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GLASSWARE Adélaïde de Caters

GLASSWARE

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ABSTRACT

When Rigaud presented the portrait Louis XIV in Royal Costume in 1702, innumerable portraits of the king had already been painted. Louis XIV, king of France from 1643, was 64 years old. Nevertheless the Rigaud's portrait has become, not only in the most celebrated icon of the Sun King, but in the emblem of the absolutism. Since the ceremonial portrait represents an institution rather than an individual, the mystical body of the king should be visible. In the portrait of the king they do not appear allegorical figures. It is the image of the king which becomes the allegory, himself, of a new abstract system and without face, the new French state.

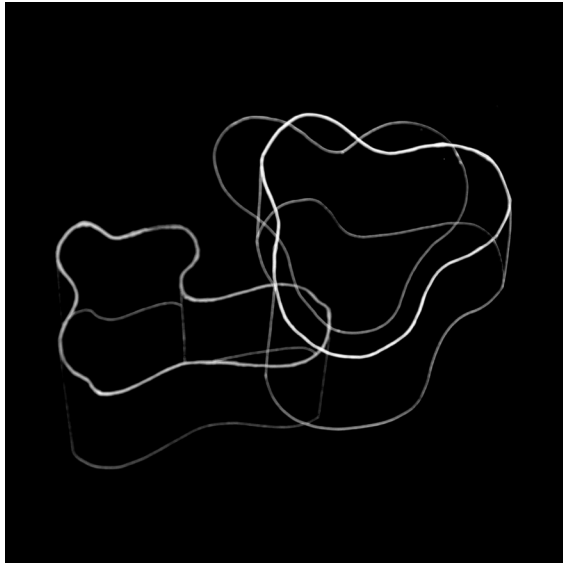


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The Savoy vase is undoubtedly the best known piece of glassware produced by Alvar *Aalto*. It is, in fact, just one of the many versions of the Aalto series. The architect and his first wife, Aino Marsio, first conceived their prototype as an entry for a design competition organized in 1936 by the Karthula-littala glassworks factory and as an exhibit in the Paris exhibition in the following year, for which Aalto had won the competition to set up the Finnish pavilion with a project entitled “The forest on the march”. The architect used one of the models of the series, which he was to call Savoy after the restaurant in Helsinki that he had been asked to design.

The unsolidified glass paste, the thickness of which ranges between 1.5 mm and almost 5 mm, at both the base and the lip, is poured over a wooden mould. Subsequently—as from 1954—the wooden mould was replaced by an iron one and from this point on the thickness became constant. It is difficult, however, to know whether the use of the metal mould instead of the wooden one affected the thickness, whether this newfound uniformity was a conscious decision taken by Aalto or whether it was the result of production demands. The catalogue *Alvar and Aino Aalto: glass designers* highlights this ambiguity. The vase exists in transparent and coloured glass. The Karthula glass factory produced it for the Paris exhibition in 1937 in a variety of versions—transparent, brown, blue, green and smoked glass. The first series had the production number 9,750 and was 140 mm in height. Production at Karthula finished at the end of the 1940s and was moved to Iittala.

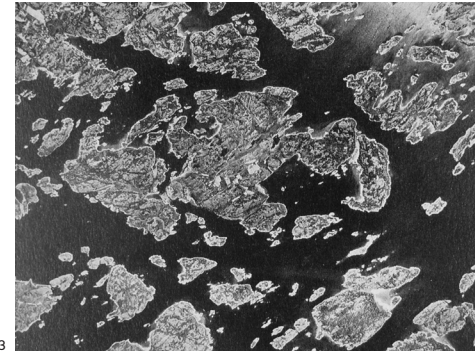
The immediate nature of working with glass means that it is difficult to recompose the creative process. The vase is too transparent, too crystalline and does not reveal the work “of its making”. Like all the other products in the Aalto series, the Savoy was based on a number of sketches, of which four have been conserved. The glass objects are drawn in pencil and crayon on tracing paper or coloured card. The panels are covered with overlapping pieces of paper which give the documents the semblance of a *collage*.



