

Gerd Hammer

Centre for Comparative Studies, School of Arts and Humanities, University of Lisbon

Paul Scheerbart: Cooling down emotions on foreign planets

The German author Paul Scheerbart is part of the few uncommon, even often described as whimsical, artists at the turn of the 20th century. And amongst these eccentric figures he for sure stands at an exceptional position. Without ever being known by a larger audience, he is somehow present amongst the intellectuals and the artists of his time – in fact in very different areas.

And yet he is no writer's writer, he has not so much inspired other authors (rather he has inspired architecture), but his eccentric, bizarre utopian or fantastic short stories are known by many of his contemporaries at the beginning of the German expressionism. Among his best known admirers we find Walter Benjamin, the publisher Ernst Rowohlt, Walter Mehring or the German anarchist Erich Mühsam.

His biography¹, which Scheerbart once wrote by himself, depicts a sad, unhappy childhood. Paul Carl Wilhelm Scheerbart was born on 8th of January 1863 in Danzig as the eleventh child of the family. His mother died when he was four years old, and soon after, in 1873, his father also deceased.

Initially, Scheerbart weights on becoming a missionary and wants to study theology, but still at grammar school he starts an intensive reading of philosophical literature and finally decides for philosophy and art history. Early in his life he starts writing art reviews for several journals. In 1887 he moves to Berlin, and there his proper life as a free-lance writer begins. But the designation free-lance writer somehow fails to characterize him well, being too limited. He called himself an

¹ <https://scheerbart.de/bio/> (02.12.2017).

“Astro-Humourist” or a “Cosmos-Comedian”. He writes short-stories, novels, poems, plays, draws and designs architecture projects and nowadays we would call him a multi-talent or an all-rounder.

But his career proceeded in a not very successful or even very happy path. However, during his lifetime he saw 30 of his books published, many of them by important publishing houses. Only twelve of his theatre plays were performed, however without any large response².

Scheerbart wrote anti-literature. He mixed the genres, parodied exhausted literary forms, changed abruptly between the tone of cosmic expectations and an everyday speech which ended every kind of pathos in a humorous way. He showed complete disinterest in consequently-developed plots or profound psychological characters, and he was absolutely not willing to abstain even of only one of his ideas in favor of the narrative plan.³

Amongst his projects there was a planned but not realized journal “Lies with Background”, and in 1892, together with Otto Erich Hartleben and Erich Mühsam, he founds the Verlag deutscher Phantasten [Publishing house of German fantasists], which lasted only for a short while. There he publishes “Yes.....What.....We wouldn’t all like to have!”, and that also was the end of this enterprise.

In 1900, Scheerbart married Ana Sommer, a widow of a post office clerk. The “Love and Pout Letters”, published in 1921, show the difficult relation of the couple. The poet Scheerbart constantly asks in his letters and notes his “Nuse-Puse”, his “dear good bear”, for forgiveness, when he spent too much time in pubs and taverns or needs money for a few more beers.

All through his life, Scheerbart was accompanied by alcohol and lack of money. In 1906, friends of him founded a Scheerbart-fund, so he at least could pay his rent, and in 1914, this idea was renewed to save him from hunger⁴.

² See Klaus Schöffing’s epilogue in Paul Scheerbart, *Liebes- und Schmollbriefe* (Frankfurt am Main: Inselverlag, 1983), p. 83f.

³ Wolfgang Pehnt, *Paul Scheerbart, ein Dichter der Architekten*, Berni Lörwald, Michael M. Schardt (Hg.), *Über Paul Scheerbart I* (Paderborn, 1992), p. 69.

