world.

In converting a passion into a set of facts, the spotters are at least following a pattern with an established pedigree, most noticeable in academia, where an art historian, on being stirred to tears by the tenderness and serenity he detects in a work by a fourteenth-century Florentine painter, may end up writing a monograph, as irreproachable as it is bloodless, on the history of paint manufacture in the age of Giotto. It seems easier to respond to our enthusiasms by trading in facts than by investigating the more naïve question of how and why we have been moved. (deBotton 2006:27)

Style, I think, requires that we do not bracket the passions we find in our work; that when we are stirred, when we observe the stirring, we make space for it in how we write. Writing for an academic audience removes, implicitly, the opportunity to create characters and implies that the authorial viewpoint is an objective one, a scientific one, rooted in description, and shying away from the explicit expression of values, or the imagination of futures. The first move in developing styles for our space then, is to considerably broaden the notion of who our readers might be.

STYLE AND REALITIES

One way to tell slick genre prose from really interesting writing is to look, in the former case, for the absence of different registers [...] a style that is locked into place. By contrast, rich and daring prose avails itself of harmony and dissonance by being able to move in and out of place. (Wood 2008:196)

We do not have the option of inventing the reality we write about. But the requirement that we stick to what is true does not put the ability to be ‘really interesting’ or ‘rich and daring’ out of reach until we switch careers. Non-fiction has its share of writers with enviable style: Atul Gawande’s *Complications* (2002), Tracy Kidder’s *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (2004), and deBotton’s “*Work*” book are all essentially ethnographic works: closely observant, broadly and deeply informed, and intelligently interpreted.

Gawande and Kidder both have ‘characters’ around which the books cohere. In *Complications*, it is Gawande himself, although other physicians and patients are as vividly drawn as are his own experiences. Opening up the specialized vocabulary of the

Redefining What Is Core

profession to a wide audience, Gawande enables readers to inhabit the confusion and the cares of a surgeon, just as McCloskey did with Mr. Mallard. Kidder, on the other hand moves back and forth between his ostensible ‘subject’ Paul Farmer, and himself. Farmer’s work and passion infects him, moves him from reporter to something more than that—a witness perhaps—but in any case, we understand that Kidder has changed, seemingly as we read. In Kidder’s conveying of a life’s work first hand, we understand Farmer, but also Kidder himself, and how Farmer brings Kidder to ‘inhabit’ a different stance toward the world.

For some time, one of the points of tension between some of the constituent groups in applied ethnography has been the relative importance of being a first person observer in primary research, of being able to vouch for the verity of an observation by saying, “I was there.” What I think goes wrong with this well-intentioned stance is brought forward by the notion of ironic tension and style: when we choose from great mounds of field data the specific informant’s words which convey the researcher’s findings, we are collapsing at least two if not three points of view into one. Quoting a participant with, “I like to read and sometimes send a text” immediately after one writes, in the academic objective voice, “People are reluctant to enter information into devices, or to learn new skills,” is, at the least, redundant, and somehow disingenuous, giving subject and author the same voice, having one speak through the other. “I observed” or “we noticed” are *not* the same as “he said.” And they are not, either, “It was troubling to me to observe” or, back to Bell and Dourish, “To us, that seems dangerous.”

The worlds of our subjects *are* strange. It is the very distance between our clients’ ways of seeing the world and the way it is understood and experienced by, as Jean Lave (1988) so plainly put it, “just plain folks” that makes the work we do valuable. In collapsing voice into findings, in searching talking head snippets for the moment which provided ‘the insight,’ we take out both the richness of style and the values that might live in the distinctions between those differences.

