The Object and the Event: the power in things

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Stream: Critical Thinking in the Management of Information and Communication Technologies

Abstract: This paper examines information and communications technology artefacts as a subset of the broader range of cultural items that surround and pervade contemporary experiences of the everyday. Within this context the paper utilises the critical perspectives of material culture studies to interpret the way in which artefacts continuously act as proxy agents of power within organisations. All artefacts reflect and are simultaneously influenced by dominant power structures. However, this relationship is not constant and is experienced in an indeterminate manner. Specific events within the organisation variously reinforce dominant structures or alternatively offer moments of liberation which are experienced directly and through interaction with artefacts. The argument presented in this paper understands events as cycling between the situationist perspectives of detournement and recuperation. By examining events and various interchanges that occur between people and objects, a critical understanding of how artefacts can be used both as tools of emancipation as well as mechanisms for reinforcing managerial and ideological modes of power can be exposed.

The power of objects: a review

Culture relates to objects and is a phenomenon of the world; entertainment relates to people and is a phenomenon of life (Arendt 1993).

Material culture studies has a lengthy history that is primarily associated with collectors, archaeology and the modernist project for knowing (Buchli 2002, 5). ‘Artefact’ is used interchangeably in various literature with terms such as ‘things’, ‘items’, ‘objects’ or sometimes ‘tools’ (e.g. Miller 1991, 85; Buchli 1997; Miller 1998; Aunger n.d., 0724.020). The core meanings attached to artefacts by each author are relatively consistent, the artefact has meaning because humans define it as having meaning (Shanks & Hodder 1997, 17). Narrower and long standing definitions tend to emphasise manufacture by humans as the predominant rationale for the definition of artefacts - as artefacts (Ingold 2000, 199). However, in contrast to this view, contemporary artefacts include a wider ranging set of possibilities that extend beyond solely archaeological provenances. For examples, the centuries old practice of selective breeding has produced an enormously varied but inter-related set of artefacts in the form of domestic dogs, livestock and flowers, which are all consequences of human manufacture and intention (Hodder 1995, 75). Similarly, the fashion industry annually produces a varied range of artefacts that have meaning and inherently reference, either positively or negatively, contemporary cultural practices (Baudrillard 1993a, 93; Dant 1999, 86). The advent of the ‘modern primitive’ and the
influences of the urgent dynamism of the fashion industry have also contributed to the increased awareness of the manufacture of the human body as artefacts (Larratt 2003; Perlingieri 2003). The understanding of bodies as artefacts is well recognised within the literature of studies of gender discourses (Rodaway 1994, 31; Fruhstuck 2000) but clearly extends the original intention of archaeologists in their study of prehistoric arefactual remains.

The understanding of the artefact as a product of human definition also extends the possibilities for artefactual examination of cultural phenomena. Permanent geographical references such as mountains or waterfalls used in traditional stories and as wayfinders are both examples of the ways that natural phenomena are also artefacts (Graham 2000 109; Harvey et al 2001 14). These sites are artefactual because of the human ascription and meanings placed on an identifiable and permanent part of the landscape. These places also remain geological but it is their use by humans that positions their roles within cultural practices.

The important themes from Material Culture studies literature and other disciplines that pursue an understanding of artefacts is the fact that artefacts have a cultural meaning that is attributable to them beyond that of immediate interpersonal social relations. “Things do not exist without being full of people, and the more modern and complicated they are, the more people swarm through them.” (Latour 2000,10). Artefacts consequently stand as proxies to immediate human experience (Richardson 1974, 4). As an aspect of cultural practice and everyday life the meaning of artefacts is also consequently fluid and dynamic (Pearson 1997; Bloch 1997).

