



Grace

*Architectures of the Figure*

and

LARS SPUYBROEK

Gravity

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# GRACE AND GRAVITY

Architectures of the Figure

**Lars Spuybroek**

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to J. B.

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# PREFACE

Maybe, in a book where Roman poets explain media theory, media theory explains transcendence, squids turn into dandies, where driving a car explains ornamentation and haloes, Minoan painters explain photography, monkeys language, lipstick consciousness, automata wonders, and where a limping Greek deity shows us the way to an inverted form of technology, maybe in such a book the wisest form of introduction is to sketch out its most important findings to get at least a hint of a skeletal structure. Though the present book is not an essay in architecture history, nor exactly in architecture theory, there is something deeply architectural about its main argument, something that is not a philosophy of the discipline, but views architecture itself as a philosophy, which as a consequence applies to a far broader range of disciplines. In that sense architecture approximates language, where thousands of years of interpretation and thought have structured its formal elements in such a way that even in its most quotidian use a deep structure of thought is anonymously at work, a structure we hardly notice because it quietly thinks while we act and speak.

Architecture as a discipline has long lost contact with this deep structure and both its theories and daily practice demonstrate an enormous chasm that has ripped its protagonists apart for almost two hundred years now, namely an art-oriented approach of the Beaux-Arts and a technology-oriented approach of the Polytechnique, the two main design schools of the nineteenth century. This chasm is by no means restricted to the field of architectural design, but pervades all disciplines that make up our cultural body of thought, especially in the form of the division between technology and the humanities. Indeed, the split is merely a symptom of a far more fundamental chasm between appearances and workings, where appearances are interpreted as if they are text and can be read as if they are information, and where workings are nothing but blind interactions between forces and matter. In that regard, art, art history, art theory, and philosophy suffer as much under the chasm as engineering and design.

The two realms may speculate about each other, fight each other, or be secretly dependent on each other, for many the fact that we live in a double world hardly poses an existential problem; for people like me, who are deeply in love with both

appearances and technology, it is unbearable. No problem could be more urgent; more than ever we are in need of a “nonhumanities” where the two domains are interrelated. Of course, we have seen many attempts to cross over, to invent a technology of the image or a phenomenology of technics, but the first never goes beyond a technology of seeing, a computational view of consciousness, and the second never beyond an instrumentalism where “we” and what phenomenologists call “the world” are temporarily bridged by tools that are viewed as extensions of a bodily experience, making the world into a *Lebenswelt*, a life-world surrounding us, which is indeed part of the body, not of the world. Despite the attempts to theoretically bridge the two realms we remain locked in—as in the syndrome—either working at the dark, reverse side of images and trying to expand the realm of materiality and technics as far as possible, or from the other side, to expand the realm of appearances as deeply as possible into matter without ever being able to explain how things work.

Although a technologist by nature, I set out in *Grace and Gravity* to “save the appearances,” as Plato phrased our task for the ages to come, primarily by a *rigorous misunderstanding* of both phenomenology and technology. The explanations of technology I offer in this book are strongly based on workings, yet none of them material workings and interactions; on the contrary, the links to mythology and religion are pervasive. Likewise my misunderstanding of phenomenology, a philosophy that set out, as Husserl claimed, to “return to the things themselves,” by which he meant to *the appearances of things* themselves, and thus fundamentally confusing things and appearances. Which I wholly applaud. Nothing is more important than the confusing of things and appearances. Of course, Husserl meant things as appearing in human consciousness, “for us,” as they say in his field; I mean things appearing by and of themselves, a fundamental misunderstanding of phenomenology that turns the main vehicle of perception a full one hundred and eighty degrees. This is what I start calling phenotechnology at the end of the second chapter: things do not appear phenomenologically for us, they appear *phenotechnically for themselves*. Obviously, this requires some genuine philosophical gymnastics.

To be sure, phenotechnology is a strange term, something seems to be wrong with it. While phenomenology is a study, and a logic, and a discipline, of appearances, phenotechnology seems to be a double discipline, one of phenomena and one of technology. That it is not. First, I am not so arrogant to think I might be able to found a new doctrine; second, it is largely not a matter of *logos*, but a way of working, and its thought consists of finding those ways. The term implies that when we side the powers of appearance with things, phenomenology by necessity turns into a technology. As a working principle, it is always present and operative. If that is true, and I think it is, there must indeed be something highly disciplinary about phenotechnology, yet in a way that is difficult to follow, and that from an historical viewpoint must look ridiculous or downright illegitimate. Like Freud’s concept of dreamwork—which we discuss in the final chapter—it establishes



connections between the most disparate elements. To give an example, phenotechnology allows me, in Chapter Seven, to connect specific traits of Minoan art from more than three thousand years ago to the moment of photography by comparing the specifics of Minoan imagery to the taking of pictures; on the other hand, by applying photography as a technological act we suddenly understand Minoan art's relationship to movement. By establishing a phenotechnical loop the argument moves in both directions: the working principle explains the correspondence of imagery in one direction and that of technology in the other. The book is absolutely crammed with such anachronical correspondences.

