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The imaginative use of glass in Horta's interiors provides a springboard to Modernism and offers inspiration for the crystalline cities of the future.

## The Symbolist interior and crystal imagination

David Dernie

Transparency, translucency and surface reflectance are material qualities that pervade modern architectural form. Lightness and see-through walls continue to brand the contemporary city. From London to Los Angeles, from the Shard to the Crystal Mall, the potency and immateriality of the crystal image is a liberation of the modern imagination. It reaches deep into the history of material culture, from the waxed surfaces of ancient Pentelic marbles to the crystal gardens of Fra Francesco Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (1499) or Biagio Rossetti's Palazzo dei Diamanti, Ferrara (1493–1503) and to the vast glass halls of the industrial age or Paul Scheerbart's utopias.

This paper focuses on the *crystal imagination*, as represented in the architectural interiors, visual and literary culture of *fin de siècle* Belgian Symbolism. Here crystalline materials not only embodied themes rooted in Romanticism but also engaged industrial technologies in a way that anticipates the use of glass and glass-like surfaces in the diverse movements of the twentieth century.

The last decade of the nineteenth century was remarkable for its material culture and spatial imagination. Exploring the idea of synaesthetic experience, this paper will look at the material imagination of these artists and writers, for whom coloured and patterned glass, mirrors and rare stones embodied poetic and musical themes. Crystal and glass, like frozen water, was the touchstone of Symbolist aesthetics in its paradoxical capacity to be at once reflective and at the same time mysteriously closed to the world outside. For these late Romantic writers, artists and architects, the depths of mirror, translucent glass and polished stone captured the soul and released a world of dreams. In the opaque covering of a wall, another reality would unfold, far from the torment of the industrialised modern age.

Diverse aspects of the crystal image are explored; as light, reflective and see-through, but also as a mysterious, closed world connected to nature, a vessel for inner dreams. The Symbolist notion of interior (both spatial and psychological) is examined, as embodied, during the last decade of the nineteenth century, in the mature work of the

architect Victor Horta. Here, a highly individual approach to architectural style, and a taste for the artificial, is combined with the references that surround the crystal imagination to create garden-like interiors of gilded sinuous ironwork, rare marbles, lacquered woods, glass and mirror.

### Belgian Symbolism

The last decade of the nineteenth century was an intense period of artistic output in Brussels. The vitality of the avant-garde and the reception of Symbolism in this youthful, burgeoning capital were to be remarkable for artistic production across Europe. Despite the influence of Social Realism and the short-lived preoccupation with the theories of Post-Impressionism, Symbolism was, by 1890, the dominant artistic movement in Brussels and represents an important reference for the architecture and decorative arts of the period. During the 1890s Brussels had not only its own theoretician in Albert Mockel, but several key Symbolist artists and writers: Maurice Maeterlinck in theatre, the poets Emile Verhaeren, Charles van



1 Musical composition interpreted in the iron mezzanine handrail detail of the Hôtel Tassel, by Victor Horta (1893)  
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Lerberghe, Max Elskamp and Georges Rodenbach, the artists Fernand Khnopff and Xavier Mellery. The last ten years of the nineteenth century witnessed a body of creative production that remains significant, not only in the way it brought together themes that stretched deep into the roots of Romanticism, but also by the richness of reference across diverse fields of artistic activity. In part this identity was generated by the group of artists, writers and musicians, called 'Les XX' ('The Twenty'), and it was convincingly articulated in the visual arts as well as in music and architecture.<sup>1</sup>

In a lecture to a meeting of La Libre Esthétique (which succeeded Les XX in 1893), the influential painter turned architect and interior decorator, Henry van de Velde expressed the notion of synaesthetic experience, widespread in the aesthetics of the time:

*Indeed this dream will come true, a dream of materials as malleable as sentences and as supple as thought. A new era of large buildings, distinguished from those of the past in that they make another step toward the full materialisation of thought, is about to dawn on us.*<sup>2</sup>

This almost mystical correspondence between a building's materials, their colours or forms and human sensations that van de Velde calls for in architecture, echoes the principles of Synthetist painting of a few years earlier. In his *Notes Synthétiques* (1888) Paul Gauguin writes: 'Like music, painting acts on the soul through the intermediary of the senses: harmonious colours correspond to the harmonies of sounds'. One may assume similar musical correspondences were in play, not only in the creative development of new expressions of decorative arts during the period, but also as these swirling lines of colour, mosaic iron and glass were perceived and experienced in the *fin-de-siècle*. Rather like the debate concerning the musicality of the *vers libre* of the Symbolist poets, contemporary architectural critics often refer to the harmony of the composition. Devoid of the reference to traditional language the essential quality of the Symbolist interior was to be its *musicality* [1].<sup>3</sup>

While Symbolism was not formally launched until 1886 with Jean Moréas's article published in *Le Figaro*,<sup>4</sup> Paul Bourget, one of the chief theoreticians of the literary movement of Decadence published his significant collection of poems *La Vie inquiète* in 1875, and his autobiographical novel *Edel* three years later. It was at this time that the poetry of Baudelaire, who had died in 1867 without extensive recognition, began to gain more influence with a new generation of poets. Bourget's *Edel* heralded the mood of a generation, and the spiritual fate of the period, as he describes a complex Late-Romantic hero who, ridden with angst and in search of sensual refinement, searches for a spiritual retreat from reality.

