

PAUL SCHEERBART'S KALEIDOSCOPIIC FANTASIES

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ABSTRACT

The work of the German polymath Paul Scheerbart is attracting a renewed attention in recent years. During his prolific career, his unconventional fiction, art and poetry influenced a range of intellectuals, from architect Bruno Taut to Walter Benjamin, who even quoted his ideas on glass in his Arcades Project. Scheerbart wrote dozens of outer-space novels and utopian stories, plus articles and reviews, always about things like glass architecture, perfect outer-worlds and realities, reflecting extreme dreams, ambitions and fears. In this essay I will revisit Scheerbart's various writings with an emphasis on the book *Glass Architecture* (1972) and the novel *The Gray Cloth and Ten Percent White: A Ladies' Novel* (2001), in order to understand the metaphor of glass and colour that shaped the fantastic dimension of his work while, at the same time, reveal a myriad of ambivalent, and often opposed, meanings.

KEY WORDS: Paul Scheerbart, utopia, glass architecture, Gothic, fantastic.

RESUMO

A obra do polímato alemão Paul Scheerbart tem vindo a atrair uma renovada atenção nos últimos anos. Durante a sua prolífica embora curta carreira, no início do século passado, a sua ficção literária, poesia e arte pouco convencionais influenciaram uma variedade de intelectuais seus contemporâneos, do arquitecto Bruno Taut a Walter Benjamin, que chegou a citar as suas ideias sobre as construções em vidro no seu projecto *Arcades*. Scheerbart escreveu dezenas de novelas situadas no espaço sideral, histórias utópicas, artigos e recessões críticas, sempre em torno de temas como a arquitectura em vidro e a perfeição de mundos e realidades distantes, re-

flectindo os seus sonhos mais radicais, bem como as suas ambições e receios. Neste texto, revisito alguns dos textos de Scheerbart com especial incidência no livro *Glass Architecture* (1972) e na novela *The Gray Cloth and Ten Percent White: a Ladies Novel* (2001), de modo a melhor compreender a metáfora do vidro e da cor que determina e contém a dimensão fantástica do conjunto da sua obra, enquanto que, ao mesmo tempo, permite revelar uma miríade de significados contraditórios e ambivalentes.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Paul Scheerbart, utopia, arquitectura de vidro, Gótico, fantástico.



The work of German polymath Paul Scheerbart has attracted a renewed attention in recent years, namely with the exhibition *A Glass Darkly* in 2014,¹ on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of his book *Glasmarchitektur*, and the translation or reprint of several of his other writings.

During his prolific career, Scheerbart wrote dozens of outer-space novels and utopian stories, plus articles and reviews, always about things like glass architecture, perfect outer-worlds and realities, reflecting extreme dreams, ambitions and fears. In this study I briefly revisit Scheerbart's various writings with an emphasis on the book *Glass Architecture* (1972) and the novel *The Gray Cloth and Ten Percent White: A Ladies' Novel* (2001), in order to understand the metaphor of glass and colour that shaped the fantastic dimension of his work while, at the same time disclosed a myriad of ambivalent, and often opposed, meanings.

Paul Karl Wilhelm Scheerbart was born in 1863 in Danzig, Prussia, now Gdansk in Poland. He worked as a journalist from 1885 until his death in 1915, in Berlin, where he founded Die Verlag Ditcher Phantasten, a publishing house for German fantasists. For example, *The Gray Cloth* (1914), a fairytale of a fantastic intrepid honeymoon, written on the outset of the twentieth century, triggered the interest and respect of many of his contemporaries such as Bruno Taut, Walter Gropius and Walter Benjamin (who even quoted his ideas on glass in his Arcades Project). Nevertheless, Scheerbart, who hence had been most often portrayed as an eccentric, was left behind by the Modernist move-

¹ Exhibition *A Glass Darkly*, org. Nav Haq, Stroom Den Haag, Hogewal 1-9, The Hague NL, 28 September - 23 November 2014.

ment and Art and Architecture written histories as an author and even as an advocate of Glass Architecture.²

Fortunately many of his writings were or are now being translated, at least into English.³ One of the most recent examples is the short novel *Lesabéndio: An Asteroid Novel* (2012), originally illustrated in 1913 by the Austrian artist Alfred Kubin, about a double-cone shaped asteroid inhabited by some peaceful, yet unruly, humanoid worm-aliens. Persuaded by Lesabéndio, the main character, the aliens united to build a tower to discover what lies beyond the luminous cloud above their world. Lesabéndio himself was dramatically transformed into a celestial being and an asteroid of his own right upon climbing that tower (Stuart, 1997: 429).