If writing of the “Our research objectives were to uncover...” variety is not “Call me Ishmael,” neither is it “They set a slamhound on Turner’s trail in New Delhi, slotted it to his pheromones and the color of his hair” – the opening two sentences of William Gibson’s *Count Zero* (Gibson 1987). Gibson is often cited for the effectiveness with which he invents future realities, realities in which we nod along in appreciation of the truthfulness of the social, technological, and psychological dynamics on which the novels are laid, even as we are astonished by the elements he creates to populate them. Whether it is the distant future of *Neuromancer* or the eerily and indeterminately closer worlds of *Spook Country* and *Pattern Recognition*, Gibson does for an imagined future what Dickens or Flaubert or Proust did for their contemporary or near-contemporary worlds: inhabit them fully while as fully subverting them—critically,

Redefining What Is Core

lovingly, but still creating just that slight shift that lets us see the difference between reality and what could or, more powerfully, should be.

By the end of the first five or six pages of *Count Zero*, the alternate reality is completely immersing without a sentence that is uninflected and omniscient. Simple descriptions embody the tensions of the style Wood calls “free indirect style”: “Something Midwestern in the bone of the jaw, archaic and American” (1987:3) or “how she lived alone in one of the ramshackle pontoon towns tethered off Redondo” (1987:4). They open the distance not between an innocent character and a knowing reader, but between the world as we know it and a potential future as Gibson has imagined it: the archaic jawline, the tethered town—words and images that are neither burst nor empty. Gibson sets up the rules for an alternate future and then plays by them. It isn’t just Gibson’s imagination we should be excited by, it is the discipline with which he takes premises laid down in our social and technical reality and develops them in ways not at all necessary or obvious. It is the kind of subversive act of art that Herbert Marcuse (1978) put at the center of critical understanding.

Fiction is the narrative imagining of invented worlds. We are not in the business of inventing data, but we are in the business of imagining futures every bit as much as we are in the business of representing realities. How we choose to do those is a matter of voice and values.

STYLE AND CHARACTER

Bell and Dourish (I’m making them stand in here for a not insubstantial, but still a minority of writers in the field) can and do shift voice and register depending on their intentions, the context, and on the readers they imagine. This isn’t waffling or unscientific of them. I’d probably rather read the prose of the *Ambidextrous* piece, but my trust in them as researchers is predicated on their corpus of journal articles and on knowing them, hearing them speak at events like this one. We are, variously, researchers, designers, and strategists. And also students, parents, confused car shoppers, and *fashionistas*. We don’t need to hide these various and varying identities, but we do need to understand the role they play in the work that we are doing. A character can be how we control who we are and who we need to be in a particular piece of research work or its communication. Shifting domains slightly, I think Alain deBotton characterizes this consideration perfectly in *The Architecture of Happiness* when he begins his reflection on how we are affected by our surroundings with:

Belief in the significance of architecture is premised on the notion that we are, for better or for worse, different people in different places—and on the conviction that it is architecture’s task to render vivid to us who we might ideally be. (2006:13)

Redefining What Is Core

In design and design research, it is not an uncommon practice to create “personas” as vehicles for conveying fieldwork (and personal experience) to clients and project teams. While in general, the sophistication of persona representations has come a long way from the twentieth century advertising agency practice of creating mood boards out of images and words clipped from magazines (many of which had been created by “creatives” looking at mood boards), they are still shallow, simplified, and static when compared with the imperfect messiness of just plain folks. Like just average academic writing, they are characterized by a lack of multiple registers and a decided absence of tension. Again, we can do better. Quotes and talking head snippets of video don’t bring subjects to life as characters. They point at the distance without ever enabling the ‘habitation’ of it. Style requires not just a voice, but a deep appreciation of other voices, even as that original voice frames and stands off from its partners.

I have a friend who is a writer (another personal communication, n.d.). Right now he is working on a collection of short, lyrical essays that hover between memoir and poetry. All of them are written in a very close first person, and all of them are ‘true’—I know because I am a character in a few of them, and they startle me always with how much I’d forgotten, but how recognizable those forgotten things are. So it came as a surprise to me that he talks about how difficult it is to create the right voice for “the narrator.” Not “me” but “the narrator.” He is working with “the truth,” but he is careful to step away from reportage and neutrality, taking the care to create the two clear voices, and the relationship between them: ironic structure, bent to the creation of value. The hard work of style, for the payoff of communication of reality.

