

# Star Architecture as Socio-Material Assemblage

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Laura Lieto

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## Abstract

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Taking inspiration from new materialism and assemblage, the chapter deals with star architects and iconic buildings as socio-material *network effects* that do not pre-exist action, but are enacted in practice, in the materiality of design crafting and city building. Star architects are here conceptualised as part of broader assemblages of actors and practices “making star architecture” a reality, and the buildings they design are considered not just as unique and iconic objects, but dis-articulated as complex crafts mobilising skills, technologies, materials and forms of knowledge not necessarily ascribable to architecture. Overcoming narrow criticism focusing on the symbolic order of icons as unique creations and alienated repetitions of capitalist development, the chapter’s main aim is to widen the scope of critique by bridging culture and economy, symbolism and practicality, making star architecture available to a broad, fragmented arena of (potential) critics, unevenly equipped with critical tools and differentiated experiences.

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## Keywords

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Star architecture · Assemblage · Multiplicity · Critique

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## 1 Stardom and Icons: What Else?

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Star architects are persons in flesh and bone who happen to participate in the symbolic economy of stardom. Their faces, popping out of lavish magazines and websites, are as recognisable and familiar as those of other celebrities in the contemporary star system. As such, each of them is one of a kind, and their signature and personality are important, adding value to the market ratings of the buildings they design. Likewise, a sense of uniqueness, of unambiguous presence in the urban landscape, features their buildings as physical outcomes of their design mastery (“that” building by Renzo Piano, “that” tower by Norman Foster).

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No matter how overrated “the romantic myth of the asocial, creative architect” (Jones 2009, p. 2524), knowledge focused on personality and uniqueness still has a relevant impact on how star architecture is understood and criticised: the building as a tridimensional symbol of capitalist exploitation of

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L. Lieto (✉)  
Università di Napoli  
Federico II,  
Department of  
Architecture,  
Naples, NA, Italy  
e-mail: [lieto@unina.it](mailto:lieto@unina.it)

36 labour and nature (Flierl and Marcuse 2009), entertaining an “autistic”  
37 relationship with the urban context to which it would be substantially indif-  
38 ferent (Kaika 2011), and the architect as its master minder, belonging to a  
39 transnational elite (McNeill 2009) and mostly a male figure perpetuating  
40 patriarchal order in the architectural firm (Scott-Brown 1989; Forsyth 2006).  
41 Both characters reverberate through vertical images of “futurity and globality  
42 which in turn are woven into complex landscapes of displacement and preda-  
43 tory speculation” (Graham and Hewitt 2012, p. 82).

44 To be sure, all the critical work done on high-end architecture over the  
45 past decade has consistently challenged the “asocial conception” of archi-  
46 tecture as an artistic, autonomous practice, foregrounding how the political  
47 and economic context deeply affects the production of architecture and  
48 how the latter, in turn, affects the neoliberal agenda through its peculiar  
49 language and aesthetic code (Sklair 2005, 2006; Jencks 2005; Sudjic 2006;  
50 McNeill 2009). In this framework, the symbolic economy of star architec-  
51 ture – the aesthetics and semiotics of some special eye-catching buildings,  
52 designed by celebrity architects to boost projects of city rebranding – has  
53 been understood for how it translates strategies of capitalist reproduction  
54 in the peculiar language of *icons*, the new “secular shrines” (Kaika and  
55 Thielen 2006) mastering both media coverage and landscape transforma-  
56 tion as intensively as religious and civic monuments used to master public  
57 imaginary in the past.

58 Combining aesthetics and politics, the critique of star architecture as a  
59 symbolic system is undoubtedly most appropriate to understand how ico-  
60 nography works in the urban landscape. As a “system of representation –  
61 conventions, structures and circulation – within which the celebrity self  
62 resonates within the public sphere” (Holmes 2005, p. 10), architectural  
63 iconography is the entanglement of both the seductive power of the archi-  
64 tect’s persona and the shimmering surfaces designed for the visual con-  
65 sumption of his creations (Frampton 1991).