Using the basic tropes of science fiction, in *Lesabéndio* Scheerbart created a sharp social satire of European salon culture of his time and its ambitions. He also included some insights on quantum and string theories, now astonishingly accurate, as he described the solar system as a network of millions of rubber bands endlessly and repeatedly extended and distended.

A year before, in 1912, Scheerbart published *The Light Club* (the complete title is *The Light Club of Batavia: A Ladies' Novelette*, 2010a), about an underground utopia created by a group of wealthy humanists. This satire comments on a dinner at which a rich heiress and an architect decided to create a secret club for «bathing» in electric light at the bottom of a mineshaft. Yet this strange activity was in fact consonant with the beliefs of electric light as a synonym for life; after the end of a nineteenth century obsessed with fatigue, illness, and spleen, the novel electric illumination still held the promise of magical restoring energy.

Indeed, Scheerbart's interest in transparent materials, in light, energy and space, extends back to his first novel *Das Paradies: Die Heimat der Kunst* (2016), first published in 1889. This fantastic story develops around a group of devils that leave their home in Hell on a guided tour to Paradise, in the company of witches and angels. He believed that the stars really were living things and this is one of his many stories based on this idea. The most complete expression of this conviction is later to be found in *Liwûna und Kaidôh: Ein Seelenroman* (2013), from 1902. It is a piece that traces the adventures of Kaidôh, a heavenly soul that floats in the universe by wiggling his toes in search of what he believes to be greater and larger truths. He then meets

2 Most of the biographic information on Paul Scheerbart was obtained in Sharp (1972).

3 Among which *Glass! Love!! Perpetual Motion!!!: A Paul Scheerbart Reader* (2014) edited by Josiah McElheny and Christine Burginss, to which, unfortunately, I did not have access to.

Liwuna, a large metamorphosing being who gradually discloses the infinite scale of the universe. Over the course of this revelation, massive coloured columns beneath cupolas of glass and other architectural constructions appear in space, at times nearly indistinguishable from the asteroids and stars into which they are set.⁴

Another recent Scheerbart in English so far is *The Perpetual Motion Machine* (2011). Here the central motive seems to be if success or failure is better for the imagination. It is a diary of intense frustration hitting innumerable highs and lows as Scheerbart tries, fails, and fails again to build a perpetual-motion machine (he and his wife were in need of the money). The book also shows Scheerbart's skills as a draughtsman: it includes 26 schematic diagrams of prototypes for a real perpetual motion machine, laughable for anyone familiar with gravity or, say, mechanics. In spite of being non-fictional, it is in this book that Scheerbart stated his conviction in fantasy, suggesting a sort-of-philosophical definition of the concept: the maximum exacerbation of vision, both of our faculty of vision and of the highest vision that is not prophetic but instead comes from a superior understanding of all future possibilities, implicit and hidden. Moreover, fantasy, to his understanding, is the sole place where to find redemption.

Indeed, in the *The Perpetual Motion Machine*, Scheerbart used failure as a means to revelation, and revelation as a device for infinite creativity. The diary also gives way to several other short stories, including «*The Astral Direction*», a symptomatic expression of Scheerbart's persistent interests. His failures yielded a vision that the Earth itself is a «perpetual motion machine». He imagined great positive changes ahead as he had already foretold in *Immer Mutig!* (Scheerbart, 2010b) from 1902. Unfortunately, he was mistaken about the nature of those changes, as First World War would soon break out (Jakubowski, 2013). It was precisely on the outburst of the First World War that two of Scheerbart's most influential stories were published, those I will now focus on: the treatise *Glass Architecture* (1972) and soon after, in early 1914, *The Gray Cloth and Ten Percent White: A Ladies' Novel* (2001).

