

The Sympathy of Things: Ruskin and the Ecology of Design. By LARS SPUYBROEK.
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From the stable of Rotterdam's V2_ Institute for the Unstable Media, Lars Spuybroek's *The Sympathy of Things* is a welcome addition to both Ruskin scholarship and the study of design and architecture. Taking as his starting-point Ruskin's seminal chapter on 'The Nature of Gothic' in *The Stones of Venice II* (1853), Spuybroek seeks, from a dazzling range of ideas, theorists, practitioners, periods, and phenomena, a means to address what he sees as the deficiencies of modern aesthetics and to connect Ruskinian ideas on decoration to a modern commitment to digital technology. It is at first difficult not to draw attention to the manner in which Spuybroek largely ignores some of those elements of the Gothic that were most crucial to Ruskin. In particular, almost no attention is paid to the specifically Christian morality that underpins Ruskin's historical reading of the rise and decline of Venetian architecture and society. Indeed, Spuybroek offers the highly questionable claim that 'with Ruskin, a line of reasoning never relies on his Christianity' (p. 14). More broadly, Spuybroek's opening chapter overemphasizes the formal elements of Ruskin's analysis of architecture, while underplaying its more important ethical dimensions as well as Ruskin's commitment to an objectivist aesthetics. At this point some readers might choose to reject the study altogether, but it quickly becomes apparent that such objections would be beside the point: Spuybroek's purpose lies elsewhere, and much of the power of his study comes from the fact that he does not approach Ruskin as an insider. Ruskin studies has produced many excellent scholarly accounts of Ruskin and the Gothic, most recently Robert Hewison's masterful *Ruskin on Venice: 'The Paradise of Cities'* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2009). From the beginning, Spuybroek's focus is quite different. His method is not to contextualize Ruskin as a mid-century aesthete, but 'to wrest [Ruskin] from history, to see whether you can filter out the typical statements of the day and discover what is left on the table, and, out of these parts, construct a creature we can recognize as one of our own' (p. 7). By placing Ruskin 'in the context of historical figures that have appeared after him' (p. 7) and through a series of diverse encounters, Spuybroek aims to transform 'a historical Ruskin into a theory of digital design' (p. 9).

Against the grain of his own specialism, Spuybroek condemns much of twentieth-century design as a 'fatal obsession with the sublime' that has led to a situation in which 'we can hardly imagine any longer how unthinkable it was a hundred and fifty years ago to leave the surface of things [...] as plain and bare as we know them today' (p. 61). Bemoaning a retreat from decoration that has led to 'a vast universe of smooth, polished objects', he none the less sees this as 'not a bad position to start from' (p. 75) in seeking to resist 'perfection, order, structure, harmony, and repose' (p. 113). Spuybroek is equally dismissive of those who call for a conservative, heritage-minded return to the design of previous centuries, and calls instead for an avante-garde digital design aesthetic rooted in the present but permitting a recuperation and reinvention of decoration. Ruskin is pivotal to the task of 'finding our way back to beauty' (p. 9), and helpful in particular because of the attentive and unusual manner of his engagement with landscape, buildings, and objects.

Spuybroek argues that we must choose between the impersonal and dehumanizing world of 'sublime' design and, by rediscovering the beautiful, reconnect ourselves to felt relations between things, organisms, people, and environment. He concludes that 'ornament and the picturesque can be considered the respective coming to life of surface and form' (p. 269), a coming into being that, he argues, is dependent upon sympathy, the central idea of his work. Sympathy, for Spuybroek, indicates 'deep-rooted engagement between us and things', a 'relationship with caring', and 'an immediate seeing-feeling-thinking relationship' (p. 171) which Spuybroek extends beyond the organic and into all things in a manner that renders it part of the process of building itself through sympathetic relations between the elements of constructions. Ruskin's deep-rooted antipathy to machine production is neatly accommodated by the ability of digital design methods to produce singular objects.

The *Sympathy of Things* is excessively wide-ranging, passionate, and in many ways ill-disciplined, and yet its passion and ambition are welcome. There is in this study more than can be comfortably digested by most readers: Spuybroek invites us to consider Bergson, Heidegger, Lipps, Worringer, Kant, Latour, Deleuze, leDuc, Morris, Islamic tile mosaics, solitary wasps, cracked mud patterns, and shrunken head trophies, amongst many other things. But the tendency to overspill the bounds of orthodox scholarly practice, and entirely to disregard the accepted boundaries of disciplinary studies, is perhaps no cause for criticism. Indeed, the work is deeply reminiscent of that most undisciplined and interdisciplinary of writers, John Ruskin. Like Ruskin's best work, Spuybroek's study is founded on a frank, unapologetic joy in the energy of things (organic and otherwise) and in the possibility of improvement in human life and creativity that engagement with the natural world can bring. This book has caused some consternation amongst orthodox architectural scholars, and may not be universally welcomed by all Ruskinians, but it is a work that will continue to reward those willing to read carefully, patiently, and with an open mind.

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