An important link between the theorising of the artefact and contemporary information and communications technology can be found within current trends in software engineering. Software engineering has been influenced for the past fifteen years by what is described as 'Object Oriented Programming' (Doke, Satzinger & Williams 2002, 3-4). The central argument made for object orientation is that in developing software that is composed by the collecting together of objects the process becomes more intuitive and reflective of ‘natural’ or real life practices (Doke, Satzinger & Williams 2002, 14). Object orientation focuses on the idea that ‘objects’ are a collection of data - the information being stored - and methods - the ways in which that the data can be manipulated. Different objects store different data and ‘do' different things. In software engineering this is described as encapsulation. In other words, the object contains, hidden from direct view, a particular combination of data and methods. The design philosophy of these techniques also centres on two other qualities that objects can possess. Objects can ‘inherit’ particular qualities from more generalised and abstract objects. A common example is that of a generalised class of object called an aeroplane that incorporates wings and the capability of flight. Individual classes of aeroplanes inherit the general features of the aeroplane class as well as their own specific features. For example, a passenger plane might feature a bar and in-flight movies whereas a crop-duster includes large storage tanks and DDT. Similarly, and in contrast to inheritance, the concept of abstraction offers a big picture view of the problem the software engineer is trying to solve. Abstraction allows design to proceed from the ‘big picture’ and the most general qualities of an object. Consequently, it is possible to look at a crop-duster and a passenger plane and understand that both are members of a common class of aeroplanes.

While this is a simplified description of object oriented design methodology it does provide a generalisation of the way that artefacts can be understood albeit in a functionalist way. Although the objects designed and created by software engineers do not possess any ‘real life’ qualities they are artefacts in the same sense that a spear, a piece of pottery or a statue can be understood. The object-oriented inspired
theorisation and development of its artefacts clearly leads to a possibility for systematic material culture treatments of software and other artefacts that do not have a direct physical form. Artefacts, such as software, search engine robots and web pages, possess the definitional qualities of an artefact in that they are separate from immediate human communication and act as a proxy to direct human action.

A(n) in/form/al (of) introduction

Digital artefacts share all the essential qualities of physical artefacts by perpetuating and sharing meaning without the need for direct human intervention. The primary distinction – or at least the distinction that this paper most directly pursues – is disentangling the varying impact on cultural practice that artefacts of ‘traditional’ material culture studies bring. We argue that the meanings and discussion surrounding each digital artefact are increasingly persistent, easily retrievable and more able to be directly compared to one another. This situation offers the researcher unparalleled capabilities for critical consideration of the political circumstance of artefacts. The raised visibility of digital artefacts within everyday life has the effect of increasingly obscuring their political meaning to the extent that software such as Microsoft Word and other office productivity tools are implied as being cultural and politically neutral. However as with other artefacts, documents produced by Word have meaning and convey specific hegemonies. For example, the contemporary business world recognises and now generally describes sans-serif fonts as being ‘Arial’. Despite the increasing sophistication of Microsoft Word’s layout capabilities documents are generally structured to conform to one of the preset ‘default’ designs that reflects business practice and understanding in specific cultures. More obvious examples of an artefact acting as proxy for the understandings of a third person is found in Word’s ‘autocorrect’ features that will for example automatically suggest “Yours truly,” whenever you start a new line with the word ‘Yours’. Similarly, newer versions of Word offer the ‘Research’ option which is in effect a shortcut to the Encarta website, the MSN search engine or other Microsoft products enmeshing individuals engaging with this artefact in a wider networks of artefacts that all share and convey a specific corporate hegemony. The designers and developers of digital artefacts such as software defend their default settings by arguing that it is readily possible for individual users to alter and reconfigure these settings. This is, in effect, a mechanism that enables individuals to alter the relationships of power that exist between themselves and the artefacts they use – a feature very specifically emphasised with Web2.0 applications. The ability to alter the capabilities of an artefact is not a new – or surprising – form of functionality. The fluidity of meaning that is attached to artefacts is, in part, reflected by the ability to be altered, repurposed and imbued with additional and new meanings. Contemporary examples of more ‘extreme’ modifications are found with the ‘modding’ of cars and computer cases. More conventional modifications include the ergonomic adjustment of an office chair, the redecoration of a room or personalisation of a name badge however none of these ‘tweaks’ alter the core functions or purpose of the artefact nor does adjusting a chair improve or alter its aesthetic qualities which are both aspects of more extreme modifications. Despite the presence of this ‘expected’ capacity to alter an artefact it is the default position that will generally most reflect dominant hegemonies and is the most common form of utilisation for any specific artefact.

