BOOK REVIEW

Oxford Handbook of Media, Technology, and Organization Studies, Timon Beyes, Robin Holt and Claus Pias (eds) (2020) 558pp., £110 hardback, Oxford University Press, Oxford, ISBN: 9780198809913

There are a few things that the reader should know before approaching this *Handbook*. First, it is surprising; second it is 538 pages long; and third it collects 43 chapters, ordered in strict alphabetical order, ranging from 'account books' to 'Wiki', passing through 'high heels', 'prezi', 'pussy hat' and 'suit'. These are things usually not found in media, technology and organization studies. I agreed to review the *Handbook* knowing nothing about it, but familiar with the theme, interested in it and trusting the authors' scholarship (I admit to being one of their fans!). Once the *Handbook* was in my hands, my first thought was that reviewing it would be an impossible task. I admit that I was frightened. After moving beyond this first impression, I realized how interesting, witty, funny, surprising and clever it is.

Given its eclectic composition, I elaborated a strategy for reading it that I wish to share with you. I thought that an alphabetical order is a non-order or as good as any other ordering principle, as demonstrated by Louis Borges's Chinese encyclopedia, *Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*. In this, animals are divided into those that belong to the emperor; embalmed ones; those that are trained; suckling pigs; mermaids; fabulous ones; stray dogs; those included in the present classification; those that tremble as if they were mad; innumerable ones; those drawn with a very fine camelhair brush; others; those that have just broken a flower vase; those that from a long way off look like flies. From Borges, we can learn that order is a multiple concept and that it is possible to start reading the chapters in this *Handbook* from anywhere, to follow our curiosity and the sudden connections that come to mind.

The chapters are not long (around ten pages) and each can be read in a spare moment. This allows us to set the *Handbook* aside until curiosity strikes or a peaceful moment permits. This mode of reading is like gifting oneself since each chapter resonates with something in everyday life. The object in its materiality lives with us and contributes to our shared sociality. For example, the *Handbook* teased me with a lost memory of another book, *Minima Moralia* by Adorno. Within the student movement in Trento back in 1968–9, it was fashionable to have this book near one's bed, but not necessarily for reading. I loved reading passages from this book randomly. It has disappeared into oblivion, but the *Handbook* reminded me of it and so I searched and found it in my library and it is on my nightstand again. One book resonates with another book and with lost memories. I am not suggesting any analogy or similarity with the *Handbook* that goes beyond the fact that both are books, and the book is an object that enters our life. Both are the type of books that can be read regardless of a linear order and that can become an affective object. Books are always about other books in an endless deferral and the thesis of the *Handbook* is that objects lead to other objects. They have an organizing power, an agency, and may be seen as mediating devices in organizational life and in everyday life as well.

The *Handbook* is organized around a simple issue, formulated by the editors: how media and technology are intimate with the capacity to organize and be organized. The underlying assumption is that media technologies condition contemporary life and that, in order to understand how media technologies are produced, changed, disappear or are transformed, it is opportune to inquire into their effects and affects. Objects are mediators that induce reflection on how they organize us and how we organize with them.

The 43 chapters present what I like to call 'biographies' of objects. Etymologically, a biography is the narration of someone's life, but is it possible to narrate the life of lifeless things? In

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what sense could an object have a life? Yet objects have stories collected and told in these chapters. They have a life in a sociological sense, a social life, and therefore they must be treated as 'subjects' capable of contributing to the collective processes of formation of social life (Kopytoff, 1986; Pels *et al.*, 2002; Burtscher *et al.,* 2009). As subjects they do something very important to us and to how we produce knowledge. They help us go beyond the anthropocentricity that has thus far marked Western (male and white) thought.

We can go back to the previous question: what do objects do to us? In the 43 chapters we meet both old objects and digital objects and we can appreciate the difference between them in the way the latter have changed our epistemic practices. For many scholars it has been hard to accept the Latourian attribution of agentivity and to accept a principle of symmetrical study of humans and non-humans. The debate has been harsh, but when we consider digital technologies, it is hard to deny that we are inside such a mediating process up to the point where our own subjectivity becomes problematic. The editors recall Agamben's (2009) reflections on how digital technologies carry their own logic in which the subject has been continually de-subjectified. The process of subjectification, that we used to think of in terms of sensing a kind of life-narrative of becoming, attaining and acquiring an identity emerging from personal and social development, is becoming bumpy. We humans no longer have centre stage, since – the editors note – 'digital media technologies have configured us as units of on/off presence: access code; social media rankings; re-booted avatars; bibliographic identifier numbers; productivity rates; biometric rhythm. Identity becomes synonymous with being recorded' (p.501). These considerations lead us to dig deeper into the concept of 'media', leaving aside the common view of media as a kind of object.

