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Attractions of the Empty Desktop

CHARLIE JÄRPVALL

An "empty table," posits media philosopher Vilém Flusser, is "an unattainable ideal." Flusser goes on to observe that "one is filled with envy noticing on television the vast and empty writing desks behind which sit those said to be powerful."[1] A similar ideal was seen circulating in advertisements from Swedish trade journals and office handbooks in the 1940s, wherein the virtue of cleanness was promoted when discussing desks as tools for office work. Papers should be sorted into drawers or organized in binders, pens and other tools put in their place, only the material that currently was worked with should occupy the surface of the desk: only in this way would the work be effective.[2] This ideal persists up to the present day, with a 2016 article in a local Swedish newspaper noting that a clean desk at home is the "dream for many, but is it possible to realize?"[3] Nowadays, formal "clean desk policies" are also to be found in many companies and large corporations.[4] One of these policies justifies its own existence on the basis that it "is generally accepted that a tidy desk and office is a sign of efficiency and effectiveness," and makes the correct impression on clients. The clean desk policy goes on to address security issues, stress mitigation, and accidents and spills prevention.[5] Clean desk policies found in activity-based flexible offices are different. These policies do not regulate private desks but rather set up rules for desk sharing in an office. As such, these policies not only include how workstations should be cleaned of stationaries and papers, but also how to use phones, interact verbally, and claim a place to sit. Here, the policies prescribe that the desk should be emptied when a person leaves for the day so that another employee can use the space. The implementation of these policies seems not to be without friction, however.[6]

The ideal of the clean desk, and the ideas on how to best order a desk, were promoted in various historical and cultural contexts during the 1900s. Yet the realities of people's desks seemed to be in direct contradiction with these thoughts. Looking at pictures of desks in the digitized collections of Swedish museums, the prescribed cleanliness is seldom in evidence. Most

of the (often staged) photographs showing people at their desk reveal desktops filled with stationaries, piles of papers, and knick-knacks.[7] If depicting a home from the early 1900s, desks were often a place to put plants and flowers. Again, this trend persists to the present: the photographs of desks from around the world collected in the book *My Desk Is My Castle* most commonly exhibits an incredible mess of computers, papers, food, and other miscellanea covering the desktop.[8]

Starting from this discrepancy between ideals and reality, the purpose of this chapter is to track the ideal of cleanness in different contexts and time periods. The chapter asks: What was this order meant to do, and what do these discourses of order signify? Desks in this chapter are understood as ordering devices in both a practical and a moral sense. They are furniture organizing papers, but their (supposedly) clean surfaces are also substrates for ideals of ordering: ideals which are subsequently projected onto the person sitting behind it. The tidiness or messiness of a tabletop is closely related to the character of the individual that owns said desk. I trace these ideas of the ordered desk both in the world of offices and in the domestic sphere. Ideas of the empty desk appears in discussions on desks in management literature, trade journals, news articles, and advertisements in the early and mid-1900s, with more recent iterations of the discussion appearing in popular home management literature, as well as experimental psychological research from across different periods of time. With a partial focus on Swedish publications, these sources form the empirical base of the chapter.

DESK ORGANIZATION

The supposed relationship between a clean desktop and efficiency has long historical roots, at least dating back to the discourses of office management in the early 1900s. As this chapter shows, this ideal also existed in the domestic realm, where the well-ordered desk is a topic discussed in organizing and cleaning discourses. If Flusser's empty desktops connoted political or economic power in the world, the domestic desks indicate power over one's own belongings. The lack of order signifies a deficiency of character. A cluttered desk is a cluttered mind, so the argument goes. Yet few empirical studies on the matter support the notion that a clean desk is the most effective one.[9] Organizational theorist Thomas Malone, in his classic study from the 1980s, identified two types in the organization regimes of information on desks: filing and piling. Malone's starting point is what he calls "desk organization," a concept that captures not only the information management on desktops but also includes shelves, filing cabinets, tables,

and other kinds of storage in offices.[10] For this chapter, desk organization is expanded to also include the management of other things than information, since the desk has been an ordering device in many ways.

