

How to Think Constructivism? Ruskin, Spuybroek and Deleuze on Gothic Architecture

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The abstract if not lifeless characteristics of classicist and modern architecture have been frequently noted and criticised by various romantic philosophers and theoreticians of architecture. According to Lars Spuybroek, Rotterdam-based architect and theoretician, those styles have, in fact, greatly contributed to the destruction of our relationship with the things surrounding us.¹ We live among boring inorganic spaces, in empty boxes, buildings with scarce ornamentation and plastic cladding used to superficially veil the bare, industrially produced construction. He sees humanity reduced to a naked and uncreative production force. Humans have become an industrial by-product. Spuybroek's ambitious aim is to search for an alternative to this lifeless world. We have to start to live differently and restore a once-existent relationship with matter. Architects and designers must reconstruct their procedures from scratch. Abstract ideas about beauty and general semiotic rules must be abandoned. What we call asignifying semiotics must come into being.²

The theoretical inspirations for this new procedure are found in the works of William James and Henri Bergson, but especially in John Ruskin's analysis of Gothic architecture.³ In the work of this nineteenth-century English social activist and aesthetician, Spuybroek discovers a vitalist Gothic ontology which could replace modernist and classicist frameworks in thinking about architecture. One of the key elements of Gothic constructivism can be found in a particular relation between ornamentation and structure. Gothic ornamentation does not

merely serve as a veil to cover a monotonous and geometrically sound structure: it is the true living force of any Gothic building. It generates structures.

The analysis of Ruskin's account of the Gothic leads Spuybroek to a critique of the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. These French philosophers are portrayed as philosophers of the sublime, conceptually unable to consider the construction of vitalist beauty and the stepwise emergence of structures out of ornamentation. Deleuze's resistance to structuralism and signifying semiotics is too excessive and leads his philosophy to an affirmation of chaos. As such, it becomes useless for the conceptualisation of vitalist constructivism. In my paper, I will demonstrate that Spuybroek partially misrepresents the thoughts of Deleuze and Guattari. I will also show that his use of Ruskin in fact lacks concepts necessary for a full comprehension of the Gothic. For Deleuze and Guattari, the stepwise process of construction and working with matter can only be a starting point for vitalist constructivism. Construction requires as its focal point a phantasm developed on the surface of sense. It always implies a certain kind of spiritual becoming. This analysis leads to certain consequences for understanding contemporary architecture. Unlike Spuybroek, Deleuze is not unconditionally forced to dismiss different kinds of architecture. For him, modernism and baroque can equally engage in the construction of phantasms or of various spiritual becomings. The search for a digital Gothic – a new and much-needed vitalist design practice – does not have to

lead to a general dismissal of the various styles of contemporary architecture. To develop my argument I will first discuss some of the characteristics of the Gothic process of construction as described by Ruskin. Secondly, I will consider Spuybroek's critique of Deleuze. In the final part, I will indicate which concepts developed by Deleuze are lacking in Spuybroek's analysis of the Gothic ontology.

The Nature of Gothic

The Rotterdam-based architect Lars Spuybroek is known for his attempts to develop radical and vitalist architecture.⁴ He has constructed moving, dynamic buildings and installations that respond to their surroundings; they are animalistic, express an inner force, and at the same time fully engage with contemporary technology. The project he submitted to the competition for the reconstruction of the World Trade Center site furnishes an example. Spuybroek presented an animalistic, amorphous and lively creature that could have dominated New York unlike any other modern or postmodern construction. The design expresses a vitalist force absent from the old modernist buildings and from what is left of the deconstructivist design of Libeskind. Spuybroek's work cannot be portrayed as postmodern. To him, the creativity and playfulness of deconstructivist or postmodern architecture constitute merely an empty and boring game of signifiers. In this respect he fully agrees with Felix Guattari's critique of this postmodern style of architecture.⁵ Postmodernism does not offer the promised explosion of new creativity. Spectacular buildings by architects such as Gehry, buildings without symmetry, or which introduce bizarre forms or surprising elements, do not yet construct a new vitalist space. Postmodern architecture develops yet another mould, yet another signifying semiotics, repetitively applied to each construction. Just like modernism, postmodernism also generates empty boxes, now veiled by colourful cladding. According to Spuybroek, design practice has not been sufficiently amended by contemporary attempts to develop architectural

craftsmanship. The use of handmade sketches, which characterise the design process of architects such as Renzo Piano, merely leads to an illusion of a proper engagement with matter. For Spuybroek, both Gehry and Piano offer a quasi-variation; they are unable to engage the physicality of building material in a proper manner.⁶