66 However, since iconic architecture is not part of the professional “natu-  
67 ral market” (Gutman 1992), in the sense that it does not represent the vast  
68 majority of practising architects, it has remained confined within the realm  
69 of “major iconic statements” (Jones 2009, p. 2530), with an emphasis on  
70 aesthetics and semiotics, on discourses and images, rather than on the  
71 actual *stuff* of which architecture is made of.

72 *Stuff* refers to the multiple socio-material practices crafting material  
73 objects as “interdependent fragments of a larger whole” (Molotch 2003,  
74 p. 1): a “lash-up” of economic mechanisms, cultural trends, standards and  
75 policies coming together. In such a gathering of heterogeneous elements,  
76 architecture’s conception and execution are *enacted*, from the tasks per-  
77 formed in the design studio with the aid of material devices like drawings  
78 and models to on-site works combining skills, construction materials and  
79 technologies. By looking at such a complex bundle, our glance is diverted  
80 from the sharp features of celebrity architects and iconic buildings glow-  
81 ing in the media and directed towards a plethora of human and non-human  
82 actors, objects, technologies, norms and places that make architecture an  
83 actual process of collective achievement.

Uniqueness and personality, in this perspective, no longer matter as much as they do in the symbolic order of icons. From here, a different critique of star architecture can be articulated: not just as a field of production of “major iconic statements” fixating the current neoliberal order onto social imaginaries, but as a knot of “many surprising agencies” and a “contested territory that cannot be reduced to what it is and what it means” (Latour and Yaneva 2008, p. 86).

We can start with a few questions: What happens when star architects are no longer regarded as individuals and conceptualised as part of broader assemblages of actors and practices “making star architecture” a reality? And what if the buildings they design are considered not just as unique and iconic objects, but dis-articulated as complex crafts mobilising skills, technologies, materials and forms of knowledge not necessarily ascribable to architecture?

Questions like these are not entirely new. In part they echo a three-decade-old conversation on architecture progressing out of architectural circles and involving feminist critics, cultural scholars, geographers and writers in the field of organisation studies who have differently emphasised the multiple actors and things in play when it comes to the production of both the architect and the building as social and bodily realities.

As a novel contribution to this debate, this chapter provides answers taking inspiration from new materialism and assemblage as the constitutive form of ongoing urban realities (Fariás and Bender 2010; Lieto 2016; Rydin and Tate 2016). Accordingly, star architects and iconic buildings are thought of as socio-material *network effects* (Law 1986), i.e. they do not pre-exist action, are not naturalised entities, but exist as long as they are enacted in practice (Lieto 2017), in the materiality of design crafting and city building. Drawing on Anne Marie Mol’s concept of the *body multiple* (Mol 2002), which emphasises the multiple planes of experience through which a reality (whatever it is – a material object, a disease, a computer program) comes into being and is apprehended through its practical effects, both the celebrity architect and the iconic building are outlined as *existing through the practices that make them relevant*, which means understanding their relationship as actively reshuffled and negotiated in multiple sites and by enrolling multiple objects.

Star architecture is a theoretical problem and a practical challenge. The coverage of stardom, placed upon architects and buildings, creates a “patina” of individualism (Dyer 1986) which stands in the way of a broader and more plural understanding of the complex socio-materiality involved in the star architecture-making process.

The two perspectives, the symbolic and the material, can be usefully and interestingly complemented in order to debunk the rhetoric of branded development that reduces architecture to an iconography of wealth and power like any other commodity – fashion, sports cars or lifestyle rituals, for example, with which star architecture entertains a very productive relationship in its own terms. What is beneath the shimmering surface of the new “cathedrals of commerce” (Willis 1995; Flierl and Marcuse 2009) colonising urban landscapes all around the world is a quest for many cities

132 less fortunate than those in the top rankings of urban competition, as is the  
 133 case of second-tier European cities, also addressed in this edited collec-  
 134 tion, hardly coping with job loss, depopulation and lack of foreign invest-  
 135 ments and resorting to star architecture to be back in the competition game.

