Being native —
distance, closeness and doing auto/
self-ethnography

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> The challenge of ethnography, and of most qualitative work,
> is to be close and avoid closure."
> (Alvesson 1999:20)

Abstract

In my PhD research project, I study the representation of virtuality in images. I study this through observation and analysis of my own work practice. My research borders on artistic research, and I am using self and auto-ethnography, combined with grounded theory, semiotics and hermeneutics, to establish a rigorous and methodological 'workflow' from observation to final text.

Self- and auto-ethnography is a new branch within ethnography. In traditional ethnography the researcher studies a group of people that are in some way estranged, and typically involves 'breaking in'. In contrast, self-ethnography involves the study of the researcher's own group; a group in which the researcher is an established participant. It typically involves 'breaking out' of cultural and social structures taken for granted within this group, understanding them from within. Auto-ethnography is the study of the self. Traditionally, self- and auto-ethnography are used to study dramatic life events such as deaths and divorces, but are an efficient and intriguing way to study much more mundane everyday events such as creative design processes.

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Introducing self-ethnography and auto-ethnography

The study of your own work practice is debatable and, to some degree, controversial in scientific research. In this text I will discuss the advantages, disadvantages, opportunities and dangers with this method. For me, studying my own work process is very natural. I could say that it is so natural, that I did not have to learn how to do it, rather I had to learn why I should not do it, and then learn again that I could do it. So, learning how to study my own work practice have been a process similar to the actual study of my own work practice, the process of breaking *out of* a cultural convention, not breaking *into* a
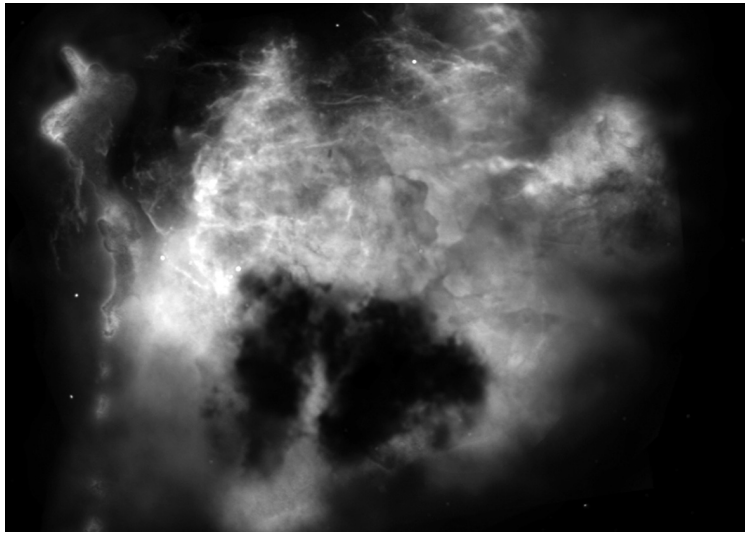
cultural convention (Alvesson 1999). It is likely that my comfort with the study of my own work process stems from my training as an architect, and my practice in creative and design oriented endeavours such as, graphic design and production design. As an architect I was trained, I would almost say indoctrinated, into the iterative cycle of reasoning-designing-evaluating. First I consider the design problem at hand. Then I draw sketches. Then I consider, in a self-reflexive evaluation, the sketches. In practice this process is not so clearly outlined. In practice it is a continuous movement between letting thoughts drift, and nailing thoughts in the interrogating light of conscious reflection. Thoughts, are at the same time shouts that I utter, and whispers that I listen to.

Can this work practice be turned into a scientific method? Can I explore the silent knowledge in my head by listening to what the mind whispers to my hand when I do my practice?

Ethnography, self-ethnography & auto-ethnography

Ethnography is the study of social interactions, practices and events. The study is done as fieldwork: the ethnographer observes and participates in the everyday practices of the group of people that is studied. The observed social expressions, what people do and say, is described, and to some extent interpreted and assigned meaning (Hughes 1994, Geertz 1998, Hammersley & Atkins 1989). In *ethnography*, we turn ourselves as research instruments towards groups of people, that are in some way external, foreign or alien. I might for example decide to study truck drivers. Since I have never been a truck driver myself, nor been socialising with them before, I need to *break into* this group of people, and to break into their practices. In *self-ethnography*, we turn ourselves towards a group of people where we already belong. I might for example decide to study other PhD students. Since I am a PhD student myself, I need to *break out* of this group of people and break out of their practices. In *auto-ethnography*, I turn myself towards myself and

observe myself in a particular role, for example, in my role as 3-Dimensional graphics artist. One of the key differences between ethnography and self/auto-ethnography is the metaphorical directions of movements. As Alvesson has pointed out (1999), ethnography could be seen as breaking into a group, while self/auto-ethnography could be seen as breaking out of a group. Another way to emphasis this essential difference is that in ethnography you are a stranger, while in self/auto-ethnography you are not a stranger.

