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### Under the Light of a Posthuman Feminist Approach to Space

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# Under the Light of a Posthuman Feminist Approach to Space

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### **Abstract**

There is are a wide variety of critical approaches to social sciences engaged in decentring the human in favour of the nonhuman. I aim to share some of these perspectives to analyse spatial design away from the usual rational practices and accepted conventions. As a researcher, I made an ethical commitment to explore spatial performativity under what Donna Haraway addresses as “the located view from a body” (Haraway, 1988, p. 589) (in this case, mine; a woman’s body), a vision that is “always complex, contradictory, structuring and structured, that stands versus the view from above or from nowhere” (Ibid, p. 589).: a sort of multidimensional subjectivity.

I will expose some of the contributions of feminist philosophers: Donna Haraway, Karen Barad, Jane Bennet, Rosi Braidotti and Bronwyn Davies. These thinkers provoked me to observe actively and intuitively nonhuman agency and those deemed as posthuman practices in architecture and scenography. According to Haraway, how to see is the scientific question in feminism (Ibid, p.587).

I invite the reader to engage in understanding that space is a vibrant matter, and to picture it as a witty agent and not as a resource. Jane Bennet claims that the most critical driving force behind the nonhuman turn is how it might help us live more sustainably, with less violence toward various bodies (Bennet, 2015, p. 235). This ethical call ought to make sense to architects or scenographers who would like to expand their relation to space into a more-than-human approach.

*Keywords:* material feminism / posthuman performances / vibrant matter / expanding scenography

## Under the Light of a Posthuman Feminist Approach to Space

There is a wide variety of current critical approaches to the social sciences engaged in decentring the human in favour of the nonhuman. I aim to share some of these perspectives to analyse design and space separately from the accepted conventions. As a female researcher I made an ethical commitment to explore spatial performativity under what American philosopher Donna Haraway (1988) addresses as “the located view from a body” (Haraway, 1988, p. 589) (in this case, mine; a woman’s body). A vision that is “always complex, contradictory, structuring and structured, that stands versus the view from above or from nowhere, from simplicity” (p. 589), a sort of multidimensional subjectivity. “How to see? Where to see from? What to see for? Whom to see with? Who gets blinded? Who wears blinders?” According to Haraway, *how* to see is the science question in posthuman feminism (p. 587).

Besides Haraway, I expose some of the contributions of feminist philosophers such as Karen Barad (2003), Jane Bennet (2010), Erin Manning (2015), Rosi Braidotti (2022) and Bronwyn Davis (1992) that engaged me into an intuitive and active observation of the nonhuman agency of space and those which could count as posthuman practices in architecture and scenography.

While investigating more-than-human spatial phenomena in scenography, I was attracted by the work of American feminist theorist Karen Barad, who calls into question the givenness of the differential categories of “human” and “nonhuman”, examining the practices through which these differential boundaries are stabilised and destabilised (2003, p. 808). Barad claims that *all* bodies, not merely human bodies, come to matter through the world’s iterative intra-activity and that BODIES are NOT OBJECTS BUT BEINGS IN THEIR DIFFERENTIAL BECOMING (p. 818). Barad explains performativity as a “materialist, naturalist, and post humanist elaboration that allows matter its due as an active participant in the world’s becoming” (p. 803) challenging the idea that it is the *thinking* of the human spectator which creates a location for a spatial assemblage. This is one of the premises from the posthuman approach that I use to observe, recognize and celebrate the agency of space as a nonhuman entity.

Following Barad’s perspective, a posthuman approach is about taking issue with human exceptionalism while being also accountable for the role we play in the differential constitution and positioning of the human among other creatures. At this point, I think that space is neither fixed and given, nor the mere end result of different processes. Space is produced and productive, generated, and generative. Space is agentic, and not a fixed essence.

In Barad’s analysis, she argues that the primary ontological unit is not “independent objects” but rather PHENOMENA. In her elaboration, phenomena do not merely mark the

epistemological INSEPARABILITY OF OBSERVER AND OBSERVED; rather, phenomena are the ONTOLOGICAL ENTANGLEMENT OF INTRAACTING AGENCIES. The world is to be understood as a dynamic process of intra-activity and materialisation.

This ongoing flow of agency through which part of the world makes itself differentially intelligible to another part of the world does not take place in space and time but happens in the making of spacetime itself. It is through specific intra-actions that phenomena come to matter-in both senses of the word (p. 139-140).

In summary, Barad proposes that the primary ontological units are not "things" but phenomena-dynamic-topological reconfigurings / entanglements / relationalities / (re)articulations of the world. This dynamism is called agency. And agency as such, is not an attribute but the on-going reconfiguring of the world. She claims that "the universe is agential intra-activity in its becoming" (p. 141).

Following these ideas and the path of my own intuition, I take the ideas of Canadian philosopher Erin Manning when she asserts that intuition activates the proposition at the heart of the as-yet-unthought and that art is a manner of becoming (2015, p. 45). "Intuition activates the smallest vibrational intervals — human and nonhuman — that lurk at the interstices of experience" (p. 48). This is how the artwork becomes capable of attuning to the force of its own potential in a way that exceeds its initial proposition.

