

Glass Transparency Metaphors as Modernist Desire and Dissatisfaction*

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GLASS ERUPTS into the imaginary of modernity as early as the mid-nineteenth century, with Joseph Paxton's famous Crystal Palace, built to host the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London. The Crystal Palace was an architectural masterpiece, conceived as a huge greenhouse placed in a beautiful park, which emphasized the spatial continuity between nature and interiors. In fact, the Crystal Palace proved to be an encapsulated enclave of nature, which resembled the historical Baroque's program to bring trees, flowers and birds into churches, in order to emphasize that the sacred does not function as a separation from the outer world, but as a compact and integrative totality ending in the blue and endless immensity of the sky. Of course, the Crystal Palace was not a sacred place, but it had the meaning of an integrative transparency aiming to bring all cultures and all nations together in a sort of artificial paradise, with trees, flowers and birds encapsulated in a huge and shiny structure of glass and steel, which functioned as a pre-historical place of recreation conceived on the idea of serene, superhuman tranquility, radically opposed to the grim tribulations of everyday lodging, set in houses made of brick or concrete, both too heavy, too much attached to the heavy inertia of the earth.

Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace was, nevertheless, closer to the architecture of the classical greenhouse than to any idea of artificial brilliancy: functional as it was meant to be, hosting an international world exhibition, it stressed the utopian idea that solar nature was transcendent to any political or economic warfare. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the German architect Bruno Taut, founder of the group "The Glass Chain" (*Die gläserne Kette*) conceived immense and functional glass houses for living in order to bring people closer to the cosmos. As Oksana Bulgakowa puts it, "in contrast to the traditional static and restricted view in conventional buildings, the inhabitants of the Glass House would be spectators of the infinite, cosmic panorama and the gigantic theatre of nature, due to the transparent character of glass walls with no limits."¹

Other modernist approaches of glass symbolism maintain the initial and positive meaning of cosmic fragility, akin to Charles Baudelaire's classical description of modernity

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(from *The Painter of Modern Life*) as “the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable.” In George Bernard Shaw’s *Major Barbara*, the hero encircles himself with a world of steel and glass, to protect himself from intrusion. As later shown in Tennessee Williams’ *Glass Menagerie* or in Paul Valéry’s *Lust*, crystal means fragility and perfection. The fragility of perfection actually, driven from the contrast between mass energy—which is always impure—, and the personal power of reclusion.

It also comes from the aesthetic de-construction of the bourgeoisie, as steel and crystal perfection (generally linked together) are associated with artistry and spiritual alchemy. The *Biedermeier* and the *Sezession*, as decoration, are both organic symbolical shifts, as they come from the organized metamorphosis of nature: wood and plants especially, taken into the home in order to re-fill the long forgotten, romantic gap between man and nature, man and universe. The shiny perfection of glass unites man with his environment, suggesting continuity and not separation. Glass is the bridge, not the gap; it is a sort of optical threshold which marks no separation between the inner perfection of the lodging, and the outer, non-structural energy of filtered intrusion. Each glass wall resembles the sacred painted church window, except it has no images on it. Its function is to consecrate the perfect, rational, transparent and highly organized being, the post-romantic utopia of the late nineteenth century, criticized by Dostoyevsky in his *Notes from the Underground*.

In the imagination of modernity, glass and crystal are associated with the specific realm of the artificial, of the non-organic: glass is the fusion, or sublimation, of sand (*massa confusa*) through the energy of fire, which links it to the alchemy. The fusion takes place by completely eliminating water or humidity from the starting substance of the earth, represented by sand. In the spiritual alchemy of the modernity, this means to eliminate psychology from the representation of perfection: to reach a heavenly structured purity of only light and no shadow, to sublimate light into the perfection of the personal or artistic existence. As such, glass clarity is also associated in the imaginary of the modernity to the transparence of light: not to the moon, as the romantics have said, but to the Sun and to the openness. Nevertheless crystal is not associated to the “hot”—natural, direct—solar energy, but to its sublimation into coldness through the exercise of purification. It comes—as Paul Valéry showed in the famous cosmogony of his *Eupalinos, or the Architect*—as a correction of the natural Genesis: a better continuation of it, a sort of later cosmic improvement, carried out by the artist in order to cover up the imperfections of the divinity.

