

# **Towards an Ethical Understanding of Nonhuman Agency in Urbanism and Architecture**

**Author: Engjëll Rodiqi**

Life; an attribute of the nonhuman

We can say that life is an immediate consciousness, an exterior event experienced everywhere, and expressed through relations which are supported on principles of association, contiguity and causality. (Deleuze, 2001) It, life, escapes a humane expression, is an attribute of the nonhuman too.

Terrestrial; an agency of the nonhuman that shapes earth

This is where all the activity of the planet is experienced and lived. Latour refers to the Terrestrial to portray a new geo-political orientation which involves the composition of organisms and the physical matter coproduce the living conditions for all. Terrestrial can also refer to the agency portraying a desire, or persistence, which can be referred to Wall Street, birds, cars, plastic bottles, computers, etc. (Latour, 2018)

Representation; an important step to evoking terrestrial agency

This sort of agency, the terrestrial, has to be embraced. It is an observable entity whose reaction can be felt from scientific measuring and modeling. Such entities are always represented by us people, we invoke them continuously, but now different from before, according to Latour, the quality of their representation matter, a human that embodies their interests has more potency to claim their agency (Latour, 2017). Therefore, new representatives are crucial, and here the architects could potentially participate through their accessibility and knowledge.

Modernism; a break in the relation to the terrestrial

Unfortunately, today's dominant narrative of anthropomorphic creation is based on a "modernist" mindset. Unfortunate, because according to Latour's in-depth criticism of this social trend, the belief in progress and a linear development of a modern society ignores completely the complex network of dependencies between humans and nonhumans (Latour, 1989).

Equity; Concluding Terrestrials as equal beings

We can conclude that all entities on the planet are interrelated and mutually dependent. They carry powers with which they are capable of affecting their surroundings and themselves. Shaviri writes "Casual and perceptual interactions are no longer held hostage to human-centric categories... there is no hierarchy of being". (Shaviri, 2014, Pg. 29). All entities interact in the same field and are ontologically equal because they are defined by the same relations within that field. We are always affected by things around us, the outer reality is capable of interfering within our subjective self, and the other way around, a duality of experience and expression occurs.

Applying; creating a response to the ecological mutation

Situated knowledge therefore can help us form new narratives of our relation to the terrestrial. It could help us be responsible, to respond, create a response to the catastrophe we have created, by approaching case by case, milieu by milieu in order to embody the terrestrials' requirements (Stengers, 2015).

Envisioning; conducting new forms of comprehension of the nonhuman being

Guattari invokes ethical paradigms to underlined this necessary responsibility. Learning to think through the attribute of being so that we can articulate better the relations that participate in our society, a self in relation to other selves (Guattari, 2000).

Ethics; a relational evaluative form

Primarily, life in Spinozist concept is a way of being, an eternal mode expressed in all its attributes (Deleuze, 1988). From this we can determine that a state of being escapes a human centric narrative, it is an internal attribute to all. Secondly, since this life

and its material escapes anthropocentric vision, it is still anthropomorphized when we invoke it to produce our urban and architectural systems. That is simply the nature of architectural production.

Therefore, a sort of evaluative process is required to determine with whom are we to share our territories and through what consequence are we to proclaim these entities and transform them into building blocks of our cities? I claim that such evaluation is found in the Ethics of Spinoza and the Deleuzeian interpretation of his literature.

We can start from the idea that architecture and urbanism are relational disciplines. If indeed architecture and urban planning could be defined as structural processes that are constituent of and constructed of social and physical relations, then their very fabric is assembled of interactions which involves the dynamics between such entities. Deleuze writes that those entities, or terrestrials to use Latour's more contemporary term, share an appetite to persist and preserve their becoming, they do this by affecting one another (Deleuze, 1988).

The outcome of such movements is a formed and shared heterogeneous network which could be called Gaia, or nature, or the Critical Zone. This is the physical surface where the relations between terrestrials produce the matter and life as we know. Each relation is however unique, meaning that it carries a statement only based on the interaction. Differently from Morality, which refers to a hierarchical evaluation of judgment, Ethics replaces morality by questioning the capacity of such terrestrials, in relation with each other, in their own power of being affected (Deleuze, 1988). This power to affect one another is what puts two separate entities to communicate and act positively or negatively upon each other. Deleuze through Spinoza further elaborates that these relations can objectively be observed if they act as a good or a bad interaction for the terrestrial. "The bad appears when the act is associated with the image of a thing whose relation is decomposed by that very act (I kill someone by beating him). The same act would have been good if it had been associated with the image of a thing whose relation agreed with it (e.g., hammering iron). Which means that an act is bad whenever it directly decomposes a relation, whereas it is good whenever it directly compounds its relation with other relations" (Deleuze, 1988, pg. 35).

Therefore, through an empirical observation whether an act is increasing the acting power, compounds a relation, or it decreases the power to act, decomposes the relation, we can associate an ethical presence in urban relations as well. For example, the relation between soil and a concrete surface, or noise pollution with human comfort. The relations are potentially infinite, but, due to the categorization of the nonhumans in order to propose the typology, as mentioned before, the ethics of relations could be narrowed down in-between the determined groups and thus empirically be determined which increases or decreases the others power of acting.

## References:

- Deleuze, G., 2001. *Pure Immanence: Essays on A Life*. Translated by A. Boyman. New York: Zone Books.
- Deleuze, G., 1988. *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*. Translated by R. Hurley. San Francisco: City Lights.
- Guattari, F., 2000. *The Three Ecologies*. Translated by I. Pindar and P. Sutton. London: Athlone Press.
- Latour, B., 1989. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Translated by C. Porter. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Latour, B., 2017. *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*. Translated by C. Porter. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Latour, B., 2018. *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*. Translated by C. Porter. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Shavero, S., 2014. *The Universe of Things: On Speculative Realism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Stengers, I., 2015. *In Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism*. Translated by A. Goffey. London: Open Humanities Press.