The significance and normalisation of digital artefacts within everyday life has placed an additional dimension to the already complex debate that examines the relationship between people, artefacts and organisations. Material culture studies has ‘traditionally’ focused its attention on – as the title of the discipline suggest – physical material items of anthropological ‘others’. This specific attention developed for
specific reasons and not least in order to distinguish material culture studies from the consideration of spiritual and ritual aspects of traditional lifeways. However, as everyday life increasingly becomes shaped by our experience with digital artefacts it is impossible to understand contemporary social and organisational experiences without consideration of the ‘digital’. It is significant to recognise that the absence of experience with specific digital artefacts is an equally important discussion not just in terms of access to resources and the issue of a digital underclass but in the specific ways that choosing not to interact with a specific artefacts can influence personal knowledge and skills, relationship networks and access to pervading hegemonic constructions. Identifying the potential for different modes of resistance opens up the meanings of not having a ‘myspace’ account from simply reflecting a lack of engagement with a teenage social networking website to a political and critical resistance to utilising part of the Murdoch media empire and its complex intertwining of specific political agendas throughout all of its outlets. To understand the social impact of not engaging with a specific artefact initially requires understanding of the obverse – what does this interaction provide - and do - to those who engage with it.

Artefacts, objects and physical items are important in the interactions of everyday life. The academic and intellectual examination of artefacts and objects has been regularly observed, studied and discussed in journals such as the *Journal of Material Culture Studies*. However, regular artefactual research tends to fall outside the mainstream of management studies and consequently its repeated calls for sustained attention to artefacts has influenced a too-small audience. A partial explanation for the marginalisation of artefacts in an academic context is the very real but tacit power that artefacts have over our everyday lives. Yet the philosophical, sociological or even managerial attention has tended to trivialise objects in preference to human-centric epistemologies. The extent of this oversight is emphasised in the observation that “organisations need people” without acknowledgement of the corollary that organisations also require artefacts. Sensitivity over accusations of technological determinism also impedes sustained investigation of artefacts in an organisational context with the simplistic assumption that talking about ‘things’ ignores human agency and assigns *a priori* significance to the artefact. This paper takes the contra-position by claiming that ignoring artefacts implies a tacit support for the conventional meanings and hegemonic forms of power with which all artefacts are intertwined. Artefacts are pivotal aspects of everyday life that clearly define and limit what can and cannot be ‘done’. Many of the theoretical difficulties regarding the examination of artefacts are resolved within a material culture context with the founding principle that all artefacts are necessarily and continuously defined and shaped by human action.

**Events and objects: the power relationship**

Situated within the parallel intellectual traditions that positions contemporary Material Culture studies and the critical theorisation of artefacts is the work of the Situationist movement. While the situationist oeuvre of thinking is expansive and somewhat incoherent we focus specifically on the concept of the event (de Bord 1994; de Certeau 1988; Plant 1997; Lefebvre 1992; Baudrillard 1993, 1998) and two processes that the situationists saw as critical in explaining – and resisting – contemporary cultural experience; detournement and recuperation.

The event is a key aspect of the complex potlatch of the mundane, the integrative blend of moments that constitute everyday life, the non-linearity of experience, the illogic of expectations, the indeterminant acceleration and deceleration of personal temporality and the moments of the unexpected or unforeseen. Events are not solely experienced as spectacles and the spectacular (de Bord 1994) but also as
identifiable moments of mundaneity and the commonplace. Each event is shaped by specific context and circumstances that defines and forms it. Everyday life is punctuated by individual movement between and through events – in an organisational context, the mundane is commonplace and represents the ‘routine of work’; meetings, coffee breaks, marking deadlines and composing emails. We – as participants in these routines of everyday life – are drawn to the spectacular and spectacle of ‘other’ events to offset these routine events. Spectacular events can unexpectedly arrive at an organisation in the form of a fire alarm or broken-down equipment. Regular and planned spectacles also shape our organisational experience – an employee of the month award, a graduation ceremony or a regular newsletter. It is particularly these latter crafted and managed events that reinforce and define hegemonic power relations within the organisation – although all events have this influence to some degree. By being drawn to spectacle we ‘buy-in’ to the messages and meanings that these events embody.

The practices and process of detournement and recuperation are relevant and useful mechanisms for understanding the event-driven organisation – which we argue are all contemporary organisations. By detourning, disentangling cultural products to present new and oppositional meaning, a resistance to hegemonic power structures is created. This is the process that the situationists utilised to perform their critique of contemporary culture through art, architecture, writing and their own personal practices. In a less organised and systematic (a somewhat contradictory description of the situationists’ themselves) manner detournement occurs regularly around the events of everyday life. It may come as a blatant sign of resistance by not participating in a meeting – not simply by being absent but by engaging the event as a personal performance space – the Dilbertesque buzzword bingo game is one example. More tacit forms of detournement can be identified with the ‘modding’ of office spaces and office furniture including ‘paperclip architecture’.