Wood talks about a number of techniques (or ‘technical advances’) which create the tension between author, character and narrator. One central one, which he argues was invented or at least perfected by Flaubert, is the notion of a “*flaneur*”, a character whose main role is to notice things:

This figure is essentially a stand-in for the author, is the author’s porous scout, helplessly inundated with impressions. He goes out into the world like Noah’s dove, to bring a report back. The rise of this authorial scout is intimately connected to the rise of urbanism, [...] to the fact that huge conglomerations of mankind throw at the writer—or the designated perceiver—large, bewilderingly various amounts of detail. (Wood 2008:48)

The “designated perceiver”—how incredible a role is that! And how close the notion of “large, bewilderingly various amounts of detail” to the experience of trying to bring some order to a roomful of fieldwork documentation. But rarely do we allow that bewilderment to show through in research reports. “We don’t know yet,” does not seem to be an acceptable response to bewilderment, even when it is true. Reading

Redefining What Is Core

reports, case studies, and proceedings, one would think that we are a profession of perfect perceivers; that we have no confusion for our readers to inhabit. Unfortunately, what we rule out along with bewilderment and confusion are the values that shape everything from how we conduct the fieldwork to the conclusions we draw and the recommendations we make to colleagues and clients. Instead of our own voice, we substitute an objective distance. Our *flaneur* explains instead of noticing. As if by removing all the first person pronouns, the author's voice is magically removed, leaving objectivity. Yet from St. Augustine to Stephen Jay Gould, the combination of clear, critical thinking with passion, with personal experience, and explicit values, has created work that is as stirring as it is persuasive and reasonable. Style is reason's partner. It does not need to be stripped away to let objectivity and truth come through. What the work of fiction does, or at least that the intelligent criticism of it proposes that it does, is to show us how to craft a distinct voice for both character and author, and define the relationship between those voices in the work of creating the narrative. Maintaining that relationship consistently is the work of style.

FIGURES AND IMAGES

Almost a decade ago, Tony Salvador opened a talk at an interaction design conference with a very simple line drawing of a daisy-like flower. Tony is, I'm sorry to say, only slightly better at drawing than I am. I remember it not because of its stunning artistry, but because of how perfectly it worked as the underlying structural metaphor for his talk, and more importantly, for the experience of the folks he and his colleagues had studied in an extensive, multi-sited ethnography.

As a field, we use metaphors, similes, and analogies constantly: consumers' "journey" through life stages or car purchases, and so many everyday activities are presented as "cycles" that the newest version of PowerPoint can turn any list into a broad-shouldered and brightly colored cycle at a click. But we tend to use them in specific and isolated forms, to make specific points, rather than to create structure or invest a report on work for hire with style. Salvador's "Flower of Spain" figure did more than that because it was the figure through which an Intel Corporation organization, specifically interested in inventing and applying new technologies, made sense out of hundreds of hours of observation, interview, and conversation. It connected the seemingly mundane (average area in square meters of urban apartments, the making of coffee, the running up of cafe tabs) with the core of the participants' experience in a way that made the distance between Santa Clara or Hillsboro and southern Spain something understood rather than measured; that provided both research team and readers with something to think with.

In *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, there is a recurring image that does much the same kind of work for Kidder, but which is selected, chosen, from the years of interaction between the two men, rather than one created by Kidder as explanation. Paul Farmer

Redefining What Is Core

is a physician and researcher whose work is global and epidemiological; who has tackled the societal factors contributing to epidemic diseases both by reframing the medical understanding of “resistance” (in more than one disease) and by mobilizing organizations on the scale of the United Nations, the World Bank, and the pharmaceutical industry to take action in dozens of countries, at enormous levels of expenditure.

