

## affecting bodies affecting design

LEMMA I. Bodies are distinguished from one another in respect of motion and rest, quickness and slowness, and *not in respect of substance*....

LEMMA III. A body in motion or at rest must be determined to motion or rest *by another body*, which other body has been determined to motion by a third body, and that third again by a fourth, and so on to infinity. Spinoza, *The Ethics* (93). Emphases added

### Preamble

These thoughts were first articulated as ‘Affecting Bodies’ as a result of a research project I was involved in 2000-1 called ‘Fashion and Modernity.’ As a paper it had a companion piece called ‘TechnoPlumage’ and together they described wearable technology and the account of the body needed to turn an engagement with wearable technology into the production of the cyborg. Both of these are now part of a chapter on becoming cyborg in the book I’m writing. Today, however, these thoughts are taking a slightly different direction. The bodies that will be affected here will lead not to the fashion object in particular, but to designing in general. Furthermore, as we re-articulate bodies in the Spinozistic terms that I’ll outline, we will also find that the stuff<sup>1</sup> of design needs to be understood and practiced anew.

Here, then, lies the most philosophically convoluted relationship in what I’m discussing: bodies = designing. How can I make claims about bodies that are also true for designing? First, we can say that the objects that designing produces operate as bodies in space (thinking in the most physical sense)<sup>2</sup>; so that the bodies that are

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<sup>1</sup> I’m using ‘stuff’ here not to refer only to material like plastic, ceramic, metal &c., but the activities which engage with such materials at all parts of the design process (including terms that have otherwise more idealistic connotations like ‘creativity’ or ‘styling’).

<sup>2</sup> Designing and subjectivity? Well, mainly insofar as designers have agency over matter (through the force of their creativity) and are seen therefore as repositories of subjective power. Bruno Latour’s discussions of the agency of objects in his work on ANT is an interesting diversion from this tradition and needs further investigation of its implications for design.

discussed in conferences, in philosophy and other humanities and social science disciplines and those that designers produce are the same coagulations of matter in space. What we say of one must therefore be true of the other.

Next, we can nuance this further by saying that, traditionally, both bodies and designing are defined by their attitudes to, or their acceptance of, issues regarding form, function, substance and subjectivity. That the following will show a way of moving away from these notions of form, function &c. is given; that such a move is necessary needs a little explanation.

Writing about machines in an essay called 'Regimes, Pathways, Subjects,' Félix Guattari says: 'People have little reason to turn away from machines; which are nothing other than hyperdeveloped and hyperconcentrated forms of certain aspects of human subjectivity, and emphatically not those aspects that polarize people into relations of domination and power' (Guattari 1992:18). Now is not the place to examine this comment in-depth, but what it offers is an observation that there *are* aspects of human subjectivity that polarize people in relations of domination and power. I would contend that these urges to polarize are articulated through discourses of form, function and substance, for these discourses include notions of propriety and impropriety, of ability and disability, of inclusion and exclusion, and so on. If we remove such discourses from the realm of bodies, then what remains is for us to offer an option for articulating bodies in ways which circumvent the polarizing relations noted above. In what follows we will find that discussions of ability, disability, inclusion, exclusion and all the rest have no meaning.

## **Theory+Practice**

*1. Spinoza via Deleuze: Speeds and Slownesses. Pushchair buckle. M&P observation of mother = what is easy for designer is not necessarily easy for user, what is seen as being difficult by designer is seen as taking care by mother.*

One of my ex-students, who now works for Mamas and Papas, was out shopping in the West End one day and noticed a mother fiddling with the buckles on the pushchair in which her toddler was sitting. Being a designer—and therefore hardly ever ‘off-duty’—she went up to ask the woman about her experience of using the pushchair. How was it? Was it easy to use? ‘Yes, very easy’ the woman replied, at the same time still having trouble with fastening the buckles. This sort of example is usually interpreted by designers as highlighting the difference between what users/consumers say about their engagements with designed objects and what they do; thus, valorizing the perceived need for designers to ignore what is said by users in favour of observing them. However, there’s another interpretation.

