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THE ORIGIN IS SUBLIME!

ABSTRACT: The essay deals with the intersections between the representations of the origin and the expressive forms of the sublime, showing their aesthetic relevance in contemporary literature and art, and in the development of the traditional concept of 'representation' towards the 'non-mimetic' and the 'unrepresentable'.

KEYWORDS: Origin; Sublime; Myth; Contemporary Art; Contemporary Literature; Aesthetics; Comparative Literature.

Where the Origin meets the Sublime

The great question about the *origin* has developed an impressive imaginative potential in cultures around the world, and inspired marvelous stories both individual and collective.[1] The origin is at the root of specific archetypes or mythologems and, in general, of the very essence of mythical thought, inasmuch as religions and mythologies have always been required to formulate an answer on the birth of the universe, of the divine, and of human beings (Cassirer 1965; Eliade 2013; Hoyle 1993).

Scientists have explained the origin of energy, of space-time, and in general of the universe with the cosmological theory of the Big Bang that described how the universe has expanded from its initial state, whose very beginning is nevertheless impossible to identify (Hawking 1988, Baggott 2015, Tonelli 2019).

The Bible opens with three verses that juxtapose God's volition, and the act of creating light, with the mention of the abyss and the unknown: "In the beginning God created heaven and earth. Now the earth was formless and deserted and darkness covered the abyss and the spirit of God hovered over the waters. God said, 'Let there be light!' And there was light" (Gen 1, 1-3). In Sanskrit culture, according to the *Ṛgveda* (1400 B.D.), the origin corresponds to the deepest darkness: "Darkness existed, hidden by darkness, at the beginning. All this was a signless ocean" (*Ṛgveda* 10:129; Brereton-Jamison 2020: 247). The Greeks placed "first of all" Chaos (Hesiod, *Theogony*, v. 116; Most 2006, 13; cfr. Ibid., xxxi), which was conceived not so much as "disorder", but as

[1] This article stems from a research project on Origins that led to the ESCL International Conference *Narrations of Origins in World Culture and the Arts* held at the University of Torino in May 2021. For the other outcomes and critical perspectives on the topic, see Lombardi 2022a; Lombardi 2022c (on which this article is based). On the myths of origin, see also, among others, Sproul 1979; Leeming 1994; Gleiser 1997; Brockleman 1999; Schipper 2021 etc.

"Chasm" (*ibid.*), from the verbs *chaino* or *chasko* which mean "to open wide", "to swallow" (Liddell-Scott, s.v. *chasko*: 1981), and therefore is to be conceived as "a gap" (Most 2006, xxix), a sort of "black hole of the universe" (Guidorizzi 2009, 1168). Chaos, in this sense and in general, is "a limiting case: the extreme of disorder, where all attributes assignable to order vanish. It is disorder made absolute" (Meisel 2016, 31).

It is on these premises that the origin meets the sublime. Pseudo-Longinus quotes the Book of Genesis in his treatise *On the Sublime*:

> [...] the lawgiver of the Jews, no ordinary man, having formed a worthy conception of divine power and given expression to it, writes at the very beginning of his Laws: "God said" – what? 'let there be light,' and there was light, 'Let there be earth,' and there was earth (*On the Sublime*, 9, 9; Rhys Roberts 1995, 191).

The Biblical narration of the beginnings, in fact, perfectly fits the characteristics and the effects of the Longinian sublime: if "the sublime consists in a consummate excellence and distinction of language" (*On the Sublime*, 1, 3, 4 – 1, 4, 2; Rhys Roberts 1995, 163), its power stems from the capacity "to transport" the human beings "out of themselves"; accordingly, "what inspires wonder, with its power of amazing us, always prevails over what is merely convincing and pleasing" (*On the Sublime*, 1, 4, 1 sgg.; *ibid.*). The sublime generates not only wonder, but also the irresistible desire to recreate it: through the sublime "we may be enabled to develop our natures to some degree of grandeur" (*meghethous*, *On the Sublime*, 1, 1, 14; Rhys Roberts 1995, 161); "the true sublime", moreover, "naturally elevates us: uplifted with a sense of proud exaltation, we are filled with joy and pride, as if we ourselves had produced the very thing we heard" (*On the Sublime*, 7, 2, 1 – 7, 3,1; Rhys Roberts 1995, 179).