Bourget was also a respected critic, and in his *Essais de Psychologie Contemporaine* he describes the artist's disposition as one of 'irremedial unhappiness'.<sup>5</sup> A deep pessimism, in part fuelled by disillusionment with the change wrought by technological progress, characterised the Late Romantic artist's position. Engulfed by anguish, their inquiry was at once

fuelled by a highly refined sensitivity to the world around them, and at the same time a rejection of industrialisation, and a retreat into private dream worlds: exhausted by all the world had to offer, Huysmans' decadent hero Des Esseintes declares that 'the idea of hiding away far from human society, of shutting himself up in some snug retreat, of deadening the thunderous din of life's inexorable activity [...] tempted him more than ever before'.<sup>6</sup>

The theme of Huysmans' novel, *À Rebours* (1884), was anticipated by the influential writers and aesthetes, the brothers Goncourt, who became Parisian literary *hommes célèbres* during the second half of the nineteenth century. Like Des Esseintes, Jules and Edmond de Goncourt retreated from Paris, with its new boulevards and train stations, to a house in Auteuil, on the (then) outskirts of the city. The house is later described in Edmond de Goncourt's book *La Maison d'un Artiste* (1881).<sup>7</sup> A passionate collector, he describes the eclectic interior that was both typical of the period, but also a distinctive shift away from academic historicism, in the way it heralds the highly personalised interiors that would characterise the approach to the decorative arts and architecture in the last decades of the century.

Following his brother's death for instance, Edmond describes how, especially at night, in the flickering light of a low fire, the silk and wool wall coverings (of Edmond's bedroom) can take on strange forms: 'a supernatural existence'. Suddenly the light goes out and the room drowns in a sea of transparent shadow and 'en les profondeurs livides de la glace obscure, en son luisant de perle noire, au-dessous du baldaquin blanc et de son bouquet de jour, le portrait de Jules se reflète-tout lointain'.<sup>8</sup>

Such passages anticipate the sense of removal from real experience that was to characterise Symbolist interiors. The dim light makes distinctions between materials ambiguous; rich texture and glistening surfaces imply fresh figurations built out of relationships not perceived in daylight. The shadowy room takes on a dream-like character that enables Edmond to find a moment to contemplate the image of his dead brother, emancipated as it were, in the dimly lit room.

Such fascination with melancholic lighting and material surfaces that have a depth was the culmination of a Romantic tradition where shadows were the subject of intense personal reflection and vehicles of liberation from the prose of the day. What made the Goncourt's interior so modern for the nineteenth century was not so much the eclecticism of their taste but a development of the interior as a highly personalised ensemble or as a visualisation of their psychological condition.

### Synaesthetic experience

The Goncourts' approach owes much to Baudelaire, and of particular importance for an interpretation of the Symbolist interior is Baudelaire's 'Correspondences' from his collection of poems *Fleurs du Mal* that set out afresh the notion of 'synaesthesia' or the correspondence of sensations. This idea was central to Symbolist aesthetics and for the reading of

architectural interiors of the period. Their perception of an ideal world of universal analogy behind material appearance, 'a forest of symbols', as Baudelaire described it, placed the role of the imagination foremost in the perception of a work of art. Above all this synaesthetic experience was personal, requiring a highly creative imagination to construct and refine the analogies between taste, sound, line and colour. One can justifiably speak of the musicality of certain compositions and understand the malleability of the material under the artists' gaze as vehicles to produce sensations outside of the purely visual field. Huysmans brilliantly describes such sensations in Des Esseintes' 'mouth organ'. Built into the walls of Des Esseintes' dining room there was a cupboard containing liqueur casks that he would taste and as he did so play internal symphonies to himself, 'each and every liqueur corresponded in taste with the sound of a particular instrument'.<sup>9</sup> He would transfer specific pieces of music to his palette, at other times he would compose melodies of his own. Either way, the imaginary music created by his savouring of selected liqueurs in the dim candlelight of his sea cabin supplanted the need for actual music.

Such experiences involved a deep introspection and a transformation of visible reality to correspond with the interior world of the Des Esseintes' dreams. The exterior world was in effect negated for what it was. Rather it tended to be transformed into quasi-mystical visions. In painting Paul Gauguin is characteristic of the period as he states: 'I shut my eyes in order to see', and Des Esseintes, Huysmans' quintessential decadent hero in his novel *À Rebours* (1884) underlines the mood of the period:

*The main thing is to know how to set about it, to be able to concentrate your attention on a single detail, to forget yourself sufficiently to bring about the desired hallucination and so substitute the vision of reality for the reality itself.*<sup>10</sup>

