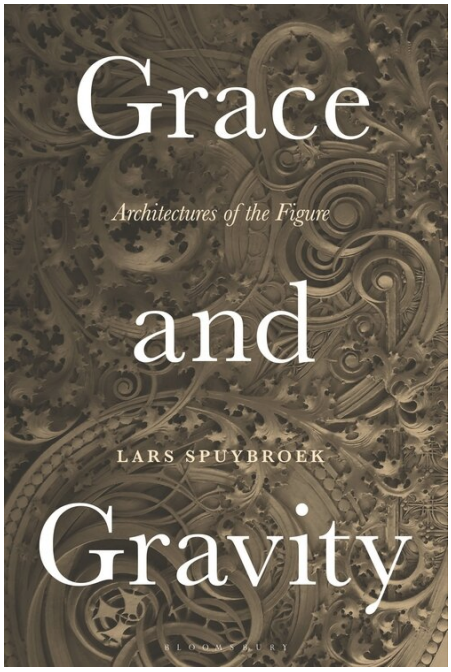
Books • Reviews
16/06/2021

Review: Lars Spuybroek, 'Grace and Gravity. Architectures of the Figure'



Review of Lars Spuybroek's *Grace and Gravity. Architectures of the Figure* (Bloomsbury, 2020), 464 pages.

Abstract

Lars Spuybroek's new book continues to develop the interest in a "digital gothic" from his last book *The Sympathy of Things*, but it shifts gears into a hypermode: his interest here is not one that would aim at an ontology of hyperobjects, and yet he is spelling out the object-oriented turn in recent philosophy more meticulously perhaps than the key protagonists have done so far. For it is the movement of *turning* itself that Spuybroek seeks to erect as the generative world-principle of the new gothic. Instead of objects, this world is one of figures that embody *generic* and *troped* activities, "likenesses" come and go through a play of mimesis that works radiantly and absorptively. These figures are not properly statues, for they don't indexically bridge the caesura between life and death, animate and inanimate. Rather, their bodies are of a spectral kind of quickness; they organise the materiality of light. With this approach, Spuybroek paths a fascinating and highly inventive way—by re-animating a rich stock of classical concepts that have been capital for every architecture theory in the past—for architecture and philosophy to begin coming to terms with the unsettling material and intellectual reality of quantum physical light.

Reviewed by Vera Bühlmann

Lars Spuybroek's gesture of introducing verticality back into the flatness of contemporary (computational) ontologies is remarkable, and sorely needed. How to do so without reintroducing hierarchies into the matrix of ontologi(sti)cs? Or likewise, without re-introducing linearity into the material thickness of a non-linear time?

Grace and Gravity works with a certain gesture of employing negativity positively, methodically so; Spuybroek is not alone with this interest, there are several recent books on architecture that have set out to explore this too—we might think of Kengo Kuma with his anti-object, seeking to *make* architecture *through making architecture disappear*; or Pier Vittorio Aureli, with his notion of *unilateral synthesis* with respect to his sought possibility for architecture to be absolute without being a-historical. But Spuybroek's gesture employs negativity as a pre-classical mechanic would: his method places a world-fulcrum where analytical or synthetical methods would place ground/reason, or foundation. The world-fulcrum he erects as the zero degree line on which everything depends, exists entirely on its own— independent of both objectivity or subjectivity—in the world's tropic line of the equator; with respect to it, everything bends sideways, and whenever or where ever a thing may exist in the world, it is defined by its own inclination angle with respect to this generic fulcrum (the tropic line). Being defined, in this set-up, means standing up, taking a stance, and it also means *hurting*. The classical contrapposto stance in the canonic tradition was often thought of as a figure of virtuosity and relaxation, and Spuybroek inverts this: a figure's stance, if it is to be graceful, is by necessity one of true weakness, pain, and suffering. It is why he refers to the contrapposto in the canonic tradition via a harmonics that works contrapuntal.