What kinds of concepts and procedures can provide an escape from the deadlock of classical, modernist and postmodernist architecture? Spuybroek finds these in the work of John Ruskin, particularly in his extensive analysis of the Gothic. Ruskin's analysis differs from the casual representation of the Gothic developed in the Renaissance, or by contemporary theoreticians of art and architecture such as Ernst Gombrich. For Ruskin, Gothic architecture was not the first step on the road from the dark and primitive Middle Ages towards the glory of the Renaissance. Gothic is not a rather primitive, early discovery of Ancient Greek architecture and art, with its admiration of the natural beauty of humanity and of nature.⁷ Ruskin does not portray the Gothic cathedrals as revealing divine perfection, or as impressive vessels that spread ascetic Christian values to the people. Unlike his Marxist contemporaries, Ruskin is little interested in the processes of exploitation proper to the feudal mode of production that enabled the building of those enormous structures. Gothic cathedrals are not presented as part of a superstructure, and neither did they only serve to legitimate the position of aristocracy and clergy in medieval society. For Ruskin, the construction of Gothic cathedrals presents an alternative to the industrial process of production. His analysis of the Gothic allows him to offer a vision of a different society. In the words of William Morris: 'John Ruskin the teacher of morals and politics, has done serious and solid work towards that new birth of Society, without which genuine art, the expression of man's pleasure in his handiwork, must inevitably cease altogether, and with it the hopes of the happiness of mankind.'⁸

What are these characteristics of the Gothic to which Ruskin pays attention? He is not primarily interested in the visible characteristics of this style: its pointed arches, the vaulted roofs, the flying buttresses or grotesque sculptures.⁹ Rather, he is interested in the Gothic mindset and provides us with its several characteristics. I will schematically mention some of these below.

The first apparent characteristic of the Gothic is its savageness. Gothic cathedrals have not been constructed by civilised inhabitants of Southern Europe but by the inhabitants of Northern Europe, the 'savage' Northerners,¹⁰ who face different living conditions from those experienced by the builders of classic architecture. The members of the guilds responsible for processing stone frequently travelled from one construction site to the other, processing the stone in cold climates. They continually encountered snow, mud and rain, harsh conditions rarely occurring in sunny Greece or Rome. They frequently made mistakes. Sometimes the craftsmen corrected them, but more frequently they just let them be. Such mistakes, in fact, did not have a negative impact on the beauty of the constructions. To Ruskin, these mistakes are even a central aspect of the beauty of the cathedrals. The Gothic builders did not have to accomplish a materialisation of abstract and universal mathematical or organic beauty. They were also honest about their own limitations, about their human incapacity to produce abstract and perfectly executed finished elements. For Ruskin, organic beauty can only emerge as an end result of an honest process that is full of mistakes. It is not established in advance.¹¹

The second distinguishing characteristic of the Gothic identified by Ruskin – the one Spuybroek most emphasises – is the flexibility or variety allowed for during the construction process.¹² Variety is the starting point for construction. It reappears at all its stages. Ruskin notices, for example, that subsequent cathedral architects lacked any kind of regard

for the style of their predecessors and almost always added their own elements to the emerging structures. Hence the second towers of many cathedrals were very frequently raised in completely different styles.¹³ Gothic employs variation, too, because it allows for a continual combination of variable and flexible sub-elements. This is evident in the case of ornamentation, when an initial arbitrary choice of the length of one decorative element necessitates subsequent choices. Spuybroek explains the point made by Ruskin in the following way:

Crucial in the concept of changefulness is that the variation of the individual figure is linked to the possible configurations that can be formed of multiple figures. In short, the line is active and shows *behaviour*. It can stretch and contract, not merely changing in scale but altering while still remaining itself; in short, it can be modulated. It can be a J-figure with a long or short shaft, including a wide or narrow arch, making up one half of an ogive; or a C-figure with various sizes of opening, which together form the familiar cusps of the trefoil; or an S-figure, which we know in the arch of the ogee – a curve that can be flattened but can also appear as a deep wave, such as we encounter in many traceries.¹⁴

Similar behaviour was also characteristic in the construction of the whole building. A limited number of elements were freely combined in a variety of manners. The final design of the cathedral did not exist in advance and emerged during the long process of construction. The random choice of one of the elements could have far-reaching consequences for the way the rest of the building was built.