In this highly influential novel, Huysmans goes on to describe Des Esseintes' dining room in the house at Fontenay, as a room within a room. The room that had been designed 'by the architect' was lined to appear as a ship's cabin. Of the two external windows in the room, one was hidden by the bulkhead, the other transformed into an aquarium that was inserted into the space between the lining and external fabric:

*Thus what daylight penetrated into the cabin had first to pass through the outer window, the panes of which had been replaced by a sheet of plate glass, then through the water, and finally through the fixed bull's-eye in the porthole.*<sup>11</sup>

The pale walls of the dining room are animated with a watery light that is tuned, as the water is tinted to change its colour, to capture the tincture of a storm or time of day, corresponding with Des Esseintes' humour. Filled with mechanical fish and artificial seaweed, shadows would fill the space so that it became like a shadow theatre, with distorted patterns of light and dark pointing towards an artificial world and a simulated journey. The scent of tar would fill the room that was hung with seafaring prints, chronometers, compasses, sextants and

dividers. Fishing rods, nets and a fake anchor were strewn by the door. By these means Des Esseintes 'was able to enjoy quickly, almost simultaneously, all the sensations of a long sea voyage, without ever leaving home'. Indeed Des Esseintes shunned travel, preferring instead simulated environments of his fertile imagination, inspired by the refined artifice of his decor:

*There can be no doubt that by transferring this ingenious trickery, this clever simulation to the intellectual plane, one can enjoy as easily as on the material plane, imaginary pleasures similar in all respects to the pleasures of reality [2].*<sup>12</sup>

That the unified arts and simulated experience of this kind can provide solace from the industrialised city is a theme that inspired two sets of poems by Emile Verhaeren.<sup>13</sup> The first, *Les Campagnes Hallucinées* – whose publication coincides with Victor Horta's commission to build the Hôtel Tassel (1893)<sup>14</sup> – describes the plains of Flanders, deserted after the exodus of country workers to the city. The vast windswept plains are transformed into images of desolation measured by the flow of deathly water and punctuated by the shrill call of black cormorants. The poems which followed, *Les Villes Tentaculaires* (1895), purvey a disquieting image of a city in the embrace of 'Les bras des machines diaboliques' which drain the countryside of its life: 'La plaine est morne et morte – et la ville la mange'.

The poems are important to us for two reasons. First, like Huysmans' *À Rebours*, they convey a sense of distrust of the industrial progress which was perceived to be deforming the city and killing the landscape, and they shed light on the Symbolist

<sup>2</sup> Horta's use of textured 'American' glass in the Hôtel Van Eetvelde, Victor Horta (1895)  
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preoccupation with the interior as a protective retreat – the unified arts offered a potential salvation in the artificial reality of the Art Nouveau interior. Second, the verses illustrate the Symbolist poet transforming both the landscape and city to conform to an interior vision. In themselves the reality of city and landscape hold only a limited interest for Verhaeren. Instead they are vehicles to reify his own mental condition; they lose their everyday characteristics and are transformed by powerful analogies, into the projection of his own subjectivity:

*Le monde ne m'intéresse qu'en tant qu'il me réfléchit, et je le glorifie non pour lui-même, mais parce qu'à certains moments d'exaltation il ne me semble être que mon propre prolongement.*<sup>15</sup>

Here Verhaeren recalls Albert Mockel's description of a symbol as intuitive, indefinite, and suggestive of a world not quite definable. Like Verhaeren's vision of the world Mockel's symbolic reality was to allow access to an unconscious, personal reality. The traditional role of the symbol, which was to articulate references embodied in a culture and tradition, were here refigured as personal. The mood of Symbolist literature, and visual arts and interior architecture, tended to be overwhelmingly one of self-reflection to the extent that the external world was only relevant in so far as it mirrored or affected an interior world of sensations. The reign of individualism is declared by Verhaeren in *La Nation*:

*n'obéissent plus à des lois générales [...] de grammaire, mais qu'ils cherchent leur forme en eux-mêmes, forgent leur ordre et ne se soumettent qu'à des règles individuelles, jaillies de leur manière de penser et de sentir.*<sup>16</sup>

### The soul of things

In the visual arts this attuned sense of interiority as 'closure' in an intimate world of self-reflection, or disquiet with the world outside, is a prevalent theme and is powerfully observed by artists such as Xavier Mellery, whose *My Hallway* (1889)<sup>17</sup> is one of a number of quietly meditative works that attempted to depict 'the soul of things'. The scene is artificially lit. It is night-time and there is no view to the street or garden. The source of light is hidden and stark, so that the vestibule is structured as much by the shadows it casts as the horizons of its decor. It is a place of reverie, made intimate through the materials of its making, but at the same time haunting – a world withdrawn but menacing. A number of drawings and paintings from the period describe an interpretation of interior as an extension of a psychological condition: they are invariably still, melancholic, withdrawn and a little haunting. They reflect the Symbolist ideal of retreat from external experience, a place to reflect moreover on an internal life, a place of dreams, a place to find solace for the soul. And where artificial light articulates the shadows that rouse such romantic self-reflection.

