Spinoza was a lens maker

Baruch Spinoza, the seventeenth century Dutch philosopher, is best known for his 1677 philosophical treatise *Ethics, Demonstrated in Geometrical Order*. In this work, written in Latin, he developed a theory of the affects, the capacities of conative bodies, and an argument that rejected a hyper-separation of the mind and body advanced in the philosophical rationalism of the mathematician René Descartes.

'What can a body do?' was a question posed by Gilles Deleuze in the twentieth century, creatively reworking Spinoza's ethology into a new philosophical interpretation of affect that continues to unfold in practice and theory across disciplines of the humanities and the contemporary arts. Here, affect is understood and explored, not in terms of the emotions per se, but through a lens of the forces of encounter and the durational passages of those forces, energies and affective capacities generated.[1] I also draw on this vital Spinozan-Deleuzian trajectory of affect in my PhD research project*, The Trace of an Affective Object Encounter: a picture postcard, its provocations, and processual becomings.*

What seems to be less appreciated about Spinoza, the philosopher, is that he was a specialist lens grinder—a maker of glass lenses for the new instruments of his time, the telescope and the microscope. His *Ethics* was conceived and written in the 'Dutch Golden Age' of post-Renaissance, pre-Enlightenment Europe. For natural philosophers such as Spinoza and other searchers in the Dutch Republic, Italy and England, this was an age of looking outward to the 'heavenly bodies', zooming into the distant planets by means of new telescopic lenses, and downwards and inwards towards the particulars of the invisible realm rendered visible by the microscope. It was an age of the macrocosmic and the microscopic opened out by the new material technology of optics. For instance, in 1665, Spinoza joined the astronomer Christiaan Huygens in observing the planet Jupiter through a thirty-foot telescope; later he calculated the lens for a prospective larger telescope to confirm Huygens' (then contested) observation that Saturn was, indeed, encircled by 'rings'. One of the microscopes Spinoza fabricated was used by the physician Theodor Kerckring to 'see' and describe bundles of blood vessels in the microfolds of the human intestine; this new magnified perspective greatly stimulated the proto-science of anatomy.

I have been thinking much more about the intersectional sphere of Spinoza as a material maker, a skilled hands-on artisanal specialist and technologist, as well as a radical philosophical thinker. Going back to the life lived by Spinoza as an enworlded, embodied man, not just a collection of philosophical ideas, the phrase 'through the lens of', often heard in contemporary scholarly parlance as an articulation of a critical framework or perspective, has taken on new meaning and resonance.[2] There is an enlivening literalness to this vocabulary. In my mind's eye, I can reach out and pick up a glass lens and hold it to the light, as I might a shard of translucent porcelain. I can almost feel its cool smoothness through the touch fields of fingertips. Each time I zoom in on a bird with a pair of binoculars, I am now a happy recipient of this early, exploratory work in optics. I can wonder how, and in how many nuanced ways, Spinoza's days of shaping and polishing lenses of glass provoked and fed his philosophical thought and writings. How looking through these refractive light glasses—in telescopes, microscopes and handheld magnifiers—came to inform his propositions on bodies in movement and rest, on the changes in capacities of bodies through the impacts of other bodies in encounters, on 'substance', and in his holistic and monist viewpoint of 'Nature' as universal immanence, from which the human being could not be separated nor independent. Spinoza's interest in the corpo-real experience of light, deeply informed by a practical occupation as a glass lens maker, might be embraced as a form of 'material thinking'.[3]

The *Ethics* was posthumously published by Spinoza's circle of friends after his death at the age of forty-four. Historical accounts put this down to tuberculosis-related weakness exacerbated by silicosis, a disease of the lungs caused by the inhalation of silica dust. Lens grinding and polishing was a dangerous occupation given the substance of glass is silica. Today, silicosis is still a serious occupational hazard that contemporary makers, myself included, must also take precautions against when using the materialities of clay (a mix of silica and alumina crystals) and powdery glazes in the 'shaping and polishing' of ceramic objects in studio practice.

In the trace of an encounter with a fragile, travelling postcard, the preoccupation of my recent practice-fed research, I have been enchanted by this meeting of material

making and philosophical thinking in the seventeenth century life of Baruch Spinoza —by this meeting of the hand and eye, of material and object, and an oeuvre of esoteric thought and writing. In this anthropocenic decade of the twenty-teens, his intersectional work—lenses, affect, bodies and encounters, ethics—is a waymaker to reflect on as an idiosyncratic ecology of thinking, making and doing.[4]

The MECO[5] network research camp in Wodi Wodi river country at Bundanon Trust over the first three days of July this year coincided with the close visual conjunction of the planets Venus and Jupiter. From our planetary vantage point, these two celestial bodies were vivid together in the northwestern evening sky. The event coincided with a full moon rising in the east, appearing over the bend at Riversdale and reflecting the sun back into the dark sheen of the aqueous line I stood alongside. I had no long-tubed telescope like Spinoza and Huygens in their shared wonderings at 'distant stars' brought 'closer to our eyes'. But, my palm-sized binoculars invoked the presence of these optical innovators and creative thinkers, and my digital 'single lens reflex' camera co-composed night photoplays with the solar light illuminating the orbiting moon.

Louise Boscacci | 12 September 2015

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[1] Gregg, M & Seigworth, GJ (eds) 2010, *The Affect Theory Reader*, Duke University Press, Durham NC.

[2] Nadler, S 1999, *Spinoza: A Life*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

[3] Carter, P 2004, *Material Thinking: The Theory and Practice of Creative Research*, Melbourne University Publishing, Melbourne.

[4] Stengers, I 2005, 'Introductory Notes on an Ecology of Practices', *Cultural Studies Review*, vol.11, no.1, p183 – 196, DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.5130/csr.v11i1.3459

[5] MECO: The Material Ecologies Research Network, Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts (LHA) at the University of Wollongong, Australia.