Both the sublime and the wonder confer the human beings with dignity, making them "spectators and eager competitors" in the games of Nature and life:

> [Nature] therefore from the first breathed into our heart an unconquerable passion for whatever is great and more divine than ourselves. Thus the whole universe is not enough to satisfy the speculative intelligence of human thought: our ideas often pass beyond the limits that confine us (*On the Sublime*, XXXV; Rhys Roberts 1995, 274-277).

Over the centuries, the sublime has further extended the field of application and expression identified and analyzed by Pseudo-Longinus, starting from the translation and commentary by Nicolas Boileau and from the works, between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Doran 2015), by Kant, Burke, Schelling, Leopardi, who developed the comparison between beauty and the sublime, and connected the latter to a wider spectrum of emotions, such as terror.

In the twentieth century, the reinterpretations by Lyotard (1991) and Jameson (1994), and the critical perspectives on the relationships of the sublime with the tragic (Boitani 1989; Brady 2013), and with the comic and the grotesque (Vischer 1837; Mondiano 1987), have been applied to polymorphics aesthetics of contemporary culture (Fusillo 2009; 2021). The relationship between the sublime and the tragic, for instance,

is generally linked to a multiple spectrum of events that are irreducible to human reason and logic, but connected to a philosophical conception of the tragic as an experience of disorder (Fornaro 2009).

In its forms of expression, the contemporary sublime also emphasizes the impossibility of representing reality according to the regularity of nature, as Lyotard argues with its concept of the *disaster of the aisthesis*:

> The beauty of a form is an enigma to the understanding. But for one to be able to be moved by the "presence" to the senses of a "thing" that the senses cannot present in the shape of forms is a mystery inadmissible in good logic. Every description of the sentiment of the sublime converges, however, on this aberration. The regularities of nature break down, perception fails to maintain its field, and it is admitted since Longinus that this disaster of the aisthesis can occasion the most intense aesthetic emotions. A sentiment of the aesthetics at the limit, the sublime spasm is felt, like the good fortune of taste, on the occasion of a sentiment. But this is from the fact that the latter exceeds sensibility and ravishes it to the point of loss, instead of echoing the sweet consent by which it is offered to the beautiful (Lyotard 1999, 240).

On the one hand, the origin stands out between the primeval chaos and the separation that preludes order, between the darkness and the light, between the silence and the first uttered word, and between the unknown and the theological or scientific tension to clarify it. On the other, the sublime expresses the greatness, the extreme, the ineffable. They meet in the attempt to represent the first portion of space and time with the languages of science, literature and art, producing images full of creative energy, such as Michelangelo Buonarroti's frescos on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, where the effect of creation is incessantly being shown and renewed in its sublimity (Duffy 1995), connecting both the painter and the spectator who, like God and Adam, almost touch one another.

The ineffable condition of the origin, immense in its mystery, is sublime starting from the Longinian definition, but even more in the contemporary culture, which is characterized, as Lyotard himself underscored, by the "'presence' to the senses of a 'thing' that the senses cannot present in the shape of forms", and of "a mystery inadmissible in good logic"; an *aberration* towards which any effect of the sublime converges, provoking the most intense aesthetic emotion (see *supra*).

What I would like to show in this article, therefore, is that the intersections between the representations of the origin and the expressive forms of the sublime have great aesthetic relevance in contemporary literature and art, especially in the development of the traditional concept of 'representation' towards the 'non-mimetic' and the 'unrepresentable'.[2]

[2] For the contemporary debate on the relationship between the classical notion of mimesis and the postmodern claims for the unrepresentability of reality, see Greene 1994; Halliwell 2002; Hutcheon 2002.

