

Crossings Between Material and Mind: The Tugendhat House as Dream Journey

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The German Romantic Movement was born of a sense that the self was forever apart from the world, longing for the recovery of a lost unity. In this context, the Apollonian impulse can be understood as a romantic urge to overcome distance, to be one with the all through dreaming, which is nothing less than the transformation of the physical world into pure image. The waking version is material imagination. Mies Van Der Rohe’s Villa Tugendhat radically reconceptualizes the concept of house into an Apollonian journey from the physical world into a dream state of appearances.

Every house is a form of correspondence between one’s interior self and the physical world, and hence has something to tell us about material imagination. With the many givens of domestic environments, however, the material imagination does not typically manifest itself in ways that become exemplars of the concept. The architect Ludwig Mies Van Der Rohe’s Tugendhat House (Villa Tugendhat) in Brno, Czech Republic, is an exception. Commissioned by Fritz and Grete Tugendhat and completed in 1930, the house was an uncompromising experiment in living. The architect, widely considered one of the pioneers of modern architecture, was given complete control of the design of the house and every piece of furniture.

Mies radically reconceptualized the concept of house into a metaphysical journey from the physical world into a dream state of appearances. To appreciate this, some background explanation is needed from philosophy—and first from Nietzsche and Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), another German philosopher, from whose work Nietzsche draws in the excerpt below.

In an eccentric way one might say of Apollo what Schopenhauer says, in the first part of *The World as Will and Idea*, of man caught in the veil of Maya: “Even as on an immense, raging sea, assailed by huge wave crests, a man sits in a little rowboat trusting his frail craft, so, amidst the furious torments of this world, the individual sits tranquilly, supported by the

principium individuationis and relying on it.” One might say that the unshakable confidence in that principle has received its most magnificent expression in Apollo, and that Apollo himself may be regarded as the marvelous divine image of the principium individuationis, whose looks and gestures radiate the full delight, wisdom and beauty of “illusion.”¹

The Enlightenment was a triumph of reason: the belief in an existence subjected to a mechanism of laws and order, through which humankind could grasp the world as a knowable system. The individual was nothing more (or less) than a rational being, fully integrated into the new universal model created by applying scientific reason to economics, social order, political systems, and so on. In reaction to this model, the German Romantic Movement was born of a sense that the self was forever apart from the world, longing for the recovery of a lost unity. The German Romanticists hoped the productive imagination could counter the powers of reason². In this context, the Apollonian (and Dionysian) impulses can be considered as romantic urges to overcome all distance, to be one with the all, either through “drunken dancing” (Dionysian) or dreaming (Apollonian). Dreaming in this respect is the opposite of dancing; rather than dissolving estrangement through the action of the body, the dream is nothing less than the transformation of the physical world into pure image. The waking version is material imagination.

This transformation can occur through dematerialization or by distancing oneself from the physical world and/or removing a middle ground.

Visitors to the Grand Canyon often experience this absence of middle ground, describing their experience of first approaching the rim as looking at a “pure picture” or diorama. The German painter Caspar David Friedrich’s 1818 “*Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer*” (“The Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog”) also makes any middle ground absent (Figure 1). It evokes the isolated soul aching for the infinite, the romantic pathos of Schopenhauer’s and Nietzsche’s principium individuationis. The wanderer gazes (akin to Schopenhauer’s man in a rowboat) at a scene of immensity transformed into a flattened image, the clouds below having obliterated any perceptual connection between the distant landscape and the craggy outcrop on which he stands. That dark and craggy outcrop is backlit, its hard