For Spuybroek, the world-fulcrum places things under an a priori and contrapuntal tension and grants inevitably, so to speak, a certain verticality to all things existent: it is the set up of an incisive kind of nihilism: "Like everything else we discussed, [this book] is about *a nihilism that works*, a nihilism that starts things up, instead of a dark version with an apocalyptic end", he resumes the aspiration that guided his writing throughout. Employing negativity positively, in the manner Spuybroek sets out to do, has always been the very gesture of mechanics—and it is interesting to remember that coming from the Greek *mēkhanikos*, it also means "full of resources, inventive, ingenious". It is before a

background of plenty, that the mechanic counts entirely with reversible time; there is always a degree zero, a point of reciprocity, a fulcrum around which the mechanic works. This gesture is also what Spuybroek makes the principle of his writing: everything he makes reference to is considered as being at once itself *and* its opposite too. Death is as much part of this view upon the world as life is—Spuybroek's architecture of the figure is, quite literally *spectral* architecture; but spectrality here does not indicate a non-presence of things, it involves a fuller understanding of radiance: "if the figure is about the turn of stance into appearance, it is also about the reverse turn from appearance into stance, that is, stillness and death." Spuybroek works with a methodology of what he calls "anachronical correspondences". Those with which the reader finds herself presented with may well appear as arbitrary, but this is the intended purpose from the start, because Spuybroek maintains: "Arbitrariness, normally a sign of the author's authority, is now shared with the reader." Instead of the registers of ontology, his is that of phenotechnicality: "things do not appear phenomenologically for us, they appear *phenotechnically for themselves*," he maintains and comments: "Obviously, this requires some genuine philosophical gymnastics."

Just how much of such gymnastics is required becomes evident when we consider that the registers of phenotechnicality are not to delimit and contain withdrawing essences. They are themselves not whole, they absorb, percolate and leak in all directions, always exposed to the ubiquity of natural light as radiance—so much so that one might ask, what it is that holds them together. There is an outspoken agenda to this way of speaking, namely that of going to go "save the appearances"; it is what the methodology of "anachronical correspondences" ultimately aims at. This methodology depends by and large upon one thing that is evidently given in abundance, namely the radiant nature of light. With this gesture, Spuybroek projects nothing less than upsetting the very working principle in all pragmatical and economical reasoning, namely that which links rationality to scarcity. Light is evidently given abundantly everywhere on earth—although it is, as is evident too, not distributed equally. The radiant nature of light is, to Spuybroek, the gift that gives itself freely. To Spuybroek, the material and radiant nature of light is the principle of generosity which everything and everyone participates in, naturally, colourfully, and materially. Its distribution is what a digital Gothic is to organise.

Spuybroek evidently takes the risk of confusing things and appearances—and

indeed, he affirms, "there is nothing is more important than such confusion". The promise of a digital gothic projects that "with the notion of radiance, appearances conceptually change from a dependence on exogenous human consciousness to an endogenous, inside-out luminosity where the mobility of the parts shines out but now as issued by the whole." Spuybroek introduces verticality into the flatness of computational ontologies by turning it into a natural force. But generosity alone does not yet make for grace: "the appearance of gracefulness is paradoxically not of any strength but of the weakness of stance." In his approach, grace has a counter pole in beauty, not in gravity. Beauty and grace are both turns, transformations, in opposite directions that cannot be separated from one another: "the shining of the one is turned into the movement of the other, and vice versa. In short, it works." The workings then, in terms of which he addresses the material and non-linear time through anachronical correspondences, is one that translates mechanically between horizontal movement and vertical stance. It is mechanical translation because it requires "a certain leap", "a disconnection in fact". Without it, Spuybroek elaborates, grace would be the same as training, and could be infinitely repeated. Yet grace is only grace because it is "enabling, but not assured"—"it depends on automatism yet is not automatic." With respect to it one can no longer say if one is moving or being moved —there is a pivotal gap that thwarts all causal reasoning.