So far, I have been bracketing self-ethnography and auto-ethnography together, and posed them as a pair against conventional ethnography. In doing self-ethnography I study what *others* do, and what these doings and sayings could have as meaning. In auto-ethnography I study what *I* do, and the meaning I believe my doings and sayings have. The key difference is that in the latter I have direct access to the experiences, feelings and reasoning that floats through my mind.

Self- and auto-ethnography is quite unconventional and unorthodox compared to scientific methods in general, and it has been debated and criticised. Researchers using auto/self-ethnography have hard times claiming that what they do is science, and getting accepted for publication, and I will discuss some of the problems associated with these methods.

Me & others

> "Traditional scientific approaches, still very much at play today, require researchers to minimize their selves, viewing self as a contaminant and attempting to transcend and deny it." (Wall 2006:2)

> Autobiographical and reflexive methods have long been viewed by many within the social science paradigms of positivism as unscientific, and at odds with objective, standardized forms of research. (Reed-Danahay 2001:411)

As emphasised by this quote, there is much scepticism towards research methods involving the researcher as an individual. Even in ethnography, where the dependence on the observer as research instrument is acknowledges, there are still tendencies to strive for a reduction or elimination of the role of the observer/researcher. The dangers of the self have different aspects, one being the risk of self- and auto-ethnography becoming too self-focused and narcissistic.

Avoiding narcissism

Historically, the personal and the scientific have been thoroughly separated. In the late 1970's the gap was allowed to shrink and close, bringing forward new ideas on the acceptance of personal writing – "experimental writing projects [...] blended the genres of ethnography, biography and autobiography" (Reed-Danahay 2001:411). Reed-Danahay points out that in conventional ethnography "there have long been modes of ethnographic writing that incorporated the self of the ethnographer" (ibid.). One danger with narcissism in self- and auto-ethnographic texts is the risk of becoming to self-

indulgent and egotistical, so that the actual issues of the research is veiled and dominated by observations and discussions associated with the researchers own person (ibid.). This risk of being narcissistic has been thoroughly discussed in the literature (Atkinson 1997, Charmaz & Mitchell 1997, Coffey 1999, Holt 2003, Sparkes 2000). "The danger is putting the personal self so deeply back into the text that it completely dominates, so that the work becomes narcissistic and egotistical." (Bruner 1993:6) It is important to remember that in most studies the self and the personal is studied, not because the researcher's 'I' is of more importance than the 'I' of others. Usually, you do not choose to do self- and auto-ethnography because you are of any specific or particular interest, you choose these methods because you believe the study of your own 'I' can shed light on issues of general importance.

Even in auto-ethnography, when I study myself and my own actions, I do this because I am one of all of you. I am not interesting as myself, Thommy Eriksson, I am interesting because I am one of you. This of course makes the assumption that I am normal enough to be interesting to study. It also requests of me to consciously and methodically be aware of, to observe, to interrogate and reflect upon, and be critical towards the different roles that I inhabit.

How personal is too personal?

Until now we have been discussing the issue of being self-indulgent, and the risk that self- and auto-ethnography might be too narcissistic and narrow to be of interest for research studies. But if we accept that the study of the self can be of interest as long as we are aware of the issues we need to manage, the next question becomes: how far can we go? Another side of self-indulgence is self-disclosure.

Self-disclosure in ethnographic studies have been discussed quite thoroughly in the literature: Angrosino (1989), Atkinson (1992), Denzin (1989), Friedman (1990), Okely and Callaway (1992), Reed-Danahay (1997), and Tedlock (1991). There are numerous advocates of ethnographers becoming deeply and emotionally immersed in their field-work. Ellis (2007) writes that the close and emotional study of others requires, "that the researcher turn the same scrutiny on herself as on others". Shulamit Reinharz follows another vein when attacking conventional social research for being a cultural rape:

> The researchers take, hit, and run. They intrude into their subjects' privacy, disrupt their perceptions, utilize false pretenses, manipulate the relationship, and give little or nothing in return. When the needs of the researcher are satisfied, they break off contact with the subject (Reinharz 1984:95).