In *Glass Architecture* —a minimalistic essay, a text of 111 very short chapters— while supplying practical recommendations for constructing the domestic space without brick or wood, Scheerbart expressed his conviction that the widespread use of coloured glass would transform civilization, spiritually and globally (Olsson, 2004:194). The author refused to consider this

4 I followed the descriptions of these two stories made by John A. Stuart (2001: xxxvii/xli), in the «Introduction» for *The Gray Cloth*, as they were available mostly in German only.

transformation as utopian, stressing the existence of building technologies already in place. According to his own words:

Glass architecture is unthinkable without Gothic. In the days when Gothic cathedrals and castles were rising, an architecture of glass was also tried. It was not completely realised, because iron, the indispensable material, was not yet available, and this alone enables the totally glass room to be constructed. In Gothic times, glass was entirely unknown in most private houses. Today it is a principal factor in the architecture of every house. But it still lacks colour. Colour, however, will come (Scheerbart, 1972: 46-47).

He was right, in fact, as glass (and iron) were already very much in use when he started writing about it. For this, and other reasons, some authors would not align Scheerbart within science fiction genre but within the tradition of French fantasists such as Villiers de L'Isle-Adam, Théophile Gautier, among others (Morse, 2015).

Glass Architecture was dedicated to Arch. Bruno Taut, who symmetrically dedicated the Glass Pavilion, his best-known single building achievement, designed for the association of the German glass industry for the 1914s Werkbund exhibition in Kohl, to Paul Scheerbart. The writer, in turn, composed aphoristic poems about glass for the Glass Pavilion's frieze, such as «Coloured glass destroys hatred», and «Without a glass palace, life is a conviction» (qtd in Sharp, 1972: 14). For Scheerbart, «bringing in the moon and the stars' light» through Taut's glass domed pavilion prompted positive feelings that would lead to a whole new culture, while Scheerbart's ideas also inspired the composition of the pavilion's interior.

Architectural historians directly relate the glass exhibitions and botanical structures of the mid nineteenth century to modern architecture and, as such, Bruno Taut should be placed in this chronology and rhetoric. His Glass Pavilion displayed both nineteenth century construction innovations and modernist aesthetics and prospects. However, this plain storyline bypasses a large amount of other major influences that played an even more significant part in the variety of meanings behind glass architecture. In the opinion of Rosemarie Haag Bletter, behind these novel forms and building materials inherited from the Industrial Revolution, «lies an extended, if not always continuous, history of glass and crystal symbolism» (Bletter, 2002: 312). Indeed, both Bruno Taut and Paul Scheerbart's statements give a clearer indication in that direction: that the wild, exuberant Expressionist projects such as the Glass Pavilion «quite consciously allude to a traditional, if esoteric, iconography» and there is in fact a mystical tradition behind its imagery (Bletter, 2002: 323).

First of all, it is affiliated with medieval Gothic and the anagogic thinking behind the cathedral, its stained coloured glasses and the manipulation of spatial light. Many clues also link Gothic architecture with the Old Testament description of the Temple of King Salomon as well as with St. John's Revelation in the *New Testament*:

The wall was made of jasper, and the city of pure gold, as pure as glass. The foundations of the city walls were decorated with every kind of precious stone. The first foundation was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, the fifth onyx, the sixth ruby, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth turquoise, the eleventh jacinth, and the twelfth amethyst. The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl. The great street of the city was of gold, as pure as transparent glass (Revelation 21:18-21).

In spite of his declared knowledge and admiration for the Gothic style, it is still unknown if Scheerbart was aware of the influence of the Biblical descriptions in its constructions, namely the cathedral, or even in the Alhambra, which he considered to be architectonic exponents. He intensively studied Arab and Sufi cultures, all clearly embedded with a strong desire for transparency and light, literal and symbolically. Hence he stated that the «Near East is, so to speak, the crib of crystal architecture» (qtd in Calatrava & Nerdinger, 2010, p.280). Like in these ancient models, Paul Scheerbart's notion of transparency is also metaphorical, the representation of an ideal. And the metaphor becomes abundant because, in Scheerbart, the terms «light», «glass», «crystal», «transparency» and, less often, «diamond» and «mirror» are interchangeable and mostly undifferentiated in the context of his writings. As such, Scheerbart employs glass (or crystal) as both «a literary conceit and an architectural *prima materia*» (Morse, 2015) thus emphasizing the relation between literature and architecture, an enthusiastic expertise for most gothic writers too.