A few years earlier, in 1886, Fernand Khnopff's, *Listening to Schumann* [3] had, controversially, been exhibited at Les XX alongside James Ensor's *Russian Music*.<sup>18</sup> Though comparable thematically, Khnopff's interpretation is significant in the way it anticipates the intense interiority of the Symbolist interiors that would emerge in Brussels a decade later. Like Mellery's *Hallway*, Khnopff's interior shuns a sense of the world outside. Even the light of the painting seems to emerge from the pale walls of the room



3 Fernand Khnopff, *Listening to Schumann* (1886)  
© Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels / photo: J. Geleyns / Ro scan

itself. Shadows are softened and the paint treatment blurs distinctions between materials, giving the room a coherence and focus on the deep contemplation of the listener. The image is focused on the mother figure, whose dark form emerges from the shadow of the hearth behind her. Above the mantelpiece sits a large gilt-framed mirror that reflects the hidden side of the room. It reflects a second mirror, filled with shadow. Against the still light that falls on the room's pale walls and swirling lines of the carpet, is a weight of shadows that are first body, then void; black lacquered wood of the piano, and then depths of mirror reflecting mirror. Caught between these infinite self-reflections and the music of the piano, the listener (probably Khnopff's mother) is cast into reverie and the room itself recedes, as though into the depths of a mirror.

**Inhabited crystal**

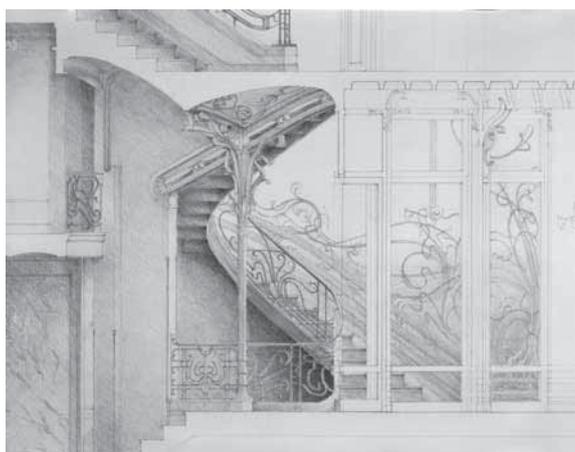
The transition of the architectural interior during this period was initially hesitant, as the traditional typology of the *Maison du Maître*, with its enfilade plan arrangement, was at first simply infiltrated with new exposed iron girders and experimental decorative patterns while retaining a traditional plan arrangement. But these early experiments, such as Horta's *Maison Autrique* (1893), were to be radically developed, partly as a response to the intensity of the artistic culture in Brussels at this time, and partly as a consequence of the new potential to realise such dreams, and in particular the availability of highly skilled iron and steel workers and new kinds of glass and mirror. Glass and its poetic equivalents were to embody the spirit of the new Symbolist interior, the inhabited crystal. As the form of the house shifted from its traditional enfilade arrangement to engage a new and explicit interior form at the heart of the building plot.

The new domestic architecture of the period – first

captured so brilliantly by Victor Horta at the *Hôtel Tassel* (1893–97) [4] – was to divide the depth of the plan into three sections, from street to garden. This introduced a central spatial sequence that was removed from both street and garden. These top-lit spaces acted in part as a stair hall, and in part as a winter garden and as a space for music. Unlike the stair halls of previous house types, the depth of building section and the use of lay lights and textured glass modelled the natural light to the extent that no direct sunlight enters these interior sequences. Rather, due in part to shifts in level and scale, they are filled with a still light, more reminiscent of the Belgian poet Verhaeren's empty Flanders landscape than external, natural light.

While in Horta's *Maison Autrique* the stair hall is placed alongside the two principal rooms in plan, like the traditional nineteenth-century town house, the stair of the *Hôtel Tassel* is combined with a winter garden and together these occupy the centre of the plan arrangement [5]. The space that this creates forms the focus and orientation of the rest of the rooms of the house. At the ground, mezzanine and first floor levels, the rooms connect across this central space. The apparent openness of the *Tassel* interior does little to remove a sense of withdrawn enclosure and introspection. The change in level in section removes the winter garden and stair from the street and the use of textured glass prevents views outside at other levels. The matrix of slender columns, the play of translucent and transparent surfaces, and the depth of the mirrored walls render the definition of the space itself highly ambiguous. It is this ambiguity of depth and surface that builds the conditions for the *chambre rêve* which was so prevalent a theme in Symbolist literature.