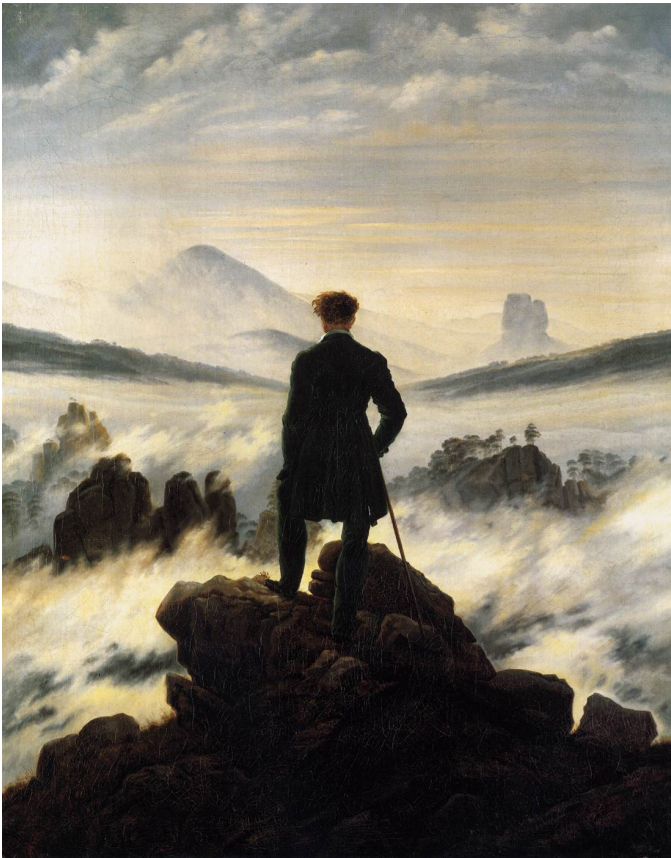


Figure 1. “Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer,” Caspar David Friedrich, 1818.

materiality intensified in contrast to the distant mountains. The wanderer is our surrogate, seeing and dreaming for us. His figure, despite being in the foreground, is nearly a silhouette, flattening and melding with the dark outcrop. He represents the Apollonian spirit, at one with “appearance” and its beauty.

The Tugendhat House, designed more than a hundred years after Friedrich’s painting and decades after German Romanticism had given way to other intellectual movements, may seem to hold little in common with “Der Wanderer.” After all, this iconic house is considered one of the great examples of high modernism, functional design, and the architectural rationalization of everyday life.

The early decades of the twentieth century were a time of experimentation for artists and architects searching to define the newly modern era in society. The influence of “The Black Square”, a 1915 painting by Russian painter Kazimir Malevich (1878–1935), can hardly be overstated. Malevich was the originator of the avant-garde Suprematist movement; his painting represented the desire for a clean break from the past, an attempt to “begin again” from nothing. Mies’ Barcelona Pavilion, contemporaneous with the Tugendhat House and designed for Germany’s exhibition at the 1929 International Exposition in Catalonia, Spain, is widely considered the architectural equivalent of a Suprematist work, built up from non-representational primal elements floating free of gravity or physical continuity.

Like any built work, the Barcelona Pavilion never escapes gravity or materiality but nevertheless shifts our attention towards its image. As historian Robin Evans observed:

By virtue of its optical properties, and its disembodied physicality, (my emphasis) the [Barcelona] pavilion always draws us away from consciousness of it as a thing, and draws us towards consciousness of the way we see it. Sensation, forced in the foreground, pushes consciousness into apperception. The pavilion is a perfect vehicle for what Kant calls aesthetic judgment, where consciousness of our own perception dominates all other forms of interest and intelligence.³

I mention this by way of introducing the Tugendhat House as a building that, like the Barcelona pavilion, is experienced not as a representation of something or symbolizing something, but rather as something metaphysical—metaphysics being defined by French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859–1941) as “the science which claims to dispense with symbols.”⁴ Dreams are like this: although they present us an image world laden with unusual even floating elements our experience is direct, not interpretive. Only upon our waking do we realize the strangeness of our dreams and attempt to understand them for their symbolic content.