After describing one worker's messy office, Malone adds in a note that this messiness "does not imply that his work is disorganized—in fact, quite the opposite seems to be true."[11] In Malone's study, people with neat offices tended to find documents and remember to do tasks more often, but at the same time it was not clear if the effort put into organizing was ultimately worth it. Finding and remembering were revealed to be the most important practices, and having documents lying on the desktop was in fact a way of remembering tasks that stood in contrast to the purposeful search through an organized structure.[12] "Whether or not it is worth the effort to keep an office neat, it is clear that there is perceived social value placed on having a neat office."[13] The management theorist Eric Abrahamson and journalist David Freeman similarly argue that there is little evidence that being organized, and keeping homes and workplaces neat, is worth the labor involved. Time spent on keeping things neat surpasses the time put into looking for things in a mess, they observe. That we are not orderly enough is a common complaint in today's society expressed in newsmagazines, television talk shows, and by personal organization consultants. Even parents telling their children to clean up forms part of this refrain.[14]

The reason why the desk should be tidy varies over time: from the first half of 1900s, where the fixation on maximizing productivity framed the desk as a means of controlling work, to the 2010s, when domestic desk organization was put forward as a means for managing the overflow of paper and the abundance of office-related consumer goods. John Laws' idea on social order in modernity is appropriate here. He claims that there is no such thing as ord*er* but instead a continuous process of order*ing*.[15] On the mundane level of desks and desk organization, both in the workplace and at home, the struggle against entropy seems to be constant. Over time, things pile up, stacks of paper grow, and disorder threatens neatness. Desks, like modern societies writ large, are in a constant state of ordering, both materially and discursively.

PAPERLESS DESKS IN AMERICAN OFFICES OF THE EARLY 1900S

"The first principle underlying all organized deskwork [. . .] is to have nothing on the desk top except what is being worked on at the moment, plus the 'tools' being used at the time."[16] This quote is taken from one of the

leading thinkers of the organization theory of offices, William H. Leffingwell, dubbed by some as the "father of scientific office management."[17] An avid proponent of organizing administrative work in the early 1900s and inspired by Frederick Taylor's scientific management, Leffingwell wrote several books on office work. The desk was an indispensable topic of discussion in these books as they prescribed how to manage paper-based information. Office manuals like these, architecture theorist Alexandra Lange notes, promoted ideas of an assembly line of paperwork within a paper-processing hierarchy, drawing schematic diagrams of the proper arrangement of office machinery, workers, and desks. The spatial distribution of desks was decided by the most efficient path for paper to travel across the assembly line. In larger offices, different technological systems for the circulation of paper were installed, such as pneumatic tubes, conveyor belts, elevators, or an "overhead ferry of clips strung from moving cables."[18] These ideas and techniques of office work organization emanated from the United States but spread to other countries in the Western world. In Sweden these concepts were disseminated through trade journals and handbooks.

Theorists like Leffingwell and his contemporary Lee Galloway also saw the organization of the individual desk as an important issue to deal with and wrote in detail on the forms of desks and how they should be used. The forms and functions of the desk varied in line with the office worker's place in the hierarchy, from executives to clerks and stenographers. What they all shared was a common aim of having an ordered desk with an empty table surface. As experts in the field of office management, Leffingwell and Galloway wrote books about office organization which sought to establish basic principles and offer guidance on how to most effectively put these principles into practice. Although offices were portrayed like factories and envisioned as an elaborate and interconnected system, efficient offices depended on office workers having neat desk to sustain said efficiency.

Neatness, for Galloway and Leffingwell, was not just connected to a general tidiness that the individual worker should maintain for improved workflow but also bettered cognition and effectiveness of information processing. According to Leffingwell, "anything on a desk or table which does not contribute directly to the better performance of the work being done distracts attention and makes concentration on the task in hand more difficult."[19] Messes claimed brain capacity, and papers should be in motion rather than lying on the office worker's desk. So, for people higher up in the hierarchy, whose assignments where more intellectual than manual, they both recommended a table rather than a desk (or as Leffingwell pre-

ferred to call it: workbench) that minimized the number of drawers. Thereby, the storage of any paperwork was avoided. Information should flow, and any paper lying around was merely a source of a mess. Apart from this cognitive perspective, the usual problems with clutter were also an issue. "Unless there is a place for everything and everything in its place, time is wasted and mistakes are made. An untidy desktop is the frequent cause of letters being mixed with carbon copies, delayed mailings, the omission of important enclosures, letters written on wrong letterheads, and many other avoidable errors."[20]