This theme of closure is reworked by Horta in subsequent Art Nouveau houses and is perhaps most explicit in the Van Eetvelde residence (1895–1898),



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4 Section detail, *Hôtel Tassel*, by Victor Horta (1893) © DACS 2013



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5 Winter Garden of the *Hôtel Tassel*, a dream-like interior characteristic of Symbolist literature © DACS 2013



6 The winter garden of the Hôtel Van Eetvelde, perhaps the most developed articulation of the Symbolist literary and artistic themes of closure and interiority. Material qualities and the completeness of linear composition that connect materials and overlay junctions create a sense of a substitute world where the artist's personal dreams of the outside world prevail over direct views and literal transparency © DACS 2013

7 The winter garden of Horta's Hôtel Aubecq (1899–1902) creating a crystal-like interior, reminiscent of the exotic worlds of Maeterlinck's *Serres Chaudes*

where the *chambre rêve* is the setting for a musical performance [6]. Unlike the Tassel house, it is removed from the stair to the upper floors, and has none of the sense of movement that is developed in the entrance sequence there. Instead it presents a powerful stillness where one's entire experience is determined by a world of still light and sinuous never-ending lines, perpetually reflected in the *Style 'Horta'*. As though reflecting Horta's own decorative programme, when instructing his architect, Des Esseintes emphasised that he wanted colours that would appear stronger and clearer in artificial (candle) light; dismissing all colours apart from three: red, orange and yellow and 'of the three, he preferred orange', claiming a close correlation between the sensual make-up of a person and preference for colour.

*As for those gaunt, febrile creatures of feeble constitution and nervous disposition whose sensual appetite craves dishes that are smoked and seasoned, their eyes almost always prefer that most morbid and irritating of colours,*

*with its acid glow and unnatural splendour – orange.*<sup>19</sup>

The same sense dominates all of Horta's major interiors. While each of their decorative orders takes its inspiration from nature, the concern is for the artificial, from plan arrangement to material, to highly individual lines and colours. The coherence of this personal aesthetic, regardless of the requirements of structure or pragmatic function, was the touchstone for the creation of an inner world that responded both to the retreat of Late Romantic artists and to the mysteries of dream that were the predilection of Brussels' Symbolist culture where paradigms for the inner world were recurrent: through the literature and visual arts of the period there is a constellation of analogies, ranging from Georges Rodenbach's vision of the town of Bruges as a realm of solitude, to hot houses, diving bells as frequent spaces of protection and imprisonment of the soul.

By virtue of their completeness and the integrity of their decorative programme, Horta's interiors may



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be interpreted as a further analogy of the Symbolist vision of interiority: they are closed, isolated, protected spaces for contemplation. This notion of the interior of the house as a retreat from the external world corresponds with the closed world of post-Baudelairian poetry and the Symbolists' cultivation of dreams: the retreat of the artist from reality and the cult of the artificial. It could be said that the literary and artistic tendency of this period was above all to create a personalised world. In architecture the Symbolist interior became the means of communicating inner experience and the private house became the most exalted domain, as originality and personal freedom to express an inner life was the prevalent view.

In this context one can identify a reciprocity between the material conditions of a space and the psychological condition of the 'dream room', that is a notion that underpins the life of Des Esseintes at Fontenay, and which draws significantly on the poetry of Rodenbach and his circle. Rodenbach's *Le Règne du Silence* for example opens with *La Vie des Chambres* where the *chambre rêve* is described not as an image of the poetic soul but its very reification: 'La Chambre est un climat psychique cristallisé dans un décor; sa personification doit être lue comme une "coloration" animique.'<sup>20</sup>

In this sense a colour or line can suddenly recall a musical chord or rhythm of words, a material junction can be a sentiment, shadows become anxieties, and realms for oneiric journeys, and light a place for the melancholy of the day. In Rodenbach's *Bruges-la-Morte*, the town itself, its history, its day to day life, or its place in the landscape and all that it signifies, are renounced in favour of how material details, sounds and sensations embody personal experience: the grey moist air, the granite quays and

the infinite silence of Bruges's waters furnished Hugues Viane with an almost mystical analogy of his dead wife. Hovering between the aqueous and the earth, the brick landscape threaded with waterways became profoundly suggestive of visionary experience – a metaphor for the unconscious mind. Imagery shrouded by incessant rain or mists negated material qualities and stillness – a suspended animation of modern progress – a world hushed and obfuscated to the threshold of non-being and immateriality. Bruges, as Patrick Laude explains, becomes a solipsistic world: Bruges-la-Morte 'est fondé sur une telle "cloture" constitutive d'un milieu microcosmique structurellement solidaire de la psychologie du narrateur'.<sup>21</sup>

Like the evening light that Hugues Viane found so conducive to his nostalgic walks, or the soft light of the Flemish plains, a light that approaches twilight falls almost evenly across Horta's Symbolist interiors. His control of the light which enters the deep light wells creates the impression not of an interior flooded with natural light, but one where muted light touches on the melancholic. Rather than being the transitory light of the exterior, it takes on the stillness of an aquarium, as though it emanated from the space itself.

The outside world leaves but a fleeting impression on the live-in crystal-like interior whose refined lines, artificial colours and walls of mirror and metamorphic rock resemble the closed, exotic worlds of Maeterlinck's *Serres Chaudes* where he describes the glass domes (*Cloches de Verre*) that protect the fragile plants and symbolise an artificial retreat [7].<sup>22</sup> The fragile barrier of glass defines a paradox of exposure and isolation: Maeterlinck describes how the transparent partitions that establish a special, protective climate and prevent the incursion of the outer world upon the private realm, also construct a prison for the soul:

*Sealed within the windows of crystal  
And weary melancholy  
My vague, abolished distress  
Hovers in the air and slowly grows.*<sup>23</sup>

The *cloches de verres* at the heart of Horta's Hôtel Van Eetvelde (1895–1898), or Hôtel Aubecq (1899–1902), interrupt a sequence of dimly lit chambers which mark each domestic activity and which frame this *organic crystal* as a kind of *live-in symbol*.