Morphology of the Unrepresentable

In books XII and XIII of his *Confessions*, Saint Augustine concentrated his exegetical meditation on the Book of Genesis, and on the origins of Heaven and Earth in their "beautiful appearance" (*speciem pulchram*, XII, II, 9; Hammond 2016, 260 ff.). Facing God's "sublimity" (*altitudini tuae*, XII, II, 1), the "heart is smitten" (*multa satagit cor meum*, XII, I, 1), and the human being shows "the paucity" of his understanding (*egestas humanae intelligentiae*, XII, I, 3-4) and the "lowliness" of his tongue (*humilitas linguae meae*, XII, II, 1).

Focusing on the first verses of the Book of Genesis ("above the abyss was darkness", XII, III, 14; Gn 1:2), the philosopher addressed his own questions to God:

> What is darkness if not the absence of light? For if light had existed, where would it have been if not on high, conspicuous and shining forth? So when light did not yet exist, surely the presence of darkness was simply the absence of light? So darkness was above it because there was no light above it; just as when there is no sound, there is silence. And what does silence in a place consist of, if not the absence of sound from that place? Surely you, Lord, have taught this soul which makes confession to you? — surely you, Lord, have taught me that before you gave shape and distinct identity to that formless material, there was nothing — no color, no shape, no body, no spirit? Even so it was not completely nothing: there was a certain shapelessness, without definite form. (XII, III, 1-15; Hammond 2016, 262-263)[3]

Augustine confessed his inability to grasp with the mind, to understand (*intelligere* is the verb used in XII, VI, 3 and 4), as well as to imagine the condition that preceded the creation:

> I for my part understood it to be something that took countless different forms – in other words, I did not actually understand it at all. My mind revolved around gross and terrifying shapes in a disarranged state, but they did have shape. I spoke of "shapelessness", but it was not really shapeless. Instead it had the kind of shape that – if it appeared – my feelings would revolt from as incongruous and bizarre, something to throw human weakness into turmoil. (XII, VI, 5-12; Hammond 2016, 266-267)[4]

Augustine's crucial question is later reformulated – amongst other ancient, and biblical, theories and figurations of the origin – in Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1674), the

[3] "['tenebrae erant super abyssum'] quid aliud quam lucis absentia? ubi enim lux esset, si esset, nisi super esset eminendo et inlustrando? ubi ergo lux nondum erat, quid erat adesse tenebras nisi abesse lucem? super itaque erant tenebrae quia super lux aberat, sicut sonus ubi non est, silentium est. et quid est esse ibi silentium nisi sonum ibi non esse? nonne tu, domine, docuisti hanc animam quae tibi confitetur? nonne tu, domine, docuisti me quod, priusquam istam informem materiam formares atque distingueres, non erat aliquid, non color, non figura, non corpus, non spiritus? non tamen omnino nihil: erat quaedam informitas sine ulla specie".

[4] "eam cum speciebus innumeris et variis cogitabam et ideo non eam cogitabam. foedas et horribiles formas perturbatis ordinibus volvebat animus, sed formas tamen, et informe appellabam non quod careret forma, sed quod talem haberet ut, si appareret, insolitum et incongruum aversaretur sensus meus et conturbaretur infirmitas hominis'.

sublime poem par excellence (Fusillo 2009, 27), through the voice of Satan who wonders: "who saw / When this creation was? Rememberst thou / Thy making, while the maker gave thee being?", V, 856-8; Fowler 2007, 336).

Even "Doctrine" (V, 856) cannot provide an answer, but only asserts that:

> We know no time when we were not as now;
> Know none before us, self-begot, self-raised
> By our own quickening power, when fatal course
> Had circled his full orb, the birth mature
> Of this our native heaven, ethereal sons. (V, 859-863, *ibidem*)

Milton emphasized the symbology of chaos, from which the Heavens and Earth rose out (I, 10; Fowler 2007, 58): in the poem it coincides with Hell, where Satan finds himself after his rebellion against God and the temptation of Adam and Eve ("hell [...] a place of utter darkness, fitliest called chaos", *The Argument*, *ibid*., 55-56). And it is the space in which Satan's mind dwells, inhabited by horror and remorse (I, 248 ff.; *ibid*., 76). But chaos also becomes the symbolic expression of the power of Hell, which guides Satan to the reconquest of heaven (Book II, *The Argument*, ibid., 109-110; cf. II, 233, *ibid*., 120). Belonging to the infernal landscape, "eldest Night / and Chaos" are defined as "ancestors of Nature" (II, 894-895, ibid., p. 153 ff.; cf. II, 970, *ibid*., 970). Chaos, therefore, is another metaphor to represent Satan's conscience, and opposite to that created by God, in an ironic sense (Ferreccio 2006; Meisel 2016, 158).

