

AT THE MARGINS OF MODERNISM: THE CUT-CRYSTAL OBJECT IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

PENNY SPARKE

In his seminal text, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture and Postmodernism*, Andreas Huyssen has written that, 'Modernism constituted itself through a conscious strategy of exclusion, an anxiety of contamination by its other: an increasingly consuming and engulfing mass culture' (Huyssen 1988: vii). In this paper I want to suggest that the cut-crystal object represented one of Modernism's 'others', and that, as a result, it was, at least in its traditional form, consciously excluded from it. While cut crystal was much more closely aligned with the world of luxury goods than with the democratized world of mass culture that Huyssen is concerned with, it represented, nonetheless, a set of values which opposed those within which Modernism was rooted. It presented, consequently, the threat of contamination that is suggested here.

That threat was first sensed by English design reformers in the middle of the nineteenth century. In the first section of this paper, which will focus on the attitudes of the English proto-Modernists towards the cut-crystal object, I shall argue that, for them, the threat was that of the possible dominance of a set of aesthetic values which were embedded within the 'feminine sphere', of a set of values, that is, which were formed by the requirements of conspicuous consumption and domestic display.

Within Modernism proper, however, as I shall demonstrate in the second part of this paper, cutting crystal retained a presence albeit at the margins of the movement and with a new aesthetic agenda which rejected all the visual effects associated with its past. Where the technique of cutting crystal survived within Modernism, that is, it was used to create a new identity and ideological significance for the cut-crystal object which distanced it from its traditional antecedents. At the same time, the marginal presence of cut crystal within Modernism represented that aspect of the movement which was the least hostile to decoration and the expressive rôle of the object. As such it provided various strategies for practitioners working within Modernism to position themselves deliberately at the edge of that movement and, to some extent, to challenge it from within.

The first indication that there was, within the thoughts of those mid-nineteenth-century English design theorists who could be called 'proto-modernist', some criticism of the cut-crystal object appeared in the writings of John Ruskin. Characteristically his disapproval was couched in terms of materials and making, that is, of production rather than consumption. His main criticisms focused on the fact that cut-glass artefacts demonstrated a level of perfection and finish which, in his eyes, went against the natural imperfections resulting from the work of the hand – 'Our modern glass is exquisitely clear in its substance, true in its form, accurate in its cutting. We are proud of this. We ought to be ashamed of it' (Ruskin 1851: 168); on the essential 'dishonesty' involved in working the material in its cold, rather than its hot state; in imitating a natural substance – '. . . all cut glass is barbarous: for the cutting conceals its ductility, and confuses it with crystal' (Ruskin 1851: 394); and on the denial of the essential qualities of glass, namely, its transparency and its lightness wherein lay, for Ruskin, its 'great spiritual character' (Ruskin 1851: 2).

The vehemence of this attack was to have reverberations through the second half of the nineteenth century in England and the same criticisms were repeated over and over again by design reformers anxious to replace cut crystal by blown glass. The strength of the emotion underpinning these attacks clearly betrayed an, albeit unspoken, fear that the cut-crystal object represented a significant threat. While Ruskin gave little away in this context, Charles Eastlake, in his 1868 text *Hints on Household Taste* was a little more informative. While his critique was rooted in Ruskin's arguments he also explained that 'North of the Tweed, it is not unusual to regard "crystal" as the all-important feature of domestic feasts; and certainly most London housewives who can afford the luxury are as careful of the appearance of their decanters and wineglasses as the glittering plate which lies beside them' (Eastlake 1872: 242).