The third characteristic of the Gothic style is its naturalism. The medieval craftsmen were fascinated by nature. They express an intense affection for living foliage, as Ruskin states. Gothic craftsmen were nevertheless not imitating nature. They did not want to provide its perfect image but drew abstract

and noble lines that imitated the objects only secondarily. They attempted to express the vitality of the living matter with all its strengths and weaknesses.¹⁵ The immense number of details and sub-elements expresses the fullness and wealth of the material universe. Gothic buildings are an expression of sheer force. As Ruskin states: 'Egyptian and Greek buildings stand, for the most part, by their own weight and mass, one stone passively incumbent on another; but in the Gothic vaults & traceries there is a stiffness analogous to that of the bones of a limb, or fibres of a tree; an elastic tension and communication of force from part to part, & also a studious expression of this throughout every visible line of the building.'¹⁶ Additional material is not added on top of a pre-established structure, as is the case with baroque. The true elements of construction are not the abstract geometrical entities but rather the organic forces of matter. These forces are not wild and forever escaping structure: a Gothic architect worked with forces from the very beginning, he allowed for their expression. For Spuybroek, this is visible in the case of a column. Rather than the manufacture of a preselected model, a column is first of all an expression of a vital force. The Gothic builders used a mould to produce a column, but its use was of secondary importance. As Spuybroek says: 'When a twelfth-century architect designs a column, he will take on the morphology of a column and nothing else, but therein lies his freedom, because he takes the column for granted, since it will not materialise as such anyway; he is merely interested in an expression of the building.'¹⁷

The overabundance of matter visible in the Gothic cathedral does not mean that the construction sinks into chaos. There is active rigidity in place.¹⁸ Various levels of organisation emerge during the subsequent steps of construction. The forces eventually solidify into a given structure. Nevertheless, the procedure characterising Gothic architecture always involves risks. It frequently leads to grotesque results. Some cathedrals are 'over the top'. The walls are covered

with too many figures. Patterns of ornamentation frequently become too complicated. Many buildings, as for example the famous cathedral of Chartres, become asymmetric. Geometrical perfection is, in fact, reached only occasionally. For Ruskin, this grotesque aspect is nevertheless fundamental. It shows the true freedom of the Gothic. Nor is the overabundance of ornamentation the expression of a base will to accumulate and display wealth. For Ruskin, something entirely different is at stake here. As he states: 'There are, however, far nobler interests mingling, in the Gothic heart, with the rude love of decorative accumulation: a magnificent enthusiasm which feels as if it never could do enough to reach the fullness of its ideal; an unselfishness of sacrifice, which would rather cast fruitless labour before the altar than stand idle in the market; and finally, a profound sympathy with the fullness & wealth of the material universe.'¹⁹

In his analysis of Ruskin, Spuybroek seems to be most interested in the Gothic as a process of the gradual emergence of subsequent elements of a structure rather than in its spiritual mindset. He defines Gothic ontology as follows:

That is *Gothic ontology*: there is plenty of accident, yes, but accident leading to substance, and there are huge amounts of flexibility, but flexibility leading to rigidity. Things do not miraculously meet in a single moment either through magical emergence or magical intervention; rather, they settle step by step, in a process that takes on more direction the more it progresses, trading the initial vagueness for increased determination.²⁰

This reading is justified by Spuybroek's own quest for a new architectural practice. Gothic ontology is presented as a guideline for contemporary design that hardly needs craftsmanship. It must allow for variety and profoundly accept change and mistakes. Spuybroek is aware that in the age of computers and large-scale constructions, the use of bare

hands in working with materials is hardly possible. Contemporary machinery, abundant in every kind of design process, cannot be eliminated. The skillfulness of an artisan must therefore be combined with digital technology. Machines can allow for accidents, variation and flexibility due to their operational use of generative codes. In this way, design can take into account the emergence of various scenarios. Especially in the initial stages of design it can play with chance.²¹ Only given such conditions will vitalist design cease to imitate nature by means of predetermined animalistic forms as seen in the work of Niemeyer or Calatrava. It must work with imperfections but never as a predetermined idea. Savageness and vitality can only emerge as a consequence of the rightly set process. Organic beauty can only appear at the end of construction.

Spuybroek and Deleuze.