When Galloway wrote about "The Modern Efficiency Desk," the real innovation was that "there is no room for placing current work in the drawers, any tendency to defer until tomorrow what can be done today is nipped in the bud." A desk, accordingly, should not be a storage space for unfinished work, but rather a "tool for making the quickest possible turnover of business papers." The roll-top desk—more common in the 1910s than in the 1950s—with a lid that covers the writing surface, was seen as an especially bad design because it made it possible to hide unfinished work from co-workers and managers. Such a design encouraged "disorder and lack of neatness."[21] Thus, the flat-top desks, with shallow drawers, was a medium of control, transparency, and speed. The constant flow of information could be monitored by managers when the work of a clerk was laid out bare on the table. The empty surface should not show any evidence of all the work that had taken place there. Galloway adds that something is wrong if a clerk "in seven seconds, cannot put his hand on any paper or article needed."[22] These rules applied not just to clerks, but also to upper management and even executives, whose records should be stored in filing cabinets and other equipment designated for the purpose of storage. For typists and stenographers, the "precise method of arranging individual equipment is usually left to each girl's fancy," though this autonomy was in fact quite limited if one followed Galloway's specific instructions, which listed 21 different materials that should be placed in assigned drawers. The upper right-hand drawer, for instance, should contain different letterheads, special papers for long memos, and telegram forms, while the lower right-hand drawer was reserved for different envelopes, slips, and "well-sharpened pencils."[23] Papers, meanwhile, should be "at hand" at any time. In fact, the freedom to choose how to organize the stationary should be understood in the all too common context where the typist was working in large typing pools, producing and reproducing information at high speed under intense supervision by managers. The optimal typist was one who sat completely still,

with only her fingers moving. While the clerks, by contrast, could be seen as undertaking some sort of intellectual labor, these girls were most certainly relegated to manual laborers.

Leffingwell and Galloway both identified that the different functions in the office system required different desks. But, as shown in the descriptions above, the overall ideal of how to organize the tools and means of information processing was common for all persons working in an office. Except for stenographers and typists, all documents should be stored elsewhere—in filing cabinets or cupboards—or immediately dispatched from the desk. The ideal worker in this period sat in his or her place. From the end of the 19th century and onwards, the office in the Western world became an increasingly more important and more sophisticated functional unit in private companies and governmental administration. The offices grew both in size and complexity, from small and poorly staffed operations, and consequently became much more dependent on proper communication.[24] The bulk of information was produced, processed, and circulated by a growing number of office workers, who did their typing and counting with typewriters and calculating machines on paper and printed forms. Adding to this was a plethora of ordering devices for organizing information. Among these devices, the filing cabinet stood out as crucial for the administrative digestion of information. According to media scholar Craig Robertson, since its invention in the 1890s, the filing cabinet played an important part in the conceptualization of information as a discrete entity, as well as illustrating the drive for speed, standardization, rationalization, and precision in office work in the beginning of the 1900s.[25] Vertical filing—as opposed to horizontal piling (that is, laying files flatly atop one another)—increased both the storage capacity and retrieval efficiency. This way of storing documents also had the advantage that information could be reorganized more easily.[26] Piles on the desk were a threat to efficiency, while documents filed in a cabinet leveraged the tool's intended benefits. Thus, the categories of piling and filing later used by Malone in his ethnography of desk organization have deeper historical roots than might be presumed at first glance.