The argument is that the researcher is required to become emotionally and personally involved in the research issues and the people that are under study, and to turn the gaze on themselves, for ethical and moral reasons, but also because it is vital for making good and productive observations and interpretations (Ellis and Bochner, 1996). She

uses phrases such as "evocative autoethnography" and "emotional sociology" (1997) to emphasise that private emotions, and the connotations they can trigger, can be allowed to appear as relevant observations. Tami Spry similarly argues, in her some times fierce assaults on conventional qualitative research:

> The body in academe is rather like the headless horseman galloping wildly and uncontrollably to somewhere, driven by profane and unruly emotion, while the head – holder of the Mind – is enshrined under glass in the halls of academe.
> (Spry 2001:715)

It is argued that vulnerability gives authority (Ryang 2000, Behar 1997). Vulnerability could be seen as a verification of honesty, closeness and commitment. The vulnerability I display proclaims that *I have been there to*. If I write about grief as a researcher, I could be dismissed as being too detached. If I write about grief as a researcher experiencing my own grief, my claims on observing and interpreting grief gains authority. Vulnerability gives authority. If we apply these thoughts on my own research, I would say that when I make myself vulnerable as a digital artist, then I have a deep view through the issue, and I am being honest. When writing about my own work process, there could be a natural tendency to make myself look better. Maybe I do not want to admit my faults and shortcomings as a designer, so I streamline my work process when I re-construct it in my interpretation and writing. But making myself vulnerable, exposing the ugliness of my own lack of professionalism, my own doubts on my capabilities as a designer, my lack of coherent reasoning, and so on, this gives me the authority to say *I have been there, this was how I perceived it.*

There is also a personal risk in self- and auto-ethnography, since there is a danger of revealing your own flaws, you have to be careful how you present yourself (Ellis 2007). There is of course both the private risk of exposing yourself towards friends and relatives, and a professional risk of exposing yourself towards colleagues. I believe the potential risk might be quite important. In our culture it is not common, and often not even accepted, to be frank with your own drawbacks. In the production culture of movie-makers and computer-graphic artists that I study, it is probably even less acceptable to reveal issues such as lack of professional work methods or lack of confidence in your own professional skills. Exposing my deepest flaws might damage my own career, either as an academic, as a designer, or both. It is inevitable to adopt a layer of censorship, or rather different layers of censorship, some flaws might be so severe that I might not even be honest to myself about them. This censorship might result in missing pieces and gaps in my observations and their interpretation. The risk of finessing observations during interpretation might be even more severe; strange behaviour, mistakes and lack of professionalism might be shedded in the creation of theoretically sleek and streamlined accounts of the originally messy and jumbled practices. It could be argued that these risks are associated with balancing between the too personal and individual, versus the

general and relevant. Avoiding private and sensitive details might solve both the risk of being too specific and the risk of being exposed. But even quite general flaws might be too sensitive to reveal, there might be flaws and unprofessional behaviour that most of us are aware of, but which are never spoken about or brought out into the exposing light of a written text. Most people masturbate now and then, but we do not mention it during the afternoon coffee. This colourful metaphor illustrates a strategy to manage the balance between censorship and self-exposure; sensitive matters can be spoken of if they are discussed in a careful and systematic manner that describes their meaning and relevance. Behar cautions that self-exposure "has to take us somewhere we couldn't otherwise go to. It has to be essential to the argument, not a decorative nourish, not exposure for its own sake" (1996:14).

Hermeneutics as interpretational tool

My most important interpretational tool is hermeneutics. From a self- and auto-ethnographic viewpoint, hermeneutics stresses the important idea that it is not the informant that determines the meaning of an observed action – it is me as a 'reader' (interpreter) that determines the meaning. Gadamer states this clearly:

> In a certain sense interpretation probably is re-creation, but this is a re-creation not of the creative act but of the created work, which has to be brought to representation in accord with the meaning the interpreter finds in it. (Gadamer, 1989:118)

The argument can be brought even further, as when Merleau-Ponty writes that "thought always uses thought already formulated by myself or others" (1962:35) and Barthes chimes with "text is a tissue of citations, resulting from the thousand sources of culture" (1977:146). This is a questioning of the freedom and sovereignty of the author, once again devaluing the author's intentions – might the author be just a vehicle through which our collective culture expresses itself? How free are we to behave and express ourselves? I prefer a middle-way in this discussion; it is reasonable to accept that we are only free to textually express ourselves from a defined range of possible expressions. Thus, language determines what we can say. Language allows me to say that my roses are 'red', but I am not free to say that my roses have the colour 'fertilizer' (of course I can utter the words, but the meaning would be non-existent or at least lost). However, I am free to say that 'red' is a romantic colour, and I am free to say that 'black' is a romantic colour, even though the latter statement might result in confusion, possibly misunderstanding, potentially a new code, a new sign that might anchor itself in our culture. Language constructs our world, but we continuously de-construct language, we continuously re-negotiate reality.