To understand the conceptual apparatus of the *Handbook*, it is opportune to start with the concept of media rather than with technology (as the editors do). Thus, leaving aside the commonsense view of social, mass media or IT systems, we can move to media as mediation. The Latin etymology of media derives from *medius* – in the middle – and *ediates* – placed in the middle – and then mediation as interposition. Thus, media applies to any object that conditions the structure of a certain situation and affects conditions of possibility in general. The editors (and most of the authors) adhere to a processual and relational definition of media, stating that:

> something becomes media by being epistemologically productive as an order of materiality and technological or technologically influenced structures of communication, interaction and affect through which material, energy, and information are brought into continual commerce at a scale whose organization is beyond the scope of measurement and hence recognition. (p.504)

In my reading of the *Handbook*, the most innovative theoretical contribution derives from the ontological denial of media. If there are no media but rather object-bound processes of technical mediation, this implies that we do not focus on what is represented or excluded from representation. Rather we focus on the material conditions for representation. From non-attributing an ontological *a priori* to media derives the epistemological question: how to conduct research on media, technology and organization? The *Handbook's* editors respond 'by reconstructing how such mediation organizes, and how organizing takes place around it; by revealing the material specificities of organization and tracing how mediation takes place' (p.505). With this consideration, the status of the object is radically redefined since there is something more than simply focusing on the processes that render organization possible. This something more is the opening of the theoretical framework to the consideration of aesthetics under both the concept of affect/being affected and *aesthesis* as forming. The editors' conception of forming relates to 'the idea that separate entities set in spatial relations to one another gives way to a more disorienting sense of continually interacting objects whose affective power is apprehended as a force of propensity and performative probability' (p.505). Objects are the means and not the focus of inquiry, and can be approached only from within other objects.

In levying a critique of the *Handbook* (this is expected of the reviewer), I noticed that the aesthetic dimension is more present in the editors' conclusion than in the chapters. We cannot expect

much homogeneity within 43 chapters; nevertheless, I regret that the attention to the affective power of mediations – that make the object present-at-hand rather than ready-to-hand – and to aesthesis as the process of forming is not more evident, since this would enrich not only the concept of mediation, but also the empirical means for conducting research on media, technology and organization. Maybe the fault is mine, since I am particularly attentive to both affect and to the idea of forming as formativeness, using the concept in the formulation derived from Pareyson's philosophy (Gherardi and Strati, 2017; Strati, 2018). This concept directs the researchers' attention to the process of 'knowing while inventing the way of knowing' and thus the idea of forming is material-semiotic.

If mediation is the main concept, how does it relate to technology and organization? In the concluding chapter, the editors introduce technology before media even though mediation as the in-betweenness operates as a linchpin for the three concepts. They introduce technology through the myth of Epimetheus, the twin brother of Prometheus. While Prometheus is characterized as ingenious and clever, Epimetheus is depicted as foolish. In fact, the two brothers were entrusted with distributing traits among the newly created animals. Epimetheus was responsible for giving a positive trait to every animal, but he lacked foresight and found that nothing was left when it was time to give man a positive trait. Prometheus decided that humankind's attributes would be the civilizing arts and fire, which he stole from Athena. Epimetheus is credited with bringing to the world our knowledge of dependency on each other, described phenomenologically in terms of sharing, caring, meeting, dwelling and loving. In modern times, Epimetheus plays a key role in the philosophy of Stiegler, particularly in terms of his understanding of the relation between technogenesis and anthropogenesis This myth represents how we understand the world as an extension of ourselves. The editors comment that 'making things with tools became a subject of study and the application of learning: it became technology' (p.503). And therefore, human bodies may be understood prosthetically as extensions of technologies. This is an important move in the elaboration of the theoretical framework of the *Handbook* since it enables a shift of attention from social organization, that in the editors' understanding implies a human primacy, to the technical means of organizing the techno-social. Obviously, what is understood by 'social' is debatable: is it only human or (if human and non-human) should it be treated on the principle of symmetry. Nevertheless, for the editors the point is to argue how objects mediate action and thought, and this leads to the consideration of the third pillar of the *Handbook*, organization.

The influence of Simondon is pervasive throughout a volume that relies on the illustration of processes of structuration 'in which objects are only and forever circulating as active and functional parts of wider networks of objects' (p.507). In all the chapters, we can see how objects have use value, a performative form, and are projecting out from the body and back in. One of the basic rhetorical tools of the book is that anthropocentric conceit has to be abandoned since humans are not in control or at the centre of things. The editors present the implications of thinking of organization in these terms in a few points (pp.507–8): first, there is a media-technological *a priori* of organizing; second, there is a history of thinking of organization as entangled with technology; third, a medial *a priori* is needed for getting closer to the experience of being organized and of organizing; fourth, we should not posit communication as grounding organizational technologies without tracing how mediation takes place; and fifth, the *Handbook* traces how objects organize and keep on organizing.

My last comment on the volume is that it fulfils the editors' intention of convincing readers about what objects do to us. Nevertheless, it leaves me with an unanswered question. Why does the *Handbook* not enter into dialogue with other, closely related conversations such as 'turn to matter', 'new (feminist) materialisms' and 'posthumanisms'? Surely the editors and the authors are well aware of the critiques of anthropocentrism, relational epistemologies, the power of matter and ethico-onto-epistemology. Some veiled critique is made of socio-material studies, understanding them only in relation to technological entanglement or Latourian apparatus. I am not arguing in favour of theoretical battles, usually both irritating and useless, but I would have liked a conversation with other voices. Conversation with others helps to refine one's own thought and further articulate the conversation.

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