Engagement with the work of Ruskin, but also with that of Bergson, leads Spuybroek to a critique of the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze. He considers Deleuze to be a typical postmodern philosopher, conceptually unable to satisfactorily understand the procedures proper to the Gothic. Deleuze is mainly interested in the sublime. Instead of conceptualising the progressive emergence of solidified structures out of overabundant matter, Deleuze continually stresses the importance of continuous change. His concepts do not allow him to understand the emergence of beauty out of organic elements. For Deleuze each construction must always be undermined by continuous deterritorialisations.²² For Spuybroek, the emphasis placed on the non-organic processes of deterritorialisation leads to a misunderstanding of the process of order emerging out of chaos. Deleuze is conceptually unable to understand that ornamentation can produce a structure. This point is visible in his interest in baroque. For Spuybroek the details and ornamentation of this style, which despite being violent and fluid, are merely a veil that distorts and covers up the structure instead of producing it.²³ Ornamentation fulfils the same

role as the figures in baroque paintings, which, no matter how expressive, are executing a well-defined role within a pre-established religious narrative. The damned descend and suffer. The blessed ascend and are overwhelmed by the possibilities revealed by the proximity of God. Their character does not shatter the pre-established vertical hierarchy. To use a Marxist vocabulary (not employed by Spuybroek) in the analysis by Deleuze, ornamentation fulfils merely the role of a fetish or false consciousness. It never challenges the signifying structure in a sufficient manner. Deleuze adds what Slavoj Žižek would call a 'Coca-Cola light' option to the existing structure. The vertical hierarchy remains unchallenged. Nothing new is envisaged. For Spuybroek, deconstructive architecture functions in a manner that is similar to baroque. It does not pose any challenge to the lifeless architecture of the empty box. It merely offers a superficial veil and does not reverse the modern separation of space from life. Deleuze's focus on the necessity of movement does not allow him to think of the emergence of organisation. Movement as conceptualised by Deleuze must exhaust itself, 'like a primordial soup never coming to life'.²⁴ The Gothic is far more intelligent, he states. It uses movement not to break away from form or structure, but to create it.

Spuybroek's understanding of the structural role of the processes of deterritorialisation in the thought of Deleuze and Guattari must nevertheless be critically examined. For both philosophers, deterritorialisation, when exercised correctly, is not obliged to become a movement of destruction. It cannot be reduced to an unproductive escapism. To be able to respond to Spuybroek – but also to other critiques of the work of Deleuze and Guattari by Badiou, Hallward or Žižek²⁵ – we have to understand Deleuze's specific ideas about the process of the construction of sense, or his version of asignifying semiotics. In that way we will see that a concept such as deterritorialisation is necessary for a proper understanding of constructivism.

For Deleuze, the process of construction does not consist in engagement with matter alone. Various levels of organisation – in this case, the successive stages of constructing a cathedral – do not solely emerge out of interactions with matter alone, as Spuybroek suggests. The movement of construction is always guided by an orientation towards a third inorganic or spiritual instance. This instance must be placed at the level of what Deleuze calls the virtual, or the surface of sense. Deleuze thinks of the process of construction outside the framework of the philosophy of representation and the systems of signification it presupposes. This third instance must also be thought of in that way. It belongs to a dimension that is not rigidly organised. We should be precise about how to understand the workings of this dimension. The distinction between the two dimensions is discussed, for example, in his analysis of the emergence of sense in *The Logic of Sense*. In this book, Deleuze clearly distinguishes between the depth of the physical bodies and the surface of sense, frequently called the spiritual or metaphysical surface.²⁶ Depth has all the characteristics of the matter discussed by Spuybroek and, to a lesser degree, by Ruskin. Depth is itself full of change and variation. It is the realm of the superabundant bodies directly interacting with each other, without the mediation of external structures. In order to define the characteristics of the semi-otic system proper to this depth, Deleuze uses the concept of simulacra, which allows him to challenge the primacy of the Platonic differentiation between copies and Ideas.²⁷ For Deleuze, Ideas are by no means primary with respect to the imperfect world of copies. Copies are not their inferior actualisation. Nevertheless, the challenge posed to the Platonic worldview is not posed by the reversal of the relationship between copies and Ideas but, instead, by emphasising the primacy of simulacra. The simulacra are not a bad copy of a perfect Idea. They simulate and allow for the emergence of new entities: they generate ideas. One such idea, discussed by Deleuze, is beauty, which can never be achieved

in advance. It is a construction and is generated out of the direct interaction of bodies. Hence, a Greek sculpture of a God is not an inferior copy of an abstract Idea of a perfect body. For Deleuze, beauty emerges during the process of sculpting. It is a creation that emerges out of the interaction between the sculptor, the stone and the spectators. Beauty and the idea of perfection emerge within given circumstances. They are a solution, a manner in which the spectators can construct themselves as imperfect and ugly, as striving towards perfection.