Recuperation represents the counter response to detournement and is the strategy for reasserting mainstream hegemonic power. The claimed failure of the Situationist movement was that it proved unable to resist recuperation itself (Plant 1997) trivialising in many ways the cultural critique that it had endeavoured to offer. The significance of recuperation is that as a process it does not simply represent a reversal to a prior cultural state. Recuperation takes the activities and actions generated through detournement to absorb and adopt them for the mainstream. Punk music, nose piercing and tribal tattoos have all lost their impact and meanings of resistance to become fashion. Punk music is perhaps the most totally recuperated with the actions of former teen popstars such as Britney Spears making the Sex Pistols look markedly restrained. Similarly, the music of the punk era was criticized for being ‘too fast’ and ‘too loud’ but the basic structures of these 1970s songs now form the core structure for many current ‘Top 40’ hits. Recuperation is a subtle and continuous process making it difficult to individually resist in a culture that is attracted and drawn to spectacular events. Baudrillard (2001) observed that, “before we dealt with an unbroken abundance of banal images and an uninterrupted flow of spurious events, the terrorist attack in New York has resurrected both the image and the event.”

Artefacts are intimately tied to event-driven culture and its cycles of detournement and recuperation. The punk music example above is clearly based around the construction, use and detourning of artefacts. The situationists did incorporate performative detournements activities but these were ultimately oriented around critiques of place – which are themselves artefacts. It is only an event - any event - that can capture, but not necessarily sustain, the attention of mainstream culture. This expectation produces events that increasingly become extreme and less
predictable. The quad-bike accident of Ozzy Osbourne left him in a coma. While this was not intentional, it created an unexpected popular music event that positively contributed to the duet with his daughter becoming the number 1 UK single in the week before Christmas 2003 (and perhaps ironically his first number one UK single). The suicide of weapons expert David Kelly in the UK also became an event that briefly threatened the stability of the Blair Labour government and news reports (BBC 10/7/2004) suggested that Blair considered his own resignation.

**Between emancipation and constraint**

The interplay of artefacts and events through the processes of detournement and recuperation is emphasised with digital artefacts. Digital artefacts provide a range of opportunities for organisational detournement. Youtube’s collection of artefacts both captures organisational detournement and is a mechanism for detournement. An example of YouTube’s ability to capture detournement is the Pacman event (www.youtube.com/v/05Xk02UG7Yc) which converts a college library and computer lab into a full-scale game grid for the pacman game. This event readily critiques the regularised, regimented and serious patterns of these locations by actively comparing it to Pacman’s ‘fun’ game grid. The event itself disrupts these serious environments as the laughter and applause that has also been recorded readily shows. Somewhat less effectively Pacman at the football (www.youtube.com/v/5hMBHSB33x4) critiques the formality and ritual of a college football game by superimposing another game. However, this event is an example of a subtle recuperation – the execution of the event is poorer and comes seven months (October 2006) after the first Pacman event (April 2006) and has been posted by different YouTube members. While this latter point is not evidence that the Pacman detournees are different it does suggest that Pacman events have become more common-place and expected features of the college environment. The critique that Pacman at the football offers appears to be more of a student stunt than the result of a thoughtful cultural response. The recuperation of Pacman is also a consequence of its popularity and increasingly weaker imitations. The Spanish Pacman (www.youtube.com/vRnOEbb6MyaU) which comes 1 month after the first Pacman event reduces the critique to a person in a Pacman suit jogging the streets of a Spanish city or town. While this could generously be read as a comment on the number of people on the streets any locational or institutional comment has been completely discarded and the performance becomes a pale echo of the original statement.