The discourse on desks shows that even if office machinery, management and organization theory, routines, and standards where developed, the main problem was that of manual labor. The sorting, counting, writing, reading, checking, and conferring were all manual practices crucial to the processing of information. Media historian Cornelia Vismann has argued that a desk could be seen as the "microcosm of the state."[27] In a business setting, they could similarly be understood as the microcosm of the company. The

detailed descriptions of desk organization could be understood as efforts to exercise control over the individual worker and to maximize the productivity of an important node in the network. The pace of the whole system was dependent on an individual worker's productivity. Controlling a worker's attention, fatigue, and speed were therefore vital. As business historians Ingrid Jeacle and Lee Parker note: "Although the office desk was the main focus of furniture investigations, its companion, the chair, was not completely forgotten. The pursuit of efficiency was jeopardised by worker fatigue, so the quest for the seat 'which prevents fatigue' was a worthy one."[28]

DESK PRACTICES BETWEEN OFFICE AND HOME

Entering the postwar period, and thereby a new era in how to spatially organize offices with the emergence of the open plan office, desks persisted as the focal point for managing work practices. In line with Vismann, Jeacle, and Parker, design historian Jennifer Kaufmann-Buhler points out that in America "the essential building block of the office plan was the desk."[29] In this period, the single tables in large typing pools were reimagined as part of workstations placed in cubicles. From being a concept associated with factories or laboratories, the workstation in postwar American open-plan offices became the central unit for the individual office worker, combining desks, storage units, work surfaces, and partitions. Although the concept is of later date, the main goal of this way of organizing office space was to optimize work. Yet, the means to do so were diametrically opposed to the means of the proceeding era.

The inventor Robert Propst, the man behind the Action Office which would later evolve into the cubicle system, was an influential thinker in the postwar period. In his view, altering office space meant a shift from function and fixed space to individual and interior flexibility "so that workers should be able to adjust the interior workspace to suit their own individual working needs," as Kaufmann-Buhler summarizes it.[30] Since the late 1940s, the manufacturing of office desks were increasingly modularized and standardized so that a desk could be individually built up according to the specific needs of the task. Propst's vision of desk organization was the opposite of the ideals of Leffingwell and Galloway. Clutter and paper were not something to be eliminated, according to Propst, but instead important components in the work process. The Action Office was designed to function as an interface for paperwork, and the aim was to support the processes of creative thinking. In Propst's eyes, the office workers should be

surrounded by the visual signals of their work, sitting at the center surrounded by the material arranged, pinned, and organized in the workstation.[31] The paradigm of the efficient paperless desk of early 1900s seemed to have been replaced, and the clutter that hindered thinking decades earlier was now seen as a productive force promoting creativity.

In the modern postwar American household, as media scholar Lynn Spigel has shown, office work and housework became gradually more entangled, as desks and storage solutions, communication devices, and home offices were brought into the domestic space. Even if the home office was imagined as a male space, the managerial aspects of housework were increasingly understood as important. Planning, accounting, investment, and decision making became increasingly important among the duties of the housewife, and women were expected to be "family secretaries by keeping track of bills, filing receipts, and compiling family data." Along with these new duties came the requirement for a desk.[32] Robertson argues that office technologies, and rationales, entered the domestic sphere even earlier than Spigel proposes (see also Andersson and Gregg in this volume). In the early 1900s, both technologies and methods from the office were being imported to the household, supposedly to make housework more efficient. In the literature on scientific housekeeping, domestic work was associated with office work to raise its status. The call for desks (and filing cabinets) in the home was part of an attempt to change the status of housework, and these desks were that of managers, not clerks.[33]

The empirical evidence indicates that this was also true for Sweden. Since the 1940s, tools and recommendations for the "home office" where advertised in newspapers and discussed in articles, often focusing on order, tidiness, and cleanness as a way of organizing the information of everyday life. One recurring example illustrated in these advertisements was the annual filling of income-tax returns. The domestic office in 1940s advertisement—especially the ads of the stationary company Esselte—did not emphasize the desk, as such, but instead highlighted shelving units, binders, home archives, and briefcases. "It is both easy and comfortable for you to keep your domestic finances and papers in order if you have a home office."[34] Twenty years later the Swedish office machine manufacturer Facit introduced onto the market a typewriter aimed for household use and described as an "important asset for the modern family."[35] This implies that the industry saw the domestic realm as a potential market for office-related products, which marks a more widespread diffusion of office appliances and practices. This transfer of office technologies also suggests that office

rationality was being applied to domestic paperwork. The home office was now compelled to be as organized as the office, and the modern family as efficient as a business.