Between the seventeenth and the nineteenth century the symbolic representations of the origin – not only in literature, but also in the arts, from Bruegel to Hogarth's street cacophony *The Enraged Musician* (1641), up to the oratorio *Die Schöpfung* by Haydn (*The Creation*, 1798) – reflect the challenge of capturing the energy and the expressive density of the beginnings, in the coexistence of chaos and *kósmos*, or in the passage of one into the other (Meisel 2016, 18 ff). The sublime especially is shown there where the imagination tries to reach the first moment of light and beauty, and even the state before, arising it from the impossible challenge of communicating the incommunicable, and of representing the unrepresentable (Fusillo 2009, 24-28; Boitani 1989, 8).

From this point of view, another example is provided by Melville's *Moby Dick*. Ishmael begins his adventure by sea encountering what is most unrepresentable: chaos. Before embarking for Nantucket, at the Tabard Inn he sees a large painting, an oil blackened by smoke, poorly lit, the meaning of which is almost impossible to understand except by referring to the concept of *chaos bewitched*, on which inexplicable masses and shadows converge:

> On one side hung a very large oil-painting so thoroughly be-smoked, and every way defaced, that in the unequal cross-lights by which you viewed it, it was only by diligent study and a series of systematic visits to it, and careful inquiry of the neighbors, that you could any way arrive at an understanding of its purpose. Such unaccountable masses of shades and shadows, that at first you almost thought some ambitious young artist, in the time of the New England hags, *had endeavored to delineate chaos bewitched.* [...] (Melville 1964, 35-36)

The origin (and chaos as the pre-existent stuff) prefigures the journey that Ishmael is about to undertake, aimed at challenging the depths of nature, and of the destiny, that will emerge in enigmatic and allegorical forms along the white silhouette of the hunted whale, in its elusiveness and violence. But it is by examining the painting more deeply that Ismael discovers a "portentous black mass" that suggests to him "a sort of indefinite, half-attained, unimaginable sublimity". The image becomes polysemic, insofar as it may be interpreted through the juxtaposition of different symbols:

> But what most puzzled and confounded you was a long, limber, portentous black mass of something hovering in the center of the picture over three blue, dim, perpendicular lines floating in a nameless yeast. A boggy, soggy, squitchy picture truly, enough to drive a nervous man distracted. Yet was there *a sort of indefinite, half-attained, unimaginable sublimity* about it that fairly froze you to it, till you involuntarily took an oath with yourself to find out what that marvelous painting meant. Ever and anon a bright, but, alas, deceptive idea would dart you through.—It's the Black Sea in a midnight gale.—It's the unnatural combat of the four primal elements.—It's a blasted heath.—It's a Hyperborean winter scene.—It's the breaking-up of the icebound stream of Time. But at last all these fancies yielded to that one portentous something in the picture's midst. That once found out, and all the rest were plain (*Ibidem*).

Through this *ekphrasis*, Melville recovered the Romantic conception of the sublime (that formulated firstly by Burke) by opening up to the contemporary notion of it, such as the American Sublime. "How does one stand / To behold the sublime [...]?", are the first lines of the homonymous poem by Wallace Stevens, in which the poet wonders not only how it is possible to face the overwhelming intensity of the sublime, but also how and where we should be placed to contemplate it (Stevens 1997, 106).

Wallace Stevens' question evokes Anselm Kiefer's painting, *The Orders of the Night* (*Die berühmten Orden der Nacht*, 1997), a large acrylic and emulsion on linen in which a man is lying on a dry, wasted earth, staring at the mystery of the stars and the universe.