The house is built into a south-facing slope along a quiet residential street overlooking the city of Brno. The plans show a lower main living level facing the garden and city and an upper level of bedrooms and entryway fronting the street. Early sketches by Mies are dichotomous; the upper level is drawn with forceful thick charcoal lines, the lower level with a few wispy strokes. The significance of this will become apparent.

A visitor first encounters the house as low, compact, even dense, planar volumes of glass and stucco set slightly back behind a steel railing, a wide, paved, stone apron connecting street to entry. Stepping onto this field of stones distills the elements in view: stucco wall, horizontal roof plane, vertical mass, curved glass element, single dull bronze cruciform column, and a framed view of the city beyond. This visual reduction has the effect of heightening the senses, making even the smallest of details pregnant with meaning. Nature is distilled and almost invisible, its vestiges now controlled by the architectural order, yet its presence is acute: a few planters of topiary are aligned on the Cartesian grid of the apron’s terrazzo. Small tufts seem to have been planted in exacting fashion in the gaps between each stone (seen in early photographs; Figure 2). The view of the cityscape beyond is framed, held at a distance, and spatially flattened. The entry is demarked by the cruciform column—a faint echo of compass rose, gnomon, and ordination—heightening consciousness of the sun’s play on the pavement and shadow cast by the horizontal entry roof. In sum, the adumbrated physical world of the exterior entry portends.

Entry is through a heavy, thick, hinged wooden slab of a door that fills a compressed gap between the semi-cylindrical glass element and the body of the house. Inside, the elements of the exterior recur, but are transformed and intensified. The exterior stone surface



Figure 2. Entry Forecourt, Tugendhat House. (Image © Rudolf de Sandalo.)

continues into the interior, each stone the same size and proportion, but the material is now a far more figured and directional travertine. With the stones placed in opposing orientation in a subtle check-board, the field sustains its Cartesian neutrality. A single, leafy plant keeps a tenuous connection to the outdoors through the visually obfuscating opal glass. A dematerialized reflective chromium



Figure 3. Interior entry hall, Tugendhat House. (Image © Rudolf de Sandalo, Muzeum města Brna.)

cruciform column marks the center of a semicircular stair that descends below (Figure 3). This twilight zone, a between state, is both more intense materially and more dematerialized, wakening the material imagination. Natural light is no longer physical, shadowed, directional, or optical, but a timeless shadowless glow, as if experienced from behind the closed lid of an eye. There is no outside or inside here; all that is replaced by a suspended state oscillating between perception and representation.

The semicircular stair repeats the earlier track of rotation from outside into the entry. The winding descent is a second act of disorientation as it carves its way into the solid ground, arriving humbly at the darkest corner of the main level—leaving the visitor without bearings. A strange and vertiginous space opens. Both the ceiling and floor are seamless and white, as if the arrow of gravity could point up as easily as down. Shadows barely register on this floating field, ordered by chromed cruciform columns that have an uncanny effect of appearing as if in tension—slender ties that prevent the floor and ceiling surfaces from floating away from each other. A closer examination of the columns gives some insight. Typically, a square column will visually enlarge when viewed diagonally. The cruciform geometry of the columns, especially with their rounded ends, creates the unusual effect of visually shrinking when viewed on the diagonal, further accentuating their slenderness and sense of tension. The mirrored finish adds to this by making the columns appear to waver, seeming almost cylindrical at certain angles.

Beyond, the space itself is monumental and billowing, delimited by precise elements. Ahead, a long compressed zone, doubly glazed, is filled with topiary. An onyx wall divides the space ahead (figure 8), and seen to the right a highly figured wooden semicircle emerges from a glowing light wall. Just beyond, an enormous 79-foot-long glazed wall presents a view of the landscape and city beyond. The viewer is disconnected from the scene by being raised above the ground (the main level is a full story above the garden level). The view presented is flattened and almost surreal—a pure image pressed up against the glass wall.