The aqueous quality of these spaces is reflected in the verses of *Serres Chaudes* where there is a frequent association of the transparency with water, and where the *Cloche de Plongée* represents a symbol of closure, its glass walls preventing the soul from reaching the abundant life of the oceans. For the Decadent poets water became fundamental to the contemplation of a disappearance of being, often described as a source of dreams. Its prime quality is that of a natural mirror and, as such, water is the vehicle for a rich constellation of themes from the period. At its heart is the figure of Narcissus, whose contemplation of water's still surface reveals the fundamental dialogue between the clear fleeting images of surface and the mysteries and shadows of its depths. Water is at once seductive and perilous, as



8 The infinite reflections between the walls of the stairwell of Maison Horta (1898)  
© DACS 2013

the tragic end to Narcissus's self-desire is to be drawn into the water's depths like a disappearance into his own soul.

Here water is important as an analogy to glass, mirrors and the nature of transparency. These ideas come together in Rodenbach's *Les Vies Encloses*. The opening poem, *Aquarium Mental*, describes the Symbolist dream room through the analogy of an aquarium: 'Eau de l'aquarium, nuit glauque, clair-obscur, Où passe la pensée en apparences brèves, Comme les ombres d'un grand arbre sur un mur. Tout est songe, tout est solitude et silence'. The aquarium's transparent enclosure rejects the exterior while opening the gaze into the mysterious world of the water's impenetrable depth, a symbol of a life unmoved by the distant and partially defined world outside. The transparency of the aquarium establishes the presence of the two worlds, one silent and indefinite – a still interior; the other a place of fleeting surface reflections: Rodenbach's silent imaginary foyer was a metaphor for the solipsistic closure of Symbolist aesthetics.

Elsewhere, mirrors are also described as 'closed' spaces; 'emprisonnant la réalité dans son cadre et l'isolant de son contexte ambiant, le miroir lui offert une "profondeur" de réalité qui pourra révéler sa vraie nature'.<sup>24</sup> By virtue of their dual register of surface and depth, mirrors, Patrick Laude points out, *draw out dreams*.<sup>25</sup> The mirrored surfaces of Horta's interiors are not presented as objects but appear as a wall, a fireplace, or are framed within a cabinet. Where they appear – as in the winter garden of the Hôtel Tassel – they are like fictive openings into aqueous depths, whose surfaces are washed with fragmented reflections. Mirrors and glass belong together in the artificial landscapes that lie at the heart of Symbolist interiors. In a scene which could have been set between the paired mirrors at the top

of the staircase of Horta's own house [8], Henri de Régnier's Hertulie loses the man she loves and wanders through a palace:

*de chambre en chambre, haletante et lasse, dans une où étaient les miroirs, elle s'arrêta. Son image s'y multipliait à l'infini; Hertulie autour de soi se vit jusqu'au fond d'un songe où elle perdait le sentiment d'avoir produit tant de fantômes identiques à sa paleur; elle s'y sentait dispersée à jamais et à force de se voir ainsi, ailleurs, tout autour d'elle, elle s'y morcela au point que dissoute en ses propres reflets, exorcisée d'elle-même par cette surprenante magie où elle s'imaginait indéfiniment impersonnelle, ses genoux fléchirent et elle s'affaissa doucement sur le parquet, inanimée.*<sup>26</sup>

As a kind of death, through her disembodiment into the context, Hertulie experiences an almost mystical union with the gilt-framed dream space of the mirrors. There she found a place to rest, overcome by the deep reflections of her inner anxiety all around her.

A similar drama of disappearance is described by Stéphane Mallarmé in *Hérodiade*:

*Oh mirror!  
Cold water frozen by ennui in your frame.  
How often and how long, driven desperate,  
By dreams and searching my memories which are  
Like leaves under the ice of your deep depths  
I appeared in you like a distant shadow.*<sup>27</sup>

Like the crepuscular light of Horta's stairways, the shadowy depths of the mirror became the restful foyer for the artistic soul, where actual vision and experience of the world was overlaid with oneiric experience triggered by the mirror's crystal-like surface, and the coherence of the artifice.