Eastlake's definition of the cut-crystal object as a highly significant object of domestic ritual and display immediately signals an alternative, socio-cultural reading of the proto-Modernists' rejection of it. While, for Ruskin, its 'perfection' was a sign of its aesthetic inadequacy, for middle-class female consumers and users it was a mark of its appropriateness as an object for social display. In addition, its ornate, weighty and brilliant characteristics, and its unchanging aesthetic redolent with references to aristocratic life in the earlier century, rendered it the perfect sign of conspicuous consumption and 'artistic uselessness'. Undoubtedly the reformers' rejection of the strong visual effects of multiple deep cuts into thick lead glass were linked with their fundamental distaste for the widespread presence of the cruets, bottles, glasses, jars, flasks and sets of decanters which were such important features of the Victorian middle-class domestic setting.

If we follow Thorstein Veblen's thesis, expounded in 1899, that goods were used in this context to suggest conspicuous leisure (as opposed to work) and therefore needed to be distanced from the idea of function as far as possible, then the cut-crystal object offered the consumer enormous possibilities. (Indeed it is no coincidence that the most glittering and sparkling cut-crystal objects of all appeared in the U.S.A. in the 1890s, examples of what was dubbed the 'American Brilliant' movement.) There was, therefore, within the proto-Modernists' rejection of cut-crystal a strong socio-cultural agenda, a desire, that is, to move away from the use of this artefact as a bourgeois social symbol. Within this, I would like to argue tentatively, that there was a gender implication as the design reformers set out to remove the object from the feminine sphere of consumption and domesticity and, by emphasizing, instead, the importance of making glass and the aesthetic rules that arise from engaging in that process in an 'honest' manner, to place it within the masculine sphere of work.

Modernist design theory was generally rooted within a productionist ethic which, in turn, suggested, a primary commitment to the masculine sphere. The preference for universal, standardized, functional, and undecorated forms can be seen to represent a shift of interest away from the rôle of the object within the context of consumption and social display. The marginality of the cut-crystal object within avant-garde Modernist European practice, and the dominance of other techniques of glass manufacture such as blowing and pressing, is consistent with this analysis, I would like to argue.

From the work of the Art Nouveau designers Emile Gallé and the Daum brothers in France, to that of Wilhelm Wagenfeld in Germany and Ladislav Sutnar in Czechoslovakia, the modern glass objects of the early century were generally worked in the hot state, whether blown or pressed. This picture of modern glass is the one most frequently presented by historians of that phenomenon and is generally seen as operating in opposition to the continued production of cut glass in traditional styles. The latter is seen to be meeting the needs of a conservative marketplace and is of little or no interest to Modernist designers and historians for whom aesthetic innovation is all.

In the next section of this paper I would like to muddy the waters of this picture to some extent, however, by showing that glass-cutting *did* exist within the world of innovative glass production, but only at the margin of things and only in situations where the technique was already established as a production possibility. It was also only in evidence within those areas of Modernist practice where a 'soft', decorative, or expressive, version of that movement was embraced.

I want to suggest, therefore, that as one of Modernism's 'others' cut-crystal retained a place within that movement but, inevitably, only a marginal one. As some historians have shown, Reyner Banham among them, architectural Modernism was not the cohesive, monolithic movement that early historians of it have led us to believe. In fact it contained the seeds of its own contradictions within it. Thus, as Banham argued back in 1960, movements such as Futurism and Expressionism had been left out because they did not fit into the linear, reductive picture of Modernism that had been documented hitherto by modernist architectural historians and apologists, Nikolaus Pevsner among them. Similarly in the history of modern design the expressive and decorative aspects of that movement have either been ignored or seen as marginal. Cut crystal presented a difficulty for historians of modern design as it evaded the categories which preoccupied them. While the process was essentially industrial, there was much hand-finishing involved as well. In addition the product was luxurious rather than democratized.

The first signs of the survival of the technique of cutting crystal into the twentieth century can be seen, predictably, in Bohemia where the process had been widespread since the eighteenth century. The first notable piece in this context was designed by the Czech architect Jan Kotera who studied under Otto Wagner in Vienna and taught architecture in Prague from 1898 onwards. His punch bowl and glasses of 1903 recalled earlier Baroque cut glass but also introduced a strong architectural quality with their large panel facet cuts. Kotera's design was highly influential as it provided a form of transitional Modernism which looked both backward and forward at the same time.