However, the glass metaphor further unfolds a variety of senses. On the one hand, glass and iron came to be the signature of industry and progress in the nineteenth century. On the other hand, its use evoked pre-industrial aspects and images. The first Crystal Palace was designed by Joseph Paxton as the stage for the 1851 Great Exhibition and established the image of the Victorian world and its prosperity. Besides being a construction feat, the Crystal Palace fitted the Victorian desire for transparency and decorum. Yet, at the same time, it also showed that glass and iron technology could be somehow fantastic, magical and bewildering. The greenhouse, for instance, functioned

as well as an exhibition venue while giving the impression of a magic crystal, an iceberg, a glass palace.⁵ Curiously, it is said that when Queen Victoria first entered the Crystal Palace, in 1851, she observed that the place «had quite the effect of fairyland» (qtd. in Talairach-Vielmas, 2014: 80).

However, and in spite of the disparity between the world of fairies and the industrial world, the fact is that the interest for stories with fairies, spirits and other supernatural entities peaked in this period of alleged modernity, rationality and the new built technologies of iron and glass.

Besides, crystal palaces could be noticed in fantasy tales long before the nineteenth century, mostly in the context of Northern Europe folk tradition. Paul Frankl (1960), in *The Gothic: Literary Sources and Interpretations through Eight Centuries*, refers numerous legends containing descriptions of fantastic glass buildings, even if he only discusses them in relation to the use of the Gothic form and stained glass. These forms and buildings migrated into the nineteenth century mainly through Brothers Grimm's retelling of «The Glass Mountain», the Polish fairy tale «The Glass Coffin», «Snow White», and «The Crystal Ball», just to name a few variations of this motif.

Indeed, and according to Laurence Talairach-Vielmas, Grimms' tales are «a significant starting point to try and emphasize the ideology which the glass-house conveyed in the second half of the nineteenth century» (2007: 93). Moreover, for the present purposes, the Grimms and their stories also shared with Scheerbart the Romantic influences, Goethe and the tradition of German folktales. In fact, when reading Scheerbart, it's not unusual to find a parallel with northern European fairytales and the Great Exhibitions seen as fairylands.

The only known literary review from the period of *The Gray Cloth*, Paul Scheerbart's final literary piece, was by critic August Kober in *Das Literarische Echo*. The critic's observations surely targeted the story, but could also easily fit an account of the magnificent world fairs of that time:

Technical Utopia or perhaps, more appropriately, technical futurism — since it only concerns itself with anticipated realities and pure artistic formations of free adventures — are balanced here in poetic harmony [...] the whole book is a splendid color symphony. Technical realities and architectural dreams are exchanged in a dazzling magic of light, in wonderful glowing and harmonious colors (qtd in Stuart, 2001: xxiv)

⁵ There was a Crystal Palace in the city of Porto, designed by Thomas Dillen Jones as a copy of the London Crystal Palace. It was built in glass, iron and granite and opened in 1865 on the occasion of the Great International Exhibition. It was destroyed in 1951 and, in its place, a huge glass dome pavilion, now called Pavilhão Rosa Mota, was built.

John A. Stuart,⁶ responsible for the English translation and introduction of *The Gray Cloth*, claimed that Scheerbart was first and foremost a poet and often mistakenly considered a visionary along the lines of Jules Verne. He further suggested that, unlike his earlier writings, *The Gray Cloth* expressed a refinement «of comic style into the “ripe old humor” found in the best German fairytales» (Stuart, 2001: xxv). Some other authors consider Scheerbart’s futuristic writings quite distinct from those of Jules Verne, or even from H.G. Wells’, who allegedly lacked irony in their extensively detailed and too frequent technical descriptions. Instead, Scheerbart otherwise combined the social critique of Jonathan Swift with the fairy tale structure of Clemens Brentano, authors with whom he felt closely aligned.

The plot of *The Gray Cloth* is set in the middle of the twentieth century, a time when new technologies, as foreseen by the author, would have enabled people to travel around the world, to build large structures of glass and to communicate with each other by telegraph. Like Philip Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, Scheerbart’s novel peers into an undetermined world some forty years ahead of his time. He utilized these marginal futures—more than a generation away, yet close enough to fall within a lifetime—to engage real and fictional conditions in a narrative that enhances our understanding of both.

The story follows the newlywed Edgar and Clara Krug as they travel around the world in their own dirigible-like airship, a trendy mean of transport in the story, populating the planet with widely varied coloured glass buildings, including: an elaborated high-rise and exhibition concert Hall in Chicago, a retirement complex for air-chauffeurs on the Fiji Islands, an elevated train structure through a zoological Park in Northern India, a suspended residential Villa on the Kuria Muria islands, and a Museum of ancient Oriental weapons in Malta.

