

Nettleton on Scott (2016)

Scott, Hannah. *Broken Glass, Broken World: Glass in French Culture in the Aftermath of 1870*. Legenda, 2016, pp. 151, ISBN 978-1909662872

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From the shattered windows that exploded during the bloody Commune to the polished *vitrine* displays of the Bon Marché department store, *Broken Glass, Broken World* traces France's recovery from the *année terrible* (1870–71) through the lens of one material: glass. Pairing literary analysis with material cultural history, Hannah Scott's debut monograph illustrates the ways in which French society picked up the broken pieces of its cultural identity and attempted to restore glory to the nation once again—through spectacular crystal roofs, luminous mirrors, and clinking champagne flutes.

As Scott explains, glass, like the foundation of the Third Republic itself, is alluring, dazzling, and also incredibly fragile. Once available only to the elite, the ubiquity of glass during the second half of the nineteenth century helped provide the illusion of wealth and stability while remaining an invisible but impenetrable boundary between classes and individuals. Although the author builds upon previous studies in nineteenth-century French material culture by Anne Green, Emma Bielecki, and Janell Watson, *Broken Glass, Broken World* is the first book-length literary study on the subject of glass in this era. Scott's book thus offers a fresh metonymical approach to analyzing key works of French fiction: Émile Zola's *Au Bonheur des dames* (1883), Guy de Maupassant's short stories, and J.-K. Huysmans's *À Rebours* (1884), while providing readers with archival material regarding the multidimensional importance of glass at this time.

In the spirit of Walter Benjamin, reading Scott's first chapter, "Glass and Culture in the Aftermath of the Année Terrible," is like strolling through the boutiques of a prismatic Parisian arcade illuminated by gas lamps and transparent rooftops. A comprehensive history of glass production and use in nineteenth-century France, the chapter offers dates, prices, and physical dimensions of materials from bottles to bibelots. With a microscopic zoom that could rival that of Zola, Scott also provides historical details for the mirrors, panels, and windows of public establishments such as the Paris World Fairs, dance halls, aquariums, and transatlantic ships. In addition, the chapter discusses the private sphere as depicted by artists and writers such as Berthe Morisot and Huysmans. Through newspaper clippings and eyewitness accounts by literary giants such as Edmond de Goncourt, the final sections illustrate the nineteenth-century association between shattered glass and the repressed trauma of the Franco-Prussian War and the Commune.

In contrast, as the second chapter "Shopping for Harmony: Glass, Sound and the Exhibition Effect in Zola's *Au Bonheur des dames*" reveals, the numerous mirrors, glass building materials, and glass objects in the fictional department store provide the illusion of stability and harken back to the Second Empire. As Scott notes, the novel is set in the 1860s, and offers readers a nostalgic glimpse of commodity culture before the Commune. However, the author also reveals that traces of this tragic event as well as that of the Franco-Prussian War still remain behind the gleaming displays of the *Bonheur des dames*.

Scott argues that while Zola's novel attempts to conceal such trauma, Maupassant's short stories, by contrast, use glass to reveal psychological instability and the erosion of fixed—and masculine in particular—identity. The Jules Ferry universal education reforms, which granted education to girls, the high rates of syphilis, and the low rates of birth all cracked the looking glass in which men at the time saw themselves as virile and dominant. In the next chapter on Maupassant's short stories, Scott details the impact of greenhouses on Parisian culture and modern romance in "La Serre" (1883). She also describes the author's use of glass as a narrative frame in "En Voyage" (1882).

The final chapter, "The Ideal Naturalist? Glass, Popular Culture, and Naturalism in Huysmans's *À rebours*" analyzes Huysmans's best-known novel, considered to have spawned the Decadent movement. According to Scott, Decadence is inherently paradoxical because it is dependent upon popular culture despite its claim to reject it. The author thus also approaches *À rebours* from this material cultural perspective, zeroing in on references to glass, which, in turn, she compares to other popular trends. For example, Scott links Des Esseintes's admiration of medieval stained glass windows to a Belle Époque revival of stained glass, as evidenced by Bon Marché home furnishing catalogues. The monograph's greatest strength is its interdisciplinary infusion of history and industry to shed new light upon classic literary works.

Scott's incredible historical precision within a compact monograph has tremendous benefits to the field and raises even larger questions about the relationship between the Third Republic's emphasis on glass and the social roles played by glass today, especially in the ecological arena. One wonders how the windowpanes, glass aquariums, and wine glasses of the post-industrial

era gave way to the plastic wrapping and electronic screens that now serve as barriers between ourselves, the rest of humanity, and the planet as a whole.

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