The Origin is Now!

In 1948 Barnett Newman published *The Sublime is now!*, an essay that has been deemed a key for interpreting his pictorial work, and contemporary art in general (Crowther 1985). The relationship between the concept of the sublime and the representations of the origin is only implicitly argued in this essay (and in other texts such as *The First Man was an Artist* and *The Ideographic Picture*), but Newman's main thesis is that the sublime tends to stem from the *shapelessness* of the primeval chaos, or from the instantaneousness of the origin in its absolute manifestation. His theory of art is based on the idea that art history has developed from the "fall from the metaphysical grace attained by primitive art", as Crowther explained (Crowther 1985, 53). In contemporary art, in particular, "man's desire in the arts to express his relation to the Absolute" (Newman 1948, 51) does not rely on the classical tradition of ideal beauty, but coincides with the artist's desire to destroy form ("where indeed, form can be formless", Crowther 1985,

53). Significantly, therefore, between 1950 and 1952 Newman represented the progenitors, *Adam* and *Eve*, through a saturation of color resulting in an absolute chromatic abstraction. According to similar representative modalities the artist also created *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1950-1051, img. 1), an imposing canvas (2.42 m × 5.41 m) developed in the monochromatism of red, and aimed at evoking a direct and instinctive reaction from the observers.

Even before Newman, the Russian avant-garde artist and art theorist Kazimir Severinovič Malevič created a correspondence between the *shapelessness* of the origin and the effect of the sublime. "It is from zero, in zero, that the real movement of being begins"; "I transformed myself into the zero of form and emerged from nowhere to creation" – Malevič claimed in his writings (*From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism*, 1915; *The Non-Objective World: The Manifesto of Suprematism*, 1926; cfr. Schjeldahl 2003; see also *Suprematism*, the catalog of the exhibition held at the Deutsche Guggenheim in Berlin in 2003: Drutt 2003; Lodder 2018). The different paintings titled *Black Square* (1914-15; 1930 or 1932 etc.) expressed this search, by subtraction and in terms of absolute purity, for a sort of *zero point of painting*.

More recently, many essays, studies and painting exhibitions have been dedicated to the sublime, such as the exhibition that was held at the London Tate Modern in 2002, entitled *American Sublime. Landscape Painting in the United States 1820-1880,* carried out with a project that started in 2008 (see Wilton and Barringer 2003). The exposition hosted works, among others, by Fredric Edwin Church, the American painter of the Hudson River School known for his paintings of large natural landscapes approached as absolute events, dominated by fiery red colors in which dawns and sunsets are devoid of living beings, similar to scenes taken from a primeval world not yet inhabited or civilized: *Cotopaxi* (1862); *Twilight in the Wilderness* (1860); *The Iceberg* (1891); and *Niagara* (1857), a painting of more subdued tones but equally shocking, a true icon of the American Sublime (McKinsey 1985; Wilmerding 2018).

In order to understand the continuity between the American Sublime and its contemporary forms of representation, such as the Abstract Sublime (Rosenblum 1961), it is worth considering the exhibition, also digital, organized by the Mnuchin Gallery in New York in 2020 and 2021, entitled *Church & Rothko: Sublime*. The works of Fredric Edwin Church and Mark Rothko, although distant in time and style, were combined to highlight the intense expressive strength capable of producing an extraordinary emotional impact through a similar chromatic effect (for example *Marine Sunset* by Church, dated 1882, and *Browns and Blacks in Reds* by Rothko, dated 1957, juxtaposed on a wall of a room; cf. Smith 2020).