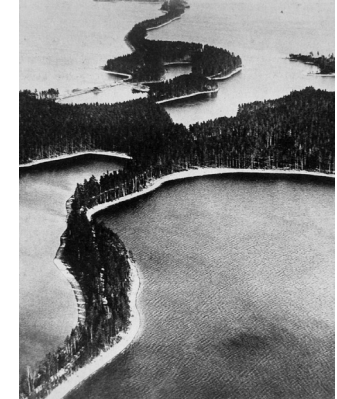
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The sketches have the strange title of *Eskimåkvinnans skinnbuxa* (the Swedish title under which the Aaltos entered their project for the competition), which means “the Eskimo woman’s leather breeches”. The name probably came from the similarity between the shape of the vase and this piece of Eskimo woman’s clothing. The wooden mould gives a much clearer image of this unexpected relationship between the vase and the breeches. The cylinder of soft wood (birch) shows the covered leg, protected by the leather. (Fig. 1)

One of the documents of the series *Eskimåkvinnans skinnbuxa* is particularly revealing of the vase’s creative process. The sketch shows that one of the lines—attributed to Aalto and not his wife—has been drawn more than once. Aino also worked on glass production, but in a different way: Alvar began to work spontaneously, directly from his imagination, whereas Aino painstakingly studied practical needs before she started to draw. When the names behind the signatures were revealed, nobody was in any doubt that it had been Alvar



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who had drawn these unconventional sketches. The curved shapes are a break with the traditional way of designing glass, in which symmetry had been the dominant feature up to that time. The free, organic lines are characteristic of Aalto’s mature phase and this glassware belongs to this period of his work and life.

The strokes describe a variety of intermingled closed loops. (Fig. 2) They are clear, clean; but the production of the object took the process to a higher plane by absorbing the different lines, freezing them and crystallizing them in a single design. From a bird’s eye view, the object seems to be a water stain, whose soft outline immediately reminds one of the sinuous, liquid perimeter of a lake. The vase has frequently been used to evoke the Finnish landscape. Numerous publications present it in conjunction with pictures of Finland: that is to say, fragments of land in the waters of lakes. (Fig. 3-4)

There is a clear and close affinity between Aalto and his native landscape, and the whole of his work is “contaminated” by the environment. Victor Brossa refers to this sensual interweaving between Aalto and his environment: “Aalto always seeks to immerse himself in his surroundings, to wallow in the ingredients in his hands, but he makes no attempt to raise himself from his material condition to an ideal plane.”¹ The people who knew and worked with Aalto confirm that he was influenced by nature, the liquid forms of Finnish nature. His second wife, Elissa, recalls how her husband used to paint: “When he sat down to paint in Muurarsalo, Alvar would sometimes say, ‘Oh, nature is so tiresome!’ But, of course, he depended on it in so many ways, the snow in the garden and so on.”² The vase can be seen as a metaphor of a Finnish lake—and the lake as a metaphor of Finland. A metaphor is a metaphorical figure that translates the meaning of one thing to another. It has, then, two components: a relationship between two bodies and a shift. Metonymy, a figure that is close to metaphor, adds movement to the representation of the image that up to that point had been stable. It slides progressively from one term to another and, in this way, reflects the environment by contamination. The metonymic metaphor is a literary technique that is at the heart of the Proustian text. One of Proust’s long sentences, according to *the glass jars of the Vivonne*, is one example among many of the chained metaphor or metonymic progression.

*Je m’amusais à regarder les carafes que les gamins mettaient dans la Vivonne pour prendre des petits poissons, et qui, remplies par la rivière, où elles sont à leur tour encloses, à la fois “contenant” aux flancs transparents comme une eau durcie, et “contenu” plongé dans un plus grand contenant de cristal liquide et courant, évoquaient l’image de la fraîcheur d’une façon plus délicieuse et plus irritante qu’elles n’eussent fait sur une table servie, en ne la montrant qu’en fuite dans cette allitération perpétuelle entre l’eau sans consistance où les mains ne pouvaient la capter et le verre sans fluidité où le palais ne pourrait en jouir.*³

