Op Ed: Defined by Form

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t the time of this writing, the “Webisphere” is breathlessly agog (its customary posture). The object of this Thud and Blunder? It is, arguably, a timepiece. Wait. Is it a timepiece? A couple of the top headlines on the topic, pulled directly from Google News this morning:

“Apple Watch shows the strategic ripple effects of a big splash”
“Xiaomi to Take on Apple Watch With Round-Dial, Premium-Looking Smartwatch”

Leaving that first headline aside for the moment, let’s consider the second. The word “watch” appears twice in that headline, once with a single modifier, “Apple Watch,” then a second time with several modifiers, “Round-Dial, Premium-Looking Smartwatch.” We see the battle lines drawn: to confront the seriousness of the emergence on the field of battle at an opposing position, as depicted in the film 2001, A Space Odyssey. The first Pulsar watch became commercially available on April 4, 1972, in 18-carat gold, for the entire fair and reasonable sum of $2,100. It had a red LED display, and the timing of all events. Such trinkets were out of reach for those of us serving “before the mast.” Pulsar was sitting pretty, at least until 1975, when Texas Instruments introduced a mass-produced digital watch in a plastic case for $20, reduced to $10 in 1976, a year which, ...saw Pulsar lose 6 million and the Pulsar brand sold to Seiko, according to Wikipedia.

But all of these devices were straightforward timekeepers, and little or nothing more. Remember the Casio calculator watch? How about the Timex Datalink watch? These were each evolutionary, if not revolutionary, steps forward.

Note also the influence of fiction on product design. The digital clock in 2001 is at the very least matched by the introduction, on January 13, 1946, of the “2-way Wrist Radio” worn and used by Dick Tracy. This hugely influential design was supplanted in 1964 by the 2-Way Wrist TV.

To fulfill its potential, that watch, excuse me, that “Smartwatch,” is going to need network connectivity. It’s also going to need to know whom it serves — that means it’s going to be on the network as you or at least, as “your” Smartwatch.

The only way this won’t be true is if it relies on some other device for network access — your phone, for example. But that would be regarded, I would guess, as only a limited, short-term, non-optimal solution. No, I would say, as envisioned, both your Smartwatch and your phone will require network access — indeed, if they’re something to say to each other, they’ll say it over the network, rather than over some short-distance, point-to-point connection. I may be wrong about this. Maybe these devices will set up a side-long connection over Bluetooth or Near Field connection. We’ll see how it all works out.

Another aspect of wearable devices worth considering is the challenge (or opportunity) they present in terms of user interface design. Properly done, a fresh
Collecting to the Core — Classic Ethnographies

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Column Editor’s Note: The “Collecting to the Core” column highlights monographic works that are essential to the academic library within a particular discipline, inspired by the Resources for College Libraries bibliography (online at http://www.rclweb.net). In each essay, subject specialists introduce and explain the classic titles and topics that continue to remain relevant to the undergraduate curriculum and library collection. Disciplinary trends may shift, but some classics never go out of style. — AD

Ethnographies are the primary literature of social and cultural anthropology. Ethnography is also the term used to describe the process, practices, and methods used by social anthropologists performing the fieldwork that results in published ethnographies. Traditionally, anthropological fieldwork took place in small-scale, non-western societies (a village or a tribal community), while today such research may take place in virtually any community, even an urban one not unfamiliar to the ethnographer. The study of any definable community may produce an anthropological ethnography, whether that community has a defined border (such as an inner-city neighborhood undergoing gentrification, a military school, or a religious congregation) or not (a multicontinental diasporic community). And while ethnographic fieldwork was once practiced almost exclusively by anthropologists, it is now used by researchers in a wide array of disciplines in the social sciences (economics, political science, communications, and public health, to name a few). In his very useful article “Ethnography” in the International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences, linguistic anthropologist Michael H. Agar discusses whether “the many ‘ethnography-like’ approaches in other fields should be considered acceptable or not.” Regardless of the debate surrounding the use of ethnographic methods in other disciplines, this article focuses on eleven classic ethnographies written by anthropologists and based on anthropological ethnographic fieldwork.

Before anthropologists embarked on fieldwork, readers had only anecdotal cultural reports produced by travel writers, journalists, and missionaries. The authors of the works described in this essay, however, were more than just visitors to their selected communities; rather, they became deeply embedded within them. These ethnographies span 80 years of scholarly publishing and are discussed in order of their original publication from 1888 to 1969. They also range across the globe, representing communities in Africa, East and Southeast Asia, North America, and South America.

The first two ethnographies focus on indigenous peoples of North America. The Central Eskimo (1888) by Franz Boas dates from anthropology’s earliest years as a distinct discipline (ethnography being previously within the purview of academic departments such as geography or natural philosophy).2 Boas, often considered the father of American anthropology and geography in his native Germany and published on a wide range of anthropological subjects over a long career. He first encountered the Inuit (as they are now called) on an expedition to Baffin Island, Canada, and The Central Eskimo appeared as part of the Smithsonian Institution’s 6th Annual Report covering 1866-67. Alfred L. Kroeber trained in the anthropology program at Columbia University under the direction of Franz Boas, earning the first PhD awarded in the department in 1901. Kroeber’s The Arapaho, which first appeared in a four-part journal article from 1902 to 1907, was a published version of his doctoral dissertation.3 It is interesting to note that both of these early ethnographies were not originally published as “stand-alone” monographs, but rather as articles produced by major U.S. ethnographic museums. The same was true for the many ethnographic treatises coming out of the great national museums of Europe in the mid- to late-19th century.

Crossing the Pacific Ocean, the next three ethnographies are from Southeast Asia, Melanesia, and Polynesia. A.R. Radcliffe-Brown was a British social anthropologist who studied a number of different societies. His earliest ethnographic fieldwork took him to the Bay of Bengal between India and Myanmar and resulted in his first major ethnography, The Andaman Islanders, published in 1922.4 Radcliffe-Brown is considered a founder of structural functionalism, a framework for theory-building that looks at social structures and social functions. Bronislaw Malinowski was a Polish anthropologist who trained at the London School of Economics. Specializing in economic anthropology, he studied traditional exchange systems in Australia and the Trobriand Islands, part of New Guinea. The latter resulted in his classic ethnography Argonauts of the Western Pacific, published in 1922 and reprinted many times since then, most recently in 2014 with a new introduction by Adam Kuper.5 The next classic ethnography — Coming of Age in Samoa (1928) continued on page 28