These interpretations of the sublime, especially in their reaching for the origin, find renewed impulse through the form of the installation as conceived as a performance of an artistic event and, specifically, of the original event. An example may be provided by the five large canvases and the permanent installation by Anselm Kiefer at Pirelli HangarBicocca in Milan, *The Seven Heavenly Palaces* (2004-2015, img. 4), whose impressive sublimity – from the structure to the symbology – has been widely renown by

critics (Stables 2017; Corriero, D. Eccher, F. Vercellone 2002). The seven (biblical number of totality) towers rise from a height of fourteen to nineteen meters, reinforced by books and wedges of lead (a metal which is a symbol of melancholy), and are endowed with evocative names of the ancient civilizations by which they were inspired: *Sefiroth*, *Melancholia*, *Ararat*, *Linee di campo magnetico*, *JH & WH*, the *Torre dei Quadri Cadenti*. The Kabbalah and the myths of the biblical book of Genesis, the ancient Hebrew treatise *Sefer Hechalot* and the "Book of Palaces / Sanctuaries" (IV-V century. B.C.) blend as the sources of inspiration for this great syncretistic and original re-creation of a renewed and wonderful sense of the origin.

Contemporary literature can also be considered a field of special elaborations of the origin that become archetypal and extremely impressive, especially when emphasized by the different expressions of the sublime.[5] In a previous article, *Joyce e l'archetipo del* chaosmos *nella narrativa contemporanea* (Lombardi 2022b), I tried to highlight how the Joycian notion of *chaosmos*, hapax coined in *Finnegans Wake* (118.21; Joyce 1975) blending chaos and *kósmos*, can be considered an important symbolic pattern capable of describing and interpreting the existence and the world through the tension between structures of stability and order that guarantee a correspondence with reality, and the centrifugal and chaotic forces that increase the level of complexity and unpredictability (Eco 1982 and 1989; cf. Baudrillard 1981). By improving what Blumenberg defined the *readability of the world* (Blumemberg 2022 [1979]), the Joycean concept of *chaosmos* can thus contribute to interpreting the contemporary narrative, and especially the 'opera mondo' and the maximalist novel in their sublime yearning (Moretti 1994; Ercolino 2014).

According to a similar principle of symbolic coexistence between order and chaos, and between alpha and omega, we may also read tales such Borges' *Aleph* (1945), and find them to be new archetypes. The Aleph is like a small telescope on cosmic space and infinity, which opens up to a an all-encompassing, revealing, and frightening vision, even on a chronological level. In short, what derives from it evokes once again the sublime according to its ancient and modern meanings already explored: the infinitely overwhelming in nature and in the cosmos, and what no one has ever contemplated nor, consequently, represented: the origin of the universe. Although the Aleph itself would be unrepresentable, it becomes the archetype of a *whole* (including both space and time) to which Borges offers synthetic concreteness.

Starting from the sixties, with the more systematic explorations in space up to the Moon landing, the infinite universe paradoxically became more human-sized, from a scientific and imaginative point of view. The possibility of touching this hitherto inaccessible space, which manifested itself only to the eye as an incandescent sphere plunged into the darkness and the stars, offered new metamorphoses of symbolic representations, stories and archetypes which connected literature, figurative arts, and

[5] The vocation of literature to the sublime has been widely explored, but the relationship with the concept of origin much less. Cfr. Carboni 1993.

cinema. Between 1965 and 1967 Calvino published *Le Cosmicomiche* and *Ti con zero*. In the first collection, Qfwfq cancels the temporal and spatial distances to make its history coincide with the life of the universe. In 1968, Kubrick's movie *2001: A Space Odyssey* showed its sublimity starting from the long opening sequence, within a darkness only interrupted by the rising of the Moon and the Earth, accompanied by the music of Ligeti *Atmosphères* that fades into the harmony of Strauss's symphonic poem *Also sprach Zarathustra* (Stelzer 2022, img. 3).

In these narrations the time of the origin and the time of the end seem to coincide in a single point, at least in a theoretical and imaginative form, such as in the Borgesian *Aleph*, or to proceed in the opposite direction. In *Babel Tower* (1996) by Antonia S. Byatt, and in her Joycian 'mise en abyme' *Babbletower*, the manuscript by Jude Mason that concludes the novel, for instance, a retrospective and dystopian look connects the present, past and future, the history and the rubble.