In this long and complex sentence, we find comparisons between opposite elements: the fluidity of the water and its opposite state of crystallization. The relation between “container” and “content”, between form and matter, is annulled. The “content” becomes the “container”, the water becomes a glass jar. Proust intensifies the effect by interchanging terms: the solidified water, and the liquid, flowing crystal. The liquid and immobilized water solidifies and in turn becomes a container, thus inverting the terms. The topic of inversion occupies a central position in Proust’s novels: it affects the very structure of the text. The author himself highlighted this function: “Why so much room for inversion?: it is of *prime importance* from the point of view of the composition of the book.”⁴ In his essay on Proust, Roland Barthes states, “Inversion is a law. The destiny of every stroke is to change, by the implacable movement of rotation.”⁵ Little by little the characters reveal different aspects of their personalities, which often result in sexual inversion. There are no isolated categories, frontiers disappear. The various elements blend together and, at the same time, the opposites are “highlighted”. At the centre of the sentence, Proust places the technical word alliteration, a repetition, a reiteration of the same vowels. It is a literary experiment whose effect is mainly sonorous.

In his meticulous analysis of this sentence, Philippe Lejeune points out that Proust first attempts to name the effect produced while the final sentence tries to recreate the effect before naming it, and sometimes instead of naming it.⁶ The current of the river, the murmur of the water, is repeated and expressed through this word: alliteration. Lejeune highlights the liquid aspects of the word alliteration, which are not to be found in the “rocky *paracres*” (Greek equivalent of alliteration), and he makes special mention of Proust’s⁷ deliberate choice of the word. Alliteration involves repetition, of which Proust makes boundless use, by collocating the word with the adjective perpetual. By no means is the notion of coolness that is at the heart of the sentence lost: on the contrary, it is intensified and becomes at once deliciously desirable and insufferably irritating. Aalto’s vase transmits the same sensation and the same idea of a “larger container of liquid glass”, which not only contains the solidified water but is also

¹ Victor Brossa: *Aalto Hoy*, Barcelona, Sebal, 1988, p.18.

² Statement by Elissa Aalto, born Elsa Kaissa Makiniemi, in *Alvar Aalto • Ex Intimo. Alvar Aalto through the Eyes of Family, friends and Colleagues*, Helsinki, Building Information Ltd, 2001, p. 25.

³ Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu, Du côté de chez Swann (Combray)*, vol. 1, Paris, Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1987, p. 166. In English : «I would amuse myself by watching the glass jars which the

boys used to lower into the Vivonne, to catch minnows, and which, filled by the current of the stream, in which they themselves also were enclosed, at once ‘containers’ whose transparent sides were like solidified water and ‘contents’ plunged into a still larger container of liquid, flowing crystal, suggested an image of coolness more delicious and more provoking than the same water in the same jars would have done, standing upon a table laid for dinner, by showing it as in flight in a perpetual alliteration between the impalpable water, in which my hands



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contained by it. (Fig. 5) The arrest and flight that goes on forever in the sentence *The glass jars of the Vivonne* is interrupted, trapped in the jar. The direction of Proust's sentence is the same as that of the course of the Vivonne, in the depths of which the glass jars are a solid point, and it tries to trap evasive contents.

In Aalto's work, the opposite occurs. The movement of the course of the water is neutralized by the amorphous figure of the lake. The vase is located in the still waters of the lake and its outline is the same as that of the edges of the lake because the banks of earth prevent the water from overflowing. In Lukács' famous sentence, "forms delimit matter that would otherwise disperse to all corners, like air,"⁸ the element air could easily be replaced by water. The function of the perimeter is to contain, to unite, to join, and thus allow matter to condense and give rise to shape. In this case, shape is the result of both the aqueous mass within the perimeter and the pressure exerted by the wall of earth on the water. The solidified water of the vase is presented as the most eloquent manifestation of the process of crystallization of Aalto's world and it is undoubtedly its most seductive allegory.