While Husserl's connection between things and appearances remained an idealist statement, since things can only appear as such in the human mind, my connection between the two is chiefly a realist clause: the power of visibility lies on the side of things, they appear independently of us. It follows that the phenotechnical concept of appearance by and of itself involves very specific properties, which are extensively analyzed and elaborated, internally regarding the understanding of its reality as existing by itself, externally in relation to other notions of entities and other philosophers such as Bachelard and Heidegger, for instance, who are discussed at length in the last section of Chapter Three. More significantly, the appearance by and of itself is sometimes denoted with the compound term thing-appearance, a term that, despite its ugliness, indicates a highly geometrical—architectural—aspect that links the verticality of things to the horizontality of appearances. After all, the term “thing” is central to all realism—the Latin word *res* means “thing” and *realis* “belonging to the thing itself”—and things therefore exist, the latter again a word of another elucidating etymology from that language, namely *ek-sist*, meaning “standing forth,” a connection I often refer to, implying a direct relationship between stance, thing, and reality. However, such a real thing does not yet appear by itself, and still relies on an outer source, namely light in combination with human consciousness, to appear. A thing-appearance, on the other hand, not only stands forth, it also *shines forth* and makes a claim on the realm of seeing, thinking, and feeling, without being a priori seen, understood, or felt by others. Before being properly thought through in its philosophical consequences, such a statement needs to be experimentally constructed, and that I mean quite literally. My conclusion, in the last section of the second chapter, is that a thing-appearance, if it exists, does two things simultaneously: it stands vertically and appears horizontally, and therefore needs to take a turn.

This turn we know from its ancient heritage as *tropos*, in English *trope*, which positions the turn unequivocally in the domain of the figure. Now, instead of immediately placing the figure in the traditions of rhetoric and mimesis—which I do mainly in the third and fifth chapters—I begin by taking the figure as literally as possible. The strength of standing does not by itself simply turn into the sideways movement of appearing, it requires a specific form of weakening that allows the parts of the figure to mobilize and connect to one another in order to construct a standing

entity. Therefore, standing and appearing cannot simply be compounded by hyphenating two terms; they require a third aspect, something that is not-standing, a weakening that enables stance to bend sideways, a doubling that sounds extremely ambiguous and paradoxical, which I term contrapuntal based on the classic notion of *contrapposto*. And here we have arrived at the arguments of the very first chapter. Of course, it is no accident that *contrapposto* is derived from sculpture's vocabulary—in rhetoric it is called *chiasmus*—since sculpture necessarily addresses the problem of stance; after all, that is what statue means. At the point where we quote Leonardo on *contrapposto* we establish the link to grace: the appearance of gracefulness is paradoxically not of any strength but of the weakness of stance. Yet, its appearance is not a question of a static image, but of many images moving through and over one another, a blurred and thickened state of the image that the Greeks already called shining or radiance. 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. A figure, then, is a radiant thing.

This shining-out is what in Homer's time was termed *charis*, which translated into Latin became *gratia* and again into English "grace"—remarks we encounter in the first pages. (I am introducing the book by explaining it backwards.) The ancient notion of grace is deeply embedded in a far older history though, namely that of gift exchange. And with the gift we start to understand far better how thing-appearances work. Purely emphasizing the thing as a realist entity would quickly place our relationship with them in an objectivist framework; similarly, an emphasis on appearance could—thanks to phenomenology—only be understood in a subjectivist mode, since it is based on subjective experience. Neither applies to gift exchange, which is of a cyclical nature. The two positions cancel each other out. If radiance were viewed as emanating from the object, the concept would go against the subjectivist position. Yet radiance cannot exactly be "seen" either, it has to be absorbed and incorporated, not at all reflected upon, which would be the objectivist response. Grace is put to work, digested and absorbed, which means not a dualist process of object and subject but a threefold mechanism of shining, absorption, and transformation, often viewed as a sequence of increase and growth. These three stages correspond precisely with the three stages of the gift cycle: giving, receiving, and returning, three stages that, unsurprisingly, correspond again with the Three Graces, which demonstrates the fundamentally aesthetic character of gift exchange.

Beauty and grace are deeply connected, as we find in that first chapter, beauty being radiant, that is, shining its mobility outwardly, and grace conversely transforming movement into a thing. Thing and appearance relate to one another as stillness and movement. When we draw a diagram that says "movement" on one side and "stillness" on the other, as I propose in the sixth chapter, with two semicircular arrows pointing in opposite directions to show the continuous reversal of one into

the other, we should put the word “beauty” with the arrow that points from stillness to movement, and “grace” with the other arrow. Both beauty and grace are turns, transformations, but 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.