## Conclusion

The power of the crystal image continued into early Modernist aesthetics, first through German Expressionism: in Wenzel Hablik's drawings *Shaffende Kräfte* (1907–1909, *Creative Forces*) for instance, crystals were the focus of a thematic sequence of architectural images. Referring to a range of religious and mystical traditions, Hablik explains how his crystal images embodied creative forces governed by a higher radiant body. His crystal landscapes were images of vast earthly paradises, that pre-dated Paul Scheerbart's well-known call for a revolutionary crystalline architecture to transform society:

*We live for the most part within enclosed spaces. These form the environment from which our culture grows. Our culture is in a sense a product of our architecture. If we wish to raise our culture to a higher level, we are forced for better or for worse to transform our architecture. And this will be possible only if we remove the enclosed quality from the spaces within which we live. This can be done only through the introduction of glass architecture that lets sunlight and the light of the moon and stars into our rooms not merely*

through a few windows, but simultaneously through the greatest possible number of walls that are made entirely of glass – coloured glass. The new environment that we shall thereby create must bring with it a new culture.<sup>28</sup>

Bruno Taut's Cologne Werkbund Exhibition Glashaus (1914) embodied Scheerbart's crystal visions, and went on to inspire the activist movement that was to overlay such utopian materialism with political action. In post-war Berlin, Taut, Mies van der Rohe,<sup>29</sup> Adolf Behne, and the Luckhardt brothers were, in different ways, driven by visions for a new Europe, where the crystal image stood as an antidote to the horrors of the period. Typically, the art historian and critic Behne announces the immateriality of glass: 'No material overcomes matter as much as glass', and 'of all the substances at our disposal, it achieves the most elemental effect. It reflects the sky and the sun; it is like luminous water'.<sup>30</sup> In the space of two decades the dual registers of the crystal image – its surface and depth – had fused into one: this modern crystal image, as material embodiment of a new world full of light and hope, departed from the solipsistic dreams of decadent artists for whom the mysteries of the crystal were liberations from the prose of the day. The shimmering surfaces of the Modernist crystal acknowledged the spiritual death of a decadent, bourgeois aesthetic.

At the same time, this rendering of the crystal image was not without its detractors and caused Walter Benjamin in 1933 to pronounce glass as having

lost its 'aura'. He attests that 'glass is in general the enemy of secrets. It is also the enemy of possession [...] and asks, 'do people like Scheerbart's dream of glass buildings because they are the spokesman of a new poverty?''<sup>31</sup> Here Benjamin is highlighting the shift from Scheerbart's utopian visions to the alignment of glass with industrial aesthetics that promoted the large-scale use of glass in architecture. Benjamin was no doubt aware of the rich histories of the crystal image and the *fin de siècle* interior, not least in the arcades of Brussels and Paris. He also understood the thematic connection between Scheerbart's dreams and the Romantic tradition. In comparison, the Modernist see-through walls were, for Benjamin a 'new poverty'.

One might argue, by way of conclusion, that Benjamin's observations remain pertinent, as the legacy of the crystal image continues to oscillate between the monumental, formal expression of crystalline shapes and the glass-crystal as light filled or see through. Benjamin refers to Modernist aesthetics that foregrounded glass as reflective and see through, sombre and functional, where the duality of a crystal's surface and depth and its elemental, indeed geological reference is substituted for the singular allure of transparency, light and immateriality. In this sense, the crystal imagination of the late nineteenth century, and the potential for those crystal metaphors to unravel worlds not available to sight, still may provide rich inspiration.

## Notes

1. Les XX were founded in Brussels in 1884 and became La Libre Esthétique in 1893. See J. Block, *Les XX and Belgian Avant-Gardism 1868–1894* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1984). This paper explores this background and elaborates arguments first explored in D. Dernie, Victor Horta and the Symbolist Interior, in *Colloque Horta Actes Académie Royale de Belgique*, (Brussels, 1997)
2. Published in booklet form as Henry van de Velde, *Déblaiement d'art* (Brussels: Monnom, 1895 [2nd edn]).
3. The Symbolist poets sought to make work that re-engaged with the musical origins of literature and poetry. See H. Braet, *L'Accueil fait au Symbolisme en Belgique (1885–1900)*, (Brussels: Palais des Académies, 1967), p. 51:  
*Non contents d'une poésie verbale qui cherche à reproduire dans le vers l'émotion musical, certains poètes, comme René Ghil, ont cru pouvoir ériger en système les relations qu'ils percevaient entre les sensations auditives ou visuelles et les éléments phoniques du langage.*
4. Jean Moréas published the Symbolist manifesto in *Le Figaro*, on 18 September 1886:

*la poésie symbolique cherche à vêtir l'Idée d'une forme sensible qui, néanmoins, ne serait pas son but à elle-même, mais qui, tout en servant à exprimer l'Idée, demeurerait sujette. L'Idée, à son tour, ne doit point se laisser voir privée des somptueuses simarres des analogies extérieures; car le caractère essentiel de l'art symbolique consiste à ne jamais aller jusqu'à la concentration de l'Idée en soi. Ainsi, dans cet art, les tableaux de la nature, les actions des humains, tous les phénomènes concrets ne sauraient se manifester eux-mêmes; ce sont là des apparences sensibles destinées à représenter leurs affinités ésotériques avec des Idées primordiales.*

He was considered one of the most influential Symbolist poets of the 1890s. Between 1874 and 1884 there appeared some 25 magazines dedicated to literature. *L'Art Moderne* was founded in 1881, out of the heritage of *L'Artiste* (1875–1880). Octave Maus became the director, but Edmond Picard in fact led the journal. *L'Art Moderne* was socialist and oriented Belgian literature towards a social nationalism.