What is to be understood by this process exactly? Literally, crystallization is the change in state of a material, from the liquid phase to the solid phase, the moment at which the dissolved body crystallizes: the shapeless takes shape. The word crystallization has a strong connotation of transparency, of purity. Matter is emptied of all organic traces. The process, then, is always

accompanied by a loss of vitality and the immobilization of movement. Seen in this way, the process of crystallization is the tendency to abstraction as it is presented and contrasted with *Einfühlung* by Worringer in his famous text *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* from 1907.⁹

In Worringer's book, the term abstraction does not mean lack of shape: it must be regarded as a "crystalline-geometric" composition, according to the terms that the author borrows from his reading of Riegl, who speaks of the crystalline beauty that "establishes the first and eternal artistic law of inanimate matter, the one that is closest to absolute beauty (material individuality)."¹⁰ Worringer describes this artistic law under the concept of Abstraction, which is thus contrasted with *Einfühlung* and he formulates a system of analysis that includes the totality of the aesthetic experience.

What does *Einfühlung* mean? The word *Einfühlung* is at the heart of the German psychological aesthetic of the first years of the twentieth century. It could be translated as "empathy" or "intuitive communication with the world", but it is usually left in the German, untranslated, because other languages do not have a term that is exactly equivalent. It is difficult to define and it has a long and complex history. At first, it was used in literature (Novalis used it on numerous occasions) to refer to a projection of the soul. It was Theodor Lipps who developed the term *Einfühlung* as a concept throughout the thousand pages of the two volumes of his *Aesthetik*, published in 1903 and 1906.¹¹

could not arrest it, and the insoluble glass, in which my palate could not enjoy it.»

⁴ The original version is: « [pourquoi tant de place pour l'inversion] capitalissime au point de vue de la composition du livre », Line from page 17 in Cahier 57 (1913-1916), (notes for *Le Temps retrouvé*) in Marcel Proust: *Matinée chez la princesse des Guermantes*, Paris, Gallimard, 1976, p. 326.

⁵ Roland Barthes: "Une idée de Recherche", in *Recherche de Proust*, Paris, Seuil, 1980, p. 38.

⁶ Philippe Lejeune: "Les carafes de la Vivonne", in *Recherche de Proust*, idem, pp. 163-196.

⁷ Ibidem, p. 184.

⁸ Georges Lukács: *L'Âme et les formes. À propos de l'essence et de la forme de l'essai*. (1911), Paris, Gallimard, p. 20.

⁹ *Abstraktion und Einfühlung es en realidad la tesis de doctorado que Worringer leyó a la edad de veintiséis años*

The two great trends, *Einfühlung* and *Abstraction* are based on a psychic predisposition, the subject's attitude to the cosmos. The attitude to *Einfühlung* assumes a relationship of trust with the world, a sense of well being that encourages life to be immobilized and which enables the subject to be in the world. *Abstraction*, on the other hand, involves anguish, anxiety, a profound state of shock that prompts subjects to distance themselves from the world, to stand to one side in an attempt to find a place to rest. *Abstraction* is the need to pluck the things from the outside world, to deprive them of their arbitrary, random nature, and to make them necessary and unchanging, free of any vital dependence and cleansed of any contamination. The aesthetic experience of *Einfühlung* "finds satisfaction in organic beauty, while *Abstraction* discovers beauty in what is inorganic, in the negation of life, in what is crystalline."¹²

The small glass object produced by Aalto is at first inscribed on the side of *abstraction* and the image of the solidified water in the depths of the watercourse reveals it to us as "a halt in the flight of appearances."¹³ The shape of the vase, however, does not allow it to be inscribed in the same way. The sinuous surface of its sides belies a geometric-crystalline composition and once again an association is made with the Finnish landscape. With different materials and on different scales, many other projects are characterized by sinuosity: the gigantic floating wall of the interior of the pavilion of the New York International Exhibition, the small wooden pavilion for the Exhibition of Finnish Agriculture in Lapua in 1935, the movement of the dark velvet curtain in the conference room of the Viipuri Library.

The sinuous surface recalls the thick morning mists that envelop the Finnish landscape: they soak it, they lie across it without ever changing it. This latter

image is closer to the second tendency—*Einfühlung*—which suggests that we melt into our surroundings, identify with them, shorten any pre-established distance between the subject and the outside world. As far as *Abstraction* is concerned, sight is the sense that enables us to maintain this distance.