In *The World as Will and Idea*, Schopenhauer's man is serene in his rowboat, despite the surrounding storm. His Apollonian spirit turns away from the waves and wind, trusting instead in the beauty of appearance. The man's serenity is a state of mind—not a withdrawal of the powers of perception, but rather transference of the tactile and haptic into a reverie of image. It may be tempting to think of the house as the man's vessel protecting, accommodating, and inspiring its occupants to dream on—but that would be wrong. Further examination of the particulars of the house, including its materials and details developed with such syntactic precision, leaves little doubt of a greater aim for this *Gesamtkunstwerk*: for it to embody an Apollonian *Weltanschauung* (worldview).

The house doesn't quite fit any historical model for the "new architecture." Critics and historians have described the upper level of the Tugendhat House as cumbersome, unresolved, and compromised.⁵ The bedrooms in particular are regarded as ordinary in comparison

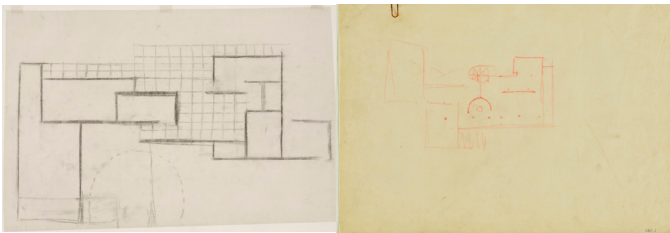


Figure 4 Plan sketches, upper (left) and lower (right) levels, Tugendhat House. (Image © 2017 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY.)

to the spectacular openness of the downstairs. This presumes a homogenous spatial conception for the house, and fails to consider that the core of Mies' architectural conception is the upper level's dense physicality transforming into the disembodied spatiality of the lower level. The upper floor is composed of hermetic capsules (the bedrooms) pushed together on the gridded stone field in marked contrast to the diaphanous spatial composition of downstairs analogous to the aforementioned early sketches of Mies, the thick charcoal marks used to think through the upper floor plan and the minimal marks for the lower level (Figure 4).

Material imagination becomes apparent here. When drawing, you imagine a different condition with thick charcoal marks than with thin, wispy ones. In other words, the thick, broad strokes of the charcoal are the trigger—in this case, to conceive and organize and represent chunks of spaces such as we find on the upper floor of the Tugendhat House. Mies used a much thinner piece of charcoal or graphite to sketch the lower-level space, its character thus in keeping with the light touch of those marks. He understood that thought

emerges through media and worked the two floors accordingly, bringing them into dialogue.

While each floor serves very different functions of the house, there are a number of elements that appear on both floors, codifying the dematerializing metaphysical transformation from the entry to living space. Compare, for example, the informal sitting areas of the naturally lit upper foyer with its lower-level equivalent, adjacent to the electrically illuminated wall. The upper chairs are of dark wicker, the lower ones of white leather; the former textured and natural, the latter ethereal and physically detached. Outside on the upper terrace, a leafy rectangular steel belvedere and semicircular seating echo the main sitting area and semicircular dining area below. These comparisons can be seen in the original photographs, in particular those by Studio Sandalo (Figure 5). The contrasts couldn't be more clear. The photo of the upper terrace is the only one with a living person: in the background, the Tugendhat children stand naked in the sun near the belvedere. Downstairs, a stone sculpture of a woman's torso occupies the analogous space, the main living room sitting area in front of the onyx wall. Original Sandalo photos reveal the downstairs bereft of a single living plant. Supplanted by cut flowers, the living has been replaced by the image of life.