⁴ http://www.thokra.de/html/scheerbart_biografie.html (02.12.2017). “Im Jahre 1906 gründeten Philipp Spandow und Alfred Walter Heymel einen Scheerbart-Fonds,

Paul Scheerbart, this amiable artist, pacifist, and bohemian anarchist died in 1915. If he starved, as Walter Mehring believes, in protest and despair for the atrocities of the First World War has yet to be proven. His close friend Erich Mühsam described it in his *Unpolitische Erinnerungen* [*Non-political Memories*] – and Scheerbart would have liked it:

During the war Paul Scheerbart died; all his life he ate not enough and drank too much. [...] But the time will arise which will learn again Scheerbart's laughter, this huge and relieving laughter, that has his origins in the wide and happy universe where there is no poverty and no wars. That will be the time, which will, as well, print again and read again and enjoy with serious amusement Scheerbart's books.⁵

Part of his more successful ideas – or better his only really successful idea – is the glass architecture. The architecture historian Wolfgang Pehnt once called Scheerbart the writer for architects. He wanted to build a universe palace, Weltallpalast, with costs he had calculated amounting to approximately 20-billion Goldmark. German architects, among them the important expressionist architect Bruno Taut, picked up the idea with excitement:

They fabricated the building bricks that Scheerbart had dreamt of. There were the glass bricks without color and the colored ones. Out of this dream material the young architects built the first glass construction and then the great glass tower for the Werkbund-Ausstellung in Cologne in 1914. The glass brick was the biggest practical success ever for a writer. But the people who thought Scheerbart was crazy, were the majority. And this majority did not care about the young

aus dem er monatlich 20 Mark für die Miete erhielt. 1914 gründeten Freunde von Scheerbart erneut einen Fonds, um ihm finanziell unter die Arme zu greifen.” (In 1906, Philipp Spandow and Alfred Walter Heymel founded a Scheerbart fund, from which he received 20 marks a month for the rent. In 1914, friends of Scheerbart again founded a fund to help him financially.)

⁵ <http://scheerbart.de/bio/erich-muhsam> (Erich Mühsam, *Unpolitische Erinnerungen*). (02.12.2017)

architecture neither about glass bricks. Scheerbart had to argue very strong with them. He said about himself: ‘I became a humorist out of anger, not amiability.’⁶

Scheerbart achieved a certain kind of fame because of his work on one of his favorite projects, the perpetual motion machine. In 1908, Scheerbart submitted the patent for his invention at the patent office in Berlin, but in spite of his intense efforts, the “perpeh” as he affectionately called his invention, would simply not work. However, in 1910, Scheerbart published his work under the title “Das Perpetuum Mobile. Die Geschichte einer Erfindung” [“The perpetual motion machine. The history of an invention”]. And Scheerbart had no doubts: “All paradises can’t compare with earthly life after the discovery of the Perpeh”⁷.

Scheerbart’s time, the *Fin de Siècle*, was also the era of engineering and by that time, the belief in progress for society or even humanity through technical development was still in good order. And above all, this enthusiasm for new technologies, Scheerbart’s at times effervescent technical fantasies, urged for the universe, for foreign planets. The earth was much too small for him. But is that enough to call his books science-fiction?

If literature gets classified only according to the described objects inside the texts, then a considerable part of Scheerbart’s fantasies clearly belongs to science-fiction, to utopian fantastic literature, as we would have still called it some years ago, because the plot is set in the Cosmos; the Cosmos is Scheerbart’s very own literary domain, even more than the Orient and other sufficient remote and sufficient exotic regions of this earth.⁸

In Scheerbart’s short-stories and novels, human beings hardly ever appear, and when they do, they appear as negative examples, such as in the novel *Lesabéndio*, first published in 1913⁹.

⁶ Pehnt, *Paul Scheerbart*, p. 68.

⁷ <https://scheerbart.de/bucher-sortierseite/das-perpetuum-mobile/10/> (02.12.2017).

⁸ Franz Rottensteiner, “Der Dichter des ‘anderen’: Paul Scheerbart als Science-Fiction-Autor”, Michael M. Schardt, Hiltrud Steffen (ed.), *Über Paul Scheerbart 2: Analysen, Aufsätze, Forschungsbeiträge* (Hamburg: Igel Verlag, 1996), p. 259.

⁹ Paul Scheerbart, *Lesabéndio: An Asteroid Novel*, Illustrations by Alfred Kubin. Translated, with an introduction, by Christina Svendsen (Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 2012).

I shall concentrate my paper now on this novel, but what I am going to say about this book applies to the other asteroid- and moon-novels by this author, as well. *Lesabéndio* is about the plan and the construction of an enormous tower on an asteroid called Pallas. The planned building should tower above the star and help reveal the secret of life.