The origin, therefore, proves to be indissoluble from the contemporary image of life and the cosmos, its key to interpretation. Even as an emblem of the unknown in its tension to the unrepresentable, or precisely for this reason, we obsessively try to figure it out in order to broaden the spectrum of representation of the real beyond space and time, outside or before both. Contemporary culture also recovers the darker meaning of chaos as a hellish abyss that precedes the cosmic order, to become the symbol of the dark origin of evil in history and human existence. This is the meaning of chaos, for example, in Primo Levi's novel *La tregua*. Chaos is where the unanswered question regarding Auschwitz resounds: *Warum?* And it is the symbolic perversion of the Universe in the form of History on which the writer's reflections in *Il brutto potere* are based.

Conclusions

From the analysis carried out so far, it appears that, although the notion of the origin refers to an event that is in itself impossible to represent, cultural history shows the need for its conceptualization and representation through evoking images.

As underscored by Mircea Eliade in *The Quest. History and Meaning in Religion* speaking of a "nostalgia for the primordial, for the original, universal matrix":

> Matter, Substance, represents the *absolute origin*, the beginnings of all things: Cosmo, Life, Mind. There is an irresistible desire to pierce time and space deeply to reach the limits and the beginnings of the visible Universe, and especially to disclose the ultimate ground of substance and the germinal state of living Matter (Eliade 2013 [1969], 49)

And as Edward Said also remarked, "Beginning is not only a kind of action, it is also a frame of mind, a kind of work, an attitude, a consciousness. It is pragmatic [...]. And it is theoretic" (Said 1985, XV).

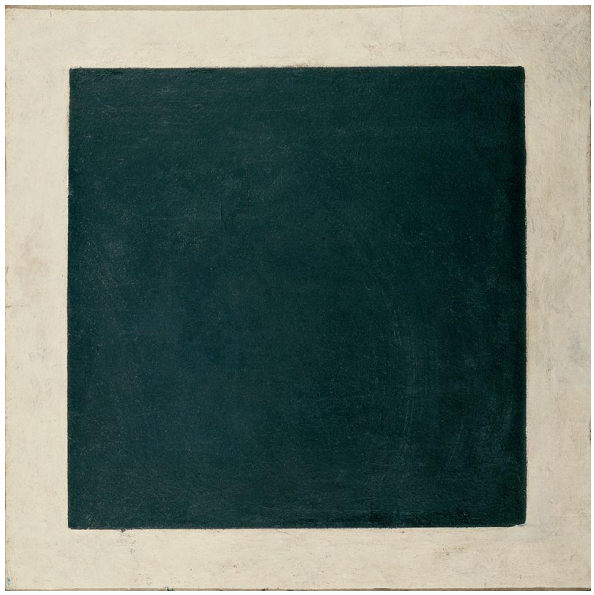
The origin may be considered as a symbolic space never over-saturated with signs, full of potential creative and re-recreative energy and, as a fundamental anthropological

structure (Durand 1963), it is an archetype capable of forging other more specific archetypes in turn. After all, the need to find new archetypes, as Sergio Zatti has shown, characterizes the substance of literary expression (Zatti 2018, 45).

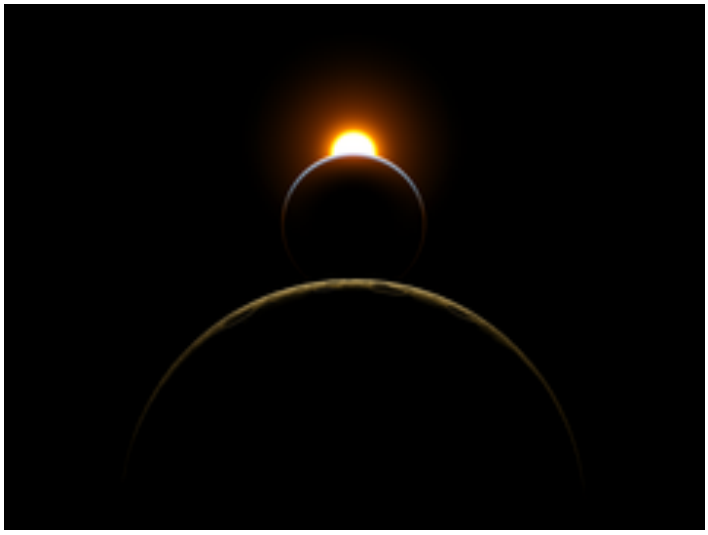
As concerns the contemporary cultural imaginary that stems from the origin, I proposed the – oxymoronic – concept of *morphology of the unrepresentable*, by emphasizing the functions, the use and the effects of the languages of the sublime, from the *grandeur* to the *ineffable*.