This coincides with an ordering project on a societal level which involved experts, politicians, scientists, and private companies. With the goal of creating a modern welfare state in Sweden, and to raise living standards though an expansive housing program, new apartments and houses were built. These social and housing reforms where embedded with ideas of technological progress, rationalization, and bureaucratization. And the houses themselves would need to be furnished.

One manifestation of this rationalization effort was a series of books covering common furniture in homes. In 1957, the Swedish architect Erik Berglund published a book called *Bord* (Tables) as the second volume in a book series. The series itself was the outcome of a survey aimed at finding the appropriate sizes, types, and qualities of different furniture in Swedish homes.[36] In *Bord*, Berglund discussed the standards for a table's height and width as well as its placement in the home. In Berglund's account, the desk was foremost a place for different kinds of writing. Depending on the amount of writing that had to be done—categorized as sporadic writing, frequent writing, and professional writing/homework—the placement and type of table differed. Berglund also stressed the non-writing functions of desks, given that many older homes had large writing desks which used to be "part of the necessary properties of the 'gentlemen's room'."[37] This demonstrates that not only was the desktop to be in order, but also the desk itself. Through the standards and recommendations, an ideal desk could be identified that suited the individual needs of the user and properly supported the managing of domestic information. Standardizing these material aspects of desks had already been put into practice in the office realm since the 1940s in Sweden, where the manufacturer Åtvidabergs industrier named one series of office furniture "the standard series." The desk could here be seen as one expression of the ordering of modern Swedish society, with both the societal and commercial spheres pushing for standardization.

DOMESTIC PAPERWORK AND ORGANIZING FOR CREATIVITY AND PRODUCTIVITY

At a visit to my local IKEA-store in February 2020, an Ivar bookshelf—with a built-in desk—was on display, filled with boxes, trays, and other ordering paraphernalia, along with a sign saying: "Let the creativity flow, in an organized way." In a similar manner to the order that was intended to

facilitate accurate and speedy information management, as discussed above, this anecdote illustrates another rationale for the ordering of the domestic sphere, creativity; and it is creativity, we are now told, that is enabled by maintaining an organized desk. Creativity is one of the achievements unlocked by empty desks in a domestic setting; the other is the control over the overflow of products endemic to consumer society and which companies like IKEA are responsible for.

It is not only IKEA which is interested in organizing the things of everyday life. Research in ethnology, anthropology, consumer studies, and the like have taken an interest in the management of things in contemporary consumer society. One aim of these studies is to understand what the abundance of "stuff" accumulated in people's homes means in both symbolic and real terms.[38] The inability to manage clutter and chaos at home have also created a market for professional organizers, and in the US a whole industry has developed dedicated to helping ordinary people and companies to organize their material environment.[39] In the pursuit of material and intellectual order, this industry has many similarities with office organizers a hundred years ago.

Linked to this consultancy industry is a plethora of self-help books, magazines, and news articles which advise on how to organize and tidy the home. Many of these books on how to best manage the home and household also give advice on the organization of desks, home office, and domestic paperwork. In literature on the problem of domestic paperwork, desks are mentioned first and foremost as something that must be cleaned, and the papers covering these desks' surface as something that must be organized. The writers of these advisory messages often adopt an autobiographical style, presenting a confessional "I" and describing their journey from chaos to order. Through pictures of tidy homes and inspirational texts, an ideal and ordered domestic world is mediated, where objects are on their proper shelves or tucked away in fancy-colored boxes. Material ordering devices, highly rational cleaning guides, prepared "to-do" lists, and other different methods are prescribed in attaining the ideal of an ordered home. Many of the documents describing domestic paperwork are published in holiday specials focusing on wellbeing and similar themes. Most of them also include a checklist on how the achieve order in one's paperwork, listing certain practices that one should follow. One handbook aligns to the ideal of cleanness discussed earlier: "If you have a desk, review what's on it. Only the most necessary should be displayed. The rest should be hidden in drawers and cupboards."[40]