Yet, the workings of grace are those of a *paradoxical machinery*, the functioning of which are never assured. The fact that grace works on the instantiation of movement into stillness—that is, from horizontal movement to vertical stance—means that a certain type of leap is required, a disconnection in fact. The ties between movement as given and posture as pursued can never be directly established. If it were, grace would be the same as training, and could be repeated infinitely. Grace has often been associated with training, automatism, and habit—we will discover what Heinrich von Kleist, Félix Ravaisson, and Samuel Butler had to say about that—but the fact that grace cannot be conditioned means there must be a gap between habit and inhabitation. We cannot simply fill the hollow space of habitation, i.e. of architecture, with habituated figures of posture and movement. This gap plays a pivotal role in the book and returns again and again in different guises.

Grace is enabling but not assured; it depends on automatism yet is not automatic. The definition of grace as a movement that we cannot truly locate—since we cannot say if we are moving or being moved—links directly to the meaning of habit and inhabitation. The word “habit” shares its etymological roots with “able,” and inhabitation likewise with “enable,” a distinction that resolutely structures the whole book. When we view Chapter One, “The Grace Machine,” as the main introduction to the argument, the second, third, and fourth chapters develop the notion of inhabitation. These chapters chiefly analyze the structure of space—which by then is not called space anymore—in relationship to the gap and how the gap enables figures. This process can be divided in prefiguration, figuration, and transfiguration, three steps that deeply influence the nature of architecture, as we will see in Chapter Four. Figurate architecture is not an architecture that itself takes on the qualities of the figure, but rather lets figures appear. It sets the stage for the exchange and absorption of thing-appearances, what I call its *spectral* function: architecture is what brings us in contact with the spectral. The spectral, a term which is constantly being revived in contemporary philosophy, involves in my view—*contra* Derrida’s definition of the spectral as “non-presence”—a more complete 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. The turn of the figure proves to be a double turn, a loop, closed upon itself. From that point in the book onward, the dead take an ever stronger hold on the argument.

By the time we get to the fifth chapter, “Grace and Gravity,” we have understood so much of grace and figuration that we simply drop the notion of habit in a single paragraph to then replace the importance of ability with that of its counterpart,

disability. Here the full powers of Hephaestus come to the fore, the Limping God married to the first of the Three Graces, Aglaea, a name that literally means “shining.” Deeply hidden in our abilities it is disability that leads to grace, weakness that works, and pain that structures the architecture of the figure. If the second, third, and fourth chapters are about the *spectrality of architecture*, the fifth, sixth, and seventh are about *our own spectrality*. Yet, that involves as much architecture as the other set of three chapters. Instead of seeing us humans living in an architectural environment, we quickly begin to see how we ourselves turn into architecture, by becoming a structure bearing the unbearable—pain—and a figure of carrying based on the rhetoric of metaphor and chiasmus. We begin to see that the figure of contrapposto introduced in the first chapter is never a figure of virtuosity and relaxation, but of true weakness, pain, and suffering. We are hurt. Though grace looks like a form of ease, it is difficult and can only be acquired through, sometimes extreme, difficulty. We have entered the domains of religion, which from our phenotechnical viewpoint means a technological realm of appearances, light and spectrality. The sixth chapter shows even less restraint as it begins to ponder how such a technology of light approaches McLuhan’s definitions of media, to then pursue a radical, *decadent media theory* which uses the concept of spectrality to link the color spectrum to our own deaths. The switch made at the end of the nineteenth century from Aestheticism to Decadence becomes the most logical step in the history of aesthetics: the more we study beauty, the more we encounter decay. And again, vice versa: decay not as the absence of color, but as its engine. Color is the fragility of light. Decay is not the absence of light, but its very presence, a breaking and division into color that relates the spectral directly to bliss. The technology of media, the presence of death, the shining of light, and the nature of consciousness all start to intersect. When we get to the seventh chapter, falling becomes the engine of the world.

The concluding chapter, “The Stone Reckoner,” shows how this engine can be one of design in architecture, in painting, and in storytelling. Machines of things falling apart converge with machines of things coming together in a chapter that fuses the technologies of color—what St. Thomas Aquinas called *claritas*—the technologies of decay and those of imagination. Evidently, I have not restrained myself: architecture taught me to think things through to the end, and while the practice of architecture scarcely allows for that, its philosophy does. On the one hand, the book is full of structure, permeated with symmetries on every level. A first chapter that serves as an introduction, then three chapters combined mirrored by another set of three, and concluded by a chapter that once more mirrors the first; a structure that is explained in the final section. Eight chapters with four subchapters each, all of them with titles that include the same conjunction (including a few notable exceptions), which adds up to thirty-two, a number that would have made Jung dance around the table, if my adding of Hephaestus to the Three Graces—making their trinity a quaternity—would not have already done so.