5. J. Pierrot, *Decadent Imagination*, trans. by D. Coltman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 14:

*Il m'est impossible aussi de m'intéresser à quelqu'un, sans me figurer avec une intensité presque égale à celle de mes souvenirs personnels, ses façons de sentir, ses goûts et ses dégoûts, ses plaisirs et ses chagrins. Je dis: me figurer, et non pas comprendre. Car il n'y a rien de commun entre ce travail tout hypothétique et la justesse de l'observation. J'ai trop éprouvé au cours de ma vie combien on se trompe aisément à construire ainsi en hâte et d'instinct le caractère des autres.*

6. J. K. Huysmans, *Against Nature*, trans. by R. Baldick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), pp. 23–24.
7. Often visited by Paul Bourget.
8. Edmond de Goncourt, *La Maison d'un Artiste*, II (Paris: Charpentier, 1881), pp. 202–03.
9. Huysmans, *Against Nature*, p. 59.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
13. Verhaeren participated in Les XX, though was not a member, and was also a key contributor to *L'Art Moderne*.
14. Tassel was a professor of descriptive geometry at the Free University in Brussels. His links to freemasonry, together with his

- membership of Les XX, provided Horta with influential patrons that were also informed by avant-garde aesthetics.
15. Émile Verhaeren quoted in P. Gorceix, *Le Symbolisme en Belgique* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1982), p. 136. The Symbolist poets sought to create the new at all costs, as Picard emphasises in his article in *L'Art Moderne*, VI (1891): 'cet effréné et salubre besoin d'originalité; le mépris de l'imitation; l'obligation stricte imposée à chacun d'être soi-même sous peine de n'être compté pour rien'. Quoted in Braet, *L'Accueil*, p. 132. Individualism became the artistic paradigm.
  16. Albert Giraud, 'Chronique littéraire', *La Jeune Belgique*, XII (1893), p. 287; quoted in Braet, *L'Accueil*, p. 72. It was this *aesthetics of self* that Bruno Taut's 'Activist' circles responded to some thirty years later.
  17. For this image see <<http://pinterest.com/pin/116108496613740058/>> [accessed 21 June 2013].
  18. See Emile Verhaeren's articles on Khnopff in *L'Art Moderne*: 'Silhouettes d'Artistes. Fernand Khnopff', *L'Art Moderne*, 12 September 1886.
  19. Huysmans, *Against Nature*, p. 30.
  20. P. Laude, *Rodenbach Les Décors de Silence* (Brussels: Editions Labor, 1990), p. 72.
  21. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
  22. Maeterlinck's *Serres Chaudes* appears in May 1889, in Ghent, and is hailed by Verhaeren in *L'Art Moderne* in July of the same year for the fluidity of its images.
  23. *Foliage of the Heart* in *Serres Chaudes*.
  24. Laude, *Rodenbach*, p. 47.
  25. *Ibid.*, pp. 88–89.
  26. Henri de Régnier, 'Hertulie', *Revue Blanche*, March 1894. Quoted in S. Bernard, *Le Poème en Prose de Baudelaire Jusqu'à Nos Jours* (Paris: Librairie Nizet, 1959), p. 522.
  27. Mallarmé was recognised by *La Jeune Belgique* as the father of Symbolism. See Braet, *L'Accueil*, p. 27. Translation from Guy Michaud, *Mallarmé*, trans. by Marie Collins and Bertha Humez (New York: New York University Press, 1965), p. 35.
  28. Paul Scheerbart, *Glass Architecture* (1914). Quoted in *Programs and Manifestoes on 20th-century Architecture*, ed. by Ulrich Conrads, trans. by Michael Bullock (London: Lund Humphries, 1970), p. 32.
  29. See for instance Mies Van Der Rohe's project for a crystal tower on Friedrichstrasse (1921).
  30. Adolf Behne, *Die Wiederkehr der Kunst* (Leipzig: Kurt Wolff, 1919) quoted in Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Gerhard Richter: Eight Grey* (New York: Deutsche Guggenheim Publications, 2003), pp. 21–22. Many of these contributed to Taut's well known 'Die gläserne Kette' (1919) and if we compare the sequence of projects by Mies van der Rohe from a crystal tower on Friedrichstrasse (1921), to the Barcelona Pavilion (1929), to the Seagram building (1950) we can trace the long influence of the crystal imagination in Modernism, emerging from German Expressionism but focusing increasingly on surface reflections, functionality and transparency, through the Bauhaus as a split symbol. For on the one hand this crystal image was to bring forth a new light-filled and colourful architecture and, on the other, it was to be a potent image of progress of the new machine age. On the one hand the crystal image reverberates with Hablik's elemental utopias and, on the other hand, the rational reduction of the material to a rhythm of openings that is the Seagram building develops, as technology permits, into the monumental image of crystals of contemporary cities.
  31. Walter Benjamin, 'Experience and Poverty' (1933). Quoted in Buchloh, *Gerhard Richter*, p. 23.

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