Edgar Krug, a star architect of his time, is renowned for his colourful glass architecture, a passion to which he remains stubbornly faithful throughout the story. In *The Gray Cloth*, the reader witnesses the trials of the designer, and the adaptation of his new wife, who learns to navigate the social responsibilities as the spouse of a popular designer in the mid-twentieth century.

Because the novel takes place about forty years in the future from the time it was written, many of Scheerbart’s contemporaries classified it as uto-

6 The original *The Gray Cloth* was not illustrated, but John A. Stuart added some graphic experiences of his own for the publication of his English translation. However, and since I first found this book, visually associated it with the fantastic illustrations by Albert Robida, for the lavishly illustrated science-fiction novels *Le Vingtième Siècle* (1892).

pian.⁷ However, John Stuart (2001) argues that it is rather a calculated prediction of the future, located everywhere thus not «u-topian», as it also uses technologies of the day to create the ideals in the book. Through this narrative device, Scheerbart believed that he was depicting an accurate representation of the future. He created a case for the reader to fill with his or her own visions of what the future may look like, thus avoiding the risk of being taken as pure fantasy as his contemporary reader was already more or less familiar with the references of technologies, places, and cultures. Yet Scheerbart had not travelled around the world himself, not to any of these places; so it was a fictional, imagined geography.

The Gray Cloth offers a prescient version of the implications of a global society and may be seen as a reaction to Germany's expansionism at the time. According to John A. Stuart, «Scheerbart relies on contemporary emerging technologies and media —film, International exhibition, air travel, etc.— to address the dissemination of design values and the concomitant fame it provides» (2001: xxviii). In fact, the global dissemination of design is a central topic of the novel (quite clairvoyant if one considers that the Bauhaus school was soon to be established) and that is most evident in the many places, some quite exotic, that Edgar Krug occupies with his glass projects.

Also the airship, the most impactful gadget of the Krugs' resources, is critical to his conception of global design and amply illustrates the importance of technology to Scheerbart's vision. Dirigibles, in this case, not only provided a residency, a transport and a perspective of the world, but moreover they set up a connection to the global community of air travellers, who communicate by light and telegraph signals. An invention less two decades old in 1914, the dirigible —also known as Zeppelin in homage to the pioneer of rigid airship development— spiked the imagination of the European bourgeoisie and were further to become the subject of famous tragedies and cautionary examples of unwise human ambition. Some years before, Scheerbart had already expressed his fear that the military development of aviation would cause an international calamity, predicting with perspicacity that the devastation caused by air-based weaponry would be the greatest the world would ever see. Scheerbart's (2007) pamphlet «The Development of Aerial Militarism and the Demobilization of European Ground Forces, Fortresses, and Naval Fleets: A Flyer», recently published and promoted as a montage of alternative records and notes, from trivial to grandiloquent, informal or dry,

⁷ For an excellent development on the subject of utopia in Scheerbart and close authors and contexts, see Gomel and Weninger (2004).

and as having «a deadpan tone that leaves readers uncertain as to what's amusing or not».⁸ But, precisely, as he himself said: «I became a humorist out of rage, not out of kindness» (McElheny, 2010: 10).

As for *The Gray Cloth*, it uses subtle irony to question utopian ideals. The book frequently contradicts itself, particularly on the architect's relationship with the natural environment. The protagonist often wonders about covering the landscape with his colourful glass architecture and declares at one point that he hates wild life, yet goes on describing how nothing can compete with the beauty of nature. The conflict is not only present within the architect, but in the story itself. Each passage is written with an idealised view of humankind capacities, but ends with a description of the stunning view of the horizon from Krug's airship, untouched by human hands. Although the political and social observations in the novel, and even geographic representations, may be considered outlandish, they give important hints for our understanding of the manifold positions and directions that were on the table at the time. The recurring motives in many of Edgar Krug's designs, as said, are colour and transparency but also adaptability and internationality. However, his projects, had they been built, would have produced a rich, shimmering, and illusory world of reflections. His diaphanous kaleidoscopic projects are easily conjured up in literary format only, much as King Salomon's Temple. But when one reads its descriptions—and also looks at Bruno Taut's drawings—it is fairytale glass palaces that immediately come into one's mind.