The office-management theories of the early 1900s and homemaking in the early 2000s differ in many ways, but there are also some striking similarities. The lecturing tone of the best practices of desk organization from the early 1900s is later echoed in the handbooks meant to inspire the creation of the perfect home a hundred years later. "Clean regularly! To have order in your [home] office is to respect both yourself and your company," a book on the "mindful" home explains. Rather than being an effective tool for the flow of information, the ordered desk in this case is part of an environment promoting contemplation and inner peace. The desk of the mindful home should be well organized, yes, but make room for a tabletop fountain.[41] In the art of creating and maintaining order at home, deletion and trashing are the prerequisite for cleaning. Order can first be obtained if a lot of items that are not in use are thrown out. "Only keep important stuff and those things that you use or like a lot."[42] Cleaning and tidying are often presented as processes with discrete steps, accompanied by questions that one must ask oneself. The method is often characterized by being goal-oriented and aimed at altering the relationship between the readers and their possessions, aspiring to change the practices of consuming, ordering, and trashing the objects of everyday life. Most famous in this category is the Japanese organizing consultant Marie Kondo, and her KonMari-method. She recommends that an overhaul of one's belongings should begin with the removal of most things from the home. Only around a third or a quarter of the possessions should remain. Kondo's "basic principle for sorting papers is to throw them away," and only papers that fall under the categories "currently in use, needed for a limited period, or must be kept indefinitely" should be saved.[43] For Kondo, a traditional ordering of paperwork does not suffice. "One of my clients was a woman in her thirties who worked for an advertising company. The moment I entered her room, I felt like I was in an office. My eyes were assaulted by rows of files with carefully printed titles."[44]

This way of dealing with the material abundance in everyday life is connected to ideas on how to live a minimalist lifestyle. To have less things becomes a kind of countermovement to the contemporary consumer culture. Lesser things mean more order, both actually and symbolically. On the other hand, order could also be achieved through buying more stuff, especially ordering devices from the office realm. Binders, calendars, labels, and boxes make organization possible, and are suggested solutions to problems of clutter and mess. If cleaning is part of everyday maintenance and perceived as dull and burdensome, this ordering is promoted as a creative

and meaningful duty. The piling and filing as suggested by Malone could be seen as inadequate categories in this context. These mundane sorting practices are, in the words of information researchers Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star, "desktop classifications" that are in various ways linked to socially formalized classifications and standards, such as paper formats or internet protocols.[45] The organization, labelling, and color coordinating could be understood as materializations of domestic classification practices. One of the handbooks is structured after different classes of things and how to manage each class: mail, memorabilia, magazines, and recipes are all different objects that each demand diverse managing practices.[46] Besides these products, other classes of objects that pile up on desks also need to be sorted into the right categories (for example, photographs, toys, cactuses, stationary, and books).[47]

The paperless home office seems to be far away, but as a vision and a method of ordering, digitization is a key component in the literature. In the push for a paperless office, the number of items on the desk should be limited to the "[c]omputer, telephone, and a note pad where you have your 'to do'-list. That's enough."[48] The paperless home office is a solution to the ordering problem, often by digitizing documents before they are discarded. Important papers can be photographed, subscription to magazines shifted to digital editions, and thoughts and ideas stored in apps and web services (for example Pinterest, Trello, or Evernote).[49] Despite this, the digital devices of the paperless home office create their own messes, where tangled cords from computers and other electronic appliances need to be taken care of and hidden from sight. The order of files and folders inside the computer or telephone is not a problem that is discussed in the literature.

The discourses around the creation of a clean desk in the domestic realm are both commercial and rational: commercial in that they aim to sell both ordering devices and advice (that is, consulting services and books); rational in the sense that, to create order, the individual should have structured methods for creating a tidy space and to stave off the threat of messiness. IKEA's product-based ordering, the KonMari-method of deletion, the Zen-inspired mindfulness, and the classification of objects are all different methods that could be applied. Despite the differences between these approaches, they all share a goal: the neat and tidy desk and the uncluttered home. Consumer researchers Russell Belk, Joon Yong Seo, and Eric Li note that "a physically disorganized home means a disorganized life and a fragmented and chaotic sense of self."[50] Exercising power over one's belongings

is a representation of self-control. In line with this, the ideal of the clean desk could also be an expression of ideals of how to live one's life.

