

# glas – philosophical shards

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As a work of art, glas is both transparent and opaque. It combines optical clarity with the impenetrability of symbol. glas is a sensual metaphor, and like all metaphors, it is ultimately inexhaustible. A metaphor can be neither substituted for nor paraphrased. It is best to simply let it be. What a metaphor has to say cannot be said in any other way. The same is true of works of art. “The work of art does not aim to convey something else,” said Wittgenstein, “just itself.” For art there is a simple rule: form and content are one and the same.

Think about a poem. Or a piece of music.

Beethoven once performed his final piano sonata for a small audience, after which someone is said to have asked him: “But what does the piece mean, Herr Beethoven?”

In response, he played it again. The only valid answer. My thoughts on glas are splinters, shards. Nothing more. Thought fragments, not constituting a whole. But perhaps they can be of some use all the same, helping to point out all there is to see in this glass which is no glass at all.

They say transparency is a virtue, but like all virtues, this one is ambivalent. Our transparent society makes it more difficult to cheat, but we are also threatened with a “tyranny of visibility”, as the philosopher Byung44 Chul Han has written. In his words: “Illumination is exploitation.” Foucault knew as much: “Anyone who is subjugated by visibility and knows it assumes the coercive means of power and turns them on himself. He

internalizes the power relations by playing both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjugation.”

Today we all sit by ourselves in isolated cells observing each other. In the digital panopticon we are at one and the same time the watchers and the watched. To repeat: we are isolated, alone, even as we fight our way down a busy street. It is as if we've been covered by a bell jar: we see the others, but they remain distant. We are surrounded by namelessness, though this anonymity is disconcertingly connected with an ever-increasing exhibitionism. Just think of the “real-life” satire of the talk show guest, the antiheroes of reality shows like Big Brother, or the stranger sitting next to you on the train and baring her soul into the telephone.

According to Han, it's not just people who suffer under this rising tide of transparency – beauty does as well. That's because beauty relies on opacity, on mystery, on the merest of hints, on our imagination as it spreads its wings into the unknown. Can there be beauty in a world where everything is transparent?

In 1974, Derrida wrote a book called “Glas”. The French word “glas” means “death knell”, and is derived from the Latin “classis”, meaning “department” or “classification”. Glas is a settling of accounts with Hegel. Derrida deconstructs Hegel's whole system, sounds the death knell for absolute knowledge, and traces Hegel's faith in reason – his “logocentricity”, which is equally a “phallogocentricity” – to his chauvinistic attitudes towards women and family. Hegel places women at the outskirts of rationality, defining them as the “boundary of reason”. For him, the absolute spirit is masculine, and the family nothing more than the line from father to son. Derrida answers Hegel with the poems of Jean Genet – the French novelist and poet, vagabond and criminal, dubbed by Sartre “an absolute literary genius.”

Next to the great Hegel, the glorifier of macho reason, Derrida places an obsessed sexual poet, next to the classifier the unclassifiable, next to asexual theory the poetry of the pornographic. His conclusion? Hegel's reason – which can only survive through repression – has outlived its use. The repressed, on the other hand, have returned to the fore. The feminine raises its voice. Derrida sounds the death knell for Hegel while defending the rights of the singular, unclassifiable, resistant, incommensurable, and inarticulate. “Individuum est ineffabile”, so the tradition tells us: “the individual is inexpressible”. All concepts are generalizations which completely miss the individual case. The term “person” reduces all people to the same thing. It is only his or her name which really applies to the individual. Hence the power of names. Anyone who is called by name feels caught, recognized, seen through, powerless. Magic. Hence it is forbidden to speak the name of God.

glas is at one and the same time a name and a concept.

But glas is no glass. Not anymore. It is an object that is what it is precisely because it is no longer what it was.

glas is dis-figured glass. Greetings from Heidegger.

Meanwhile Hegel is off on vacation: a glass on top of an umbrella. Thanks to Magritte.

There really is something bell-like about glas. A bell with its phallic stem at its center, protected and shielded, but also on display, shown off. Safety and shame.

Here the feminine and receptive – the chora – covers over the masculine and silences it. Apropos silence: the French word “glas” also contains echoes of a “trumpet blast”, the Latin word “classicum”. And we can see a trumpet in glas as well, with the opening face down. We cannot hear it. Just as we cannot hear the bells that used to call the faithful to prayer. We wouldn't hear this particular glas-bell, by the way, even if the clapper

could swing and the bell could ring. This bell has no opening, it is isolated. And the clapper is stiff, straight, erect. The metaphysical death knell is rendered mute.

Thanks to an erection.

As a material, glass has the characteristic that it is only permeable to our eyes. Objects behind glass can only be seen. We cannot hear them, taste them, smell them, or touch them. Glass provides an unimpeded view of the “purely visible” – of something which does not exist in the real world and can only be revealed to us through art. As such, it embodies what Benedetto Croce and Konrad Fiedler both consider to be the specific nature of the pictorial arts: the visualization of the purely visible. A field of snow, say, depicted in a painting.

It doesn't exist out there in the real world. Yet it is more than just a collection of blotches of color on a canvas. We can touch the paint, smell it. The depicted landscape on the other hand has no scent nor physicality.

It is a purely visual object. The canvas is like a pane of glass, a window in an unreal world of sight. A portal to insubstantial pictorial objects, to “purely visible forms” as Fiedler calls them.