Accordingly, there are three main symbolic uses of glass in modernity. The first use, a positive one, expresses the crystalline human organizational perfection of the Socialist Utopians of the 18th century (Saint-Simon, Fourier, Robert Owen), as it appears later in Nikolai Chernyshevsky’s novel *What Is to Be Done* (1863), whose heroine dreams of a perfect human society inhabiting a completely transparent Crystal Palace. In architecture, Sir Ebenezer Howard’s “Garden City,” Le Corbusier’s “Radiant City,” Bruno Taut’s 1914 Glass House, Mies van der Rohe’s glass skyscrapers or the Russian Constructivist Tatlin’s projected and never built Monument to the Third International resort to the same idea of transparency as perfection. The extreme and even monstrous form of this kind

of human transparency lies in Paul Valéry's *Monsieur Teste*. Since the mainstream modernity of the first half of the twentieth century was related to individualism, solitude and secrecy, excessive transparency was considered to be humanistic, collectivistic at its extreme, and by that relieving. In his essay on "Surrealism," Walter Benjamin wrote in 1926: "In Moscow I lived in a hotel, in which almost all the rooms were occupied by Tibetan Lamas who had come to Moscow for a congress of Buddhist churches. I was struck by the number of doors in the corridors which were always left ajar. What had at first seemed accidental began to disturb me. I found out that in these rooms lived members of a sect who had sworn never to occupy closed rooms. The shock I had then must be felt by the reader of *Nadja*. To live in a glass house is a revolutionary virtue by excellence. It is also an intoxication, a moral exhibitionism, that we badly need."²²

The second use of glass in modernity is a negative one, derived from the anxiety of extreme and controlled socialization through transparency: we could find it not only in Yevgeny Zamyatin's novel *We*, which is to be analyzed below in his paper, but also in Jeremy Bentham's famous *Panopticon*, a circle prison with a glass tube as its core, discussed by Michel Foucault in his seminal *Discipline and Punish*. A symbolic reaction to the authoritarian neuroses of controlled transparency comes from the literature, with Dostoyevsky's, Kafka's and Bulgakov's passion for the hiding underground as the privileged space for the artist.

The third modernist symbolic extension of glass is related to the art of photography as it was conceived at its beginning. The detailed analysis of the phenomenon shall be omitted in this paper, but it seems important to mention that both in Daguerre's early experiments and in William Henry Fox Talbot's *Articles of Glass* and *Articles of China* (1844–46) the stress lies on the "other-worldly quality" of the light impressed glass plates, indirectly derived from the magic art of the fortune-telling seers animating hidden images found in the depths of mysterious crystal bulbs.

NOT TOO far back in time from the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Socialist Utopian Charles Fourier envisioned a "perfect" human community, living in a privileged place called the "Phalanstery." People joining this community came, each, with his specific psychological imprints and particular personal or human drives. It was considered that 1,600 people concentrated in a Phalanstery were the perfect number—nobody knows why, as Fourier never explained his attraction to 1,600—in order to neutralize all the human differences existing in the universe, and to articulate a perfect human harmony. In order to reach that, Fourier also carefully imagined the details of the construction these people would live in, which was articulated on the logic of the perfect transparence, achieved through the lines of social intersection. Wherever a member of the Phalanstery went—to work, out into the fields, to the only common kitchen, to the reading room, or even to the bathroom—he had to pass through the center of the Phalanstery, which was a place of happy, smiling socialization. By doing this, and also by continuing to perfect his body and spirit, he would soon understand that his life gained worth only by participation, or—to use a hard word, which modernists seemed to like a lot—by de-personalization.

Fourier's Phalanstery was a space of perfect and happy alienation, built according to the logic of the 18th-century solar model of spreading central energy. Reason came like the Sun, as an irradiating central energy, which lit even the most remote places and even the most humble human beings, whatever their sins might be. The permeation of man by reason was obstructed only by his desires and by his shadowy psychology. As such, the more transparent a person was, the more he could get from the central illumination of cosmic reason.