In Proust's sentence, the glass jars submerged in the water are perceived exclusively by sight and, precisely for this reason, they cannot be touched or tasted, like the inedible food that Proust speaks of: "*J'avais appris qu'il n'était pas possible de la toucher, de l'embrasser, qu'on pouvait seulement causer avec elle, que pour moi elle n'était pas une femme plus que des raisins de jade, décoration incommestible des tables d'autrefois, ne sont des raisins.*"¹⁴

From the point of view of *Einfühlung*, visual perception is not very important; the subject participates better in the world through touch.

To understand the *raison d'être* of form, Worringer studied how the subject behaved in response to the cosmos. We could ask ourselves about Aalto's attitude to the outside world. At first sight it is extremely similar to *Einfühlung*: from his person emanated a *joie de vivre*, an enjoyment of life. The people who have been close to him speak of his spontaneity. But they also recall a certain nervousness: the feverish restlessness of his strokes, the trembling of his hand. Pellervo and Tarkko Oksala remember that, "Aalto would offer us youngsters vermouth, with his trembling hands [...] But they trembled for other reasons. Not drink!"¹⁵

His attitude was one of a happy and generous confidence but disturbed by a certain nervousness, even worry. These antagonistic elements can be seen in the various portraits that have been painted of Aalto. A photograph of the young Aalto, in the 1930s, reveals this component of strong will (the furrow between

en la Universidad de Berna.

¹⁰ Citado por Wilhem Worringer en *Abstraktion und Einfühlung*, Paris, Klincksieck, 1986, pág. 55.

¹¹ Theodor Lipps: *Aesthetik. Psychologie des Schönes und der Kunst*. Volume I: *Grundlegung des Aesthetik*, Hamburgo, 1903. Volume II: *Das ästhetische Betrachtung und die bildende Kunst*, Leipzig, 1906. Even before these volumes were published, Lipps' theories were well known because of his articles.

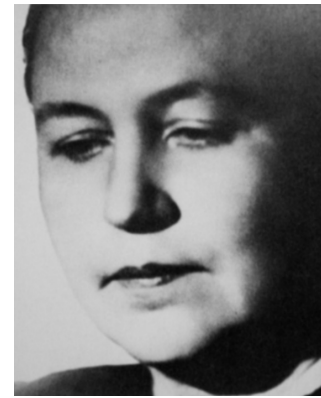
¹² Wilhem Worringer, op. cit., p. 52.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 53.

¹⁴ Marcel Proust: *À la recherche du temps perdu, Le côté de Guermantes II*, Volume II, op. cit., pp. 656-657. In English: "I had learned that she could not be touched, kissed, that she could only be spoken to, that she was not a woman for me. She was like those jade grapes that used to be the inedible decoration on the tables of yesteryear:



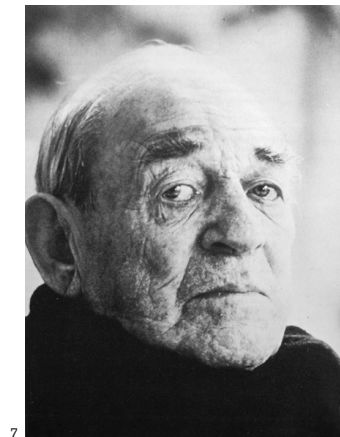
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his brows), exteriorization, projection, affirmation, authority and, also, a certain urgency, a certain impatience in his eyes. (Fig. 6) This portrait in some ways contrasts with the face of the “last Aalto”, a face full of wrinkles. (Fig. 7) It could be said that there are two types of face: those with a smooth complexion, which the events in life have just washed over, and those with wrinkles, into which life has gradually embedded as it has slipped by. In the first case, there is a certain distance from the events which suggests *Abstraction*; in the second, there is *Einfühlung*, empathy between the events and those who experience them.

We again find Aalto's pronounced taste for full shapes, rather unexpectedly, in his first wife, Aino Marsio. The somewhat heavy features of Aino and the opulence of her forms are rather too obviously similar to Aaltian forms for the similarity to be ignored.