Four years after Scheerbart's death in 1915, the circle of German Expressionist architects led by Bruno Taut and named Crystal Chain—it can't be stressed enough the repetition of the same terminology—cited Scheerbart as their spiritual leader, their *glaspapa* (Stuart, 2001: xxii). This movement expressed itself also by means of drawings, such as the mentioned Taut's depictions of coloured glass landscapes in his visual book *Alpine Architecture* (1972), and Hans Sharoun's and Wassily Luckhardt's as well.

Wolfgang Pehnt (1973), in *Expressionist Architecture*, wrote that the use of crystalline imagery is a characteristic motive in this artistic movement. He even mentions several sources for this iconography to which may also be added the material nature of these elements. The properties of glass, like the properties of ice, of iron and of lead, are transmutable, unlike true crystal (which is stable, in spite of its visual likeness with glass). They are substances that can

8 Publisher's catalogue blurb for Paul Scheerbart (2007).

waver between a solid and liquid state, depending on the given temperature. Thus they are almost magical, alchemical; their visible form as building materials is just a transitory state in the process. To add up to these qualities,

The crystal remained a popular metaphor for the unity of material nature and the immaterial spirit among Expressionist artists and writers, partly as a result of the writings of the influential monist philosopher and Darwinian biologist Ernst Haeckel, whose *Kristallseelen* (Crystal souls) was published in 1917 (Benson, 1993: 37).

The affinities between ice, glass and crystal —and its opposites iron and fire— and their metaphors, are thus present in both Scheerbart's iconography and also in fairytales by means of its fantastic buildings. A.S. Byatt wrote an essay on fire, ice and mirrors for Kate Bernheimer's anthology *Mirror Mirror on the Wall* (1998) that was republished in her own selection of essays *On Histories and Stories* as «Ice, Snow, Glass» (Byatt, 2001). She examined the fairytales mentioned above: «Snow White», «The Glass Mountain» «The Glass (or Crystal) Coffin», «The Crystal Ball», and adds «The Snow Queen» by Hans Christian Andersen. Besides the presence of ice, glass, snow (snow flakes are crystals too), crystal and, occasionally, mirror, and their proprieties of transparency and shine, Byatt considers the symbolic oppositions in all these stories: red blood and white snow, wood and iron, fire and ice, etc. Most of us will remember these stories and the enduring images of their glass objects and buildings. In all of them «the frozen sleep, or death-in-life, of the ice-princess is a kind of isolation, a separate virginal state, from which she is released by the kiss, the opener, the knight on horseback» (Byatt, 2001: 154).

These themes and stories are also tightly linked with women and issues related to femininity. In Scheerbart, most especially in *The Gray Cloth*, Krug's glass buildings, like Snow White coffin, encapsulate female life and desire. The book was subtitled *A Ladies' Novel*, as *The Light Club of Bavaria* was subtitled *A Ladies' Novelette*. In fact, many of Scheerbart's writings are mostly enjoyable books, optimistic, ironic, and, as their titles suggest, apparently pro-feminist for their time... at least if one considers the subtitles. But this appearance has intricate senses that call for some discussion, even if brief.

In those mentioned above well-known fairytales, young women are confined by enchantment in crystal or ice or glass palaces, or mountains, or coffins, or shoes. Their emotions, thoughts, actions and possibilities are «frozen» and put on hold by means of ice, glass or crystal. Their material quality

of transparency allows, at the same time, to expose and to preserve the alleged feminine beauty and youth. While permitting visual access, the transparency of a hard cold surface such as glass or crystal, denies touch and shields the female body out of others' reach.

Transparency was also the expression and ideal of a particular sense of ideological, aesthetic and emotional hygiene and, above all, of a higher morality shared by the Victorians, the Krugs, Scheerbart and the Crystal Chain circle, and the modernists architects aligned with the International Style. However, while with the later this ideal, under the argument of rationality and functionality, was reinforced by a radical refuse of colour and ornament, Scheerbart's vision and Krug's buildings were richly multicoloured. The luminous, spectacular visual impact was, in Scheerbart case, of major importance yet placed him as anti-modernist, or at least as inconsistent, for his preference for colour as ornament.