For Gilles Deleuze, in his essay ‘Ethology: Spinoza and Us’, Spinoza’s body can be described thus: first, in terms of a ‘kinetic proposition’ (cf. Lemma I); second, a ‘dynamic’ one (cf. Lemma III). Deleuze elaborates the first like this:

Thus, the kinetic proposition tells us that a body is defined by relations of motion and rest, of slowness and speed between particles. That is, it is not defined by a form or by functions.... A composition of speeds and slownesses on a plane of immanence.... One never commences; one never has a tabula rasa; one slips in, enters in the middle; one takes up or lays down rhythms.... (Deleuze 1992:626).

In doing this, one is placing oneself within a network of flows, connections between bodies and things are made; one is not alone, single, or simple. Whether these connections occur with or through other bodies, or with or through various parts of the ‘one’ body, the emphasis here is on the process of ‘becoming’. The different particles that compose the body are not the ends—the aims, or finalities—of the body; the body is not the sum total of its bits, its points; its organs are not added up to

provide proper organization. These points, bits, organs *are moved through*, at various speeds and slownesses, connecting but not encompassing.

To articulate bodies according to this kinetic proposition, then, we must listen to the rhythms according to which these speeds and slownesses ebb and flow; in this way, bodies—as concretizations or liquifications of various intensities—connect in a matrix of becomings. As these relations of speeds and slownesses occur, as connections are made, as lines of flight are taken, so the ordinary aspect of a single body—alone in its individuality—is disrupted. According to this kinetic proposition, bodies exist only in relation to each other, and the sum of all these relations can never be exhausted.

Returning to the design example introduced above, where the designer sees problems to rectify, difficulties to remedy and obstacles to overcome (issues about form and function and substance), the mother, in this case, was performing a task which through the time it took to get right expressed a level of care that she was showing for the safety and comfort of her child. The pushchair is not a conceptually static object: though, if you look merely at its ostensible function—to carry a baby/small child—it may seem so. The pushchair is not rigid in the sum total of all its finalities. By looking at the various becomings within which it is culturally located, we may be able to break the object out of any imposed rigidity and thereby release a number of new possibilities for its design. New cultural connections of this object have appeared to do this: no longer simply a *carriage for babies*, the various other objects within its plane of immanence are—to name only two—4x4s and golf carts require us fundamentally to redress our understanding of this object. M&P have recently used these speeds and slownesses to offer new possibilities for articulating pushchairs.

This, then, brings us onto our second bodily concept...

*2. Dishwasher has explicit function of cleaning dishes; affect of clear surfaces, no handwashing, different notion of personal time.*

A visit to the consultancy Design Continuum in Milan a couple of years ago brought to my attention a conceptual project they did for a Electrolux. On one hand, there may not be much that can be done with a dishwasher: its form and function seem quite limited and limiting. The dishwasher's explicit function is to wash dishes and it borrows its form from (clothes) washing machines. But, again, we may think of it differently. Deleuze's explanation of Spinoza's Lemma III, goes like this: 'The second [dynamic] proposition concerning bodies refers us to the capacity for affecting or being affected. You will not define a body (or mind) by its form, nor by its organs or functions, and neither will you define it as a substance or a subject' (Deleuze 1992:626).

If, in the first case, we were shown how speeds and slownesses provide the rhythms according to which bodies are both thought and felt, thereby encouraging their multiplicitous becomings—and dissolving the need to talk of bodies in terms of form and function—in the second case, the 'dynamic', Deleuze describes the relevance of 'affects' over 'substance'. The determination of the 'affective capacity' of a body comes from the disorganization of its ordinary connections within social, scientific, natural, cultural (or whatever) schema and the allowing of many different properties to be re-connected in other, creative ways. Where the kinectic describes the possibilities for new connections, the dynamic engages the forces which bind (or reject) these connections. Deleuze explains: 'Take any animal and make a list of affects, in any order. Children know how to do this: Little Hans, in the case reported

by Freud, makes a list of affects of a draft horse pulling a cart in a city (to be proud, to have blinders, to go fast, to pull a heavy load, to collapse, to be whipped, to kick up a racket, and so on)' (Deleuze 1992: 626). Furthermore, in *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* (1990), Deleuze writes: 'A horse, a fish, a man, or even two men compared with one another, do not have the same capacity to be affected: they are not affected by the same things, or not affected by the same things in the same way' (217). If bodies are kinetically described—if we take account of the speeds and slownesses of the rhythms of their connections to other bodies and things—then they cannot help but affect other bodies. Once we have made material connections (and uncouplings) between bodies, their constituent parts and everything else, then the intensive properties of the new ways in which these connections (or disconnections) are charted are the affective capacities. The Spinozistic body thus allows for multiple connections; and with multiple connections come multiple subjective possibilities.