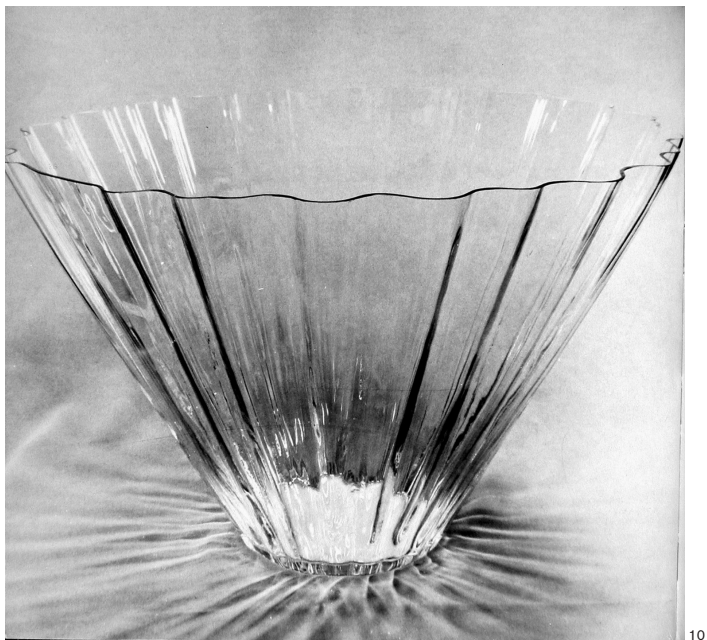
Aino's portrait, published in the glassware catalogue alongside the portrait of Aalto that we have just described, expresses a gentleness, a fullness, a patience, an inner world (the lowered gaze, protected by the arch of her brows) and at the same time, a certain firmness (the corners of her mouth). The portrait also seems to have come from the same mould as the vase. The play of shadows caused by the relief of the cheek resembles the reflections of the Savoy vase. (Fig. 8-9) We know—or can guess—the role that Aino played by the side of the impulsive Aalto. Her rather listless nature contrasted with the exuberant personality of her husband.

In 1944, some time after Aalto had given up working with glass, he designed an immense vase on the occasion of her fiftieth birthday. Only a few copies of the vase were made: as well as the gift for Aino, other pieces were blown that were put on show at such exhibitions as the one held in 1947 in the Art Centre in Helsinki. The vase was produced by Iittala and its series number was K308/54. The glass blower was probably Hugo Rask, who had previously worked on objects by Alvar Aalto in Karthula and had experimented with a mould made up of small pieces placed very close together on a wooden base. Aalto used this procedure again. He conceived the vase as a cone shape. The glass mass, still liquid, was blown in the centre of the mould and it expanded to the outside, flowing over the small segments of wood.¹⁶

they were not grapes." Marcel Proust: *Le côté de Guermantes*, op. cit., p. 413.

¹⁵ *Alvar Aalto Ex Intimo*, op.cit., p. 117.

¹⁶ See Alvar Aalto Designer, Paris, Gallimard, 2003, p. 155.



The vase, then, is both the result of this process and the opposite of it, the invisible double of this wall. The transparent glass was poured in a very thin layer and blown until it acquired an appearance of extreme delicacy and fragility, which, unlike the Savoy vase, meant that it simply could not be marketed. Only the original piece has survived. The sinuous outline, turned in on itself, of the cooled glass produces a play of dazzling and iridescent reflections which belie the immobility of the crystallization and evoke “the turbulent proximity, the illumination, the reverberating instability of the water.”¹⁷ (Fig. 10)

In the portraits, we yet again find this ambivalence between the ephemeral nature and the permanence of matter in terms of worry, nervousness and serenity, theorized by Freud under the concept of *Das Unheimliche*.

“The uncanny strangeness” is the translation that best reflects the term *Das Unheimliche*, the title of a text that Freud wrote in 1919. The Viennese psychoanalyst begins his text by reflecting on the semantic contents of the word *unheimlich*, a nominalized adjective formed by the root *Heim* (in English, home) and preceded by the suffix *un*. Freud makes a detailed inventory of the

meaning of *heimlich*, *heimisch*: “from the country”, “from here, that is part of the house, not a foreigner, familiar, domestic, dear and close, attractive.”¹⁸ These descriptions link the term with Worringer’s idea that *Einfühlung* can be defined as “feeling at home”. As he develops his topic, Freud points out that the feeling of uncanny strangeness can only exist in contrast to its antonym and can only arise out of the family environment.

