

## Special Issue of *Organization Studies*

### The Material and Visual Turn in Organization Theory: Objectifying and (Re)acting to Novel Ideas

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*Organization Studies*, the official journal of the European Group for Organization Studies (EGOS), invites submissions for a Special Issue on “The Material and Visual Turn in Organization Theory: Objectifying and (Re)acting to Novel Ideas”.

**Deadline for paper submissions: February 28<sup>th</sup> 2015**

Contemporary organizations increasingly rely on images, logos, videos, building and office design, building materials, physical product design and a range of other material and visual expressions to form identity, communicate, organize their activities, and compete. For example, organizations build consumer awareness through websites and twitter feeds, express corporate values and shape employee interactions through building designs, and reformulate the way we interact with technologies and one another through products like Apple’s Macintosh and i-phone.

Visual and material artefacts can travel as fast and as far as complex, abstract ideas expressed in words, and they are as open to interpretation as is text. They capture the imagination of audiences in new and substantially different ways, triggering a range of cognitive, emotional and other responses that transform audiences into active co-creators and communicators of symbolic meaning. Yet, our theories of organizations are ill equipped to capture the significance of the visual and material turn, and the ways in which organizations and other actors objectify novel ideas and engage (with) their members as well as various audiences in the (re)active co-creation, contestation, stabilization, diffusion, and deinstitutionalization of innovations. In fact, the social sciences have paid attention to materiality and visibility in the past (e.g. Gilles Deleuze, Emile Durkheim, Michel Foucault, Richard Rorty, and Michel Serres, among others) but these elements have perhaps been lost or distorted in their translation into organization theory. It is only recently that organizational scholars have begun to take interest in either integrating these two inter-related aspects of organizing within existing organizational theories or formulating entirely new theories and methodologies that are adapted to their empirical study.

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, social scientists have tended to emphasize the primacy of the linguistic and cultural dimensions of organizational life. Indeed, we have experienced a “linguistic turn” (Rorty, 1967, 1991) and a “cultural turn” where scholars examine cognitive and shared cultural frameworks constructed through language (e.g., Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Searle, 1997) that direct practices (e.g. Alexander, Giesen & Mast 2006; Bourdieu, 1977; Lounsbury & Crumley, 2007). As a consequence of how these works have been employed in or applied to organizational theory, material and visual dimensions of organizing tend to be absent or immaterial in the cognitive and cultural frameworks that dominate organizational theories, even those that emphasize material

practices (Jones, Boxenbaum & Anthony, 2013).

Although many social and organizational theories do not attend to material and visual expressions, scholars do acknowledge material and visual artefacts as critical elements, which populate, express and construct our social worlds and organizational experiences. For instance, forms, images, visualizations, and assemblages are found essential for processes of organizing (Quattrone, Puyou, McLean & Thrift, 2012). Artefacts are considered central to collective processes such as sensemaking (Stigliani & Ravasi, 2012) and semiotic processes through signification (Friedland, 2001), as well as conduits for expression of occupational jurisdictions, identity, and legitimacy (Bechky, 2003; Fiol & O'Conner, 2006; Rafaeli & Pratt, 2006; Rafaeli & Vilnai-Yavetz, 2004). Design, texture and color, and new technologies excite consumer responses and stabilize new markets (Eisenman, 2013). When advertising materials decay or are misplaced, an intended message to prevent AIDS and improve public health goes awry or falls silent (McDonnell, 2010). Meaning and boundaries of novel managerial ideas are defined and translated through their visual representation (Höllerer, Jancsary, Meyer & Vettori, 2013). Buildings direct our social interactions (Gieryn, 2002), materialize our ideas (Jones & Massa, 2013) and shift cultural understandings and social relations (Jones, Maoret, Massa & Svejnova, 2012).

In fact, some of the organizational theories, perspectives, and analytical approaches that have emerged in recent decades engage more directly with the study of artefacts. For instance, science and technology studies (STS) have developed significant insight into how material objects instantiate ideas, shape collective knowledge, streamline organizational practice, and assign value to a variety of phenomena (e.g., Callon, 1986; Latour, 1987; Pinch & Bijker, 1984). Actor-network theory (ANT) scholars have investigated the acts of experimenting, measuring, calculating, writing, and communicating as constitutive of scientific facts (Muniesa, forthcoming), whereas social construction of technology (SCOT) researchers have examined material objects as arenas of negotiation among actor groups with divergent interests (Pinch & Trocco, 2002). Activity theory scholars have explored the intersection of human consciousness, activity, and interaction design, focusing on the human engagement with digital artefacts in the totality of their potentials (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006). Another line of research on materiality has developed around management tools as an element that fundamentally structure and shape organizational practice (Chiapello & Gilbert, 2013; Labatut, Aggeri & Girard, 2012). Finally, research related to institutional work has explored not only the dynamic relationship between organizational practice and artefacts but also the institutional conditions and effects of these dynamics (e.g., Blanc & Huault, 2014; Gond & Boxenbaum, 2013; Lawrence, Leca & Zilber, 2013; Raviola & Norbäck, 2013).

