

**Gillespie, T., Boczkowski, P. J. and Foot, K. A. (eds.) (2014),
*Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Materiality, and Society***

Published by: MIT Press, Cambridge MA and London UK
ISBN: 978-0-2625-2537-4 (paperback)

Reviewed by:

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Pages: 195-197

A low-angle, upward-looking photograph of a complex, white, lattice-like architectural structure, possibly a dome or a large-scale sculpture, with several thick, colored (purple, green, yellow) structural beams radiating from the center. The text 'book review' is overlaid in a large, black, sans-serif font.

book review

Image: AdHoCities © Athanasios Bampanelos

The Journal of Space Syntax

ISSN: 2044-7507 | Year: 2015 | volume: 6 | issue: 1 | Online Publication Date: 26 October 2015

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Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Materiality and Society comprises 13 chapters by 15 authors intended as an invitation – as well as a provocation – to the fields in which the authors of the volume work. The aim is to develop a complex and nuanced discussion on media technologies to address both conceptual foundations and research practices. The premise is that media technologies are no longer treated simply as happening to society, but as products of distinct human and institutional efforts; '[...] constructs richly etched with the politics, presumptions, and worldviews of the designers' (p.1). Divided into two parts – 'The materiality of mediated knowledge expression' and 'The people, practices, and promises of information networks' respectively, the book addresses these questions throughout in an ongoing discussion between the contributing authors.

Compared to many edited works, there is a strong emphasis on this inter-authorial discussion. The authors have been allowed to read each other's texts to give recommendations and feedback as well as incorporate reflections on their own contributions. Even if the degree to which this been impactful varies, it binds the chapters together into an overarching discussion. This is one of the main strengths of the book from the perspective of an outsider to media technology research. Another strength is the thorough historical account of research into media technology in general, and Science and Technology Studies specifically, given by Leah A. Lievrouw in her chapter.

The themes primarily resound within Science and Technology Studies, where the collection brings to

the table a number of questions relevant for architectural research. A principal theme binding the chapters together is the question of materiality – why 'materiality', why now, and what are the implications, risks and potential of the growing academic focus on *the material*. Another strand running through the whole book – quite topical in light of discussions during the recent Space Syntax Symposium in London – are questions of data: 'big data', data accessibility, and its effects on research, and also on the understanding of knowledge and knowledge work. Finally, the book is concerned throughout with history. History here means both the history of media technology and the history of technology studies, with interesting parallels between the two being made.

Attention to the history of the digital seems to be a concurrent trend also traceable in architecture, where the 'digital' has been the subject of several recent publications outlining both history and field in what seems to be as much an intensive discussion around definition as a descriptive endeavour (see, for example, recent work by Mario Carpo and Gregg Lynn). The discussion in this book points to the importance of looking further back and studying contemporary digital technologies across a longer historical perspective. In this respect, *Media Technologies* seems comparatively thorough and nuanced regarding the history of Science and Technology Studies. The contributions discuss rather than define the origins of media technologies, even of 'technology' as such, and note that the way such definitions are made affects not only work in the field itself but also how these relate to ideas of humanity and society in general.

Of particular interest, although requiring some translation from Science and Technology Studies to architecture, is the continuous engagement with *the material*. The collection highlights how the focus on the material is anchored in a frustration with constructivism and relativism, and a wish to return to firmer ground – although, as is made clear throughout the work, whether there is a firmer ground to return to, and what this would entail, is a matter of great concern as it has both epistemological and ontological effects. In many accounts, it is also noted, the focus on materiality has tended to imply a degree of determinism reaching further than might have been intended. It also risks de-emphasising that which is less easy to understand as ‘material’ – even though just what is ‘material’ itself requires many different definitions. In recent work, there seems to have been two dominant ways of handling this problem, and I will quote Lievrouw’s words (in this volume) to describe them. On the one hand, ‘[s]ome argued that the stabilization, embeddedness, and sheer material presence of technological artefacts influence and shape human action just as surely as action shapes artefacts: both directions of the relationship should be accounted for’ (p.23) – here we can include Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory as one of the stronger formulations of this viewpoint. On the other hand, ‘[o]thers have highlighted the material *affordances* of communication technologies; that is, the physical properties or features of objects and settings that ‘invite’ actors to use them in particular ways’ (*ibid.*) – here we find a direct link to James Gibson’s work on environmental affordances.

While the collection overall is of high quality, I believe some chapters are particularly likely to appeal to the readership of this journal – assuming, for example, a shared interest in the relation between ‘the material’ and ‘the social’ in some configurational sense. The first is the previously mentioned chapter by Lievrouw. Her description of the development of

media technology research finds many parallels in architectural theory, although the discourses do not seem to always be in phase with one another. The second is Jonathan Sterne’s ‘*What do We Want? ‘Materiality!’ ‘When Do We Want It?’ ‘Now!’*’. Sterne notes (p.121): ‘[b]ut before we go too far down the path of affirming our fatigue with constructivism and seek refreshment in the garden of materiality, it is worth pausing for a few pages to remember why scholars pursued constructivism in the first place’. In discussing the overarching theme of determinism versus constructivism, he also problematises historical and contemporary ‘technological utopianism’ – including the advent of big data – and points to how constructivism was a means to barricade against the ‘weighty tendencies that collapsed descriptions of people into descriptions of their bodies [...]’ (p.125). The chapter holds a good discussion regarding just what ‘materiality’ might mean in different contexts, and the risks and potentials involved in the demand for a ‘firmer ground’ to stand on than constructivist and discursive theories have so far had to offer.

Finally, Steven J. Jackson’s chapter *Rethinking Repair* offers a refreshing take on the subject of materiality. He outlines what he calls a ‘broken world’ concept, in order to reach a discussion on repair, maintenance, and the ethics of care. He notes that things are not only produced and consumed but also used: they need maintenance and they break down, requiring repair unless they are to be discarded. On the one hand, he questions the growing practice of making things more difficult to repair, both from an ethical and sustainability standpoint. On the other, he demonstrates how even for ‘non-repairable’ objects there is, in fact, a wide range of repair, maintenance and alteration taking place. I cannot help but think that Jackson’s concepts of maintenance and repair could offer interesting new avenues of investigation in the study of architecture and urban design –including challenging the fash-

ionable discourse of 'smart' cities and buildings. By engaging with themes of urban innovation and development, Jackson suggests new research directions by offering alternatives to concepts such as 'development' and identifying productive ways to explore theoretical divides in architectural research such as that between 'generative' and 'analytic'.