## AU3 36 2 Star Architecture as Socio-Material Assemblage

137 Star architects and buildings are not inherently coherent and homogeneous  
 138 formations: they partake in the symbolic economy of icons as long as they  
 139 actively participate in the socio-material production of the built environ-  
 140 ment. In this latter perspective, and drawing on Anne Marie Mol's work,  
 141 the assemblage in which they are entangled can be outlined as a specific  
 142 manifestation of a *body multiple* (Mol 2002) in the urban space. In this  
 143 sense, the body of the architect (the persona) and the body of architecture  
 144 (the building) "are more than one [although] this does not mean that they  
 145 are fragmented into being many" (Mol 2002, p. viii). In other words, both  
 146 the celebrity architect and the iconic building are *enacted in practice* by a  
 147 multiplicity of collaborations, involving human and non-human actors,  
 148 technologies, places, norms and materials that *make* both terms of this  
 149 relationship, and provide them with a sense of reality, achievement, perfor-  
 150 mance and practical effect. In this perspective, the star architecture assem-  
 151 blage is understood as an open-ended process of gathering in which  
 152 patterns of coordination and competition develop through different time-  
 153 space rhythms (Lowenhaupt Tsing 2015).

154 This kind of analysis bridges the symbolic with the factual, focusing on  
 155 how such a socio-material assemblage comes into practice. Inspired by the  
 156 Lefebvrian heuristic of triadical space (Lefebvre 1991), it conjoins *con-*  
 157 *ceived* space and *perceived* space combining both the symbolic complex-  
 158 ity of star architecture as a manifestation of capitalism in space and its  
 159 practical experience as an actual process of gathering an open-ended array  
 160 of people and things.

161 Such a perspective, I argue, can be relevant to rise critical arguments  
 162 about branded development, about its unequal effects in terms of redistri-  
 163 bution of wealth and power and about its power over governments, mar-  
 164 kets and consumers. In particular, it can be useful to better understand the  
 165 process of global architecture making, in order to extend the scope and  
 166 arguments of urban development's critique to the materiality of processes  
 167 occurring in real places and affecting the everyday life of people differ-  
 168 ently dealing with star architecture.

169 Taking the approach of practice and materiality implies viewing things  
 170 for their multiplicity. Multiplicity is not pluralism: it means that a thing – a  
 171 building, a physical person – becomes real and comes into the world not  
 172 because multiple perspectives are in play around it in a constructivist sense  
 173 while leaving the thing unaltered and stable, but because the thing itself is  
 174 enacted through different practices. Perspectival approaches – like social  
 175 constructivism – assume that the thing stays the same, while different  
 176 gazes move around and produce it as a reality through social conversation;

the methodology of the multiple body proposed by Mol assumes instead that the thing is not passive, does not stay the same – that is, it does not fully pre-exist knowledge – but comes in play because it is enacted through practice in different sites, involving different humans and non-humans, and through a constant scale-shifting movement.

The groundbreaking point in this approach is that “the singularity of objects [as well as the uniqueness of the star architect’s persona] so often presupposed, turns out to be an *accomplishment*. It is the result of the work of coordination and distribution” (Mol 2002, p. 119 – emphasis added).

In this perspective, the chapter argues for a broader critical conversation on star architecture not limited to specific expertise or driven by sectorial logics, but encompassing multiple planes of research collaboration. As in most writings in this edited collection, a multiplicity of approaches is in play, showing how to deal with the different, practical entanglements through which star architecture is enacted in the city.

The multiplicity of star architecture can be traced, and different, meaningful connections can be critically addressed. Practical enactments do not just produce “outcomes” (buildings), but they also reveal “the many surprising agencies” (Latour 2005) operating within the star architecture assemblage.

### 3 Who’s and Where’s of Star Architecture Making

Star architecture can be disentangled into an array of practices that make it a reality – an achievement, in Mol’s terms. To do so, we need to look at star architecture “in action”, as a process that is “overtaken” not by one agent, but many (Latour 2005), and “distributed” over different sites and different moments in time (Beauregard 2015b).

When we ask “who’s acting?” in star architecture, we have to keep in mind that action is always networked, that nobody acts in a vacuum, and that interdependencies, collaborations, delegations and frictions between actors, objects, technologies and norms are always in play when acting (Lieto 2016). This sounds particularly compelling for global architects, regarded as “members of a heteronomous profession, interacting with and often reliant upon urban planners, quantity surveyors, project managers, and structural engineers. And clients, those who actually pay for and commission buildings, are as a group highly diverse, including politicians on government building committees, corporate chief executive officers, property fund managers, civil servants, and so on” (McNeill 2005, p. 502). Looking at architects from this standpoint, as highly dependent on a vast array of collaborating actors (Sarfatti-Larson 1993), also allows to grasp the *places* of these collaborations that are not obviously confined to the workshop or the building site, but extend over a distributed spatiality and overlapping times.

