

Elvio Manganaro
Language and abstraction

Abstract

There is a point where training of the architect and education of the child meet. Criticism has never questioned such a point that keeps Froebel and Bauhaus together: the contribution of these two moments to the construction of what we call language of modernity is clearly evident. The purpose of this essay is understanding how the pedagogic and progressive function of such convergence, which has its primary base point in geometric abstraction but its purpose in design and educational action, has finally removed the spiritual component inherent in abstraction. In other words, it is as though the linguistic combinatorial process, or the insistence on the configurational possibilities of a language reduced to few elementary signs whose sense lies in the world, had sterilized the mystical power of abstraction. Such considerations crossbreed with the issue of language understood in a speculative, figurative, verbal, as well as social, broad sense and justify the need to address language in an issue devoted to the relationships between school and architecture.

Keywords

Language — Abstraction — Combinatorial process — Mystic

«A human being speaks to human beings about the superhuman – the language of art»
 Vasilij Kandinskij

«There was a time when language ceased to connect words according to simple relationships and became a tool so delicate that its use was forbidden to most men»
 Maurice Blanchot

1.

Language has been conspicuously absent in these years of renewed interest in the school, and this in spite of the role it had in the meditations of Father Milani and Tullio De Mauro (Roghi 2017). Yet, as soon as we hear about two Egyptian children who put together a sort of Arab vocabulary for their teacher Antonella in an elementary school in Milan¹, we find ourselves again at the precise point where we had left *Lettera a una professoressa* and *Dieci tesi per l'educazione linguistica democratica* – in other words, where «the limits of my language mean the limits of my world».

This, however, is Wittgenstein (1964, § 5.6) and perhaps it is unsurprising that a quote from the Austrian philosopher appears in the first edition of De Mauro's *Storia linguistica dell'Italia unita*, which is an attempt at exploring the relations among income, school attendance and language in Italy. A famous quote, drawn from the *Philosophical Investigations*, in which extension of language and life coincide and language emerges as a constantly evolving process, not unlike a city where ancient layers exist alongside new conurbations.

Such coincidence between language and life is also at the origin of the classist use Father Lorenzo Milani made of language. Dealing with language means dealing with politics and, whereas the purpose of Barbiana was, on

one side, protecting a rural culture that progress was gradually erasing, on the other side Father Milani conducted a fierce battle against the «masters of language», against the words that «imply a previous culture» (Milani 1967, p. 195) and become weapons wielded by the so-called *Pierini del dottore* to constantly prevail over thousands of *Gianni*.

2.

I have little to add about this social, progressive and transitive dimension of language; that said, I miss a time when working on language in order to change the balance of power still appeared as a viable option.

Instead, I would rather go back to Wittgenstein who, as everybody knows, was himself a teacher in an elementary school for a time. However, the Wittgenstein I would like to go back to is not so much the one of the *Investigations* and of language games, the unwitting champion of Anglo-American analytic philosophy and precursor of the postmodern; it is rather the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*, which is, by the way, the only text, along with a Dictionary for elementary schools, the author sent to the press during his life. In the *Tractatus*, the effort to superpose the logical structure of language to reality in ways that Wittgenstein considered as definitive does nothing but describe the limits of the linguistic structure itself, thereby showing precisely what escapes that armature, what language cannot *say* and in front of which propositional logic can only be silenced, in other words what Wittgenstein calls the Mystical.

It is Wittgenstein «the mystic, the aesthete, the Stalinist of spirituality», as described by Alain Badiou (2018), we are interested in here. All of Wittgenstein's construction underlies an aesthetic, *hyper-aesthetic* approach. In this, aesthetics and ethics are not different. Aesthetics and ethics come true in the act, which does not belong to language but is the only way through which a value shows itself – the sense of the world is unsayable, and can only be shown.

However, going down this road, language on one side and aesthetics and ethics on the other are bound not to meet. Having confined aesthetics and ethics to the transcendental level actually implies their exclusion from the realm of language.

This is how it is, at least in the *Tractatus*.

Yet, if we take the case of tautology, which – according to Wittgenstein – is a meaningless form of propositional logic, the authenticity of which cannot be ascertained although it belongs to the world, well, precisely in this extreme form, language shows itself in reflexive terms, and in so doing inevitably slides towards aesthetic realms.

In other words, if language can *say* reality, it cannot say itself – it can only show itself, and it is only when language reflects itself by showing its own structure that it accesses those «artistic paradigms of pure showing» (Ibidem, p. 22), which is also access to mystical life, as «ethics and aesthetics are one» (Wittgenstein 1975, § 6.421).

Therefore, the power of tautology lies in its being unbound to the trades of the world – this much, as argued by Stefano Agosti², was clear to both Wittgenstein and Mallarmé.

Besides, such an alignment of Wittgenstein and Mallarmé is not so unheard of. Badiou himself recognizes a formal homology between the *Tractatus* and the famous *A Throw of Dice ...* – a proximity made clear by a «mas- sive» syntax and an «affirmative and hierarchical unfolding» that, as soon as it exhibits the logical-linguistic structure of the world in all its aphoristic



Fig. 1
Vasilij Kandinskij, *Picture with a Circle*, 1911, private collection, Paris.

