

**Daniela Rosner**

*Critical Fabulations. Reworking the Methods and Margins of Design*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2018, pp. 216

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The first time I have approached the book *Critical Fabulations. Reworking the Methods and Margins of Design* by Daniela Rosner was during the EASST Conference held in Lancaster in 2018. At the time, Rosner was in Lancaster acting as one of the discussants in the open panel “Situating designs”, and presenting her freshly published book. I remember that Rosner’s insights into the rich and complex relationship between design and STS have been quite encouraging for me, a postdoctoral researcher in Participatory Design back then, with a PhD in STS and a background in Media Studies. I was grappling with the particular condition of navigating neighboring, yet different, research fields, striving to find my place somewhere between them. In that circumstance, I found Rosner’s thoughtful considerations about how STS and design are connected rather promising insofar as she identified the contribution that each of them could offer to the other (Boeva 2018). More than anything, after listening to Rosner’s intervention, I have started the process of dismissing that idiosyncratic picture of design made up of sticky notes, portfolios, posters, websites etc. (that is, what I was the least familiar with), and pinpointing the actual, although challenging, entanglements between STS and design. This commitment was definitely confirmed and reiterated by reading the book, which advances the theoretical argument of ‘critical fabulations’ understood as ways of storytelling that rework how things we design come into being, therefore opening new paths for design by awakening alternative stories.

The book is divided into five chapters, crossed by a narrative thread that starts with theoretical and impersonal chapters (1 and 2) and runs towards practical and personal examples of critical fabulations (chapters 3, 4, 5). The distinction between ‘personal’ and ‘impersonal’ narrative is not a trivial one, as it reflects both the theoretical pivots underpinning Rosner’s book and work as well as the narrative tone deployed in the book. The book’s structure, indeed, moves from a historical critique tracing central influences on design today and search for “correctives” (identified in feminist programs of technoscience) to interventionist possibilities. Such content structure is also experimented in form and voice, with Chapter 1 presenting a historical account, Chapter 2 a biographical narrative, Chapter 3 an autobiographical note, while Chapters 4 and 5 portray Rosner herself as deeply embedded into critical fabulations. Accordingly, she adopts a more embodied and experiential writing voice along the way, a narrative choice that reflects her professional and personal transi-

tion from a dominant design paradigm towards a more implicated, open-ended, collaborative practices of technoscience. As a matter of fact, Chapter 1 reconstructs the intellectual pillars that, according to Rosner, have dominated design thinking: individualism, universalism, objectivism, and solutionism. Each of them is situated, so as the doctrine of *individualism* is associated with John Dewey's American Pragmatism, while *universalism* is linked with Cold War cybernetics, *objectivism* is related to the cognitive model developed by economist Herbert Simon, and *solutionism* is coupled with the increasing tendency toward problem solving the design discipline took up at the outset of the 1960s. According to Rosner, these intellectual foundations of the dominant design paradigm advance an understanding of design as a disembodied activity comprising universal subjects, thus neglecting or underrecognizing certain bodies and voices.

An alternative way of understanding design is drawn from feminist programs of technoscience, which are examined in Chapter 2 through the biographical notes of two major figures in the field: Lucy Suchman and Donna Haraway. Rosner engages with Suchman's and Haraway's work and lives through biographical notes collected from various public interviews and from conversations she personally had with them. The outcome is an interesting double portray that emphasizes connections by highlighting the different paths walked by the two scholars, namely ethnomethodology and symbolic interactionism in the case of Suchman, and Heidegger's phenomenology, Whitehead's writings and cybernetic theory in the case of Haraway. Such heterogeneous formations developed later into two more coherent research frames: whereas Suchman attended to the position of the user by developing the concept of 'situated action', Haraway focused on the position of the analyst by elaborating the concept of 'situated knowledges'.