Reason was, in the 18th century, not only generous cosmic irradiation, but also social axiology, as humans were placed into hierarchies of power and esteem according to the quantity and quality of universal reason they were able to encapsulate. Social blame came from the logic of rational differentiation among people: those who were mean or repulsive, those whose personal psychology proved to be reluctant to the call of universal reason had to be helped to reach a socially accepted level of human rationality.

To help by social restriction means—as Foucault has shown—to oblige: to turn tenderness into the rhetoric of coercion. This brings us to the brilliant demonstration taken from the *Discipline and Punish*, in which Foucault describes the essence of Jeremy Bentham's *Panopticon*. The *Panopticon* is the perfect jail, as it helps the convicts to get rid not only of their sins and to actively practice remorse, but also of the shadows of their souls. The *Panopticon* was envisioned by Jeremy Bentham as a solar structure, with a central core composed of a vertical, transparent pillar—that is: perfectly surrounded by glass windows—, which is the place where the guardians stay. The prisoner's cells are disposed on an outer circle, so as to symbolically suggest the sinful marginality of their condition. On the other hand, the cells are constructed at the end of solar rays, in a way which prevents the prisoners from seeing each other, or to communicate. They can see only the glass window of the central pillar, and the guardians. That is: the reachable embodiment of power. The glass window is essential for this kind of construction, as it suggests the relative proximity, and not the remoteness of relieving reason. Each prisoner can get to it, it is not out of reach, as a sort of unattainable goal, but in the distant vicinity of sin. On the other hand, it means human standard attained through coercion: the exercise of power, the art of submitting one's personal, humble power to the impersonal power of the universal reason.

The first type of modernist imagery associated with glass comes as such, rather paradoxically, from the complexes of reclusion and symbolical containment, represented by the material glass fences with surround self-proclaimed “perfect” political systems or personal empires. One of these fences is found in Yevgeny Zamyatin's *Wz*, a serene dystopia written at the beginning of the twentieth century, and published abroad only a quarter of the century later, because of the Russian Revolution and the censorship it brought along.

The protagonist of *Wz* is D-503, a highly praised mathematician, builder of the “Integral,” a sort of sophisticated space machine which will contribute both to the conquering of the outer space and to the self-perfection of the people who share the joy of working upon it. The society that constructs it is the best modernity has ever imagined. A long time ago, when the engineers of the new, perfect world decided to subli-

mate our modernist impurity in order to gain the clearest community which had ever existed, they radically changed the nutritional habits of our planet by replacing meat, carrots and all the “junk” food we are currently ingesting with a scientifically tested oil derivative. As expected, almost everybody passed away, except the 0.2% of the population, which resisted the oil treatment, and became the social core of the new world. This process of social engineering entered into the collective memory as a procedure of “crystallization,” which wasn’t completed without residual losses: some members of the new community failed to achieve the new human and political goal of deleting all impurities out of their soul and body, others managed to complete the introductory phases of the initiation process, fully enjoying the benefits of the new social order, but continuously fearing that the repressed, inner impurity of their being would somehow come to the surface, betraying them and disqualifying them as rather unsuccessful, weak members of the society. As such, each member of the new world is continuously improving his—or hers—process of crystallization. D-503 does this by participating in the construction of the “Integral”: it proves to be the most outstanding product of the new world, nothing similar has been assembled in the history of the mankind, so by sharing the serene work of this utopia, each participant becomes part of a great, collective crystallization process.

Nevertheless, a few people of the old, dysfunctional modern society resisted the food annihilation, and managed to settle at the outskirts of the perfect society, in the woods, being separated from the inner world by a solid fence made of glass. Glass is, actually, everywhere within the inner world: the houses are made of glass, the streets also, electric vans run frantically on extremely elaborated glass highways, everything is made of glass, as the main imperative of the new society is to gain full transparency, expelling from its structures even the smallest suspicion of shadow.