Simulacra of the depth are nevertheless not the only focus point in Deleuze's analysis of construction in *The Logic of Sense*. Materialism is in need of an ontological dimension that separates it from the direct physical materiality of the actual.²⁸ This dimension transcends the directness of matter found in the depths. In *The Logic of Sense*, this dimension is called the surface of sense. It allows for the expression of matter and consists of a multiplicity of events, which can be related to one another in an infinite number of ways. Sense is produced on this surface and retroactively influences matter itself. When the simulacrum of beauty emerges in the depths, it can become expressed on the surface of sense. However, in that case, the simulacrum engages with a problematic field and becomes a phantasm. It contributes to the emerging sense and becomes a solution.²⁹ The phantasm is a synthesis of various events into one scenario. It allows a subject to act.³⁰ Beauty can hence become a solution to a problematic field. It can reach a distance with respect to the depths and express events on the surface of sense. As such, it can introduce a rupture in the material causal chain and surpass the laws of causality. As a phantasm, it becomes spiritual in nature while at the same time remaining entirely independent of the already existing system of signification.

Events can therefore be represented by phantasms that synthesise them into a unity. They can become quasi-causes.³¹ In *The Logic of Sense*,

Deleuze mentions several examples of phantasms proper to the surface of sense. According to him, to understand the work of Lewis Carroll we have to surpass the direct materiality of his prose and poetry and uncover a deeper-lying phantasm that is guiding his work.³² For Deleuze, Carroll's work is characterised by a certain kind of perversion, by his extreme fascination with the figure of a little girl who is still unable to properly function in the world of adults. In the terminology of Deleuze and Guattari, the phantasm of Carroll is characterised by a becoming-woman. Without the emergence of this phantasm Carroll's work would never reach the same state of perfection. The various stories would lack a binding element. They would lack a quasi-cause, a unifying spiritual principle that could be actualised in each of them. The bizarre activity of Captain Ahab in the book *Moby Dick* – his violent search for a white whale that leads to the complete destruction of his ship – is discussed by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*, and can also be characterised as having been guided by a spiritual instance proper to the surface of sense. Ahab is not living within the depths of over-abundant matter. He is, for instance, not carefully constructing a certain unity by means of making little movements. Ahab is acting the way he does because from the very beginning he is driven by the phantasm of a white whale. He is fascinated by the relationship between the whale and the sea. This phantasm emerges out of a synthesis of various events and is full of different scenarios. It allows Ahab to relate to and break away from the physical world of an industrial whale hunt. This phantasm is not an expression of the destructive urges of a mad captain. His deterritorialisation is not a rejection of the industrial whale hunters' way of life. The phantasm is a particular construction that expresses the material problems of his existence and allows him to relate to them: it is the construction of a new spiritual territory. Ahab can now live by his own rules and keep the ones provided by the whale hunting industry at a distance. He can now guide his crew

in a manner that has not been foreseen before. For Deleuze and Guattari, a true construction process first of all needs such a virtual instance.

The analysis of Gothic architecture in *A Thousand Plateaus* adopts a similar structure. Deleuze and Guattari distinguish between the two previously mentioned ontological levels and search for a phantasm guiding the nomadic constructors of the Gothic cathedrals.³³ At first glance they seem to stress only their destructive tendencies. Indeed, they seem to be interested only in the idea of the sublime and the disruption of order. Nomads operate outside the procedures and ideology of what Deleuze and Guattari call 'state science'. They seem not to build according to the pre-established and abstract rules of a religious order attempting to establish the hegemony of ascetic spirituality. Nevertheless, for Deleuze and Guattari, a simple kind of opposition to state science, which also characterises a part of postmodern architecture, is not the guiding spiritual principle of these craftsmen. Basing their argument on the work of Worringer, Deleuze and Guattari emphasise the emergence of a particular phantasm proper to the Gothic. This architecture reaches a certain spiritual delirium. It is characterised by a particular will, visible when Gothic cathedrals are compared with Romanesque churches. Nomadic scientists construct buildings that must be as long and as tall as possible. However, the differences do not primarily concern the scale of such constructions. For Deleuze and Guattari, the Gothic conquers what they call a 'smooth space' and surpasses the rules and limitations imposed on the builders by the striated space, the predefined rules of construction. As they state, the difference between both styles is marked by a qualitative change:

[...] The static relation, form-matter, tends to fade into the background in favour of a dynamic relation, material-forces. It is the cutting of the stone that turns it into material capable of holding and coordinating forces of thrust, and of constructing ever higher and longer

vaults. The vault is no longer a form but the line of continuous variation of the stones. It is as if Gothic conquered a smooth space, while Romanesque remained partially within a striated space (in which the vault depends on the juxtaposition of parallel pillars).³⁴