A closely related issue has been thoroughly ventilated in the Habermas/Gadamer debate (Negru 2007), where Habermas claimed that the reader/interpreter must become free from her own tradition and prejudices, while Gadamer objected that this is not

possible and that prejudices should be embraced and accepted (Gadamer, 1989). Ricoeur attempted to formulate a third way where the interpreter accepts her own tradition, but must be actively critical towards her prejudices:

> Reflection can never make me stop seeing the sun two hundred yards away on a misty day, or seeing it 'rise' and 'set', or thinking with the cultural apparatus with which my education, my previous efforts, my personal history, have provided me. (Merleau-Ponty 1962:54)

One of the most well known components of hermeneutics is the hermeneutic circle (Piercey 2004). Gadamer claims that "Hermeneutic work is based on a polarity of familiarity and strangeness..." (1989:295) and that, "we must understand the whole in terms of the detail and the detail in terms of the whole." (ibid.). This is suggesting two circular movements of thought in the work of interpretation. The first, I think of as a switching on and off of prejudices (pinpointing the strange experiences of others text/actions and turning them into something natural and familiar), and secondly, pinpointing the familiar and turning it into the strange. All human actions have an element of familiarity, and of strangeness. We humans are similar but no two are identical. Recall Alvesson's (1999) terms of 'breaking in' and 'breaking out' of the cultural structures of the studied group of informants, the hermeneutic interpretation of this idea is a circular, perpetual movement between breaking and breaking out.

> We turn over our recollection of observed facts; we endeavour so to rearrange them, to view them in such new perspective that the unexpected experience shall no longer appear surprising. (Peirce 1974/1979:36)

Creating distance — is it possible, is it required and is it harmful?

Finally I will devote a section to the issue that has been hinted at several times in different arguments: that of distance, brought up by Alvesson (1999).

When doing research in my own cultural backyard, I am already an insider, an accepted and natural part of the social system. I have a good viewpoint and my presence doesn't seem to disturb the system in any abnormal way. I am a true native. When I move around in my fieldwork, among moviemakers, computer artists and other researchers, I easily blend in. A researcher coming from afar might be more obvious as an intruding observer, influencing peoples' actions to a larger extent.

Does scientific research require distance? Does the ability to observe and analyse break down when the distance disappears? Can you take something apart from the inside? It is as if when being close, you can't see clearly, as if the researcher needs to raise herself above the ground and see the world from an aerial view in order to see it clearly. As if you have to be on the outside of something in order to pick it apart. But these plays with words are just metaphorical. In self- and auto-ethnography, what do we mean with being *close?* I would say that being close, is to have big helpings of tradition (pre-knowledge) as

Illustration_autoe_03
Computer generated graphics developed by the author for a virtual lab developed in a research project including Göteborgs Universitet, Chalmers tekniska högskola and Stanford University. The image is an example of illustrations created during the collaborations that the author has studied.

well as emotional attachment. This is both our curse and our blessings. Our abundance of tradition gives us a wealth of interpretational clues. I would claim that someone less immersed in the production culture surrounding movie making would most likely have a limited ability to interpret experiences in that field, while my interpretational repertoire is wider and deeper (albeit also twisted and tinted by all that tradition). The emotional attachment means that we have a complex connection to what we study, and that the connections we have has a wide array of connotations, such as my ambivalence towards Hollywood. This not only influences how we see things, but what we see; we see different things. To use another metaphor, we see one view when we are on the outside of something, outside a group or outside someone's thoughts, and I see another view from the inside, inside a group or inside my own thoughts. We see other things. One view is not better than the other. They are different. They complement each other.

> The comfortable sense of being 'at home' is a danger signal. From the perspective of the 'marginal' reflexive ethnographer, there can thus be no question of total commitment, 'surrender', or Incoming'. There must always remain some part held back, some social and intellectual 'distance'. For it is in the space created by this distance that the analytic work of the ethnographer gets done. Without that distance, without such analytic space, the ethnography can be little more than the autobiographical account of a personal conversion. (Hammersley 1989:90)

And, there is distance, even when you are inside your own mind, listening to your own thoughts. I claim that the distance never disappears, not even when I study myself in auto-ethnography. There is always a distance between me as a researcher, and the rest of my viewpoints and roles (in my auto-ethnography, I do not study myself as a researcher but myself as a digital designer). I started this treatment on self- and auto-ethnography by asking whether the architect's convention of self-reflection could be turned into a scientific method. I say yes. As a designer I always listen to myself in flow at the drawing

table or in the re-combination of ideas, which takes place when doing the dishes or taking a shower. As an auto-ethnographic designer I listen more closely then usual, trying to remember more of the process, and my analysis is more methodological, theory-connected and my note-making is guided. Thus our standard mode of perception is seeing without really seeing, just knowing we have seen, but conscious interrogation of our own experiences can create at least some distance, so that we may actually see what we actually see.

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