**Material and Rational Feminisms: some notes toward a contribution to a humane architecture**

Peg Rawes and Doug Spencer

*Introductory remarks*

**Peg Rawes:** This is a conversation in progress, and for my part, a response to the current political situation in the UK and the US, which suggest that feminisms, including feminist forms of rationality, are even more societally necessary. Might reasoning or rational thinking be tactics, modes or strategies that feminism can take up in its practices? I say this as someone trained in feminist philosophy, where reason and rational thinking have been considered the ‘opposition’ or ‘the problem’: normally associated with universal, transcendental and male forms of Enlightenment philosophy, and therefore very actively critiqued by significant feminist continental philosophers (e.g. Irigaray, 1985; Butler, 1993; Grosz, 2001). However, given the strong denigration of reasoning in the public sphere by ‘charismatic’ politicians who claim power through an abandonment of rational thinking, perhaps we need to rethink this. Also, in the UK, expertise and experts are being discredited in ideological attacks on the Higher Education sector by populist, anti-institutional ideologies from both sides of the political spectrum. There is a very *real* sense that knowledge derived from engaged, rational or technical practices – which I take to also include specific feminist histories, knowledges and practices across disciplines and training – are not being promoted or defended in the public political sphere.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Douglas Spencer:** Our discussions, as well as concerned with questions of reason and rationality, have also been prompted by my own recent critique of the discourse of affect in architecture (Spencer, 2016). I’ve been arguing that the so-called ‘affective turn’ is effectively complicit with a processes of subjectification within and for neoliberalism, especially in respect of how we are fashioned as essentially emotive and affective beings, and in terms of the denigration of our reasoning capacities accompanying this process. I would want to note, drawing together the issues of affect, architecture and feminism, that these same affirmations of affect which I critique within architecture can also be found within certain currents of feminist thinking, such as its ‘new materialist’ forms.

My argument is not that we should recover reason at the *expense* of affect, but that we need to find ways of thinking the two things together, especially if we are to overcome conceiving of them as essentially opposed terms. Whereas for Peg Spinoza is perhaps the central thinker through whom we might move forward toward this end, for me it is the thought of Theodor Adorno, particularly as expressed within his and Max Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1972).

*Materialisms and Ecologies*

PR: Feminist thinking and materiality are intimately linked. Very important and creative work has been done on this, which has produced pre-histories, e.g. Judith Butler’s matrixial etymologies (Butler, 1993), and significant feminist architectural histories, theories and design practices, including many colleagues who are participating in this conference.[[2]](#footnote-2) Two modes of feminist materialist thinking highlight its importance for architecture. Both are related to Marxist critiques of capital, and an affirmation of affect. First, Luce Irigaray (1985) and Silvia Frederici’s (2012) work on reproductive labour and difference is in sympathy with colleagues who have discussed women, work and architecture (e.g. Rendell, 2001; Brown, 2013, and Parlour, 2014), and which now have a renewed value because of the detrimental impact of unpaid labour that affects significant numbers of female and male academics and practitioners. Over the past few years, unpaid labour and poor reproductive rights and caring provision (and, by extension, ‘care of the self’) in the academic and architectural professional environments, have come to be defined as ‘affective’ forms of labour; for example, the precarious job security of young lecturers is reflected in *The Guardian’s* recent report of an academic who earns a salary of £6000 from 3 different institutions (Weale, 2016), and concerns that leading UK universities are now using zero-hour contracts for part-time lecturing positions: situations very familiar to part-time architectural lecturers, especially for those who teach in the architectural humanities.

The second reason to advocate materialist feminism is because of the techno-scientific formation of architecture and the built environment (Rawes 2016a). Very good examples of feminist thinkers have shown that this kind of critique has ethical and societal significance: for example, Donna Haraway’s ‘companion species’ (2008), Isabelle Stengers ‘ethics of practice’ (1997) and Karen Barad’s ‘agental realism’ (2007). These writers present critical and creative analyses of science and technology within humanities and aesthetic research, revising rationalism in a manner so that it can then be used to tackle pressing issues about the techno-scientific formation of society. As a consequence, feminisms may critically engage with techno-science, rather than oppose narratives of reasoning, in order to question the biological and political definitions society, self and care, such as narratives that are produced in neurocognitive science. These very powerful visual and cognitive forms of representation are often taken as dominant material and social ‘truths’, but without any reconstruction of subjectivity or of politics: ‘proofs’ which are some of the most universal (and, for feminists, obsolete) concepts of subjectivity that reconfirm normativity. Despite all the ‘brilliance’ of these sciences, their positivist origins are used to undermine understandings of reciprocity or responsibility with the societal and political forces within which we live and work. Secondly, given that commercial architecture and our cities are being substantially transformed by large-scale techno-scientific systems – especially the drive towards automated and industrialised forms of computational design, including BIM – architectural feminists (men and women) need to directly engage in these discussions. If feminist architectural critique fails to debate science, technology and rationalism, is it in danger of being permanently consigned to an irrelevant ‘anti-rationalist’ margin that is deemed viable only at the small scale rather than at the public and private infrastructural large scale? Of course, I also say this, as someone who shares in this responsibility to develop new ways to engage, to learn, and to challenge pedagogies which reproduce the ‘same’ instrumental forms of practice that reproduce standard models of power and control (and which exclude feminine forms of reasoning).