The first part of the *The Gray Cloth* subtitle gives another clue of ambivalence in Scheerbart's work: *And Ten Percent White*. In the story, to satisfy her husband's idiosyncrasy and anxiety about her feminine disruptive presence and garments inside his coloured buildings, Clara Krug signs a marital agreement complying to wear only clothes made in gray fabric with ten percent white, hence neutral, colourless. The mere idea that women's fashion could disturb in the slightest the gigantic built structures of multicoloured glass is bizarre. Clara had to renounce and withhold a part of her personal expression, to be visually «neutral» and thus «less» present, secondary to her spatial environment. She was also highly dependent on her «hero» to have some sort of life, similarly to the protagonists of the mentioned fairytales. It is evident the symbolic and literal power buildings and objects can exert over the individual, but hardly how a superficial aspect such as clothing can inversely affect the built environment.

It is precisely in the context of gender that this issue must be raised and women's fashion must be understood as contentious in *The Gray Cloth*, as a hint on its hidden misogyny. For example, in the novel, the first appearance of the female character Amanda Schmidt is presented as a menace to the coloured glass space and displeasing to the architect himself:

The lady did not make a favorable impression on the architect. She wore a dark violet velvet dress with carmine red and chrysolite green cuffs and trim. Herr Edgar Krug said softly to the lawyer: 'I'm really supposed to be the only one here discussing colors. The ladies should be more discreet in their outfits out of respect for my glass windows' (Scheerbart, 2001).

Notice the resonance of particular striking contrasting colours in most of these stories, from fairytales to fantasist Scheerbart: red, green, black, and trim, on white, on snow, on glass. Even if colours may be visually suggestive in the built up environment, they were still inappropriate, as they would call attention to female presence and visibility. Besides, colours were traditionally both associated with the irrational, the passionate, the savage and unruly and with the superficial and cosmetic, hence its exclusion by the modernist movement. For colour as ornament had by then become a crime.⁹ As Elana Gomel and Stephen A. Weninger observed, «the modernist body, founded on the ideal of technological perfection, purity, health and transparency, is presented as a cure of, and a successor to, the degenerate body, with its malady, contingency, and opaqueness» (2004: 66). This logic implied that the ancient, organic, feminine and colourful body could contaminate the pristine and transparent spatial ideal. In that sense, Scheerbart is absolutely aligned with the modernists but his preference for colour instilled a never resolute contradiction. Moreover, probably it was this *unforgivable* predilection that condemned him for decades to an almost oblivion.

Mark Wigley (2001), in his original revision of modern architecture, explores the most self-evident and conspicuous feature of modern architecture: white walls. Of course, in consequence of what has been said above, the white wall is the result of the political and aesthetic repudiation of ornamentation and colour. Wigley argues that modern buildings are neither naked nor neutral, and that architectural white surfaces were understood as a form of clothing, determined to oppose and contrast a multicoloured logic yet still a part of that. It is not hard to see the affinity with Scheerbart. The point is that, in spite of his visionary and pro-feminist reputation, *The Gray Cloth* reveals deeply engrained issues on gender representation, partially inherited from the German folklore fantasy stories, partly from the modernist environment.

I recently came across with a related object that embodies the playful and fantastic sense of crystal palaces and Scheerbart colourful stories: «Dandana, The Fairy Palace» is a block construction game designed in 1919 by Arch. Bruno Taut, Scheerbart's fellow. According to Nuria Prieto, and as far as can be known from some of the available pictures of the game itself, «it is a set of 64 pieces of yellow, red, green, blue, and transparent glass. It is based on Taut's project and allows the construction of a colourful shiny palace» (Prieto,

⁹ This is a pun with Adolf Loos' *dictum* and famous essay title, *Ornament und Verbrechen* (2006).

2016). With its dazzling glass components in geometric shapes, the set is a partial realization in miniature of the idea of a world given new life by glass architecture, as expressed in writing by Paul Scheerbart in *Glass Architecture*. The blocks permit a variety of structures easily associated with Taut's real Glass Pavilion and, presumably, Krug's constructions in *The Gray Cloth*.

Architectural historians viewed both Taut's and Scheerbart's work as being unfeasible and somehow foolish, hence the portrayal of Taut's and Scheerbart's architecture as only being fit for fantasies such as this construction game: «Everything you see here, is nothing but an elegant play of light, an eternal magic lantern» (Scheerbart qtd. in Benson, 1993: 287). Yet it does not do justice to the actual impact they had on built architecture and on future generations of architects. Today's environment contains indeed all-pervading artificiality, transparency, light and color, skyscrapers and monumental volumes, some very intense and convincing Scheerbartian dreams across the globe.

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