

Glass and the Myth of Transparency

Anna Taylor (2007)

Glass can be viewed in terms of its' many inherent contradictions; at once strong and fragile, solid and liquid, and, formed of sand and ash, being of the earth but appearing other worldly in its chemical complexity, and in the mysterious duality of its transparency; in revealing and yet veiling; of altering perceptions.

The simultaneous desirability and danger of these paradoxes are contained within the books in The Glass Archive. Perusing the content of the archive, I was drawn to the metaphor of the glass enclosure, referenced in many of the archive's titles, and the implications of an alluring yet threatening architectural environment constructed of glass, somehow implied in titles such as:

- *The Glass Playpen*, Edwina Mark (1958)
- *Walls of Glass*, Amanda Brookfield (1995)
- *The Man in the Glass Booth*, Robert Shaw (1967)
- *The World is Made of Glass*, Morris West (1983)

In these glass walled, 'transparent' enclosures or environments, things are not as they seem, reality becomes skewed.

The general belief in the transparent vision enabling properties of glass, is evident in its incorporation into optical devises such as glasses, magnifying lenses and camera lenses. However, early musings on the nature of glass allude to its illusory qualities, linked to only seeing in part. The 1960s saw a critical debate on the nature of transparency in architecture, following the publication of Colin Rowe and Robert Slutzky's 1964 essay *Transparency: Literal and Phenomenal*. The essay was since criticised for presenting only two positions for glass and transparency. I hope to draw on this debate, whilst taking into account the metaphorical meaning of glass throughout history, and bypassing the mainstream usage of glass in architecture from modernism,

consider a second set of beliefs in the Universalising properties of glass, which rather than adopting a belief in its transparency, celebrated its obscuring 'opacity'.

An early biblical mention of glass refers to this obscuring, referring to Paul's desire to see God in heaven, as on Earth he cannot fully be 'seen':

For now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.¹

This phrase, which has since been appropriated widely in film and fiction, provides the title to a novel in *The Glass Archive*:

- *Through a Glass Darkly*, Jostein Gaarder (1998)

The archive contains a negation of this:

- *Through a Glass Clearly*, Isaac Asimov (1967)

The first implies a distortion of reality by witnessing it through the haze of a veil. The second, a negation of this often appropriated phrase, suggesting clarity of perception, and direct access to the object.

To return to the architecture of mainstream Modernism, glass is synonymous with revealing, which held the promise of truth, or self improvement, a belief that had been current through the nineteenth century. Nowhere but in Modernist Architecture do we see the redemptive belief in glass's transparency exploited so fully, through the illuminating of spaces. Transforming factories, offices and homes from the dark, oppressive brick enclosures to transparent, light filled spaces, consistent with the age's obsession with revealing mechanisms, attributed to the mechanical age, psychoanalysis and a fear of the dissolution of boundaries within the metropolis. In the architecture designed to represent this modernity, **glass became synonymous with revealing.**

Modernity has been haunted by the myth of transparency: transparency of the self to nature, of the self to other, of all selves to society and all of this is represented, if not constructed...by a universal transparency of building materials, spatial penetration, and the ubiquitous flow of air, light and physical movement.²

What lies behind this modernist myth? By tracing the history of the glass metaphor, we see that glass historically has embodied the fantastical, the mythical, the illusory and the Utopian, and that these have, in legends, become intertwined with our understanding of reality.

In *The Interpretation of the Glass Dream: Expressionist Architecture and the History of the Crystal Metaphor*, Rosemary Haag Bletter provides an exhaustive account of the Iconographic tradition of glass throughout history. She begins the history of the glass metaphor with biblical references to Solomon's Great Temple, later interpreted as a translucent building of glass, and heavily influencing the mystical, unreal side of the glass metaphor. Solomon, a mystical character said to be in possession of all the wisdom of the Universe, at once embodies knowledge of reality with mystical otherworldliness. As legend would have it, Solomon built a palace for himself, constructed entirely from glass, water and gold, signifying both transparency and reflectivity; focusing on the image, or simulacrum but also upon revealing and gaining knowledge.

King Solomon is said to have built a place of glass (with glass floors) to reveal to him whether the visiting Queen of Sheba was a real woman or, as was suspected, a genie. Genies were rumoured to have hairy legs and the glass floors were intended to settle that question. The Queen of Sheba, not familiar with the illusory effects of glass architecture, upon entering Solomon's palace (as the legend would have it) believed that the king was sitting in the midst of water. To step over to him across the imagined pool, she lifted her skirts to keep them dry, but thereby exposed her hairy legs. In this particular Solomonic legend [she says], the meaning of glass architecture and its suggestion of shimmering water is quite direct and literal: it helps to reveal what would otherwise remain hidden—the true supernatural nature of Sheba.³

Herein lies a wonderful paradoxical layering of ideas of revealing and illusion; of truth and myth, in the appearance of glass itself, in its revealing the true nature of Sheba, which in turn is mythical, the indicator of which is hairy legs—a sure indicator of a human woman and not a genie.