DS: Thinking of the relationship between materialism and feminism, it strikes me that we have, on the one hand, an older ‘materialism’, a ‘dialectical’ or historical ‘materialism’ with which Simone de Beauvoir was, of course, very much engaged (Beauvoir, 1978). This was critical to her understanding of how ‘woman’ was produced as a historical category, and of how ‘woman’ was produced as the ‘other’ to man through a range of material, political, cultural and technological means. On the other hand, we have a so-called ‘new materialism’ which has in some sense presented itself as an advance over all those older and critical practices that have been invested in the study of the linguistic, the semiotic, the textual (Bennett, 2010; Coole and Frost, 2010; Dolphijn and Tuin, 2012). The progressive promise of this new materialism is that in bypassing such forms of mediation we will somehow bypass systems of power; that we will achieve some more immediate engagement with the material world. But this is a false immediacy. Within our field, it implies that we can study and understand architecture simply in terms of its apparently obvious presence, in terms of its immediate materiality. Any properly critical theorisation of architecture, though, would want to stress that architecture is not immediate but *mediated* and *mediating*. Think, for, instance, of Fredric Jameson’s statement that architecture is ‘that constitutive seam between the economic organization of society and the aesthetic production of its (spatial) art’ (Jameson, 1991: 121). Architecture is also mediated by, and mediating of, the environmental, the political, the cultural the technological and, perhaps most of all, conditions and practices of labour. An exclusive focus on matter will tend to obscure the nature and work of those mediations.

*The Promises and Problematics of Affect*

PR: My interest in affect is concerned with its efficacy for biopolitical thinking and practices. Feminist philosophies of affect, particularly through Rosi Braidotti’s writing (2013), take it to be a necessary counter-argument to the negative forms of oppositional debate in contemporary politics: e.g. as found in the UK’s parliamentary chamber, which spatially reflects the negatively-defined form of political difference in policy and party position, and is therefore also, politically, a repetition of the same. As is so currently evident in the UK, there is very little opportunity for political transformation in this order, showing the need for and potential of political affect, rather than just ‘sensory affect’.

I find Baruch Spinoza’s discussion of affect valuable here, particularly because he is a rational philosopher of the late seventeenth century writing in the Dutch Republic at a time of intensive urbanisation and in an early modern neoliberal society: a very sympathetic setting to northern Europe today. Also, as a Jewish thinker, his subjectivity and position of thinking is with, and of, difference. His notion of affect in *The Ethics* [1677] is a political philosophy (Spinoza, 1993), which materialises the ‘passions’ – i.e. the *powers* of the emotions – through a forensic analysis of their differences, yet presented in a ‘geometric method’ which repurposes Euclid’s geometry. Placing science and emotion together, this is an early form of psychoanalysis (see Damasio, 2003). It advocates for our passionate powers of reasoning but, importantly, reasoning is not divorced from our capacity to produce rational forms of agency. This is the rationalism that Deleuze and Guattari remove from Spinoza, because of their anti-enlightenment project, but perhaps we could benefit from returning to it? Particularly if we understand Spinoza to be a practitioner of affective powers and alterity he can then be linked to Foucault’s work on biopolitics. Nevertheless, unlike Foucault’s negative definition of biopolitics and biopowers (2008), Spinoza releases affect so that it becomes a production of care of the self, where ratio is not only inhumane (as Foucault suggests), but can be the humane care of self, and hence society. This seems very valuable to me, because it produces a kind of rational power which is lost in many other narratives of sensory or bodily affect. Instead, for Spinoza, affect is produced as a form of ratio or reasoning, which produces difference rather than sameness (Rawes, 2017 in press). Also, historically, Spinoza’s thinking is located in an early phase of Enlightenment when there is a dynamic and mobile understanding of individuation, before 18thc Enlightenment philosophy and law codify subjectivity into universal, moral, autonomous forms of individuation.