But several times a year, crammed into short holes in crazy global itineraries, Farmer returns to Haiti and goes to see individual patients, in their homes. The hike to see two patients which Kidder describes in most detail takes 11 hours. Of hiking.

It is a journey between two worlds, and a metaphor which works on many levels, which Kidder returns to deftly throughout the book. Farmer doesn't just move between rural Haiti and the centers of global policymaking, he connects them, walking from one to the other, and taking what each gives him back to inform the other. In that journey, we can see starkly the complex relationship between economic and political structures and an individual illness, recovery, or death. The real hike is used not only to re-register our way of thinking about something removed from our reality—how many of us know someone who has died of tuberculosis?—but to make the role of an individual interpreter's re-registering as vivid as any fictional one. Through that shift, Kidder hands his readers responsibility and a moral choice: knowing that a different reality is possible, and is within the realm of individual agency, we choose between doing nothing and doing something.

Making real events do the work that a brilliantly imagined metaphor can do as well as this one does is no mean trick, but it is work. In ethnographic research and in design, representations, models, and frameworks are often metaphorical. My point here is not just that they could be more so, but that in writing to create the distinct tensions and voices between what is, how our subjects understand that, and what *ought* to happen, we can create in compelling style, as well as in truth. As Wood has it, “in cases like this metaphor is doing what it is supposed to do; it is speeding us, imaginatively, toward a new meaning.” (2008:204)

CONCLUSION, WITH MUSIC

I've been approaching the notion of style mostly from the point of view of writing and writers. Considering the work (in all the senses I've been using it) as it is embodied by authors in communications on the scale of talks, articles, and books. But I think that there is more potential for the idea of styles than what I've glossed so far. Again, Wood started me on the particular approach to the issue, but it is one that the social sciences and the design world has long considered—the idea of practice and the related notion of communities of practice. The development of the novel and, in particular, the development of “free indirect style” is an historical and, as the *flâneur*

Redefining What Is Core

passage shows, also a material evolution, with originators, experiments, students, and masters.

In this strange little intersection between research, technology, design, and strategy, we haven't quite understood ourselves to be engaged in that same sort of social/technical search. We should. We can develop distinct styles of analysis, differing sensibly between what we'd use for close interaction analysis and the ones we'd use to build a large strategic plan. Or that are identifiably of the voice and values of particular organizations or affiliations. We can begin to develop styles as different approaches to communication, representation, and value. The notion of style can be a basis for the evolution of the field in something other than methodology.

Music has both the kind of individual artistry that we admire in great writing and the sort of collective creation that we want from vital communities of practice. Like writing and corporate work, it has its share of hacks and dross to make great work stand out and be valued. It has for its entire history lived on the tensions between high and low, innovation and tradition, creation and interpretation, genre and canon. We can learn from style in music, too.

In 2006, Bruce Springsteen released *We Shall Overcome: The Seeger Sessions* which included a documentary of the album's making, and which was followed by a tour with 18 musicians playing at least 40 different instruments. The material underpinning the album is American, Irish, and English folk music, standards of the folk genre long in the public domain such as "15 Miles on the Erie Canal" and "Jacob's Ladder." Springsteen and an assemblage of musicians play it all not from scores, but from a combination of recollection, intent listening to old recordings (the "Seeger" part of the title is a recognition of folksinger Pete Seeger's decades-long efforts to find and record folk music and musicians), conversation, rough notes scribbled on legal pads, and trial and error. As Springsteen says to the camera at one point during the documentary, this is "music being *made*, not just being *played*, which means that opportunity and disaster are both close at hand."