Before indicating briefly what the reader is to expect more precisely from the contents of the chapters, I want to point attention to one interesting overall aspect. While the machinery of phenotechnology which this book presents as the workings of the digital gothic's architecture is introduced as "running wild like a cosmic Rubik's Cube," and "relentlessly keeps on shredding history by making its anachronical connections, turning the multileveled symmetries into a kaleidoscopic mosaic of stories, images, and philosophies," the book itself is composed of uttermost symmetry and order. Indeed, Spuybroek employs a rich stock of classical concepts that have been capital for every architecture theory in the past, even if many of them have largely fallen to negligence over the more recent decades: among them that of the contrapposto, mimesis and canon, gracefulness and beauty, and also the pythagorean notion of the tetraktys and its classical role for organising architectural treatises into particular numbers of books (like the Vitruvian *Libri Decem*). This asks for specific attention, as Spuybroek's witty spirit—his own and proper originality—manifests here perhaps most strikingly.

The very last paragraph of *Grace and Gravity* is titled "Stone and the Book". It gives away the workings that went into the book's own composition, and they contradict in their strictness strongly with the lax "workings" of which the book's content treats (as indicated above) — form and content are themselves in contrapuntal tension rather than in parallelity. What we read about its form is this: "Write a book (1), but divide it in two halves A and B (1-1). Then divide the halves again in two: Aa and Ab, Ba and Bb. The outer ones, Aa and Bb, are now opposing one another, while the inner ones, Ab and Ba, are like nonidentical twins. This gives us a 1-2-1 structure." This sounds like an algorithm, but it also echo Plato's *Timeaus*. In Plato, the workings of the Demiurge are presented as "architecting" a structure of world-making in which there could always be correspondence between the intelligible and sensible. For Plato, the material fabric of the Demiurge's two rings is, famously so, the soul of the universe. In Spuybroek's own demiurgic architecting, it is the soul of the world, not that of the universe. Instead of facilitating the workings of *Logos*, the structure for world-making we are presented here facilitates the workings of *Stone Reckoning* — and stone reckoning is reckoning with images, to Spuybroek. "It rains images," he quotes from Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Imagination, of which this book is abundantly full, counts to him as communication with the world soul: "Counting and recounting are not simply connected; the counting we do with numbers is immediately one of images, stories, and fantasies." The communication with the world soul that this world-making involves suggests that "all things are little cloud-images, has-beens, wannabees, and can-bees." Reckoning with images means to count and recount, numbers and stories — but also the telling of stories itself. This explains the gesture in which Spuybroek wrote "as a former architect and as a dilettante philosopher", who allows himself "to embark on discussions with philosophers and break them off with such impertinence that I have yet to fully adjust myself to its brutality. The being-hurt turns into a hurting, a slicing and devouring." There are so many encounters in his book with "members of the philosophical pantheon" from which, he tells us, "I grab and tear off whatever I find necessary to reveal any phenotechnical links, basically refusing to see their ideas and observations as part of a larger system." But nevertheless, there is a method at work of which Spuybroek claims that it is "hermeneutical", and this is a truly helpful strategy with respect to an original approach to what we could call a coding literacy: there is a fifty percent rule at work in those encounters, Spuybroek tells us. It consists in spending as much time with a philosopher as needed until one agrees to exactly half of what is being said, and reversely if one tends to like a text, then one has to spend as much time with it until one disagrees

with exactly half of it. This "hermeneutical" method allows oneself, as a reader while writing, "to become spectral"; it effectively turns one's own reading into a machine much like that which he describes, in the first chapter, as a "grace machine". There are liberating as well as therapeutical aspects to this, which work well together with the second aspect of this hermeneutical method, namely the graphical treatment of images in the book—there are none. This is highly unusual for a book on architecture. Part of his method was to omit any kind of illustration of the text by paintings, photos, sculptures, and architectures, he explains. The main reason for this is to keep the reader from being distracted in imagining for herself what the text is talking about. It is a decision for "the art of 'writing images'" with its virtue of not interrupting the reading process as a lively discussion process in the across the various mentalities at work in such participatory "authorship": "one can read through the image, so to speak, while staying in direct contact with the conceptual argument," Spuybroek writes.