After Spinoza, then, feminist *ratio is located in human difference*, not sameness. An affirmative dissimiliarity that is constituted between our bodily, mental, ecological and political realities, and through which differentiated societies can be built, rather than normative, technocratic monocultures. Unlike Agamben’s influential but negative theory of the human as lack or exception (Agamben, 1998), Spinoza’s relational theory is a ‘biopower’ which has ‘a care with’ poststructuralist ethical imaginaries that do not exclusively return to oppositional forms of individuation. His proto-materialist essay about *humane ratio* has a ‘critical sympathy’ (Haraway 2008) that accords with feminist practitioners, including: economists, Julie Graham and Katherine Gibson (2006), and architectural professionals who promote ethical, affirmative and diverse modes of practice.

DS: As Peg notes, Deleuze and Guattari’s treatment of Spinoza occurs in the context of their own particular project. The pronounced anti-Hegelian aspect of this project means that they seek to circumvent theories and practices of mediation and the dialectic. Instead Deleuze and Guattari pursue an affirmative philosopy of immediacy and immanence. This is the context in which we ought to understand the quote that Deleuze famously takes from Spinoza, that ‘we do not even know what a body is capable of’ (Deleuze, 1992: 226). Prior to the intellect, and to any linguistic mediation of experience in the form of ideas, we can locate the immediacy of the body as a site of experience and affirm its potentials. This quotation, in turn, becomes endlessly repeated and recycled by others, in other contexts and to other ends, to the point where it *seems* like a body can do anything and everything, and that therefore *all* we need is a body. So this notion of what a body can do is supposed to be grounded in immediacy but is in fact itself the product of the multiple mediations on which it affirmation depends.

As for my own concerns around the so-called ‘affective turn’ in architecture, I’ll start by referring to Sylvia Lavin’s *Kissing Architecture* (Lavin, 2011). When she says in this book that ‘No one can speak when kissing’ (Lavin, 2011:14), this captures her absolute affirmation of affect and the body, her belief that these can and will do everything for us, and that we do not need language, speech or interpretation because meaning is of little concern. Similar arguments can also be located in Farshid Moussavi’s affirmations of affect in architecture and her claims regarding the end of the efficacy of language (Moussavi, 2009). Lars Spuybroek’s *The Sympathy of Things* also follows a similar line of argumentation, suggesting that we don’t need to think about the material world because it is quite capable of thinking for itself, and that rather than meaning we should develop a sympathetic *feeling* for things Spuybroek, 2011: 96).

These affirmations of affect, as exclusively sufficient to our experience of the world, are typically conceived as being opposed to the apparently intellectualised, distanced and essentially negative practices of critical theory, practices for which Adorno has come to stand as a figurehead in this context (O’Sullivan, 2001). If we step away from the common caricatures of Adorno’s thought, though, we find something within it that is both important and pertinent to an analysis of the relations between reason and affect. For Adorno, the subject can never be *identified* with its body. Nor can it be *identified* with its thought. In fact, at the heart of patriarchy — and this is precisely the term used by Adorno and Horkheimer in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* — there is a constititive split between reason and feeling on which a whole raft of further dualisms and hierarchical relations are founded. So, from this perspective, I find the splitting off and valorising of the body and affect from the negatively defined reasoning and intellectual capacities of the subject troubling.

A further critical concern around the affirmation of affect is that when isolated in itself it can easily and readily be deployed as an instrument of subjectifying power, especially when we are invited to respond to our experience of the world *only* in terms of our immediate perceptions. José Antonio Maravall, for instance, has written about this mode of affective individuation as an instrument of power in the Baroque (Maravall, 1986). In *Culture of the Baroque* he understands Baroque architecture as a protypical form of urban mass media. Its role for the counter-reformation, he argues, and in a situation in which the masses are in the process of constituting themselves as a critically reasoning body, is to dispel and disperse the force of this potential through processes of individuation. Architecture’s role, especially in its use of ornament, is to absorb the attention of the subject in a sensually charged individual experience of the city, as opposed to a collectively reasoned critique of its existing conditions.