Scholars engaging with materiality and visibility tend however to focus on associated social understandings and social processes rather than on the material and visual artefacts themselves (e.g., see Leonardi & Barley, 2008; Orlikowski & Scott, 2010 for reviews). For instance, theoretical work has defined material practices as organizational structures known through symbolic processes (Thornton, Ocasio & Lounsbury, 2012). Further, there has been a growing interest in the “turn to things” (Geiryn, 2002; Preda, 1999), the material basis of organizing (Leonardi, Nardi & Kalinikos, 2012), “how matter matters” (Carlile, Nicolini, Langley & Tsoukas, 2013), and the visual dimension of organizations, organizing and organizational research (Bell, Warren & Schroeder, 2014; Meyer, Höllerer, Jancsary & van Leeuwen, 2013). Responses to these calls are scattered and infrequent and contained within distinct academic communities, which prevents a dialogue on the emergent material and visual turn in social and organizational theories across different ‘epistemic communities’ (Holt & den Hond, 2013).

This special issue seeks to advance the study of organizations and organizing by exploring how organizations, organizational members and audiences experience and engage with materiality and visuality in the course of objectifying and responding to new ideas. It brings into focus the material and visual artefacts themselves, and aims to involve a diverse range of scholars and scholarly traditions in a debate about their significance in organizational life. We welcome submissions that address materiality and visuality from different epistemological vantage points, in different contexts, through different methodologies, and in both textual and visual form. We are also open to work that seeks to juxtapose, connect or explore the limits of the visual and the material dimensions in ways that advance the study of organizations. In particular, we invite submissions that address the following three major questions and provide novel insights on them:

### **1. How do ideas take form through visual and material representation?**

We invite articles that examine the nature and role of objectification in organizations. Processes of objectifying refer to the act of giving expression to abstract ideas, ideals, or feelings in a form that can be experienced by others through touch and/or vision. What ideas get objectified and which ones remain in the realm of the abstract? Through which types of objects and artefacts are new ideas objectified? Who objectifies novel ideas in organizations and what form can that objectification take (e.g. sketches, models, reports)? Are some forms of objectification better at focusing the attention of employees, investors, or other stakeholders, and at evoking response in them? Which practices and processes facilitate or hamper such objectification (e.g. prototyping, designing workplaces for play)?

### **2. How do audiences experience visual and material artefacts and how do they enact those experiences?**

Although material and visual artefacts underpin our individual and collective experience, we rarely examine the reactions they provoke in audiences. In the contemporary hyper-objectified organizational realities, audiences play a more active and ambivalent role as both producers and consumers of innovative ideas. They may have larger margins for interpreting and reacting emotionally to new ideas when they are expressed visually and materially rather than textually. How do objectified novel ideas become noticed/selected (or unnoticed/deselected) through visual/material expression? How do visual and material artefacts entice interpretations and provoke emotional responses in individuals, and how do such individual responses consolidate into shared definitions and/or emotive reactions to objectified ideas? And finally, how do these collective responses manifest in behavioural patterns within organizations?

### **3. How do visual and material artefacts (and the ideas they represent) take on a collective form?**

Through visual and material objectification, innovative ideas can further impact the field level as local (re)actions crystallize into patterns of action, thought or interaction that other organizations can imitate. We invite papers on the following questions: How do audience (re)actions at the organizational level crystallize into collective patterns, such as established aesthetic styles and best practices that inspire other actors to adopt and reinterpret visual and material artefacts in their own organizational context? How do objectifications become arenas for competing interpretations of material and visual artefacts? And when do actors stop noticing taken-for-granted links between new ideas and their representation in material/ visual artefacts?

**Deadline: Papers must be received by February 28<sup>th</sup> 2015.**

## Submissions

Please submit papers through the journal's online submission system, SAGE track. To do so, please visit <http://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/orgstudies>, create your user account (if you have not done so already), and for "Manuscript Type" choose the corresponding Special Issue. All papers that enter the reviewing process will be double-blind reviewed following the journal's normal review process and criteria. You will be able to submit your paper for this Special Issue through SAGETrack between the **1<sup>st</sup> and the 28<sup>th</sup> of February 2015**.

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