Fieldwork and analysis, done well, are both a lot like that: planned and executed with extensive, but informally represented expertise, we talk a great deal about opportunity, but we acknowledge disaster less than we should. It is a live recording of one of the songs, "*Pay Me My Money Down*," that connects style back to communities of practice for me. The song deserves the appellation 'rollicking,' and is, like most folk music, noticeably subversive. You'd have to have a pretty tinny ear and no sense of humor whatsoever to not end up smiling at the political innuendo and singing along. Between the second (traditional) and the third (newly added) verses, Springsteen leans back from the microphone and says to the band "Let's bring it up to b flat." There's a beat, and then the music brightens: *all* of it. Eighteen people, playing loud, hard, and fast switch from one key to a new one. It is the kind of virtuosity that makes you laugh

Redefining What Is Core

with astonishment, the way that an amazing fireworks display can. And this moment comes from understanding style deeply, from exploring the space between the source and its possibilities. Springsteen brought together a group of talented musicians who were steeped in at least two traditions: one substantive (the music) and one performative (also music). What they do during the performances is not just improvisation or riffing, though they do that, but working within one style to extend a different one. The music doesn't recreate the choir loft or the campfire singing of its sources, but reinvents it, understands it anew, and does it in a way that connects, viscerally, with a new audience.

That's what a virtuoso research practice can do, *should* to, in getting down to its business. In literature and in music, style is not surface, not decoration. It shouldn't be in the work we do either. Style is commitment, is passion. We work regularly in that 'ironic tension' between reality, experience, and intelligent analysis. And if it weren't so limiting "Life brought to different life by the highest artistry" could be the tag line for our industry. After all, we're bringing the future to life too.

NOTES

Acknowledgments – this paper benefited (I hope) from critical readings by Maria Bezaitis, Donna Flynn, Katie Boyd McGlenn, and Brian Rink. Ari Shapiro told me I needed to read Atul Gawande, and he was right. Ken Anderson provided the very useful distinction between 'assemblage' and 'group.' Jill Scipione suggested the St. Augustine epigraph, which connected things so well that I felt like singing.

REFERENCES

- Bell, Genevieve, & Dourish, Paul
2006 Is the house of the future a dangerous house? *Ambidextrous*, Issue #4 (Summer 2006), 37-40.
- 2007 Yesterdays tomorrows: notes on ubiquitous computing's dominant vision. *Personal and Ubiquitous Computing*, 11(2), 133-143.
- deBotton, Alain. D
2006 *The Architecture of Happiness*. London: Hamish Hamilton.
- 2009 *The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work*. New York: Pantheon.
- Gawande, Atul
2003 *Complications: A Surgeon's Notes on an Imperfect Science*. New York, NY: Picador.
- Gibson, William

Redefining What Is Core

- 1987 *Count Zero*. New York: Ace Books.
- 2000 *Neuromancer*. New York: Ace Books.
- 2005 *Pattern Recognition*. New York: Berkley Books.
- 2008 *Spook Country - A Novel*. New York: Berkley Books.
- Kidder, Tracy
2004 *Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, a Man Who Would Cure the World*. New York: Random House.
- Lave, Jean
1988 *Cognition in Practice: Mind, Mathematics and Culture in Everyday Life*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Marcuse, Herbert
1978 *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*. Urbana and Chicago: Beacon Press, Boston.
- Salvador, Tony
2000 The Flower of Spain. Conference presentation.
- Springsteen, Bruce
2006 *We Shall Overcome: The Seeger Sessions*. CD and DVD.
- Strunk, E. B & White, William.
1999 *The Elements of Style*. Malaysia: Pearson P T R.
- Sunderland, Patricia
2008 Representation in Practice: Utilizing the paradoxes of video, prose, and performance. In Cefkin, Melissa and Martha Cotton, *EPIC 2008 Proceedings*.
- Turabian, Kate
1985 *The Chicago Manual of Style: The 13th Edition of A Manual of Style Revised and Expanded*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Williams, Joseph. M.
1999 *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*. New York: Addison-Wesley.
- Wood, James
2008 *How Fiction Works*. New York, NY: Picador.