The same motivation to build a bridge between the past and the present underpinned the work of the Viennese designers, Josef Hoffmann (another of Wagner's students), and Otto Prutscher when they undertook some designs in glass in the early years of this century. Their commitment to local glass manufacturers, – Oertl and Co., Loetz, Karl Schappel, Lobmeyr, Bakelowitz and Moser and Sons among them – encouraged them to experiment with the technique of glass-cutting which was long established in some of these workshops. As a result their designs owed much to the past as well as to the present. Their commitment to decoration, albeit essentially a modern, innovative form of architectonic ornament, tied them to the traditional rôle of the cut-crystal object while they were simultaneously attempting to radicalize that medium.

The cut-glass objects produced by the members of the Wiener Werkstatte thus occupied an ambiguous relationship with early Modernism. While clearly operating within a new paradigm which linked objects previously belonging solely to the world of decorative art manufacture and domestic display to an avant-garde project

dominated by a new approach towards the world of architectural construction, vestiges of the 'old order' were still in place. The use of cut glass can therefore be seen, in this context, as strategic. It provided a ready-made language which could be modified while still retaining its conventional meanings. While the minimal cutting of a vessel's surface meant less decoration and, by implication, more emphasis upon structure, the mere act of cutting into a surface meant that decoration could not be entirely eliminated.

While one strategic use of the cut-glass object within Modernism served to sustain a link with the past another was to use it as a means of defining an alternative form of abstraction to the biomorphic, or organic, model proposed by the early Modernists. The Czech Cubist architects and designers who were active in the years immediately preceding the First World War, among them Pavel Janak, Joseph Gocar, Vlastislav Hofman, Joseph Choccol and, in the area of glass, Josef Rozsipal, sought to discover a modern language of form which took inorganic, crystalline forms as a starting point. Much of their intellectual impetus came from the writings of Wilhelm Worringer while their visual inspiration owed much to the work of the German Expressionist architects Bruno Taut and Paul Scheerbart. As for many other Modernists architecture had a central significance for them but they also worked in the areas of furniture, ceramics and glass. The last area was, in many ways, the least successful, however, as while the power of the metaphorical transference of imagery from crystal structures to architecture, furniture and ceramics provided a strong and intensely radical new aesthetic for these media, for glass, which had long emulated crystal, this was a less radical challenge. Their efforts were consequently less dramatic. While the Cubist cut glass experiment represented an important attempt to shed some of that material's inherent socio-cultural trappings, its lack of total success in this medium suggested the strength of the material's inbuilt associations and meanings as it entered the twentieth century.

This ambivalence of the cut-glass object remained a characteristic of it as it moved into the 1920s. Through the continued production of the Moser company – with the help of Hoffmann and other members of the *Werkstatte* – and through pieces produced by the French companies – Baccarat and St Louis – cut glass allied itself to the modern decorative art movement of that decade which reached its apogée at the *Exposition des Arts Decoratifs* in Paris in 1925. The large, geometric cuts of Kotera came to characterize work in this medium and a fashion for these goods developed at this time in the middle European luxury marketplace.

The relationship of what came to be called later 'Art Deco' with mainstream architectural and design Modernism as it was formulated in Germany and France in this decade was complex.

Cut glass had a foot in both camps as it carried with it a commitment to surface decoration, as well as to the social context of luxury and display, characteristics from which it could not be disassociated however closely it approached the aesthetic minimalism of mainstream Modernism. That closeness is probably best demonstrated by the work of the Czech glass designer Ludvicka Smrckova in the 1930s and of the Finnish glass designer Gunnel Nyman in the early years of the following decade. Both women stretched the possibilities of the glass-cutting technique to the limits, testing the extent to which it could be used in a non-decorative way and to which it could abandon the ideological baggage that came with it and be absorbed within the Modernist project. While Smrckova exploited its architectonic qualities, Nyman worked with its abstract sculptural possibilities.