The plot of this asteroid novel, as it is called in the subtitle, is mostly about the dispute between modernists and the followers of the tradition on Pallas. But these disputes and conflicts are solved in a peaceful way and have nothing to do with disputes on earth. Right at the beginning of the novel the main character, Lesabéndio, reads a story about a voyage to the planet earth, written by one of the inhabitants from Pallas:

I was horrified by the form of alimentation of the terrestrials; these ingest food through the mouth until their body swells. And the most terrible was that they killed other creatures, chopped and hacked them and put them in parts or balls in their mouth; [...] The terrestrials are of very different intelligence, the leading part had the creatures, which hardly dragged themselves forward on two stilt legs and called themselves humans. These humans originally were predators – that means: creatures who attacked with claws and teeth other creatures, killed them and ate them. Based on these predator instincts the most detestable habits arose. The humans not only annihilated the less intelligent creatures on the earth's crust, they even annihilated each other because of alimentation.¹⁰

The wars of mankind, all sorts of militarism, had enraged Scheerbart so much that the inhabitants of the moon in his novel *Die grosse Revolution* [*The big revolution*] from 1902 finally give up on the observation of the earth and start to turn their gaze to the universe.

On Pallas we do not find any kind of war, and food is absorbed through the pores. Physical violence is unknown. Finally, Scheerbart mentions the earth only in passing. For him it is enough to set his fantasy free, his literary playground is the universe. However, Scheerbart's science-fiction does not want to convince only as technological utopia, but most of all as aesthetic utopia. Of great importance for him are colors and light, transparent buildings, telescopes. For example, in

¹⁰ Scheerbart, *Lesabéndio*, p. 11.

his Moon-Novel from 1902 the inhabitants signal their willingness to communicate by turning red. And on Pallas everything is colored and constantly changing as well. In contrast to this spectacle made out of colors and light the technical descriptions of the constructions seem to be less important. And even if the plot is set on foreign planets, mother earth and zeitgeist are always present. The material for the steel bars that the Pallasians need for the construction of the tower is called Kaddimohn-steel, and the building reminds the Eiffel Tower in Paris, built from 1887-1889 out of steel and iron for the World Fair and as an observatory. The tower became a symbol of technical progress in the beginning of the 20th century. And the construction of the Eiffel Tower was accompanied by “Artists Protests”, as well. Among the opposers we find Guy de Maupassant or Charles Gounod. Though Scheerbart somehow seems to be inspired by this debate between engineering and art, *Lesabéndio* has his very own atmosphere, created by these strange creatures that arise from his fantasy. Franz Rottensteiner, the well-known Austrian publisher and science-fiction critic (he translated Philip K. Dick and Stanislaw Lem among others) described Scheerbart’s world in this way:

Scheerbart’s universe possesses a multitude of ensouled creatures which are characterized through an infinity of mostly bizarre and whimsical forms, through unusual color and permanent metamorphoses; [...] In Scheerbart’s world there are no utopian hopes of salvation, on the contrary, his cosmos seems to be extremely without any purpose, it only exists to constantly please the eye of the spectator with new surprises, changes of form and color, a kaleidoscope of colored pictures.¹¹

Life on Pallas continues smoothly. Hectic rush is unknown to the inhabitants. The big emotions don’t have any important role or are reinterpreted. And this applies to the literary forms, as well. Scheerbart always reevaluates the small and seemingly unimportant, and this attitude he shares with writers of his time like Franz Kafka or Robert

¹¹ Rottensteiner, “Der Dichter des ‘anderen’: Paul Scheerbart als Science-Fiction-Autor”, p. 260.

Walser. Wagner's total work of art or the renewal of the novel is not in his interest, monumental in Scheerbart's books is only fantasy and the subsequent arising constructions. But nevertheless we have to mention the indirect historical relations, as well, that Anne Krauter observed in her dissertation, between Scheerbart's light art and Albert Speer's Cathedral of Light¹².