Quietly, these pairings define the relationship between inside and outside, not as a question of living in nature but of the nature of living. Both transition zones between outside/nature and the inner house evoke the natural and invite comparison. Mies had spoken of the transition from out to in as different from in to out. The house treats the former as memory and the latter as imagination. The upstairs area strips away, leaving the residual substance of nature—the sun's glowing light, textured travertine, the single plant, and the

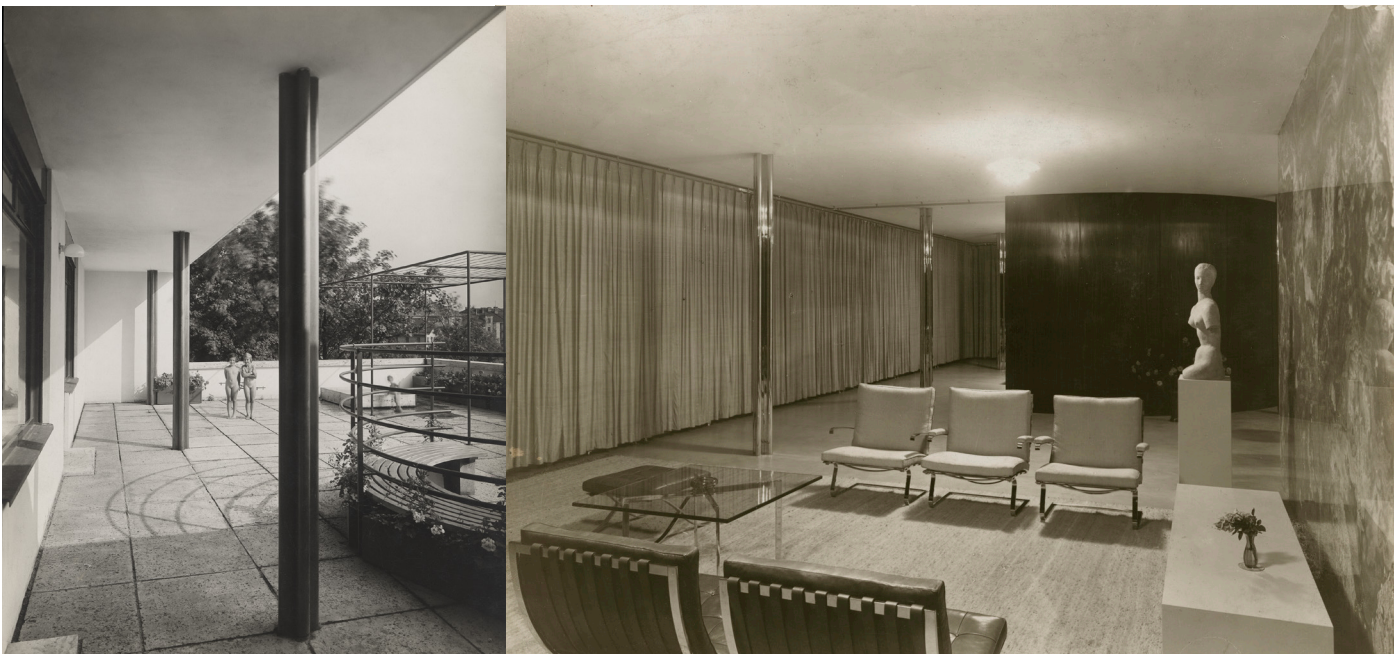


Figure 5 Upper terrace (left) and lower living room (right) Tugendhat House, (Image (left) © Rudolf de Sandalo, Muzeum města Brna & (right) © Rudolf de Sandalo, Museum of Modern Art, New York Digital.)



Figure 6 Conservatory, onyx wall and living room, Tugendhat House. (Image © Rudolf de Sandalo, Museum of Modern Art, New York Digital.)

passing body's inscription into the carved stairway. Downstairs, the long eastern conservatory puts nature under glass. Here the outside is not lost; rather, it collapses against the topiary of the winter garden. Nature appears semi-fossilized, almost marble like—an image (Figure 6).

The conservatory wall mediates between a vital and ossified nature. Directly adjacent, the iconic onyx wall, which divides the study from the living area, marks the completion of the transition of nature from the substantive to the symbolic. The chairs of the living room, too, are significant: three green “Barcelona” chairs face three white “Tugendhat” chairs, as if to symbolize the individuality underlying a lively conversation.

