Book Review of Things we could design:

For more than human-centered worlds by Ron Wakkary, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA (2021) (2021), 312 p. ISBN 978-0-26-254299-9

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Book Review

Things we could design: For more than human-centered worlds by Ron Wakkary. Cambridge, MA (2021): The MIT Press 312 pages, ISBN 978-0-26-254299-9.

What becomes of design in posthuman times? This is a central question for a growing number of design researchers and practitioners who, like Ron Wakkary in this book, seek to rethink design by drawing on posthumanist ideas.

Wakkary sees the rise of humanism as a force that shaped design into the modern era. He argues that human-centred design, despite its ambition to improve human lives, can also lead to bad consequences for our world, including degradation of environments and extinction of species. That is because, in assuming the exceptionality of human beings, designers tend to disregard other ways of being that are particular to nonhumans, whether natural or technological.

To develop a more discerning attitude towards nonhumans, Wakkary argues that it is necessary to 'unbuild' design. First and foremost, we must acknowledge the *relationality* of humans and nonhumans. Humans are not autonomous in making sense of existing worlds, nor in designing new worlds to become. They are "bound together materially, ethically, and existentially" with nonhumans. More humility and generosity are needed of designers to grasp the important ways in which nonhumans can co-constitute design practices. Such a reckoning can displace humans' privileged position and present a better standpoint from which to face pressing worldly challenges.

The book is structured in three main parts, each consisting of two chapters. These parts will be reviewed below, with a spotlight on passages that I find most revealing for researchers studying the design process. Before that, I first remark on two characteristics of Wakkary's analyses.

First, in terms of theoretical investigation, the author engages a wide variety of perspectives, including posthumanist philosophy, science and technology studies, and speculative, post-Heideggerian, and decolonialised design approaches. Some of these are essential and recurrent in his argumentation, while others are more incidental and decontextualised from their intellectual origins. He does not provide a structured review that establishes the state-of-the-art before advancing new insights. His take on the literature is somewhat opportunistic, in the sense that specific concepts will be selected at any given moment to support a claim, even if these had been introduced before to support another claim and even if a similar claim is made elsewhere based on other references. Attentive readers might notice in that something analogous to the play of agencies between humans and nonhumans that Wakkary expounds in the book. In writing, the (human) author is fully entangled with the (nonhuman) text. Each time that concepts are (re)enacted in a particular argumentative context, their agencies are inscribed differently within the ensemble, and the author must continually accommodate for that. To me, this fluidity often results in conclusions that appear transient and open for further elaboration in the book.

The second characteristic of Wakkary's style relates to the case studies that empirically ground the investigation. These cases, especially the 'good' ones, are predominantly of speculative designs of interactive technologies; for instance, prototypes developed in Wakkary's own university lab. This choice reflects the author's

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immersion in a specific research community and is understandable, considering that the intention is to say something about design while not ignoring his own situatedness. At the same time, the 'bad' examples are mostly of commercial product design. Wakkary hints at but never fully discloses if this selectivity is intended as a blow on the figure of the modernist industrial designer. Finally, in terms of empirical evidence, he does not report extensively on primary data about actual processes of designing. The preference is for secondary sources; mainly published commentaries about what things do after they have been designed.

Turning to Part I, titled 'Design', the two chapters are dedicated to reconceptualising design as a practice. Wakkary sets his ambition high when stating that the objective is to "radically speculate an alternative rather than to incrementally build". To do so, he aims at preventing established epistemologies of humanist design from tainting his proposed approach. One idea that he immediately rejects is that design is a monolithic, universal, and undisputed discipline. Wakkary elaborates an alternative conception of design as a *nomadic practice*, which is always in flux and which emphasises situated knowing and a plurality of intentionalities. He explains simply, but powerfully, that to design is always to design *something*. That understanding contrasts with Simon's well-known definition of design (i.e., to devise courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones), which Wakkary portrays as being 'not of this world'. Such a portrayal strikes me as aptly in line with his argument that it is illusory to idealise design practices as abstracted from materiality and universally applicable. In concluding this part, Wakkary delineates three types of nomadic practices – those of designing *artefacts*, *objects*, and *products*.

Part Two of the book, 'Things', is about the object of designing. By referring to *things* Wakkary wants to develop a posthumanist account of a nomadic design practice that is more profound than those discussed before (i.e., designing artefacts, objects, and products). He explains how his conception of things is meant to eschew stark differentiations between both objects and subjects, and between nature and culture. In doing so, it becomes possible to acknowledge how deeply humans and nonhumans are intertwined, to the point that we cannot consider what humanity is without understanding how it is partly shaped by things, including those things that we design.

Chapter 5 is where Wakkary is at his best in terms of theoretical insights through the interpretation of empirical data. In discussing results from a long-term study of a prototype developed in his lab, he shows how an apparently trivial tilt of an electronics-embedded ceramic bowl can question the positionality of users in human-centred design. In this chapter, he also develops a more radical take on the agency of nonhumans. He goes as far as to state, through the notion of *vitality of things*, that nonhumans have "their own intentionality towards the world". This statement places Wakkary very close to the type of metaphysical epistemologies from which he wants to distance himself (see endnote to the chapter).

Part Three, 'Designer', contains some of the most original and potentially controversial ideas in the book. This part explores how designers are forged through the mutual constitution of humans and nonhumans. Wakkary's notion of 'designer' is strongly revisionist. He holds that 'the designer cannot be seen to be exclusively human' in posthuman design. In another passage, he puts it boldly: "[The designer is] an assembly of nonhumans and humans that together inscribe themselves into the same lifeworld they cohabit". Wakkary further elaborates on two core concepts. The first is *biography*, which is used to describe the processes through which a specific designer comes into being. The second is *constituency*, which is a step that precedes and prefigures

nomadic design practices, by: "making matters of concern and care present in the world of design in ways that they cannot so easily be excluded from the designer of things or the designing of things".

Having discussed the agencies of nonhumans earlier in Part Two, in Part Three Wakkary turns to the agency of humans. According to him, a key role of humans in designing is to be a *speaking subject* that *convenes* nonhumans: "the unique human contribution is language, and so to speak on behalf of nonhumans is what I call a *speaking subject* of the designer". He goes on to note ambiguities when humans have to act as 'spokespeople' for nonhumans, the possibility of having this 'exceptional' power contested by nonhumans, and even the 'struggles' of being himself a writer who mediates things through language. However, he never questions how language itself might be co-constituted by nonhumans in design.

Here, we must pause and ask which standpoint the author is speaking from when he distributes language capacities asymmetrically among humans and nonhumans, asserting that: "[in the designer of things] it is humans who speak for and among mute things and matter". In the end, I found it problematic that throughout the book Wakkary draws so little on empirical data about actual processes of designing. For this claim might have been better substantiated had he described how language is enacted by humans and nonhumans *as things are being designed*.

To conclude, *Things we could design* outlines an original perspective from an emerging stream of posthumanist design studies. It will appeal to a broad range of researchers who wish to become better familiarised with concepts and thinkers that are not usually seen in mainstream research about the design process. It also serves as a reminder for design researchers to always translate carefully what we think things have to say.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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