These intellectual sensitivities are put at play in the subsequent chapters, in which Rosner narrates her personal encounters with critical fabulations. Chapter 3 provides an account of her fieldwork with knitters and crafters in the Bay Area, an experience that made her grapple with issues of invisible labor and the view of users as a united category of practices. In this respect, *Spyn* – the new knitting technology Rosner developed – served more as a tool whereby to open the intimate relationships at stake than the right solution to achieve a supposed universal state. This experience allows Rosner to develop a deep reflection on the role of design practice and designers, leading to the elaboration of four orienting tactics characterizing critical fabulations: alliances, recuperations, interferences, extensions. Rooted in the theoretical commitments of feminist technoscience, these techniques work as guiding orientations for critical fabulations, in order for investigators to reimagine established design techniques and to recuperate invisible stories behind contemporary technoculture's extractive systems of power. More specifically, *alliances* refer

to the set of relations designers can foster through their practice, enabling ways whereby to cultivate collective action and to inquire in concert with those standing in the design setting. An example of this tactic is mentioned in relation to contemporary design projects aimed at enabling alliances between gig workers as in the case of *Turkopticon*, a digital platform developed to allow Amazon Mechanical Turk workers to search and add reviews of employers, thus prompting both workers and employers to be known and accountable to one another. *Recuperations* point to attempts to revive stories entangled with the design settings, but neglected by prevailing design narratives. This tactic pushes investigators to ask questions such as: Whose invisible work underpins your own? How might inform your inquiry? What histories of practice have been suppressed or elided? Whose legacies are being left out or dismissed? Similarly, the tactic of interferences works to disturb a narrative that is privileged within a prevailing design culture, showing that it might work otherwise, and how. In the case of *extensions*, designers work to uncover and value an abandoned or ignored design situation within a prevailing design culture.

The last chapter of the book brings us into the critical fabulations through an account of design projects in which Rosner was involved. These projects have been devoted to challenging the established ideas of craftwork as a plan to be given form by design (*Arc* project), embracing legacies of repair (*Broken Probes* project), recuperating the textile work of Little Old Ladies – the female workers who wove the software into the core memory for the *Apollo* Missions – to trouble the current mainstream understandings of design and engineering innovation (*Making Core Memory* project).

*Critical Fabulations* is a brilliant piece of intellectual and empirical work, which falls into an interesting lineage of scholarship focused on developing a conception of design as an activity inherently cultural, social and political (Balsamo 2011; Manzini 2015; Escobar 2018), aiming at creative and ethical transformation. What I think makes Rosner's book particularly interesting for the STS audience is the effort to portray a critical and engaged practice of design building on works that are central in the STS scholarship, such as Suchman and Haraway's intellectual legacies. Such an effort is palpable in the recurrent emphasis on the alternative processes of knowledge production that critical fabulations can spark. In this respect, I feel that the most interesting contribution of the book to STS researchers is an invitation to experimenting with material objects and practices as methodological tools to be added to the STS traditional toolbox (e.g. interviews, observations, archive research, etc.) in order to detect issues and intervene in the field. Such a commitment resonates with the emergence of a "collaborative mode of practicing STS" (Fariás 2017) based on dialogue, mutual learning, and caring relationships with other research fields and disciplines as well as with non-academic collec-

tives. After all, one of the orientations informing critical fabulations is precisely *making alliances* in order to cultivate transformative collective actions by standing with the groups with which we inquire.

*Critical fabulations* is a compelling reading for STS scholars interested to find their distinctive way into design as much as for designers to re-think and retool their practice from a critical point of view. It is a tool that can help building fruitful bridges between design and STS, fostering promising alliances and possibilities.

## References

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## Tiago Saraiva and Marta Macedo (eds.)

*Capital Científica. Práticas da Ciência em Lisboa e a História Contemporânea de Portugal [Science Capital. Science Practices in Lisbon and Contemporary History of Portugal]*, Lisbon, Imprensa de Ciências Sociais, 2019, pp. 410

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*Capital Científica* [Science Capital] examines how Lisbon became not just the official (political) capital of Portugal but also the capital of its scientific system and how scientific knowledge helped build the contemporary city outlook.

This book is an edited volume that brings together ten chapters authored by some of the leading scholars in History of Science in Portugal, from the main universities and research centers dedicated to this discipline, such as Tiago Saraiva (University of Drexel), Ana Carneiro and Maria Paulo Diogo (New University of Lisbon), Ana Cardoso de Matos (University of Évora), Ana Simões (University of Lisbon, current presi-