*Architecture and reason*

PR: My interest in architectural aspects of ratio comes from working with colleagues on a project about how Spinoza’s ratio can help to critique the chronic dysfunctions in housing equity in the UK (Rawes and Lord, 2016; Rawes, 2017; Dorling, 2014; Moore, 2015; Wainwright 2015): issues which are of course also very evident in the EU and globally. I am also interested in highlighting the value of reasoning in the architectural discipline, against the tendency for an anti-rationalist debate which has become rather naturalised in some feminist thinking (cf. Irigaray), but is at odds with the positive ways in which women architects are trained and work. Women (and men) in architecture clearly do encounter significant issues of alienation from agency as a result of techno-scientific and economic pressures, but colleagues also possess affective powers of reasoning – humane ratios – that compose critical and ethical practices. So, my attention to ratio is in part to valorise the work of feminist practitioners in the built environment; for example, Parlour and ArchiteXX, who show this to be already taking place by redirecting professional, legal, political and rational languages to expose inequalities, enable equity and feminist strategies. These techniques also resonate with the work of researchers outside the education sector, including housing and welfare charities’ research into the histories and formation of housing inequality (e.g. Martin, 2016; Shelter, 2015; Joseph Rowntree, 2016). Such researchers create powerful empirical and rational critiques that have political affect and demonstrate material history. Of course, we all know that data is not neutral, but these researchers also expose the effects of its negative values, something which Spinoza also recognised in his philosophy of powerful and weak affects; and, again, valuable powers of critique for rational feminist practices.

DS: What we can find in Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and before them, in the writings of Siegfried Kracauer, is a strong critique of enlightenment rationality. This is not a call to abandon reason altogether, but to understand it dialectically. This dialectical critique is perhaps best captured in Kracauer’s essay ‘The Mass Ornament’ (Kracauer, 1995). Writing in late 1920’s, and against propositions that revolution be achieved through an absolute countering of rationality, such as were pursued within Surrealism, he argues the there is a need to be more and not less rational in order to contest the irrational powers of industrial capitalism. Rationality is for Kracauer a stalled project. It has become mired in an instrumental and calculative logic — captured as an instrument of capitalism, we might say — which should be distinguished from the liberatory potential of *reason* as a critical human faculty.

Something akin to this proposition of Kracauer’s can be also found, in a more elaborated form, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* where Adorno and Horkheimer address the Sirens episode from Homer’s *The Odyssey*. In this episode the Sirens lure unwitting sailors toward them, on the rocks, with their irresistible song. Prototypically entrepreneurial forms of reasoning, identified with masculinity, are threatened by expressions of sensuality personified as feminine and characterised as archaic. Sailors heeding the call of the Sirens, as they must upon hearing it, are rewarded with absolute knowledge of past and future, but the cost of this knowledge is death. In this mythic episode, then, the relationship between knowledge and the passions is figured as troubled and troubling. For Adorno and Horkheimer, Odysseus’ solution to this quandary is itself equally fraught, and their own retelling of the Sirens episode is presented as an allegory of how the dualisms on which patriarchy depends are founded.

The cunning Odysseus identifies an escape clause that will enable him to encounter the Sirens without succumbing to their enchantments. He will have himself tightly bound to the mast of the ship he commands, so that when he hears the Siren’s call he will be physically unable to respond to it. When Odysseus — the master — calls upon his oarsmen — the labour force — to steer the ship toward the rocks they cannot respond because he has commanded them, in advance, to block their ears with wax. This is, for Adorno and Horkheimer, a foundational moment in the establishment of patriarchal dualism and of a whole unresolved problematic of the Enlightenment, precisely because of the separation of reason from affect that it implies. This moment marks a turn after which the sensuous can only be experienced under the categorical conditions of art. Odysseus, the prototypically entrepreneurial figure, can only experience the sensuous at some remove. He is, say Adorno and Horkheimer, like the concertgoer bound to his seat for the duration of the performance. On the other hand, the workers, here represented by the oarsman at Odysseus’ command, are rendered insensible. The division of labour also divides conditions of experience.

So Odysseus’ victory over the Sirens is Pyrrhic. *The* *Odyssey* is recast in Adorno and Horkheimer’s retelling as a tragedy because when thought and feeling are separated from one another both are impoverished, damaged. Thought and feeling need to be reunited in order to remedy the suffering that follows from their separation, in order to escape the ‘infinite regression’ of enlightenment.

*Critique*

PR: Reason and ratio are consistent with the work of demystifying ideological structures of thought, and, as I mentioned earlier, very necessary practices at the moment. I also see this affective ratio as a kind of biopower which is cognisant of Foucault’s biopolitics, but also differentiated from his oppressive and inhumane form of ratio (i.e. not of a humane humanism). It is only at the very end of his writings in the mid 80s that Foucault allows for a humane ratio when he talks about technologies of the self (Martin et al., 1988). In contrast, in Spinoza and also in feminist architecture, I would suggest that there are very good forms of humane ratio, as well as the demystification of inhumane powers that colleagues work against.

