

## John Ruskin, Our Future Voice- A Lesson in Craft and Vision

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John Ruskin writing some 150 years ago, at a time of great industrial and cultural change broadly analogous to our own, speaks to us, as then, with a voice able to ‘demonstrate both his range and the unity underlying it’ with a ‘refusal in an age of growing specialisation, to separate one discipline from another or to see questions of art and science as distinct from questions of morality’. At one level he represents the archetypal polymath, founding father of the National Trust, a contributor to the conservation and ecology movement, social and political commentator and influencer of the Labour Movement, artist, art critic and supporter of both Turner and the Pre-Raphaelite Movement, and of course natural researcher and classifier of fossils. At a higher level his commentary, criticism and indeed his research can be seen to be based on the fusion of social context awareness combined with great technical skill. Ruskin’s championing of Turner being the perfect example of this. This combination of connectedness, broad disregard for the confines of specialisms, combined with an emphasis on technical excellence, or the finely honed skills of the craftsman, I would suggest, brings guidance for our future as researchers.

Ruskin particularly in his writings ‘The Stones of Venice’ and on ‘The Nature of Gothic’ develops ideas of craft and the relationship between the objects created from this craft, the artist or craftsman and society, that have profound implications for us as researchers in the first decade of the 21st century. Ruskin ‘did not see buildings merely as works of art created by individuals for the use of other individuals. They were social artefacts and, as such expressed the moral condition of the society in which and for which they were built’. In other words such creativity at it best is meaning giving, sense making and placed in a complex and multi-level relationship-research at it its best! To understand this required and even more so today requires an understanding of the interconnections between method or skill, technology and the social and behavioural contexts surrounding the subject of research, or in Ruskin’s case the artefact or work of art. A challenge to many of our current research practices, methodologies and ways of working. As Ruskin points out many of these challenges relate to the nature or manner of the labour involved in the creative processes. Is the craftsman, or we might say the researcher in danger in his work of being reduced to ‘certain fixed conventions’ where by ‘the creative freedom of the workman is repressed and controlled’ or does his ‘work give freedom to the workers imagination’? Importantly Ruskin never ceases to emphasis the role of skill or technical mastery but, whilst core, this is instrumental or only one element of the creative process. This commentary can be brought up to date by considering it the context of work by Dreyfus and notions of hierarchy of learning and expression where the ‘expert’, artist or practitioner transcends simple rules and guidelines (although these are a key element of the frame work for understanding) to reinterpret a situation based on profound understanding and deep connectivity to contextual location and use.

Today much use is made within research of the word ‘insight’, a word rapidly becoming debased. Insight without the combination of technical mastery and creativity is just an empty word or even worse misleading marketing. Gaining deep understanding, or insight, involves commitment, dare one say it a commitment so profound it is akin to higher emotions such as love. Such commitment lies in the skill of the craftsman working to draw forth from his work deeper and more profound meanings, this drawing forth is the work of the individual in direct relation to the subject of interest. Ruskin’s concern with the emergence of the factory and the dominance of processes over content and craft took the form of championing the individual. He

was concerned to discover and demonstrate how craft could flourish even against this background of factory and the onset of mass production with its alienation from context and meaning. Such concerns are of equal relevance to us, the research industry today.

## **References**

John Ruskin, *Unto This Last and Other Writings*, Penguin 1985.

*Making Social Science matter*, Bent Flyvberg, Cambridge 2201.