The women too have obviously no names, but only numbers. Zamyatin’s society is a happy polygamy, as the dusty fashion of the restrictive family life has disappeared from its realms for good. Sex, of course, has remained a painful necessity, acknowledged by the leaders of the society, but carefully organized. Men and women live in personal glass cages, whose windows remain always unobstructed by a curtain, in order to ensure the perfect transparency of personal life. As having sex in a fish bowl could be rather embarrassing, strict rules to gain intimacy have been established. “Sex hours” are actually “minutes,” in order to avoid the voluptuous outbreak of pleasure. In order to get to them, one has to forward a request to the authorities. The Sexual Bureau analyses the potency of the applicant and the sound quantity of his hormones, and if the candidate proves to be fit for sexual intimacy, it elaborates the Sexual Calendar and gives the applicant a set of tickets. When the sexual time approaches, the owner of the Calendar writes a name on the ticket, gets permission to use it, then gets another ticket which entitles his or her landlord to curtain the windows, and the act is to be completed rapidly, within the short time gap prescribed by the Calendar. Otherwise the pleasure goes astray, and you have to wait a few more serene days until the coming of a new peak day.

D-503’s usual partner is the tender O-90: they have got accustomed to each other, as O-90 is unsophisticated, rather sentimental, mother-like with her partner, which means

that she wants children. Giving birth to a child outside the carefully controlled demographical regulations of the society is strictly forbidden: if one gets pregnant, she will be immediately neutralized. The social engineering laboratories take great care of the demographical balance of the society, but O-90's maternal drives can be, still, not neutralized: in her secret, clandestine blessed state she is helped by D-503 to cross the glass fence which separates the perfect society from the outlaws living in the forest, and as such nature follows its intrinsic rules, as it has happened far back in time, when we, the modernists still inhabited the earth.

As regards the sexual permit, one is entitled to write any name on the pink ticket, without a prerequisite request towards the person that happens to be wanted: if the "number" is available, things go smoothly; if not, a certain name can be "reserved" for another Sexual Schedule. To refuse is strictly forbidden, since a virtual refusal is contrary to the logic of the complete transparency of the perfect society. According to this selection logic, D-503 gets acquainted to the beautiful and sophisticated I-330, who drives him into a destructive erotic adventure. Due to this passion, D-503 gets completely out of control: he feels the passion and the irrational overcome his mind and body, and develops an overwhelming sentiment of guilt, which is nevertheless counterbalanced by the joy of seeing I-330 and of doing things which are outside the mathematical order of the society. In the end, when the authorities discover that I-330 is actually the leader of the rebels who wish to reverse the artificial order, and get nature back into the impersonal universe of glass, D-503 is purified from his sins by the powerful brain- and body-washing machines conceived for such cases of psychological crises, and he participates in the apotheosis of the "Integral."

One of the illicit trips D-503 and I-330 take by avoiding the strict labor schedule of the perfect society leads them to the so-called "Ancient House," a "strange, fragile, bleak" construction which serves as a sort of museum. Actually its role is to show how far in transparency the new society has got, and how primitive were the modernists who lived within opaque walls, which helped them to stir the inner shadows of their being. Some alterations have obviously been made in order to preserve the house for eternity: glass doors have been added by replacing the old one, and the whole site was surrounded by a glass fence, to keep it from erosion. The logic of the Ancient House shows that in Zamyatin's mind glass perfection is opposed to time itself: glass doesn't allow any erosion; it is a material which proves to be outside the rapacious fangs of Time, that is: outside death itself. It is interesting to note that the perfect society from *Wz* lives outside any complex of death: funerals play no role in this society, as if its members lived for ever, or as if they did not grow old in order to vanish into the remote realms of light. There is no death in this society because there is no darkness: death coincides, in every modernist society, with the imagination of the afterworld, or imagination has been carefully eradicated from Zamyatin's perfect world, as a sort of spiritual sin or illness. Illness itself doesn't exist any more, due to the perfect debugging capacities of the machines.