Architecture derives much of its meaning from the norms by which it operates. A “normal” living room is furnished for conversation, and (in temperate climates) is traditionally associated with archetypal fire, the hearth, and dwelling. To suggest a dream state within the norms of everyday reality requires something akin to a metaphor—the displacement of the perceived condition with an imagined one. By virtue of its placement and appearance, the onyx wall of the Tugendhat House—one of the most discussed stone elements in all of architecture—triggers associations with fire, not so much the image of fire but the metaphysical significance of fire. Standing

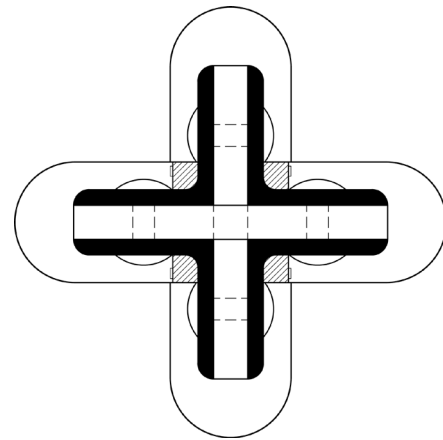


Figure 7 Cruciform column plan, Tugendhat House. (Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY.)

where the fireplace would have been, the onyx wall's swirling mineralized patterns evokes a similar state of half dreaming or reverie resulting from the tranquil contemplation of actual flames or mesmerizing patterns.

The Swiss-German artist Paul Klee (1879–1940) observed:

In the restaurant run by my uncle, the fattest man in Switzerland, were tables topped with polished marble slabs



Figure 8 Mies Van Der Rohe, Tugendhat House. (Image © Fritz Tugendhat, Daniela Hammer-Tugendhat Archive, Vienna.)

whose surface displayed a maze of petrified layers. In this labyrinth of lines one could pick out human grotesques and capture them with a pencil. I was fascinated with this pastime. My bent for the bizarre announced itself.⁶

Despite its material intensity and density—it is stone, after all—the onyx’s polished and reflective surface in the Tugendhat House assumes a diaphanous lightness and immateriality, altering its appearance when seen from various vantage points and in different light conditions (like the Klee tables). And even more phantasmagoric is the fact that the stone transmits light:

Mies himself supervised its sawing and the assembling of the slabs in order to make the most of its grain. However, when it turned out afterwards that the stone was transparent and some parts on the back shone read as soon as the sunset illuminated its front, he, too was surprised.⁷

Such paradoxical properties make the onyx wall otherworldly. It eludes stability, yet presents a timeless character. Its materiality is both intensely present and completely absent when seen only as image (figure 6). In German, two very different words are used for the English word “wall”: Wand, typically used for the wall of a room or building, with spanning and vertical construction that is gravitationally neutral, framed or clad or woven, and neither weight-bearing nor weighty; and Mauer, as in the Berlin Wall or the Great Wall of China, a heavy weight-bearing wall of massive construction made of stones or brick or some other similar material. The two columns immediately adjacent to the onyx wall are the Mauer, bearing the loads and liberating the onyx to be the weightless Wand, which

is further freed from any framework or tectonics, floating almost miraculously in its fabric-like thinness, as if Medusa had changed the living into stone.

Throughout the house, the coupling of a hardened and residual physical nature with an expansive, weightless, and dematerialized spatial field charges the whole with mystery, defying casual normalcy. The two conditions offer no resolution, but instead manage to catalyze a sense of quietude and mental stimulation—as attested to by the owners in active rebuttals to critics questioning the “livability” of the house.

But the way it is, the large room—precisely because of its rhythm—has a very particular tranquility, which a closed room could never have. ... We love living in this house, so much so that we find it difficult to go away and are relieved to leave cramped rooms behind us and return to our large, soothing spaces.⁸

The wanderer and sailor in the storm dwell in immensity, which for the romantic spirit is the feeling of unity with the world. Likewise, the house has stripped away the comfortable “middle,” leaving only extremes.