When the work stands up, it creates its own momentum, its own block of sensation, its own field of forces (...) the work evolves into a becoming that could have not been mapped in advance. The relational field activated by the work's outdoing of itself touches an ecology that does not place the human at the centre of experience" (p. 59-60).

Under the light of Manning's own intuition, she affirms that artfulness is always more than human.

American political theorist Jane Bennet is another philosopher that has been a major source that influenced my reflections on space design, as well as my own thinking. She claims that the driving force behind the nonhuman turn is how it might help us live more sustainably, with less violence toward a variety of bodies. I hope that this sort of philosophical call makes sense to any architect or scenographer that would like to expand the ethics of their use of space. In her article "Systems and things" (2015, p. 223-224) she points out that the recent turn toward nonhumans takes place within a complex swarm of other intellectual, affective, scientific, and political-economic trends and it can be understood as an attempt to depict a world populated by lively and essentially interactive materialities that make "calls" upon us and demand our attention. I will invite the reader to engage into understanding space as A WITTY AGENT AND NOT AS A RESOURCE.

Furthermore, I will bring attention to feminist theorist Rosi Braidotti's political analysis, where she argues that a posthuman turn [away from white men and patriarchy] is needed as a corrective and alternative to the intersecting critiques of power. Her call is for the equal participation of all in the discussion about what we are capable of becoming. From Braidotti's perspective, new materialism is a plane of encounter between scholarly and activist communities coming from different theoretical traditions. Her stance takes ideas from the primacy granted to the human body, to a more expanded definition of materialism that includes nonhuman elements as well as technology. She claims that

materialism is about being embodied and embedded. It is a philosophy of immanence as well as of realism, that assumes that matter is vital, intelligent, and self-organising. Matter cannot be reduced to a social construction but should be understood to exist independently of human representation and should include a structural relationship to nonhuman entities" (2012, p. 110).

The same train of thought should apply to our ideas about space.

Braidotti's perspective helped me to attempt a daring connection between my scenographic work and the marginalised materialism of ancient Indigenous thought. Long before the arrival of the European colonizers, the Mesoamerican societies were organised around impressive ceremonial centres, which were in turn constructed to reflect the cosmos through architecture and artworks. Mesoamericans saw these urban centres as *axis mundi*, places where divine powers reach the earth, and are diffused from there. Looking for a point of connection between the spatial performativity of my scenographic work and "other" beliefs that are open to "more-than-human" performativity, it was impressive to find that at the heart of Nahua philosophy stands the thesis that there exists a single, dynamic, vivifying, eternally self-generating and self-regenerating sacred force known as *teotl*. Teotl continually generates and regenerates as well as permeates, encompasses, and shapes the cosmos as part of its endless process of self-generation and regeneration. Yet, the concept of Teotl is more than the unified totality of things. Teotl is identical with everything and everything is identical with Teotl. Teotl transcends dichotomies such as personal versus impersonal; and animate versus inanimate. The Mesoamerican concept of Teotl vivifies the cosmos and its contents. Diving into these non-occidental philosophical thoughts, I convinced myself that every architect should have a deep personal connection to space on Earth and beyond. It may sound childish, cheap, magical, but I feel it clearly in every cell of my female body.

Finally, it was Australian Feminist scholar Bronwyn Davies (1992) who empowered me to refer to the experience of being female (no apologies) and to hold a position that challenges the hegemonic discourses that dictate that contradictory (female) knowing is flawed knowing. I will hold on to what could be a "contradictory" multidimensional objectivity

and challenge those who might dismiss it as irrational, lacking in direction, intuitive, incomprehensible, or wrong. It is possible to act in contradictory ways without the coherence of oneself being called into question. I am convinced that posthuman feminism can re-inscribe, discover new story lines, invert, invent and break the bounds of the old structures and old discourses about space and that the embodiment of emotions, desire, and feelings “is a legitimate part of female reason” (pp. 58-59).

### Conclusion

One of my main concerns as an architect and scenographer is reflecting about the nature of space, an entity that is usually taken for granted and commonly thought of as a “void”. When Lotker and Gough (2013) observed the agency of scenography, they explained that there is no such thing as an empty space. “Every space is an environment, is already resonant; it has its character, a psychology and a memory (...) every space is marked, every space is charged –the space performs even before the [human] actor walks across it” (p. 4). Space is not a void. Space is never empty; it has never been empty and will never be. (Lotker and Gough, 2013, p. 4; Raya, 2015; Hann, 2019, p. 86).

After my own experience in professional practice, I have concluded that space is a nonhuman body in continuous transformation; a “living” entity with an incalculable potential for play; a vibrant matter with agency and performativity of its own. I have used my investigation to offer some arguments to support my point of view and even if I do not prove it beyond a reasonable doubt, my reflection cannot be cancelled.

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