In the postmodern, the sublime belongs to innumerable forms of artistic expression ranging from *tragic extremism* to *camp*, and characterises many spectacular and ironic aspects of kitsch and trash, as underscored – among others – by Žižek (2013). James Elkins, in *Against the Sublime*, showed the abuse of the notion of the sublime as a trans-historical category, and in the interpretation of nearly all the contemporary artistic and cultural phenomena (Elkins 2010). Nevertheless, the overexposure of the sublime in contemporary culture can be specified and adequately re-dimensioned by trying to circumscribe the field. In the re-creations of the beginnings, in particular, as I tried to demonstrate, the sublime finds one of the most fruitful fields of application, deserving further critical attention.

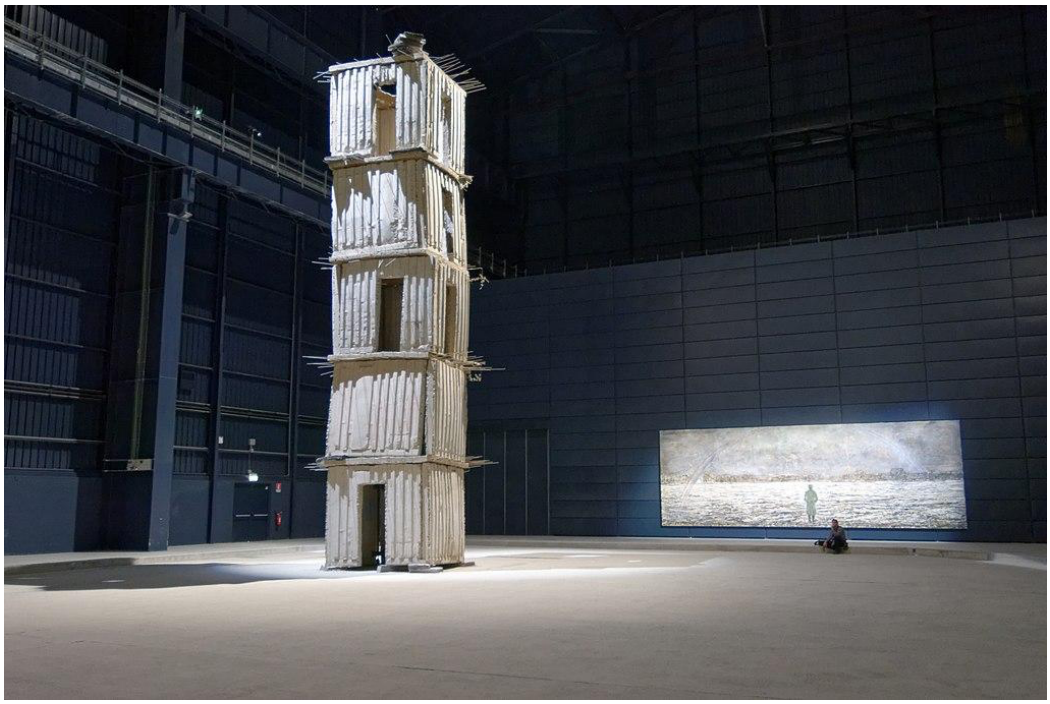
1. Barnett Newman, *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, 1950-1951
(The Museum of Modern Art, New York – Wikipedia commons)



2. Kazimir Severinovič Malevič, *Black Square*, 1930 or 1932 (Hermitage, St. Petersburg – Wikipedia commons)



3. Sunrise seen from space. Illustration inspired by the opening scene of Stanley Kubricks film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Wikipedia commons)



4. Anselm Kiefer, *The Seven Heavenly Palaces*
(Pirelli HangarBicocca, Milan – Wikipedia commons)

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