Gothic cathedrals express a will to break away from the limitations of the heavy load of stone. They are a challenge to the limitations of the physical experience. Worringer calls this will to break away from the earthly limitations, this will to reach the sky, the northern or the Gothic line.³⁵ The Gothic line is present at each step of the construction, whether it is the construction of small ornaments or a subsequent distribution of pillars in a church. Deleuze and Guattari follow Worringer, who notes that the Gothic line is not solely made possible by the advancement of technology. Contrary to modernism, Gothic arrived at its own expressive power not by means of the material and technology but in spite of it.³⁶ Gothic builders battled against the weight of the stone. This resistance was only possible because of the spiritual will to overcome materiality. It was guided by a phantasm proper to the surface of sense, one that is absent in modernism, where the struggle with the limitations of materials, the will to overcome limitations, is of lesser importance. For Worringer, the modern builders of skyscrapers lack an opponent. They do not have to win. They are trapped by the possibilities offered to them by current technology. To state this in our terminology, they do not seem to find a hidden phantasm that could guide their constructions, but only actualise the rules of the existing state science.

As with Ruskin and Worringer, Deleuze and Guattari do not consider the Gothic builders to be religious men who are exercising the will of state science. They are not interested in the construction of an ascetic religious space or in the glorification and legitimation of the institutional power of the church, but neither do they stand in radical opposition to this structure. The northern nomadic

constructors and craftsmen, working in the cold and mud, engage with different forces from the ones they are asked to express by the church. We could say that the constructors are in the process of becoming animal. Their construction is made possible by a spiritual belief in their own internal animal powers. It is precisely this phantasm that the church and the state are unable to structure for promoting their ascetic values. The nomadic builders construct their own plane of consistency, different from the plane of organisation. The phantasm of the Gothic line allows them to overcome the limitations of matter and reveals their secret power, their will to resist the natural circumstances.

According to Deleuze and Guattari, it is impossible to deny the strong influence of state science on the construction of Gothic cathedrals. The smooth space can never fully replace the striated one. Both are fully intertwined. The Gothic builders are working for the church and operate within the restrictions imposed upon them by its ideology. It is impossible to claim complete independence from this influence.³⁷ The smooth space is constructed within certain limitations. The church also appropriates the discoveries and will of the Gothic builders for its own profit. The cathedrals are immense and impress the ordinary people. But this appropriation has its limits. The striated space is continually transformed into the smooth space. The limits imposed by state science are continually transgressed. The Christian ascetic ideals and the will to dominate the population are directly challenged by the physical liveliness of the cathedrals. Ascetic ideals are challenged by the Gothic line in the very place in which they are supposed to be exercised with fullest force.

The phantasm emerging at the surface of sense is consequently not directly submitted to the signifying semiotics provided by state science. For Deleuze and Guattari, this interaction can emerge in various circumstances. Every space, even one submitted to the highest degree of organisation

and striation, allows for the emergence of smooth spaces.³⁸ Distance from the striated space is always possible. The smooth space is not merely a superficial veil that covers the existing striated space, it directly influences the latter. Deleuze and Guattari continue to express a plea to strive towards a nomad absolute, one that differs from that of the state. They remark as follows about this absolute:

There exists a proper nomad absolute that is distinguished from the state one. There exists a nomadic absolute, as a local integration moving from part to part and constituting smooth space in an infinite succession of linkages and changes in direction. It is an absolute that is one with becoming itself, with process. It is the absolute of passage, which in nomad art merges with its manifestation. Here the absolute is local, precisely because place is not delimited.³⁹

We are now in a position to understand this statement. Contrary to the claims of Spuybroek, the nomad science discussed by Deleuze and Guattari does not aim at a radical destruction of state science, nor believe in movement for the sake of movement. The nomad absolute can guide at all times locally. It relates to a problematic field and transforms the material circumstances from which it emerges.

