

# Book Review: iMedia: The Gendering of Objects, Environments and Smart Materials by Sarah Kember

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**iMedia: The Gendering of Objects, Environments and Smart Materials** examines the relationship between gender and current and future media technologies. Drawing on science and technology studies, new media theories and feminist epistemology, **Sarah Kember** suggests that existing theorisations of smart objects have tended to be shaped by disembodied knowledge practices that are implicitly or explicitly masculinist in their approach. **Younes Saramifar** finds this a challenging, rich and imaginatively articulated book.

**iMedia: The Gendering of Objects, Environments and Smart Materials**. Sarah Kember. Palgrave Pivot. 2016.

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## Becoming or Becoming-With: That is the Question

Reading Sarah Kember's latest book reminded me of an old Persian proverb. The proverb warns you to not judge a chilli pepper by its tiny size; rather, it dares you to taste it. *iMedia: The Gendering of Objects, Environments and Smart Materials* is a small book, but it is challenging, thought-provoking and eclectic in its articulation.

*iMedia* takes readers on an unusual, imaginative journey to convey a radical political message by way of theories and science fiction stories. Kember identifies conceptual turns in the contemporary intellectual terrains of communication studies and new media theories. She interrogates the shift from 'structure to scale, epistemology to ontology and from subject and object to environments of processual and imperceptible things-in-themselves' (107). The analysis emerges from her fundamental interest in the 'ongoing movement toward a post-dialectical feminism that engages its boundary work' (91). This 'boundary work' is rooted in ideas of feminist materialism that engage with the formation of boundaries without assuming any inherent separation between materials and human subjectivity. Kember marvels on the workings of subjecthood within boundary work and asks where the question of female subjectivity and gender are located within this in a high-tech-dominated future. Hence, her book follows the question of the relations between gender, objects and technology.



The preface and introduction deconstruct the undecidability of so-called smart objects in new media theories in relation to identity and the concept of life at large. Kember addresses the 'i' in 'iMedia', because 'the i of the individual human subject is fully and finally lost, dispersed and de-presented' (12). The mechanisms and operations of iMedia are charted in a diagram that deconstructs the 'i' (the first person pronoun) into 'in/determinable', 'invisible information infrastructure', 'intelligent intelligence' and, finally, 'intervention'. Kember deconstructs the configuration of iMedia to distinguish between the trajectories that deliver it in comparison with the vectors that impact its formation. This deconstruction reveals how tracing ontological trajectories is not sufficient; instead, one may reach a broader theoretical spectrum by including constitutive power vectors such as ethics and politics. Kember thus explains that 'there is no i in imedia. Its presence is an illusion that refuses to be revealed even as branded objects [...] The origin story of i as internet media is uncertain' (8).

Kember follows the question of gender in this by placing it within the alignment of democracy and capitalism in the spheres of imedia and especially imedia objects. She critiques the discrete workings of theories that interpret the freedom to use and choose various imedia objects without considering the subjection that is caused by these commodities. She challenges interpretations that are wrapped up in the argument of equal access for everyone and

for every gender within debates concerning the intentionality and agency of objects. She therefore proposes a 'post-phenomenological account of sensation and experience across scales' (12) to break through the veiled argument, traversing both phenomenology and object-oriented philosophy.



**Image Credit: Smart Refrigerator (David Berkowitz CC 2.0)**

Kember's introductory diagram exposes the fetishisation of objects. Kember connects subjects and objects to imply what is lost in current strands of object-oriented philosophy and new media theories. The connection shows how 'epistemologically structured' (12) subjects and objects are impacted by 'invisible information infrastructure'. She asserts that the recent attention upon objects 'serves to align markets and metaphysics' (24), and distracts us from discrete movements of neoliberalism. She reaches this point by particularly critiquing Ian Bogost and Graham Harman, who are both known for their brand of object-oriented philosophy.

Kember does not examine Bogost and Harman's theories in depth, but rather critiques their politics as male philosophers who write 'histories' (22) of objects. Kember questions the neutrality of Bogost's 'flat ontology' that calls for the collapse of culture/nature, subject/object and human/non-human divides, articulated through an unusual set of examples. She particularly criticises his question in the book *Alien Phenomenology*: 'are women or girls or sexiness to have no ontological place alongside chipmunks, lighthouses, and galoshes?' (Bogost, 99). While his remark appears inelegant to Kember, one cannot dismiss a philosophical approach because of its rhetoric and articulation. However, her analysis is well within the feminist framework that asks us to reflect on processes of knowledge production and to remain vigilant of the discursive formation of philosophies.

The first part of *iMedia* focuses on glass and how gender is implicated in its transparency through an exploration of the metaphor of Cinderella. This chapter must be read with reference back to the introduction to better understand its theoretical foundations. Glass, transparency, the seen/unseen and politics of in/visibility stand for Kember's idea of 'the absence of boundary work' (26). This boundary work exposes the workings of power apparatus, and its absence turns theoretical frameworks into inefficient methods. Instead, she advocates frameworks that trace how boundaries are co-constituted in their environment through movements and formations that impact the presence and performance of an object. Kember does so through the example of glass. Glass makes 'everything clear. In doing so, it obscures its own agency as a mediator' (36). Glass therefore stands for an ontology that does not expose its own politics.

The example of glass is developed further to show how the increasing smartness of technological objects has turned glass into 'the organic status of an intelligent skin' (34). Kember shifts between the history of glass, related technologies, smart glass suppliers and the story of Cinderella to argue that when glass appears in our environment, there is no becoming but rather a becoming-with. According to her, smart materials and their users move toward 'becoming-with', rather than configuring their trajectories separate from each other. This chapter lies at the heart of the book.

Kember argues against the discrete patriarchy within technologies and smart objects from a feminist perspective. She portrays a speculative future by drawing from existing electronic gadgets that objectify women in different ways. She writes of how glass dominates the life of women and disperses their presence across everyday routines to return them finally to their normative roles at home. For instance, she talks of a near future where a woman encounters her work schedule through 'ARCHITECTURAL DISPLAY GLASS' while cooking on the same material over her kitchen appliance. Kember therefore connects the means and modes of production in a future where patriarchy and gender debates hide in the transparency of glass.

According to Kember, technology therefore situates women in a category that leads to the 're-traditionalization of the gender role' (58). For instance, she finds Durex Fundwear—which enables someone else to control the user's sexual stimulation via smartphone apps—a sexist and regressive technology. She suggests that this reproduces women as a ubiquitous 'sexual object' (46), but she does not leave any space for the woman who may enjoy the experience of *becoming* a sexual object. I find her critique more radical than is required. She suggests that the debate on objects and materiality are mere distractions from discussions such as gender inequalities, embedded masculinities and consumerism, despite existing diverse literatures that address gendered objects and gendered consumption. However, it may well be argued that my disagreement is based on my gender: me writing from within *histories* of her oeuvre.

The eclectic and unconventional style of *iMedia* is innovative and demands careful reading. It is a challenging text that requires familiarity with ongoing debates in material culture and continental feminist philosophy. It portrays how storytelling, literary skills and intellectual musing can produce new modes of articulating ideas about materiality and gender. Kember has added a rich, advanced level creative text to the growing oeuvre on the philosophy of technology by way of feminist epistemology. The book is not for those unfamiliar with the debates on material culture and new media theories, but one may learn to swim by jumping into the pool.

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*Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.*

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