The vision of Solomon's Temple recurs in John's revelation of Heaven in the book of Revelations. As the metaphorical history progresses, by c12th and c13th, the material embodies religious transcendence, and, in the illuminating

of the spiritual worshipper, its luminosity becomes synonymous with lucidity, or **clarity**.

Following this, in the secular literature of the Middle Ages, glass signifies love, in Gottfried von Strasburg's *Tristan*, which told of a bed of crystal that represented pure and transparent love. By the latter C19th, the reflective properties of glass aligned the material with narcissism and the road to self-knowledge, transformation and metamorphosis. By the turn of the century, Paul Scheerbart's writings, a manifesto *Glass Architecture* of 1913 took this semiotic journey to its logical high point, emphasising glass's mystical, spiritual qualities with the ethical, Utopian belief in its Universalising promise. His manifesto describes the new glass culture as a world of Crystalline buildings on mountain tops, spectacularly illuminated by coloured light, and to the movement of light speeding past on the railways, all enabled by glass architecture. Glass is also portrayed as possessing a protective function, resilient to air attack, decay and vermin. His vision is communicated with the fantastical allure of heaven on Earth, in an extensive one hundred and eleven part work:

The Beauty of the Earth, When Glass Architecture is Everywhere

The face of the earth would be much altered if brick architecture were ousted everywhere by glass architecture. It would be as if the earth were adorned with sparkling jewels and enamels. Such glory is unimaginable. All over the world it would be as splendid as in the gardens of the Arabian Nights. We should then have a paradise on Earth, and no need to watch in longing expectation for paradise in heaven.⁴

Writer Paul Scheerbart finds his ideological counterpart the Berlin Architect Bruno Taut. Their shared and largely unrealised Utopian vision has been omitted from the history of Modern Architecture, but is now emerging as an alternative account of the era. Whilst mainstream Modernist Architecture was a work of epic significance, it over simplified and at times denied its links to the past, Taut and Scheerbart were keen to emphasise the heritage of the 'new glass architecture', Taut claiming, "*The Gothic Cathedral is the prelude to glass architecture.*" This is significant because of the use of glass in the Middle Ages, depicting images of God and Heaven in fragments of coloured glass, creating a transitory space in the interior of the Cathedral, and casting

the worshipper in a pool of light, pouring forth from glass images of paradise and biblical myths. It is this 'softening' or artfulness which they believed to be transitory, in its departure from revealing the real by reframing it in glass and natural light, it alluded to something higher.

...our hope is that glass architecture will also improve mankind in ethical respects. It seems to me that this is a principal merit of lustrous, colourful, mystical, and noble glass walls. This quality appears to me not just an illusion, but something very real. The man who sees the splendors of glass everyday cannot have ignoble hands.⁵

Far from the revealing of reality that can be found in many early modernist buildings, such as – and - , here glass revealed the desirable image of an other worldly, un-reality.

Taut's mystical vision of glass architecture centres not around the transparency of glass as with Modernist Architect Loos, but around its illusory qualities. His designs, far from enabling the penetration of light, and creating voids through glass walls, centred on coloured light and coloured glass-glass enabled the permeation of colour, creating a 'softening' of reality.

We must not strive to increase the intensity of light-today it is already too strong and no longer endurable. But a gentler light is worth striving for. Not more light! - "more coloured light!" must be the watchword.⁶

It is in this obscuring or veiling by means of coloured light permeating glass that both Taut and Scheerbart saw the ethical improvement of mankind, not in the clarity of glass and light.

So, *Through a glass darkly* or *Through a glass Clearly*? Throughout history we see that the word 'Transparent' has been misappropriated, leading to a cultural misunderstanding of the true clarity offered in seeing the world through glass. Historically, as we have seen, from Solomon to Scheerbart, it is its illusory quality that has imbued the material with such complex meaning.

The position of glass in relation to its transparency is unclear; we now view glass through a glass darkly. At times this material is invisible-it is the medium by which we experience life- through television screens, car windscreen, café windows, camera lenses, and computer screens. Here in one sense it has become invisible-looking through it, glass functions to render the world as an

image of itself: in these scientific ways that glass is appropriated in viewing technology, the myth of transparency still exists, however, it is consistent with revealing only in part.

Additionally, glass is still the material of choice for representing something transitory, for faith in the human condition, and is most visible in architecture, where, in its ghostly opacity, it possesses sublime properties, one example of which is in plans for Libeskind's Freedom Towers at Ground Zero. Here, it is not the transparency of glass that lends it with such semiotic significance, rather, it is its mysterious opacity, and the reflective illusion of light bouncing off its surface that is transitory. Whilst, consistent with postmodern spatial theory, the Freedom Towers signify a void, the Utopian tradition of the material finds its contemporary expression.

¹ 1 Corinthians 13:12

² Anthony Vidler, *Transparency*, (1992), p.217

³ Rosemarie Haag Bletter, 'The Interpretation of the Dream-Expressionist and the History of the Crystal Metaphor', *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (Mar., 1981), p.23

⁴ Paul Scheerbart, *Glasarchitektur*, (1914), (chapter 18), p.46

⁵ *Ibid.*, (chapter 73), p.63

⁶ *Ibid.*, (chapter 106), p.72