YouTube enables individual acts of detournement and the political comment that they embed to become public and events in their own right. The preference to utilize humour within these events has become a hallmark of YouTube events. OK Go (www.youtube.com/v/pv5zWaTEvkI) provides a music video that critiques the music video/exercise video genre utilized by Eric Prydz and the awkwardness of Fat Boy Slim’s ‘Praise You’ video with ‘plain’ males in a co-ordinated dance routine utilising exercise treadmills. The performance also detournes and borrows late night advertorials for slimming machines and exercise programmes. These messages are imperfect communications as are all messages conveyed through artefacts. This artefact highlights the variable political impact of detournement. The adoption by mainstream media and advertising of detournement techniques – with ‘cheeky’ and self-conscious materials – music videos attempting detournement are constantly in danger of becoming immediately recuperated by the mainstream. This is also the danger inherent for any YouTube artefact. The Neg’s Urban Sports series (e.g. www.youtube.com/v/ gy58EtxAQM) takes this problematic situation even further. “Urban Sports” is short series of sketches originally broadcast on the Balls of Steel programme and offers a series of comments about the contemporary urban environment including fast food, security and surveillance. By appearing on YouTube
these artefacts could be compared with the other examples cited here and equally be considered detournment. However, this is also copyright infringement and this raises the question of whether placing “Urban Sports” on YouTube is also a comment on the impact and meaning of copyright laws.

Web2.0 technologies takes the content of YouTube and other websites and embodies the sentiments of detournment by encouraging user participation and the construction of ‘mashups’. The Web2.0 mashup however brings its own contradictions and potential recuperation to a hegemonic mainstream. The concept of a mashup is to draw in content from a range of sources in order to customize and personalize the web experience. The disturbing personal surveillance site, navspy.com offers a Google Maps based mashup. The netvibes.com ‘ecosystem’ provides an environment for user-based mashups that draws on content from anywhere on the Web. However it is debatable as to whether this is detournement or recuperation. The original web mashups were constructed ten years ago with arts-oriented projects such as Digital Landfill and The Shredder (Greene 2004, 99; webmashup.com) which took webpages and displayed the images, underlying code and links in unpredictable ways that where never intended by the page creators. These projects show very clear and direct inspiration from the original situationist philosophies. The most accessible sources of material for new digital mashups comes from programmable APIs offered by specific sites. In effect the easiest mashups – arguably the default artefacts – are developed from the largest corporations e.g. Google and Amazon, the ‘first’ applications in a genre, e.g. Flickr and Digg or innovative newcomers, e.g. Stremepad. Webmashups.com lists 161 different available APIs but the degree to which any mashup can be consider an artefact of detournement is questionable when the site lists categories such as project management, real estate, advertising and financial as sources of content.

The politics of things and organisations
Daily organizational life is predominately carried out as a regular and planned series of events. The intertwining of events, artifacts and human interpretation, that work together to shape our organisational experience. In particular crafted and managed events reinforce and define existing hegemonic power relations within the organisation- although all events have this influence to a lesser or greater degree. It is through human interaction and participation that we are drawn into the spectacle and therefore actively contribute to the power relations associated with these events. Everyday life is punctuated by individual movement between and through events – in an organisational context, the mundane is commonplace and represents the ‘routine of work’; greeting the security guard as we enter the building, our individual work space, meetings, coffee breaks, and reading email. We participate in these routines of everyday life and therefore are drawn into maintaining exisiting hegemonic power relations.

It is through the recognition and examination of the practices and process of detournement and recuperation we are able to disentangle the event-driven organisation. Detourning to present new and oppositional meaning and a resistance to hegemonic power structures presents understanding of artefacts that they have cultural meanings that are recognisable beyond immediate interpersonal social relations. In this paper we have defined the artefact as a ‘thing’ that has been originally imbued with meaning by a social group or groups (Hodder 1995). The classification purposefully incorporates items that are not of direct human manufacture, such as landscapes and places, and acts of invention and design equally. A significant aspect of being ascribed with meaning is that artefacts can at least partially convey meaning without the presence of a third person (or the original inventors). Human meaning construction exists as a fluid and imprecise form of
communication that requires shared cultural knowledges and interpretation. In this way artefacts are a form of proxy for direct human presence. It is also the mechanism that allow artefacts to be conduits of hegemonic power perpetuating and passing meaning to others. Despite the general imperfection of communication between artefacts and people it is the meanings of mainstream hegemonic power that are most readily communicated in these exchanges as modes of hegemonic power are the most pervasive and most regularly reinforced through a network of shared cultural knowledges.

Continued practices of daily routine, in organisational daily life reproduces imperfect renderings of meaning and most often reinforces existing hegemonic power relations. Therefore, we have argued it is at the junctions of meaning creation between human interaction and artefact that we can challenge and critically evaluate the politics of things in organisation. Enabling an exposing of inequality, social exclusion and strive for the creation of new, sometimes unexpected, meanings and operations.

References Cited