Conclusion

An analysis of the process of construction discussed by Deleuze and Guattari constitutes an alternative to the one developed by Spuybroek. It is also less dismissive of architecture's different styles. Baroque and modernist procedures are indeed different from the Gothic. Nevertheless, the phantasms or space these styles of architecture construct do not have to differ much. Modernism and baroque can open themselves up towards other becomings. They might also discover the capacity to express vitalist forces that are found in the Gothic. The overabundance of organic or extremely expressive elements in baroque might suggest the existence of a phantasm that is similar to the Gothic one. The use of

sharp forms or of materials such as concrete by modernist or brutalist architects might equally point towards a possibility within the space in which corporate architecture is the norm. For Deleuze and Guattari, a becoming that cannot be captured by the striated space is always possible. This becoming is not an escape but rather a construction of a new field of possibilities. Modernism, with its hatred of ornament, should not be as recklessly dismissed as Spuybroek does. We could state that it is characterised by a 'becoming minoritarian', a resistance to the hegemony of bourgeois ideology and its forms of representation. Modernism is, in this sense, an answer to the age of neo-Gothic, where matter – glorified by Ruskin – has turned into an expression of the bourgeois ideology of overabundance. It is exactly the soberness of modernism that was a tool in the combat against architecture that facilitated and legitimated the feudal economic differences between human beings. The empty boxes of modernism, despised by Spuybroek, helped to construct new spaces of equality.

The search for a new design practice might benefit from the asignifying semiotics of Deleuze and Guattari. The process of construction presupposes a spiritual becoming. Matter is an important factor in construction but always needs an instance that transcends it. Construction needs the surface of sense and a phantasm that transcends given material circumstances and any technically defined design procedure. Construction must always engage in a search for an expressive will. Only a practice that succeeds in this search can be truly called the digital Gothic.

Notes

1. Lars Spuybroek, *The Sympathy of Things: Ruskin and the Ecology of Design* (Rotterdam: V2 Publishing, 2011).
2. Spuybroek himself does not use this term. His work has nevertheless been analysed by theoreticians

- interested in the thought of Gilles Deleuze. For a recent analysis of the work of Spuybroek, see Rick Dolphijn (2011), 'Mapping the Crystals of Life. The Radical Picturesque in Lars Spuybroek's *The Sympathy of Things: Ruskin and the Ecology of Design*', *Esthetica* (2012), and Deborah Hauptmann and Andrej Radman 'Northern Line', in *Deleuze and Architecture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013).
3. John Ruskin, *The Nature of Gothic: A Chapter of The Stones of Venice* (1892), Research Library, The Getty Research Institute.
 4. Spuybroek has gained wide international acknowledgement for his work. The list of works can be found on the site <<http://www.nox-art-architecture.com>> [Accessed 07 April 2014]. His studio participated, for example, in a 'non-standard architectures' exhibition in 2003 at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. However, frustration with daily architectural practice has recently led him to stop designing and to devote himself to writing about architecture.
 5. Félix Guattari, 'Postmodern Deadlock and Post-Media Transition', in *Soft Subversions* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), p. 292. See also Spuybroek, *The Sympathy of Things*, p. 54.
 6. 'Gehry's designs consist of large, handmade models of curved surfaces, which are digitally scanned three-dimensionally by a free-moving robot arm. All these warped planes are smashed blindly into each other on every corner of the volume, light-years away from Gothic grace and coordination.' Spuybroek, *The Sympathy of Things*, p. 54.
 7. Ernst Hans Gombrich, 'Chapter X', in *The Story of Art* (London: Phaidon, 1950).
 8. William Morris in John Ruskin, p. V.
 9. Ruskin, *The Nature of Gothic*, p. 3.
 10. *Ibid.*, p. 7. See also Spuybroek, *The Sympathy of Things*, p. 13.
 11. And it is, perhaps, the principal admirableness of the Gothic schools of architecture, that they thus receive the results of the labour of inferior minds; and out of fragments full of imperfection, and betraying that imperfection in every touch, indulgently raise up a stately and unaccusable whole.' (Ruskin, p. 15). He adds: 'The demand for perfection is always a sign of a misunderstanding of the ends of art.' (p. 31).
 12. With respect to the pointed arch, Ruskin observes: 'The pointed arch was not merely a bold variation from the round, but it admitted of millions of variations in itself; for the proportions of a pointed arch are changeable to infinity, while a circular arch is always the same.' (p. 39).
 13. Ruskin, *The Nature of Gothic*, p. 45.
 14. Spuybroek, *The Sympathy of Things*, p. 21.
 15. Ruskin puts this as follows: 'Both Greek and Roman used conventional foliage in their ornaments, passing into something that was not foliage at all, knotting itself into strange cuplike buds or clusters, and growing out of lifeless rods instead of stems; the Gothic sculptor received these types, at first, as things that ought to be, just as we have a second time received them; but he could not rest in them. He saw there was no veracity in them, no knowledge, no vitality.' (p. 71). Further on he adds: 'But to the Gothic workman the living foliage became a subject of intense affection, and he struggled to render all its characters with as much accuracy as was compatible with the laws of his design and the nature of his material, not infrequently tempted in his enthusiasm to transgress the one and disguise the other.' (p. 76).
 16. Ruskin, *The Nature of Gothic*, p. 82.
 17. Spuybroek, *The Sympathy of Things*, p. 30.
 18. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
 19. Ruskin, *The Nature of Gothic*, p. 88.
 20. Spuybroek, *The Sympathy of Things*, p. 67.
 21. As he remarks: 'Changefulness, savageness and imperfection evolve during the design stage.' (Spuybroek, p. 58). This procedure has been used, for example, during the design of the form of the D-tower, an installation in the city of Doetinchem in the East Netherlands.
 22. Spuybroek emphasises Deleuze's wrong reading of the Gothic in the following passage: 'Gilles Deleuze, who is known as a vitalist, was the last proponent of the Gothic, but in a barely recognisable manner, never giving it serious historical attention save for making