Ubiquitous jet-setters (Colomina 1994; Jencks 2006; Sklair 2005), star architects are entitled to enact very different tasks: designing, advertising, lecturing, supervising, giving interviews and negotiating with their clients.

222 These practices take place in ateliers, airplanes, conference rooms,  
223 construction sites, TV studios and the Internet. In such an extended and  
224 diluted spatiality, designers, engineers, interns, archivists, lawyers and  
225 general contractors interacting with star architects occupy different posi-  
226 tions and operate in proximity as well as long distance, differently and  
227 substantially engaging – with their skills, expertise, ideas and sensibility –  
228 with common tasks.

229 To navigate the distributed spatiality of star architecture, organisation  
230 studies provide a frame of reference interestingly drawing on the notion of  
231 community of practice (CoP) (Wenger 1998) to understand how learning  
232 and innovation circulate within the social production of global architecture  
233 (Faulconbridge 2010). In Wenger’s formulation, a CoP is formed by peo-  
234 ple who share problems, concerns and interests and have common educa-  
235 tional backgrounds. In the case of global architecture, the formation of  
236 such communities reaches different time-space scales, ranging from local  
237 CoPs taking place into specific socio-spatial settings (the studio, the city,  
238 the district, the local job market) to “global scale perforating CoPs” like  
239 intra-firm networks (Faulconbridge 2010).

240 In the tight intermingling of work and leisure spaces that is typical of  
241 creative industries as an urban process, local communities of practice  
242 linked to star architecture are often spaced out in studios, of course, but  
243 also bars and restaurants, city halls, museums, classrooms and conference  
244 rooms, revealing a thick fabric of places and practices in neighbourhoods  
245 and cities where knowledge and innovation circulate in the form of tacit  
246 knowledge (Polanyi 1967). These forms of concentration and clustering  
247 in local CoPs are then complemented with transnational networks of dis-  
248 persed places, where ideas, people and things travel (Lieto 2015), and “the  
249 ability to design at distances far from the principal design office is increas-  
250 ingly feasible” (McNeill 2005, p. 513).

251 Looking at star architecture from the extended and variable spatiality  
252 where it is actually *enacted*, we grasp it more as a socio-material process  
253 rather than an ideology of state or corporate branding. We come to under-  
254 stand, more specifically, that stakes in star architecture making are not just  
255 the outcomes (buildings), but rather the development of community net-  
256 works in which people and things circulate on different time-space scales  
257 providing knowledge and innovation that actually feed the process of star  
258 architecture making.

259 Knowledge and innovation do not pre-exist communities of practice,  
260 they are not referential but are actively produced in the making, and here  
261 objects are enrolled as collaborators in the process, as agents to which  
262 tasks are delegated. As an example of how material objects collaborate in  
263 knowledge production, think of models, images, drawings, websites and  
264 how they all “act” altogether as close allies of designers doing the job that  
265 designers alone cannot do (Yaneva 2005). These partner objects, as their  
266 human partners, do not stay in one place but travel as well, as they can be  
267 shipped or emailed to reach different places and people. Through digital or  
268 actual journeys, objects perform and contribute to enact star architecture  
269 transferring ideas that are generated in forms of collective endeavours and



getting transformed and refined until they land to some final destination (the actual project, the construction site, etc.) (Lieto 2015). On this level of enactment, a multitude of things becomes visible, giving way to further trails of critical investigation of architecture as a practical endeavour.

Power circulates in star architecture communities, not just in the concentrated form of architectural icons (the seductive power of images), but broadly distributed along patterns of cooperation and competition forming a peculiar *project ecology* (Hedlund 1986; Grabher 2002).