Let's turn finally to the contents of the eight chapters, without giving away much of the actual reading/recounting experience itself. The chapters follow a strictly symmetrical make-up, with the first chapter entitled "the Grace Machine" being literally the opposite of the last chapter, titled "the Stone Reckoner". The remaining chapters are accommodated in the mirrored structure of the procedure's divisional beginning (what we called the 'Demiurge gesture', that puts architecture as communication with the world soul), while re-organising them into two identical triplets: Aab, Aba, and Abb on one side (chapter two, titled "Foot Space and Hand Space", three titled "Caves and Chests", and four titled "Figurate and Spectral Architecture"), and on the other side Baa, Bab, and Bba (chapter five titled "Grace and Gravity", chapter six titled "Automata and Thaumata", and chapter seven titled "Jumpology and Falling"). Is it by chance that this strategy evokes remembrance to the age of syllogistic reasoning, with its catalog of modi? Hardly so. It is why I began describing Spuybroek's latest book as "having shifted gears into the hypermode": what pains him most, he tells us, is that throughout the nineteenth century, the art-oriented approach has been cut off from the technology-oriented approach to architecture, the Beaux-Arts and the Polytechnic forms of *doing architecture* find themselves, effectively, torn apart by a "fundamental chasm between appearances and workings." What Spuybroek seeks to open up is a domain of what he calls the "nonhumanities", where the two domains are interrelated.

Grace and Gravity masterfully succeeds in opening up and laying out such a third

domain. But where it falls short, perhaps, is to bridge not only arts and technology in reciprocal way, but also the human or social sciences with the natural sciences at large. *Grace and Gravity* inhabits the ambiguous and doubled up role of a computational mechanic (as "poietic" and "poetic", fabricating and fabulating), it speaks the languages of algebra and coding, but it buries the mathematical thinking deployed by this mechanics in the "images that come falling down" to the place of fantasy whenever "it rains images". From an aesthetics point of view, this might be a good thing. But it is here that we should keep certain reservations, because on a larger scale Spuybroek's project strengthens rather than resolves the said chasm—with the arts, myth and also religion, on the one side (whether humanist or nonhumanist), and science, physics, politics and economy, on the other. With respect to to the larger question the book poses, namely that of *how to live well*, architecture is effectively said here to have little to contribute—at least, if the question is raised not only on the level of an individual, but also on a social and political level. But what Lars Spuybroek's book does do, beautifully so, is raise the discussions on the digital turn in architecture out of its largely administrative, historiographical condition to a spiritual, daringly ambitious, quick and genuinely exciting, and also ethical new level, that gives us a taste of how the digital turn's somewhat narcissistic preoccupation with the production of "novelty" might be overcome.

- Related: Review of Lars Spuybroek's *The Sympathy of Things* (2017)

***Vera Bühlmann**, Dr.phil. works as a translator between philosophy and architecture. She is author of* Information and Mathematics in the philosophy of Michel Serres *(Bloomsbury Academic, 2020) and* Die Nachricht, ein Medium. Städtische Architektonik, generische Medialität *(Birkhäuser 2014), co-editor of the applied virtuality Book Series (with Ludger Hovestadt, Birkhäuser since 2012) and author of various articles and edited volumes on cultural studies, media theory, architecture theory, philosophy of technics, and coding literacy. She has been professor and director of the Research Unit Architecture Theory and Philosophy of Technics ATTP at TU Vienna since 2016.*

thick time • method of anachronical correspondences • absorptive mimesis • spectral quickness • tetraktys and the form of the architectonic book • contrapposto • contrapuntality • architecture • Lars Spuybroek • Vera Buehlmann • TCS

Comments (0)

Oldest First

Preview Post Comment...

‹ Video: Alison Downham Moore on 'Foucault's 1960s Lectures on Sexuality'

Journal News: July 2021 ›

Theory, Culture & Society is an academic publishing cluster based at Goldsmiths, University of London. It comprises the academic journals

Theory, Culture & Society is ranked #1 in Cultural Studies (2019 Journal Impact Factor, Journal Citation Reports. Source: Clarivate, 2020)

Theory, Culture & Society and *Body & Society*, as well as the *Theory, Culture & Society* Book Series

.