THE DESK AND THE SELF

From the desk of the efficient office worker of the early 1900s to the desk in the contemporary home, this last section digs deeper into the connection between the desk and the self. A biography about Dag Hammarskjöld describes the office of the Secretary-General of the United Nations in the 1950s as follows: "His desk was always clean—except for some pens and a paper knife."[51] The quote could be read not so much as a description of the actual circumstances, but metaphorically of Hammarskjöld as a person. Or, as it is elaborated in a book on individualization of office space, the desk "is highly charged with subjective-emotional connotations: it marks the territory of its owners and informs us about their status, their private preferences and desires."[52]

Based on American lifestyle magazines, Mark Moss studies "objects on men's desks" as representations of masculine identity and as an arena where masculine identity is expressed. The desk is here a surface to display objects "strategically placed, carefully angled, and thoughtfully selected," giving them a "museum-like aura." Moss' list of items includes photographs in frames, toys, collectibles, games, Zen gardens, sporting paraphernalia, Montblanc pens, clocks, busts, and ceramics. These desk objects are significant for either personal or monetary reasons and show "taste, refinement, power, wealth, erudition, and acquisitiveness." [53] Indeed, the desk is here the territory where status and preferences are mediated. Not only is masculinity expressed, however, but also class, wealth, identity, and nationality (that is, American culture). Moss is not interested in order and chaos but rather in the manifestation of refinement and cultural belonging. Still, the deliberate staging and selection of objects are ordering practices by which the owner tells something about himself. The desk becomes a stage, and the objects become props. This function of the desk as a stage is of course not new, or exclusive for the US. In a survey about the furnishing of Swedish rural homes in the 1950s, the architect Eva Hamrin concludes the following:

> Independent of its design many desks are used as ordinary window-tables in the kitchen chamber or bedroom. Judging from photographs they are often used by the housewife as a place to gather potted plants. It is common to arrange knick-knacks, candlesticks, photographs, books, etc. in pleasing groups, especially in rooms with more distinguished character.[54]

In this quote, desks in the Swedish countryside have a similar function as those described by Moss. The desk objects have little to do with work, writing, or domestic paperwork. Instead, the desk serves as a place to stages items in order to convey the orderliness, neatness, or wealth of the owner. It is no longer a question of whether the desk is neat, messy, or empty—or any of the connotations that could be derived therefrom—but a deliberate way of expressing oneself.

The connection between the desk and the self has been taken as a starting point in the study of personality traits in psychological research. Several experimental studies have used different desk setups to let people extrapolate the character of its occupant. An underlying assumption is that an ordered desk could be used as way of perceiving another person's "high level of Conscientiousness," as Terrence Horgan and his colleagues suggests.[55] The researchers had set up a test environment with desks in different levels of messiness. Participants in the experiment were then seated in the office for ten minutes, after which they were told to describe the character of the desk's owner, using the taxonomy in the Big Five Inventory of personality types. The hypothesis of the experiment was that the "observers would agree about the occupants' personalities solely on the basis of the occupants' workspaces." The results showed that participants perceived an individual owning a neat desk as possessing greater conscientiousness than one with a messy desk.[56] In another experimental psychology study, different desks settings were created based on the DSM–5 manual, a taxonomic diagnostic tool developed by the American Psychiatric Association. This resulted in eleven different layouts, corresponding to different personality styles, for example schizoid (empty sterile desk with no personal items), obsessive-compulsive (organized boxes, to-do lists, arranged orders of items), and passive-aggressive (chaotic and messy desk, dead flowers, unfulfilled tasks). Participants were then asked to choose the desk that reflected their personality best and told to complete a standardized psychological test. The results were then compared, and the conclusion was a "lack of correspondence between personality style and desks."[57]

Regardless of the success or failure of these curious psychological experiments, they seem to propose something similar to graphology, the art or science of determining a person's character from their handwriting. Here, instead, we see a form of *deskology*, where reading someone's desk serves as a method for reading the individual's personal qualities. For Moss, the staging of objects was a deliberate act, but desks in these experiments are read for the signs that are left unconsciously. Our personality traits and

styles are revealed in the residue of our work. The sorting, cleaning, and deletion of these traces could therefore be understood as a way of hiding our true selves behind the clean desk. This effort to classify humans from the character of their workplaces might be one step too far, but in it is a theme that has been reoccurring throughout preceding discussion in this chapter.