The consideration of the affective capacities of the dishwasher may lead—and did for Design Continuum—to other possibilities. An affect of a dishwasher is (among other things) to keep the kitchen's surfaces clear of both dirty and drying crockery, cutlery, pots and pans. It may also affect the movement of these objects around the home. It also may affect the owners life in other ways: frees time, displays certain cultural values, and so on. Once such dynamics are qualified, its kinetic possibilities can be re-expressed. Design Continuum's best outcomes had more connections to cabinets and storage that cleaned, than to washing machines that could be camouflaged to fit one's interior design choices. The pushchairs mentioned earlier also activate affective capacities through their multiplicitious vectoral connections: for the mother seemingly struggling with the straps, the dynamics of her activity take us elsewhere—to show care, to take time with safety and so on. These objects not only

relate to these other objects in a system, but the very system of symbiotic affections is changed by these relations. If pushchairs and dishwashers are changed by their speeds, slownesses and affects, then so are 4x4s, golf carts, kitchens.

## **Final Thoughts**

### *1. Philosophical considerations*

We saw Guattari, in a passage quoted earlier, mention that machines are nothing other than hyperconcentrated and hyperdeveloped forms of ‘certain aspects’ of human subjectivity (1992: X); these machines—understood as speeds, slownesses and affective capacities—exist in a massively connected soup with humans. Again we are discussing becoming; and, again, Deleuze and Guattari write: ‘The line or block of becoming that unites the wasp and the orchid produces a shared deterritorialization: of the wasp, in that it becomes a liberated piece of the orchid’s reproductive system, but also of the orchid, in that it becomes the object of an orgasm in the wasp, also liberated from its own reproduction’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 293). The points—linguistically and culturally marked separately, *individually*, as ‘orchid’ and ‘wasp’—are not just linked, nor even merely mixed. The symbiotic relationship in which these ‘two’ ‘things’ exist has them co-evolutionarily connected in such a way as to render them as different affects of one orchid-wasp machine. In terms of the kinetic, we can forget form, function individual subjectivities of orchid or wasp, their specific shapes or genetic make-ups; but instead undo their organizations so that their various parts engage with each other in different ways, and engage with their environments in different ways too (with other wasps, insects or animals; with other plants or landscapes or weather patterns). Dynamically, all these points of becoming have a multiplicity of intensive, energetic affects on each other (and everything else). The

orchid and the wasp are not even separate points, but regions of intensity that are passed through by lines of flight and becoming, on vectors along which the associated points blur into indistinction, or recombine in hybridically different ways. Remember Guattari's passage about machines? Humans and machines existing in a murky soup of affective, speedy, slow connections, blurring into or distinguishing from each other as intensities demand.

## *2. What is the outcome for thinking about design?*

I have written elsewhere about the consequences for design practices of thinking nonlinearly, of thinking about design in a chaotic multiply connected world. That the contemporary globally interconnected, interrelated and interdependent flows of concepts, skills, information, capital (and the rest) demands a similar way of structuring design practices: as fluid, massively connected, open, colliding networks, made up of fluid, massively connected, open, colliding elements. What is true of design as business practice is also true of design as creative (or 'innovative' to be trendy) endeavour. As I hope to have introduced today, to think of what once seemed to be simple, discrete, individual units within strictures of form, function, substance and subjectivity is limiting at best and dangerous at worst. This is true of bodies and it is true of designed objects. One of the ways around this is to uncouple supposedly creative thinking from these limiting concepts by using the Spinozistic techniques we've encountered. I'm not saying that this is the only way; for if we reflect the same conceptual rigour onto this conceptual framework, we must see that it too can connect with others (e.g. Cultural Capital, Discourse Theory, Object Narratives, Actor-Network Theory), and encourage concepts and practices to collide and deflect on new, intensive, creative voyages. And so on.



Thank you.

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