From a physiological perspective, vision is inherently rational, tending to make sense of things by fitting them into what we know. Removing the middle effects sight, inhibiting rational vision and thus opening imaginative vision—the tendency to see “into” things. The tactile dimension similarly dispenses with the “normal middle” of materiality, leaving immaterial conditions such as the white

linoleum flooring and the cruciform columns or incredibly rich ones that include the special woods used throughout the house. Downstairs, in particular, the semicircular dining area made of Makassar Ebony appears unearthly seen against the white linoleum floor. Great care was taken to avoid patterns or symmetry from the veneers (such as bookmatching); otherwise, the wall would have had a pictorial appearance. Instead, the wall is reduced to the purely elemental, and like fire, gives rise to material imagination.

The cruciform column is the most emblematic element of the Tugendhat House, not by appearance but in its cross-section, which amounts to a diagram of the house's spatial and meta-physical order (Figure 7). We find a hardened physicality in the four interior iron Ls riveted together to form the cruciform, which shrink in contrast to the chrome covers. These blossom outward from the ironwork, finding form in their geometrically idealized profile, distinct from the tough squarish iron Ls, and thereby reiterating the Mauer/Wand distinction and the transformation of physical nature into pure appearance.

Several details of the long glass wall, arguably the house's centerpiece, make clear the degree to which both architect and client were aware that its transparency was not intended to make a physical connection to nature, but rather to create a kind of splendid isolation. As Grete Tugendhat wrote:

The connection between interior and exterior space is indeed important but the large interior space is completely closed and reposing in itself, with the glazed wall working as a perfect limitation. Otherwise I, too, would find that one would have a feeling of unrest and insecurity.⁹

A blurry photograph of the great window expanse, with a silhouetted contemplative Mies, reprises the wanderer from Caspar David Friedrich's painting (figure 8). The white linoleum floor, like the sea of fog, contrasts with and accentuates the disconnection from the scene of the city of Brno beyond. The raised platform of the house, whose cliff-like edge drops off at the window expanse, effectively removes the middle ground, transforming the view of Brno into an image. A small detail, or rather its absence, heightens the Apollonian sense of being-in-the-world. The railing, which appears in photos taken six months later, is missing, leaving us to wonder: Did Mies intend for the absolute condition of the railing-less opening? After all, he had argued with the Tugendhats themselves against window awnings, which as a compromise were designed to vanish completely behind the exterior fascia.

Despite the contrast between the interior and exterior, the scene is one of unification, a metaphysical construction made of the displaced and dreamlike floating pieces of rich physicality fused with the image of nature. The transparent plane isn't an agent of continuity; rather, it acts more as a membrane against which the exterior has projected itself, and which the imaginative vision of the interior, in turn, has appropriated for its own contemplation. This apotheosis of the Apollonian has a profound influence

on the inner self: expanding it, pulling it out from its usual corporeal "home" to dwell disembodied in the interior, comparable to dreaming, distinguished by its "out-of-body" character.

The earliest prehistoric drawings are found in almost inaccessible recesses of caves. There is little or no evidence that these caves served any other function at the time of these drawings, a finding that supports the idea that these drawings were part of sacred practice of connecting with the world through image.¹⁰ To draw a line between these cave art caves and the interior of the Tugendhat House may be dubious, but if we see both as models of the world, models of reconciliation with our own inner disembodied spirit, parallels begin to emerge. The images of animals and the hunt on a cave wall and the scene of Brno pressed on the glass at Tugendhat collapse distance—between human and animal worlds in the former, and between self and modernity in the latter. In both, images serve as interpretive screens on which their liberated signs and symbols are available to make sense of reality. The flatness of images loosens their content; not only can they be experienced, but they can also be "read" as we read a text. Such images have the power to hover simultaneously as appearance and idea. They can enter our mind as words do and our mind enters them as only dreams can.

ENDNOTES

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