In a project ecology, knowledge and experience circulate through places and are fostered by ties of trust and collaboration; ongoing confrontations between actors, ideas, styles and business opportunities “provide causes for power struggles and rivalry [considered rather than] unintended side-effect, as an essential ingredient of project-base collaboration” (Grabher 2002, p. 248). Ranging from a specific locale to transnational networks of partners and peers – linking big cities and metropolitan regions with high concentration of architectural practices – the project ecology of star architecture sets the “boundaries between professions, project teams, organisations [and] sub-sectors of trade” (ibid, p. 255), within which interdependencies and rivalries about economic and reputational stakes shape “relations of power that are routinely reproduced in mundane practices of organising [and that] reproduce and introduce tensions” (Brown et al. 2010, p. 526).

The socio-spatial constellation where star architecture is enacted is heterogeneous and adaptive, mixing ties of trust and mutual recognition with competitive relations as well as occasional forms of collaboration. Material spaces and objects matter in how power-knowledge relations are performed, sustained or challenged within the constellation, which encompasses, not being limited to, the actual sites where iconic buildings get in place. Such sites are themselves “worlds” of practical enactments, conducive of power relations exceeding the scale and scope of specific construction sites and specific buildings.

Buildings are not passive objects. In the perspective of multiplicity, they aren’t either the physical, mechanical outcome of the architect’s talent, nor just symbolic weapons in the hands of market agents or elite coalitions. The singularity of the building is an accomplishment, a result of coordination and a contingent stabilisation of power and knowledge mutually interfering. In this sense, buildings can be considered as material constellations that are *done differently*, i.e. at different spatial-temporal rhythms, from construction to living and using once the building is in place. The embedding of a building in a local context (Faulconbridge 2009) is a matter of regulation of forces, objects and flows operating across different spatialities and getting “down to earth” in specific contexts, according to local rules, cultures and urban regimes. Looking at this embedding process allows to see how possibilities of practical enactment of buildings can be ever-expanding: from matters of local governance and regulatory issues rising when a complex project is falling in place (Imrie and Street 2011) to the actual process of construction as a complex endeavour mobilising actors, norms, contracts, standards and materials (Latour and Yaneva 2008).

318 However, in the perspective of practicalities, “getting the building  
319 done” is not just a matter of scale, and it does not end either with rezoning  
320 or with construction works. Many other fields of experience participate in  
321 a complex achievement such as the construction of an architectural icon.  
322 Safety on the working place, for example, is one of those of fields where  
323 buildings are enacted, and it entails impacts on human health for those,  
324 like construction workers, spending long hours at considerable heights (Li  
325 and Lee 1999) or exposed to lead and other toxic substances (Forst et al.  
326 1999). Again, the field of inquiry is ever-expanding and entails a multitude  
327 of practical layers that congregate around this complex and challenging  
328 object we call star architecture.

## 329 **4 Conclusions**

330 As a practice stretching between business and art, commercial interests  
331 and creative work, star architecture emerges as a heteronomous field  
332 (Sarfatti-Larson 1993) deeply entangled with materiality and driven by  
333 power, reputation and competition.

334 The approach of practicalities outlined in the chapter paves the way for  
335 a critical understanding not limited to star architecture’s symbolic econ-  
336 omy but open to multiple practices that actually enact star architecture as  
337 a socio-material assemblage. Such an assemblage holds through an active  
338 scale-making process, regrouping places and temporalities across localities  
339 as well as transnational networks, where different actors, objects,  
340 norms and technologies travel and contingently aggregate around common  
341 tasks. Such an understanding of star architecture expands the scope of  
342 analysis beyond the finitude of specific buildings towards a broader entan-  
343 glement of places, people and things. And, in this perspective, we start  
344 thinking of star architecture as a process touching upon different socio-  
345 spatial conditions, from cities and neighbourhoods where architectural  
346 firms cluster with other creative industries, to the worldwide network of  
347 premium universities and museums where iconic architecture is studied,  
348 advertised and narrated to the public, to flexible transnational work  
349 settings cooperating to deliver projects designed from afar.