CONCLUSION

That cluttered desks are a problem worthy of attention is clear, judging from the books, manuals, newspaper articles, and scientific journals that are written about the topic. A rather disparate choir of philosophers, management theorists, psychologists, home decorators, and professional organizers have promoted the ideal of the clean desk. The attraction of the empty tabletop seems to be a stable discourse over the last 100 years. But even if the choir seems tuned into the same chord, the reasons for having an empty desk vary. The desks in the offices of the early 1900s were essentially critical nodes in larger information networks. Having the desk in order was therefore important for the constant flow of information. Control over the desk implies control over the system. Thus, the desk was a place for managers to exercise power over the workforce. Domestic desk organization in the decades after 1950 were influenced by the office sector. In focus was the paperwork that needed to be done in order to manage the household. The ideal of the clean desk in this context shared similarities with the office realm but lacked the aspect of speed and the importance of flow. Instead, the home office in the postwar period was given the role of an archive that was to be activated on specific occasions, such as the annual filing of taxes. As discussed in the second part of the chapter, the ideal of the clean desk was not only about efficient information management, but it is also part of a wider discourse of cleaning. This means that the variety of "stuff" that needed to be organized expanded, both in the management of information and in the management of items in the home more generally. A clean desk signified an ordered life.

The attractions of the empty desktop go beyond the everyday sorting and cleaning. Desks are both devices where classification of materials takes place (home organization) and tools for the classification of people (experimental psychology). The order of desks can thus also signify social order, materialized in Galloways different desk types and in the cleaning discourses of today. The ordering of desks can be understood on many, intertwined levels, connecting the sorting of paper on the desk with societal orderings of modernity.

NOTES

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2006), 26–33.

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12. Ibid., 106–107.

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14. Abrahamson and Freedman, *A Perfect Mess*, 16–20.

15. John Law, *Organizing Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 1.

16. William H. Leffingwell and Edwin M. Robinson, *Textbook of Office Management* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1950), 258.

17. Thomas Haigh, "Remembering the Office of the Future: The Origins of Word Processing and Office Automation," *IEEE Annals of the History of Computing* 28, no. 4 (October 2006), 11.

18. Alexandra Lange, "White Collar Corbusier: From the Casier to the *cités d'affaires*," *Grey Room*, no. 9 (2002): 63–64.

19. Leffingwell and Robinson, *Textbook*, 258.

20. Lee Galloway, *Office Management, Its Principles and Practice: Covering Organization, Arrangement, and Operation with Special Consideration of the Employment, Training, and Payment of Office Workers* (New York: Ronald Press, 1922), 186

21. Ibid., 89–90. In Galloway's book a range of different desks suited the diverse tasks in an early 20th century office. Galloway mentions such variants like the standard double-pedestal flat-top desk, the "tub" desk (both sitting and standing), the general clerical desk, and the single-pedestal drop-top typewriter desk (chapter IX).

22. Ibid., 91.

23. Ibid., 188–189.

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25. Craig Robertson, *The Filing Cabinet: A Vertical History of Information* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021), 4.

26. Lange, "White Collar Corbusier," 63.

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35. Ad for Facit Privat 1961, box FHA 175 Reklamkampanjer Facit T1, T2 1960, Facit archive, Brukskultur, Åtvidaberg, Sweden.

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41. Charlotte Hagelin, *Mindful home: Fyll ditt hem med liv och ny energi* (Stockholm: The book affair, 2019), 100.

42. Beth Penn, *En liten bok om konsten att städa: Skapa ordning i ditt liv och ditt hem* (Västra Frölunda: Tukan Förlag, 2017), 41.

43. Marie Kondo, *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press), 96–97.

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50. Belk, Seo, and Li, "Dirty Little Secret," 134.

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