- a repeated reference to Worringer's Gothic line and borrowing from him the concept of nonorganic life, in which free, proliferating curves are equated with deterritorialising barbarians, nomads and vagabonds breaking away from the state, whether Greek or Egyptian.' (p. 12).
23. Spuybroek describes this as follows: 'The flexibility of the elements in the Gothic is radically opposed to that found in the Baroque; there structure comes first, and *then* movement is added. [...] The Baroque is merely distorted classicism [...]. In the Gothic, ornament acts like a structure and structure acts like ornament.' (p. 44).
 24. Spuybroek, *The Sympathy of Things*, p. 32.
 25. Peter Hallward, *Out of this World* (London: Continuum, 2005), and Slavoj Žižek, *Organs without Bodies* (London: Routledge, 2004).
 26. Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. by Daniel W. Smith (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990). For an analysis of this distinction, see Piotr Świątkowski (forthcoming), 'Dynamic Genesis of Sense: Deleuze's Analysis of Desire', in *The Logic of Sense* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2014). See also Bowden, *Priority of Events* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011).
 27. Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, pp. 187, 253.
 28. Žižek, *Organs without Bodies*, p. 32.
 29. Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, p. 193.
 30. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
 31. *Ibid.*, p. 210. In his analysis of the phantasm, Deleuze is influenced by the work of Klossowski. See Daniel Smith, *Essays on Deleuze* (London: Continuum, 2012), pp. 325-39.
 32. Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, p. 238.
 33. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari underscore the existence of the twofold nature of constructivism by means of a distinction between two kinds of planes. They speak first of all of a plane of projection which limits the construction and offers the material possibilities for the emergence of a structure. Spuybroek seems to refer to this plane when he discusses the Gothic process of construction. Construction, however, also needs the 'successive approximations' of the smooth space (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 364). This smooth space is not a destruction of order but, just like the surface of sense, is characterised by events that are represented by a phantasm.
 34. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 364.
 35. Worringer argues that in the Gothic cathedral we 'lose the feeling of our earthly limitations, we are absorbed into an infinite movement that obliterates all consciousness of the finite'. Wilhelm Worringer, *Form Problem of the Gothic* (New York: G.E. Stechert, 1918), p. 87.
 36. Worringer, *Form Problem of the Gothic*, p. 88.
 37. Deleuze and Guattari state this as follows: 'No sooner do we note a simple opposition between the two kinds of space than we must indicate a much more complex difference by virtue of which the successive terms of the oppositions fail to coincide entirely. And no sooner have we done that than we must remind ourselves that the two spaces in fact exist only in mixture: smooth space is constantly being translated, transversed into a striated space; striated space is constantly being reversed, returned to a smooth space.' (p. 494).
 38. 'What interests us in operations of striation and smoothing are precisely the passages or combinations: how the forces at work within space continually striate it, and how in the course of its striation it develops other forces and emits new smooth spaces. Even the most striated city gives rise to smooth spaces: to live in the city as a nomad, or as a cave dweller. Movements, speed and slowness, are sometimes enough to reconstruct a smooth space. Of course, smooth spaces are not in themselves liberatory. But the struggle is changed or displaced in them, and life reconstitutes its stakes, confronts new obstacles, invents new paces, switches adversaries. Never believe that a smooth space will suffice to save us.' (p. 500).
 39. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 494.

Biography

Piotrek Swiatkowski is associated researcher at the Centre for Contemporary European Philosophy of the Radboud University Nijmegen and lecturer of philosophy and Corporate Social Responsibility at various universities in the Netherlands. His book on the Dynamic genesis of Sense will be published at the end of 2014 by Leuven University Press.