350 Moreover, looking at star architecture as multiplicity highlights how  
351 design responsibility is distributed rather than concentrated in the hands of  
352 the celebrity architect, and this approach has consequences on how we  
353 deal with design ethics and issues of power shaping the creative environ-  
354 ment to which star architects belong. We become aware of gender inequal-  
355 ities, competitions and rivalries, but also of collaborations and mutual  
356 learning cementing communities with a strong local fix, embedded in cit-  
357 ies and regions where conditions are favourable for the industry to flour-  
358 ish, but also participating in broader, transnational communities of practice  
359 where knowledge and innovation circulate and are shared. This perspec-  
360 tive opens on different policy options that are not limited to the big name  
361 and the signature building as a rebranding strategy for, say, a declining city  
362 eager to “get back in the game” of international competition. Policy



options can also deal with infrastructure and services that may support the formation of communities where knowledge and innovation circulate and are transferred and learned.

Thinking about iconic buildings in the same perspective helps understanding these particular objects as powerful *network effects*, as crossroads connecting multiple practices, actors, norms and technologies belonging to different spatial and temporal projects.

Overcoming narrow criticism focusing on the symbolic order of iconic buildings as unique creations and alienated repetitions of capitalist development, we no longer look at these objects as just incarnations of modernist sublime, assertions of corporate power or weapons in a cultural battle between old and new (Sudjic 2006; Acuto 2010). We rather aim to widen the scope of critique by bridging culture and economy, symbolism and practicality. In other words, the critique of star architecture as multiple instantiation of capitalist power becomes available to a broad, fragmented arena of (potential) critics that are unevenly equipped with critical tools and differentiated experiences.

We do not “blame the building” (Beauregard 2015a) nor the architect as respectively a symbol and an agent of capital reproduction in space: we seek to understand how these agencies are enacted in practice and thus to uncover relations, actors, technologies and norms that actively contribute to put them in place. In doing so, we avoid the strictures of symbols’ critique attaching to specific individuals or objects responsibilities and intentions for inequalities and conflicts, missing a broader picture to uncover and investigate, as the chapters in this edited collection do from different perspectives.

Star architecture has been gaining momentum in the political agenda in many urban regions around the world (Ponzini and Nastasi 2016). Between energetic supporters and passionate denigrators, this particular form of capital accumulation in space is accounting for the crucial role that architecture is increasingly playing in how cities and neighbourhoods are lived and experienced today. Iconic buildings are not just the ultimate wonder for tourists and users eager to consume the new urban spectacle (Elsheshtawy 2009), they can also be highly controversial objects and mobilise publics around complex issues (Graham and Hewitt 2012). Global architects hired by authoritarian regimes and corporate organisations to design their new headquarters, for example, create no little problems to firms and professionals forced to operate invariably in and out of democratic states. Nonetheless, power structures and forms of inequality have hardly prevented architecture to be part of cultural and life worlds in the past (Kaika and Thielen 2006). Recent examples like the CCTV building in Beijing or the Burj Khalifa in Dubai show how celebrity architects and buildings are caught in the ambiguous middle ground between a market-driven logic, which ignores issues of democracy and political rights, and the progressive role architecture can play as a process enticing multiple practices, places and life worlds.

In this perspective, the architect and the building – thought as multiple bodies – are no longer the exclusive province of architectural theory but

411 become available to a broader critical spectrum, including health, labour,  
 412 ethics and the politics of everyday life. Here, I believe, is where “better  
 413 research and [...] more informed, critical and reflective attitudes in policy  
 414 makers and experts can be crucial at the local level” (Ponzini and Nastasi  
 415 2016, p. 29), conjoining specific urban problems with broader matters of  
 416 concern.

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# Author Queries

Chapter No.: 2      0004409778

Queries	Details Required	Author's Response
AU1	Please check if edit to heading “ <b>Stardom and Icons: What Else?</b> ” is okay.	
AU2	McNeill (2009); Dyer (1986); Latour (2005); Polanyi (1967) are cited in text but not given in the reference list. Please provide details in the list or delete the citation from the text.	
AU3	This heading seems to be the same with the chapter title. Please check.	
AU4	Please check if edit to sentence starting “the methodology of the...” is okay.	
AU5	References “Dyer (1979), Lieto & Beauregard (2016)” were not cited anywhere in the text. Please provide in text citation or delete the reference from the reference list.	

Uncorrected Proof