If we adopt, pursuant to René Descartes, the six basic emotions, i.e. love, hate, astonishment, desire, joy and sorrow, we can find most of these emotions in Scheerbart's world, as well. But they somehow seem to be controlled, moderated. Not by irony, for example, as we can see in the works of Thomas Mann or by theater pedagogy in Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre. Emotions in the etymological meaning as agitated or shocked cannot be found. That is: no oaths of love, dramatic scenes, intrigues, hate or envy. Inexistent are also eroticism and sexuality. Scheerbart called himself "antierotic", and in this way distanced himself not only from his friends Richard Dehmel and Stanislaw Przybyszewski, which "treated the gender relations of the human beings like poetical to be glorified issues", which "for him seemed to be immensely funny" (Mühsam). His anti-eroticism was directed against the overabundance of, or at least the strong accent on, eroticism and sexuality which we can find overall in the arts of the turn of the century.

Birth and death on Pallas take place in a complete undramatically way. The Pallasians are born in a nut which gets cracked with hammer strokes. And this is also the word for birth, therefore it is not the new born, but the freshly cracked Pallasian. By the way: nuts can be found abundantly in Pallas and be cracked when necessary, for example when there is need for workers for the construction of the big tower. As for the rest, Scheerbart never makes the effort to explain where the nuts come from. The idea itself is of greater importance than logically coherent explanations. And so he narrates all his stories with a twinkle in the eye.

The education of the new inhabitants is quite fast, as well, taking only a few days until the little ones reach normal height, know the

¹² Anne Krauter, *Die Schriften Paul Scheerbarts und der Lichtdom von Albert Speer – "Das große Licht"*, 1997 (http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/volltextserver/4903/1/Teil_1.pdf) (02.12.2017).

language and start to talk about the foreign worlds where they have lived before. And they are called after their first words, as is the case of the young Pallasian whose birth the reader is allowed to assist, who is named Bombimba (p. 42).

Even death is not an earthly drama. There is no pain, and there is no great sorrow and distress. Because death on Pallas does not mean the end but rather a transformation.

The Pallasian dies only when his body has completely dried so that one can nearly see through it. By that time the dying shows the desire to be absorbed by a living; the living absorbs the dying through his pores.¹³

And when the old Peka dies, he chooses his opponent Lesabéndio to absorb him. And that way his good qualities are taken on by Lesabéndio and the enmity, or rather the competition, is solved in an evolutionary process.

Scheerbart's small and colorful extraterrestrial worlds obtain their especial quality, their atmosphere through an abstinence from psychology. The deepness of the soul is of no interest for the inhabitants of his universe. Walter Benjamin writes this explicitly in his book review of Lesabéndio:

The true interpretation understands the very surface of things, their purest sensuality; interpretation is the overcoming of the sense. In this way Scheerbart designed the existence of his asteroid and the life on it. There are kept away all situations that might seduce to confused inwardness, to interpretation and explanation; that he has been able to write the book in the so established framework is a testimonial of his spirit... (p. 618)

The complications of love, the problems of science and the arts, even the perspective of the moral are completely switched-off to be able to unfold the utopian idea of a spiritual celestial world out of the purest not-ambiguous aspects of technology. (p. 619)¹⁴

¹³ Scheerbart, *Lesabéndio*, p. 33.

¹⁴ Walter Benjamin, "Paul Scheerbart: Lesabéndio", *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band II.2 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980), pp. 618-620.

Finally, in Pallas, technology succeeds. Scheerbart reveals himself closely connected to the faith in progress of his time. The old Peka expresses this fact so: “The utility construction replaced the art building.” (p. 102). Nevertheless, it is not a revolutionary but an evolutionary process. Because art is absorbed by technology like Peka, upon the time of his death, by Lesabéndio. And once again Scheerbart opts for a peaceful solution. In Scheerbart’s writing, and so I shall finish my paper, big emotions are, in principle, cooled down in three ways: through the humorous form of his novels and short-stories, by easing conflicts through a conversion to a technology based on aesthetic purposes, and through a general avoidance of violence in all of its aspects. We can see it in all of his works and in all of his inspirations: more important than the final result are humor and fantasy, the moment, the here and now, even on foreign planets. Scheerbart does not present any great ideas, he rather shows a humorous inspired aesthetic attitude towards life.