DS: Wherever we read that dualisms must be challenged, and that this involves rejecting critical theory, I think that what’s happening is in fact a reinforcing of dualisms but with a reversal of the polarity between the affirmed and the negated, rather than any real overcoming of the binary oppositions through which they are conceived. This happens when the material and the immediate are affirmed over the critical and the mediated. I also think that Deleuze and Guattari are deeply implicated in this shortcoming, not only in their own writings, but also in the ways that these have been appropriated. Their thought often works with and through binaries — the striated and the smooth, the tree and the rhizome, for instance — and they are, however they might qualify this, always affirming one of the terms in the binary over the other (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983; Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). In terms of maintaining the dualism between feeling and reason I find Deleuze’s remarks in his book on Francis Bacon especially egregious (Deleuze, 2008). Here he praises Bacon’s painting because, he claims, it works on the basis of affect, operating directly upon the nervous system and entirely bypassing the brain and its cognitive labours. This makes little sense physiologically and experientially, but the more important point is that it is symptomatic of Deleuze’s outright rejection of the dialectic and of the philosophy of Hegel. This leaves his thought unable to countenance mediation and, in turn, ill-equipped to overcome the binaries which it encounters. Instead he resorts to affirming bodily affect over mental reasoning.

Adorno’s encounter with Hegel’s dialectic is itself dialectical and, consequently, far better able than is Deleuze’s thought to work through the binary of feeling and reason in a fashion that looks to how their dualistic conception can be overcome. Adorno’s complaint with Hegel’s dialectic is that its teleology is charted on a course toward the realisation of pure spirit, of spirit knowing itself. For Adorno this is a forgetting of the body, specifically a forgetting of the ‘belly’ (Adorno, 1973: 23), and he seeks to bring this back into the dialectic, without it being at the cost of the absolute rejection of spirit.

*Labour*

PR: Through critique I want to come back to the importance of labour, and end with a few comments about the inhumane ratios that currently undermine sustainable inhabitation in the HE and architectural spheres, and to consider whose responsibility this is. These remarks come from conversations with my students and a contribution to The Architecture Lobby’s *Asymmetric Labor* publication, edited by Peggy Deamer and an international ‘union’ of students (Rawes, 2016b). First, as a member of the pedagogic elite, I am partly responsible for educational practices that create productive young ‘architectural bodies’. With my colleagues I help to develop affirmative discursive environments which produce students with professional and political aspirations, and critical powers about their employability. But this is also a precarious set of skills for many graduates, because when work is available, it is often poorly paid, and has little security. Secondly, many graduates undertaking doctorates have to balance the labour of their academic qualification alongside the labour of parenting (rather than previous generations who were advised to produce a PhD before a family): again challenging expectations, given the competitiveness of the PhD/young career researcher markets combined with parenting responsibilities and child-care costs. The final element in this nexus is housing, which includes the unaffordability of rents, and unsustainable travel between home and work. Again, these are discussions that were present 20-30 years ago, but are back as the norm for researchers who may well be in their 40s (rather than in their late 20s, as was the case in earlier generations). These are real life ratios in architectural work that feminist practices can directly address, and often do.

DS: The types of labour Peg refers to are largely invisible, and this is a critical issue, especially where we are concerned with affective and so-called immaterial labour. There is work, in itself, to be done on making such forms of labour visible. But this work of making labour visible also bears upon the upper strata of architectural production which seems unable to acknowledge any type of labour whatsoever. It can’t acknowledge the conceptual labour of design, preferring to attribute this to algorithimic operations or to putatively natural processes of computation. It certainly can’t acknowledge the forms of labour involved in the construction of its phantasmagoric and architectural productions. As a critical response to this, I think that we need ourselves to practice the forms of cognitive, and not just affective, labour that will allow us to critically comprehend and interpret these productions and the various forms of labour they involve.

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1. This opening remark has been tempered to some extent by the international Women’s Marches on 21 January 2017, against Trump and in support of women in the US, marking a brief public and affecting occupation of major city spaces for women’s rights. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Colleagues who are published in this anthology and the accompanying *Architecture and Culture* issue, together with Jane Rendell and …. [I’d like to insert names of key colleagues who chaired/participated, but are not in either publication]. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)