In her design for a cut-crystal jardinière of 1936, for example, Smrckova cut into the solid wall of the vessel in such a way as to create an illusion of vertical pillars acting as the internal structure of the artefact. She used cutting, therefore, to build form rather than to create decorative effects. This is emphasized by the castellated top of the vessel. The impact of the object was, as a result, less an exploitation of the effects of reflection and refraction, so closely associated with the technique of glass-cutting hitherto, and more an illusion of architectonic form achieved by this means. Thus she succeeded in designing a cut-glass object which was, aesthetically, closely aligned to the programme of Modernism. Ironically, however, it could only achieve this through a visual trick which enabled a 'cutting away' process to achieve the effect of a 'building' or 'construction' exercise. This would be like Gerrit Rietveld carving his Red-Blue chair out of a solid block of wood. In addition, the uniqueness of, and the high level of finish on, this object, achieved by skilful hand-finishing and polishing undertaken at the Ruckl Glassworks in Nizbor, distanced it significantly from the simple, standardized and mass-produced ware produced, for instance, by Wilhelm Wagenfeld at the Lausitz glassworks at around the same time.

Gunnel Nyman, in contrast, did not use any *trompe l'oeil* effects as she limited her cutting to the perimeters of her shallow glass vessels. Finland, like Czechoslovakia, stood at the edges of mainstream Modernism. The Finns' brand of Modernism was less a mechanistic than an organic one and their references to the natural world suggested a less than wholesale rejection of the past. In addition the commitment to wood and glass reinforced the idea of a 'soft', expressive Modernism.

Nyman embraced the organic, rather than the crystalline, model of abstraction but there was a place, albeit a minimal one, for cutting within her designs for glass. This was made possible by the availability of that process in the Riihimaaki glassworks where she

began working in the 1930s. If there is a 'degree zero', to use Roland Barthes's term, of glass-cutting then this must surely be it. Because the technique was restricted to the perimeter and was not used on the surface of the vessel, Nyman's objects were arguably non-decorative. Instead the dramatic cut on the edge of these shallow bowls acted as a visual contrast to the fluidity of their shape and rim and thus served to emphasize their heaviness and their essential form.

One could argue that in her designs of the early 1940s, Nyman had finally freed the aesthetic of glass-cutting from its earlier links with 'conspicuous display' and allied it instead to the sculptural ideals of Modernism, especially as it was formulated in the Scandinavian context. In so doing cut glass had completely redefined itself having abandoned all the familiar visual signs which had earned it its earlier reputation. On one level it had taken on the simplicity of form and undifferentiation of surface that had become the characteristic of objects produced by glass worked in its hot state. On another, however, like Smrckova's designs Nyman's work continued to be hand-finished and polished and exclusive in nature. As objects for consumption these were no less luxurious than their multi-faceted antecedents, although their consumers possessed a different kind of 'cultural capital' from that of their *nouveaux riches* Victorian ancestors.

To return to my statement at the beginning of this paper and the idea of the cut-glass object being one of Modernism's 'others', I would like to reiterate this idea and suggest that it remained so even at the point at which it seemed to have been almost totally assimilated into Modernism. The fact that it could only do so by undergoing a process of 'cleansing', that is, of denying itself by striving to achieve an aesthetic effect which found its *raison d'être* within the world of standardized mass production and abstract sculpture, demonstrates the degree to which, in its traditional guise, it presented a threat of 'contamination' which had to be rigorously rejected. In order for the threat to be minimized a completely new aesthetic language had to be invented.

Finally, in terms of the history of the decorative arts I would like to offer this case-study as an example of the way in which a bridge might be constructed across to the history of design where input from cultural studies is beginning to introduce issues relating to gender, consumption and ideology in making us question some of our long-held assumptions about the meaning of things.

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