*The German word ‘unheimlich’ is obviously the opposite of ‘heimlich’ [‘homely’], ‘heimisch’ [‘native’] the opposite of what is familiar; and we are tempted to conclude that what is ‘uncanny’ is frightening precisely because it is not known and familiar. Naturally not everything that is new and unfamiliar is frightening, however; the relation is not capable of inversion. We can only say that what is novel can easily become frightening but not by any means all. Something has to be added to what is novel and unfamiliar in order to make it uncanny.*¹⁹

¹⁷ Marcel Proust: *À la recherche du temps perdu, La Fugitive*, op. cit., p. 253. The original is: «le voisinage mobile, l’illumination, la miroitante instabilité du flot », *À la recherche du temps perdu, Albertine disparue*, vol. IV, op. cit., p. 224.

¹⁸ Sigmund Freud: *L’inquiétante étrangeté et autres essais*, Paris, Gallimard, 1985, pp. 216-217.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 215-216.

This psychic disposition is a feature of Hitchcock's films. *Suspicion* (1942) clearly shows this ambivalence between the familiar and the unknown. The somewhat disquieting relationship between Johnny (Cary Grant) and Lina (Joan Fontaine) reaches its maximum point of tension in the two scenes at the end of the film. The first is the scene on the cliffs: Lina looks in horror at her husband thinking that he is going to push her, while all he wants to do is embrace her. This confusion between crime and embrace transmits a feeling of "uncanny strangeness". The second scene shows Johnny taking a glass of milk to his ill wife. We follow Grant as he crosses the spacious hall and walks up the spiral staircase. His shadow seems to be entrapped behind the shadows cast by the window bars.²⁰ The glass of milk, which he holds on a silver tray, is in stark contrast to the grey shadows and the black suit. It shines so strongly, so white, that it seems to have been intensified on purpose. In fact, Hitchcock explained that he has carefully calculated the effect by concealing a tiny source of light in the milk. Lina believes, as we do, that the "illuminated glass of milk" is poisoned. Thus the milk, which up to that moment had been thoroughly familiar, thoroughly domestic, abruptly produced the opposite effect. (Fig. 11) We also find this suggestive familiarity of milk in one of Proust's sentences, in which he evokes the taste of morning coffee: "[...] nous buvions dans un bol de porcelaine blanche, crémeuse et plissée qui semblait du lait durci [...]".²¹ Proust inverts the terms in the same way as in the sentence *The glass jars of the Vivonne*. The china is described in terms of the texture of a liquid and, in just the opposite sense, the milk is described as being solidified. By interchanging these qualities, the process of crystallization is made more evident, as in the hardened tapping of Aalto's vase, when the repeated movement of its flight is arrested.



²⁰ Jean-Luc Douin proposes the image of a spider's web and recalls Hitchcock's idea of conjugal life: "Life is a prison, but the best way of locking someone up is marriage." It is also well known that Alma Hitchcock kept a very sharp eye on her husband. Comments published in *Le Monde* on 24-25 February 2008.

²¹ Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu, Le Temps retrouvé*, vol. IV, op. cit., p. 467. In English: "[...] we drank from a white china bowl, creamy and pleated, which resembled solidified milk", Marcel Proust: *À la recherche du temps perdu, Le Temps retrouvé*, op. cit., p. 238.

GLASSWARE

Adélaïde de Caters

Adélaïde de Caters was born in Brussels where she graduated in architecture at the La Cambre Institute (1993). In 2005, she defended her doctoral thesis at the Barcelona School of Architecture. It was entitled "La matière réveillée. Aalto, Eisenstein et Proust" and it was published by the Fundación Caja de Arquitectos in 2007 (FAD Prize 2009 for Thought and Criticism). She is currently continuing with her research into narrative genesis in literature, film and architecture and, as curator, is preparing an exhibition on the architectures of the licentious tale.