

The Grace Machine

▣ a seminar series ▣

A fifteen-week long *Architecture Theory* seminar conducted by Professor Lars Spuybroek in one-hour-plus sessions, which are held twice a week. The seminar is divided up in six lectures followed by separate sessions where we discuss readings of students in the context of the lectures. The seminar will be conducted internationally, online, and accompanied by **The Grace Notes**, a day-long symposium investigating the same themes, to be held at Georgia Tech during the Spring of 2022.

Could there ever exist a “grace theory”? If so, such a theory might perhaps not be *about* grace, but use grace to overcome the differences between other disciplines and bring them into direct contact. Writing *Grace and Gravity: Architectures of the Figure* (Bloomsbury, 2020) strengthened my conviction of the necessity of such a metatheory, which I, not without hesitation, coined a nonhumanities. For ages the humanities and the arts have been divorced from engineering and technology—and as we can see every day, this has brought us to the truly horrifying prospect of a future where the rift is beyond repair. We are less and less capable of understanding them as interdependent. Maybe a grace theory will offer us the necessary insights. In this international seminar we will crisscross through *Grace and Gravity* to find another, more compact book hidden in it which allows us to focus on a few of its major concepts that will help to live up to the ambitions of such a metatheory. After the introduction to the notion of **THE GRACE MACHINE**, which establishes the main operatives such as the figure and the gap, we will study five “gymnastic” postures, each epitomizing a specific aspect of grace.

► **I. STANDING: The Posture of Existence.** Literally, the term “existence” means “to stand forth” and grace theory offers a distinctive view on stance. Via a detailed analysis of the classical figure of contrapposto in various contexts we will develop correlations between movement and standstill, as well as between weakness and strength. However, not merely being an ambiguous form of standing forth, the figure “shines forth” too, which sets it apart from other entities such as the thing, symbol, or the object. Figures radiate, which places them in the domain of the gift, since gift exchange is run by the Three Graces, of which the first, Aglaia, signifies nothing less than shining. We will investigate this aesthetic ontology in its effects on the arts, architecture, historiography, and even on practices such as yoga, which created a religion of posture.

► **II. JUMPING: Grace and the Gap.** We dive deeper into the notion of the figure to distinguish it from the figurative, and we’ll discover the fundamental condition for the figure to appear: the gap, which we compare to “room,” “chaos” and “matrix.” Why is the gap so different from space? And why is the gap actually a **double gap**, both internal and external? It’s quite surprising how much of this structure is revealed by sports. Precisely how radically sports separates field from object tells us how grace depends on opportunity, what the Greeks called *kairos*, and what the photographer Cartier-Bresson called the **decisive moment**. Everything that exists depends on the gap: *Natura semper facit saltus*, “nature always makes jumps”—this will be our deliberate challenge to both Leibniz and Darwin. If true, we can dream of saltational history, of figures jumping through the hoops of time.

THE GRACE ATLAS. Based on Aby Warburg’s famously unfinished *Bilderatlas* (“image atlas”), students will be using a final four-week period to create ordered “images of grace.” In itself, grace cannot be depicted, but as indicated above grace has strong relations to photography, to the notion of the moment and to the intersection of movement and standstill. Then, there are clearly figures of grace, most of which we’ll have encountered during the lectures and discussions. There can be gaps as well as links between images. Photos can be opposed in pairs, linked by series, or related by clusters—the latter being Warburg’s technique. Images can even “rhyme” when series form again series. The idea is to make a start with such a Grace Atlas.

Lars Spuybroek is Professor of Architecture and the author of several books on architecture and digital design, such as *The Architecture of Continuity*, *The Sympathy of Things*, *Grace and Gravity*, two Research & Design books, *Textile Tectonics* and *The Architecture of Variation*.

“They fly toward grace”—Thomas Pynchon, the final sentence of *Against the Day*.

“These fragments of discourse can be called *figures*. The word is to be understood, not in its rhetorical sense, but rather in its **gymnastic** or choreographic acceptance ... in the Greek meaning: *schēma* is not the “schema,” but in a much livelier way, the body’s gesture caught in action, and not contemplated in repose: the body of athletes, orators, statues”—Roland Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse*

► **III. HANGING: The Sweetness of Ornament.** Seemingly in direct opposition to stance, we encounter figures of hanging, which have traditionally been associated with ornament: garlands, curls, earrings, tresses, tendrils, pendants, are all hanging and not independent. We will refute this notion of ornament as a mere add-on and show that its weakness is inherent to stance by a detailed study of Hephaestus, the “Limping God,” creator of all ornament and automata, as well as (unhappily) married to Aglaia. We will meet the figure of the Absolute Ornament: **Christ**, dangling from the cross. Inevitably, we will be debating the notion of grace in Christianity, especially in the Epistles of St. Paul, who made it fundamental to its religion. An extensive survey of the marvelous term **sweetness** completes our research—by opening it up to an unforeseen world of pain.

► **IV. FLOATING: Media and the Octopus.** If it’s possible to speak of a “grace machine,” at some point the question must arise what the exact relationship is between grace and technology, especially media technology. Here the gap takes on a particular quality, that of a light-filled thickness without which nothing can happen. Many have studied the link between grace and technology, Samuel Butler, for instance, who categorized it as a form of the unconscious. We will expand his ideas into a **distributed consciousness** while engaging media theorists such as Marshall McLuhan, Donna Haraway, and Paul Virilio, who speculated on the flickering, epileptic nature of consciousness. Along the way we will make detailed studies of the research into the visions and hallucinations created by psychotropic drugs, which are astoundingly similar to ornamental pattern design. (Henri Michaux, for example, called his mescaline trips a form of “ornamentogenesis.”)

► **V. FALLING: The Reckonings of Chance.** While all the postures described above are accompanied by animals such as horses, dolphins, monkeys and octopuses, falling requires an eminently human figure: the Fall of Man. We are cast from paradise because we don’t fit. As Michel Serres said, animals don’t have history; only humans do because they are bound to lead technical lives. Our falling, then, is a permanent falling, which we can’t distinguish from floating. *The Falling Man* of Richard Drew shows this in the most horrific manner. All falling is **the falling of dice**. The Epicurian and Lucretian model of the universe turns out to be pure media theory: all is falling, then swerving, then images are emitted from these collisions. Accident and coincidence. Virilio tells us why accident is fundamental to technology. We then extend the notion of ever-falling to Pascal’s Triangle and the Galton Board, to number theory, and to that great group of writers: Oulipians such as Calvino and Perec. And, by the way, falling strongly relates to comedy too.