On the other hand, the machine of phenotechnology, like a cosmic Rubik's Cube running wild, relentlessly keeps on shredding history by making its anachronical connections, turning the multileveled symmetries into a kaleidoscopic mosaic of stories, images, and philosophies.

About the latter two I would like to make a few remarks. As a former architect and as a dilettante philosopher, I allow myself 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, of which at a certain moment Vilém Flusser's Vampire Squid becomes the principal figure. There are so many long and short encounters with members of the philosophical pantheon—of sometimes merely a single paragraph—that one can hardly count them, and every one of them strategically blind to their work as a whole. It's like the Sack of Rome: 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. In fact, I have made it my own hermeneutical method to read every philosopher to the point where I agree *with exactly half* of what they have written. That goes both ways: by starting to read a philosophy one deeply agrees with, and to keep on reading until one agrees with only fifty percent; and conversely, a philosopher one strongly disagrees with deserves extended reading until agreement reaches the same number. I have found this fifty-percent rule extremely liberating and therapeutic: one's own ideas start to become spectral and one's readings turn into a machine.

My second remark concerns the use of images. It is a major question in a book such as this, if one should not have decided to profusely illustrate the text, since so many paintings, photos, sculptures, and architectures are being examined. I have decided against that. First, it would have resulted in a book with virtually hundreds of illustrations, and as images go, a reader would see a lot more in those than what I describe and would find him- or herself severely distracted. Secondly, today images are right at hand on one's smartphone, which makes the issue a lot less critical than just a few decades ago. Thirdly, and most importantly, the art of "writing images" allows a discussion not to be interrupted; one can read through the image, so to speak, while staying in direct contact with the conceptual argument.

All that remains for me to say at this point is to thank my small group of readers, Andrej Radman in Delft, Andrew Ballantyne in Newcastle, and Stuart Romm here in Atlanta. I want to especially thank Heleen Schröder for correcting my English, and my friends Frans Sturkenboom—who manages to combine a love for Heidegger and Italian Mannerism—and Gijs Wallis de Vries, the Dutch Piranesi expert who has been of invaluable help throughout. My deepest gratitude goes out to the best First Reader one could hope for, Joke Brouwer, who read and commented on every chapter in various stages over the period of three-and-a-half years.

*Atlanta, June 2019*

“Lars Spuybroek is one of the freshest and most original voices in our contemporary intellectual world. *Grace and Gravity* is a truly exceptional and quite extraordinary book. The reader comes away from encountering it with their minds instructed and their lives enriched. It is so much more than a merely ‘academic’ book and it can be appreciated on many levels. It is a book to savour and one can only be grateful for such a work.”

Keith Ansell-Pearson, Professor of Philosophy & Director of the Centre for Research in Post-Kantian European Philosophy, University of Warwick, UK

“*Natura semper facit saltus*, nature always makes leaps. In this impressively erudite book, Lars Spuybroek shows that these leaps are not across sheer void, but a ‘thin, ghostlike film’ that does not quite belong either to the parts or wholes of things. Against the recent dogmas of continuity and immanence, he invites us to a new understanding of his key term, *grace*.”

Graham Harman, Distinguished Professor of Philosophy, SCI-Arc, USA

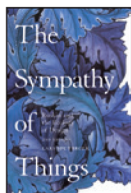
*How do we live well?* The first sentence of *Grace and Gravity* raises the fundamental question that constantly occupies our minds—and of all those who lived before us. Paradoxically, the impossibility of answering this question opens up the very room needed to find ways of living well. It is the gap where all disciplines fall short, where architecture does not fit its inhabitants, where economy is not based on shortage, where religion cannot be explained by its followers, and where technology works far beyond its own principles.

According to Lars Spuybroek, the prize-winning former architect, this marks the point where the “paradoxical machine” of grace reveals its powers, a point where we “cannot say if we are moving or being moved”. Following the trail of grace leads him to a new form of analysis that transcends the age-old opposition between appearances and technology. Linking up a dazzling and often delightful variety of sources—monkeys, paintings, lamp posts, octopuses, tattoos, bleeding fingers, rose windows, robots, smart phones, spirits, saints, and fossils—with profound meditations on living, death, consciousness, and existence, *Grace and Gravity* offers an eye-opening provocation to a wide range of art historians, architects, theologians, anthropologists, artists, media theorists and philosophers.

LARS SPUYBROEK is Professor of Architecture at the Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta where he teaches design methodology and aesthetic theory. He is the author of *NOX: Machining Architecture*, *The Architecture of Continuity*, *Textile Tectonics*, *The Architecture of Variation*, and *The Sympathy of Things*.

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