It has been a long time since art concerned itself with the portrayal of actual things. Mimesis was yesterday's game. glass makes that crystal clear as well, recalling Duchamp's “Bottle Rack”, one of his ready-mades and a reminder that any object can be art. The line between art and non-art can be rendered invisible by a pissoir. It is only with thought, interpretation, that art becomes art. Put more pointedly: the work of art itself is invisible.

We have mentioned the insubstantiality of the purely visible. There is another angle to this dearth of substance: glass is a glass which has been robbed of its function. A wine glass whose bowl has been inverted and placed atop its stem and base. An object which has

lost its essential character, it's raison d'être as a container, a vessel. We are surrounded by such objects these days: coffee without caffeine, chocolate without sugar, virtual sex without touch. Slavoj Žižek, the critic of our contemporary Zeitgeist, has pointed this out. For him, de-substantialization is the mark of our times. We live among ersatz products. Our lives resemble an endless series of ersatz actions, and our world is a kind of make believe, simulated hyperreality. In short, we live – as Jean Baudrillard recognized – in a Disneyland for grownups. We consume, so that others may produce, and produce so that others may consume. Nor do we consume products, but rather symbols, identities, 'styles' of life. We go to the car dealer, pay for a feeling, and receive an automobile thrown in as a gift. Our world is anything but materialistic, we just don't know it. Glas is a container which contains itself. A vessel sufficient unto itself. With no connection to the outside world. Like Parmenides' ball: pure being, pure thought. A turning back. A re-flection. Pure self-reflection, pure self-awareness. The thought of thought. "Ego cogito". The irrevocable foundation of all awareness, as Descartes thought.

Would be nice.

Self-awareness comes into being where subject and object come together, where the thinking becomes the thought of, and vice versa. It's like two fingers touching each other: each touches the other and is in turn touched. The toucher and the touched meld together in a subjectless event called touching.

Self-reflection is a difficult business. Say "this statement is false", and you are speaking a falsehood if you are speaking the truth, and speaking the truth if you are saying something false. Can a barber shave himself when he only shaves those members of his village who do not shave themselves? Logicians have long banded

their heads against this poor barber's paradox. Anyone looking to shed the ballast of our intellectual history – like Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Heidegger or Derrida – will come up against similar problems. The anti-metaphysician is doomed to an endless battle with our language, the unavoidable sediment of metaphysical thought. In this context Derrida has written:

“It is useless to avoid using the terminology of metaphysics if we want to shake up metaphysics. We have no language – neither syntax nor vocabulary – that does not somehow partake of this history. We cannot write a single destructive sentence that does not comply with the form, logic and implicit requirements of the very thing we are trying to question.”

A battle against language using language itself: a battle against oneself. No easy thing. Wittgenstein saw philosophy as a working on oneself. Climb a ladder and then kick it away? It's not that easy. You have to rebuild the ship on the high seas. Board by board. Self-reflection conjures up existential as well as logical puzzles. For example when we try to develop a proper relationship with ourselves. The psychologists say you should befriend yourself. But how do you do that? Be a friend to yourself, with all that implies: listen to yourself, be honest with yourself. Support yourself. Or drink yourself under. Just as the Greek god Dionysius personifies wine, ecstasy and the unfathomable, wine itself is a symbol of the Dionysian. Yet glass as a material, with its purity and clarity, is rather symbolic of Apollo, the god of light. That makes the wine glass, as the connection between wine and glass, a symbol of the unity of the Dionysian and Apollonian, a synthesis of chaos and order, of dark urges and bright, clear reason. According to Nietzsche, the purpose of art is to achieve just this synthesis. In Wittgenstein's words: “Within all great art is a wild

animal: tamed.”

What is the relationship between this work of art and the artist? And how does glas relate to other, earlier works? It's an important question as, at the latest since Saussure, we know that meaning exists solely as part of a network of signifiers which themselves only have meaning insofar as they are differentiated from other signs. Identity implies differentiation, not the other way around. How that works, nobody knows. That said: First there was a series entitled “The Content of Vessels”. But in this case the vessels – unlike glas – are not transparent. Very often it is impossible to see what is in them, one can only guess. For instance because the sculptural containers are themselves too high, or placed too far up to let the viewer see inside. What remains is the vessel itself, the carrier. The container becomes the content, as with glas. The medium of portrayal, and the thing being portrayed. “The Content of Vessels” rings in – and this without a bell – a period of self-referentiality which the artist subsequently will not leave. His paintings vary between transparency and opacity – just like the windows in the series of the same name. They point to something else, but also to themselves. We are reminded of the birch and mountain paintings, also nothing more than compositions of color on a canvas. Color which is no color, since for years the artist only painted in shades of grey. Asceticism? Or rather self-defense? Yet when you think of what a fine feeling for color this artist has! It is a gift.

Like being.

It gives.

Colors have returned. Colored rocks in a mountain landscape. They were always there, these colors. Contained in the white, like the colors in a ray of light when they are dispersed through a prism. As if out of

nothing. A nothing which is portrayed in these mountain pictures. glass as a prism, dispersing the light of the mind. One object, a thousand thoughts and associations. Smooth glass. The wounded surface of the birch and the mountain. No trace left. Only the pure, transparent, but also fragile surface of glass. A work of art which can only be fathomed by the eye, not the mind.

Yves Bossart, nude f/m 2012