It is the place to note that Zamyatin's dichotomy of the inner world vs. the outer world matches a similar one we can find in George Orwell's *1984*: Julia and Winston take walks in the forest, and hire an old-fashioned, "historical" room in order to engage in

pleasure. I do not want to insist on this similarity, which actually reproduces a recurrent stereotype of dystopias, but engage in another spiritual link, which brings us to Hermann Hesse's *Glasperlenspiel*. In Hesse's novel, the glass beam game is also the very distinctive mark of an isolated, utopian spiritual community, named Castalia, which practices extremely elaborated spiritual associations, aiming to a synthesis which brings arts and crafts together. Castalia is also surrounded by symbolic fences, which isolate it from the outside world and from history itself. To play the glass beam game it takes serenity, crystal-clear consciousness and no psychology, as they belong to the disruptive drive of time and history. As distinct from Zamyatin's *Wz*, Josef Knecht's limpid empire does not strictly delineate itself from the outside world, as a totalitarian and insecure regime does: on the contrary, privileged people from the outside world are allowed to join the monastic society for a limited period of time, in order to gain peace and to purify their minds from the calls of personal or historical erosion. In Hesse's novel, crystal-clear reclusion is an alternative, not a must. In a still remote opposition to Zamyatin, the Swiss writer also shows that existing outside time is an illusion or simply not more than a spiritual game: by the end of the novel, the protagonist of the game, Josef Knecht, *magister ludi*, leaves Castalia as being inconsistent, but beautiful, and dies unexpectedly by swimming in a lake. Nature kills him as he tries to reach a distant rock, flooded by the shining rays of a brilliant sun.

IN THE European modernity, the main difference between transparency and darkness is primarily transferred into the tension between to be seen and to stay hidden, and then into the dichotomy of being controlled and escaping the coercion. Paradoxically enough, the ancient meaning of transparency, which is related to the sense of purification (catharsis) achieved by socialization is abandoned in the era of the "masses" because of the belief that over-socialization leads to dictatorship and alienation. In the Italian Renaissance utopian architectures, for instance (Leon Battista Alberti: *De Re Aedificatoria*, 1485; Antonio Averlino [a.k.a. Filarete]: *Sforzinda*, 1461-64; Francesco di Giorgio Martini: *Trattato di Architettura*, 1481, etc.), the harmonious society represents the occasion for an unbalanced individual to get rid of his turbulences and to achieve an inner harmony. Later on, especially in the mass society of the nineteenth century, authenticity means differentiation, individualistic separation from the all-embracing crowd, revolt and self-determination. The defining obsession of the new era is the melting pot, as a source of anxiety, a sense of opposition and the will to act differently. The recurrent image of the twentieth century is that of the scientist—a biologist, usually—who studies small living beings closed up in glass recipients, aquariums and jars. Glass as the symbol of the jail perceived as a laboratory, collection or museum seems to be the most vivid perception of the running, voracious time, which leaves behind curious "vestiges" in order to come back and study its own history.



Notes

1. Oksana Bulgakowa, "Eisentein, The Glass House and The Spherical Book," *Rouge 7* (2005), accessed June 20, 2011, <http://www.rouge.com.au/7/eisenstein.html>. Oksana Bulgakowa's text is an abridged and modified version of a chapter from Sergej Eisenstein, *Drei Utopien – Architekturentwürfe zur Filmtheorie* (Berlin: Potemkin Press, 1996), 109-125. I am indebted to her for her contribution to this research.
2. Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia," in *Selected Writings, Volume 2: 1927-1934* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 209, apud Bulgakowa, "Eisentein, The Glass House and The Spherical Book."

Abstract

Glass Transparency Metaphors as Modernist Desire and Dissatisfaction

Many modernist utopias refer to glass as to a metaphor for harmony, generous transparency and accomplished socialization. The transparent society has no shadows, and nothing to hide, being nothing more than a program of self-perfection and purification. This paper, which is mainly the sketch of a work in progress, focuses on different occurrences of glass and transparency in several societal approaches of modernity, trying to suggest that by going up in time towards the twentieth century's individualistic modernism, the cultural understanding of glass also shifts from the positive approach of the benevolent Renaissance and Enlightenment utopias towards a negative perception characterized by fragility, anxiety and radical, individualistic estrangement.

Keywords

Modernity, glass culture and symbolism, transparency, Socialist Utopians, Zamyatin.