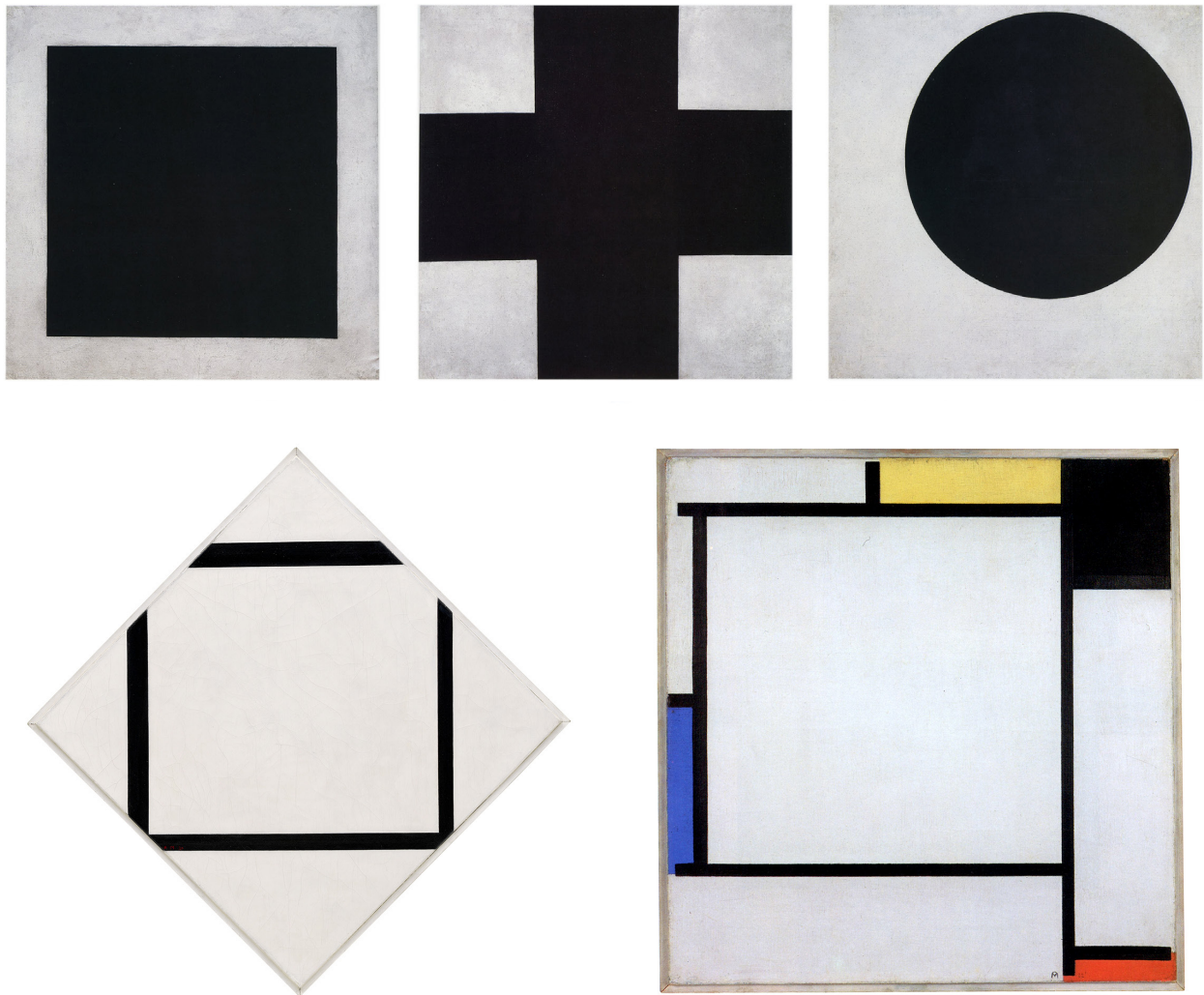
peremptoriness, also alludes to its overcoming, and shows it as inessential, as only the act is essential (Badiou 2018, p. 65).

3.

Now, the reflexivity of language quite naturally leads to the abstract avant-gardes of the early twentieth century. Giuseppe Di Giacomo already argued for this approach (1989, 1999). In the end, it is precisely when language ceases to represent something other than itself that we actually access the realm of abstraction. That realm is accessible either through color (Kandinskij) or the figure (Malevič), or the grammar structure (Mondrian). In any case, this access invariably implies an *analytical line*, if you know what I mean. And I use the expression *analytical line* on purpose, because Filiberto Menna (1975) explains these things very well, and it is precisely along this non-objective and non-iconic way that language, reduced to elementary, non-signifier units, shows itself as an autonomous formal structure.

Greenberg, Barr and the American formalist school take their cue precisely from this semantic zeroing. According to Greenberg, even avantgarde painting and sculpture, not unlike functionalist architecture and the machine, can only exist through «what they do», their purpose being exclusively the visual feeling produced by their formal structure. There is nothing else behind an abstract painting³.

Yet, a few years before the *analytical line*, Menna himself (1982) had to admit a *metaphysical hypothesis about abstract art*, whereby the analytical and procedural component derived from the pure visibility theory, which is still present in the main exponents of abstract art and is the foundation of the formalism inspired by Greenberg, finds its counterpoint in a drive towards the *Geistige*, the mystical, which disregards the formal process and instead originates from symbolist culture. Abstract art itself would re-

**Fig. 2**

Kazimir Malevič, *Black Square*, *Black Circle*, *Black Cross*, 1923, Russian Museum, Saint Petersburg.

Fig. 3

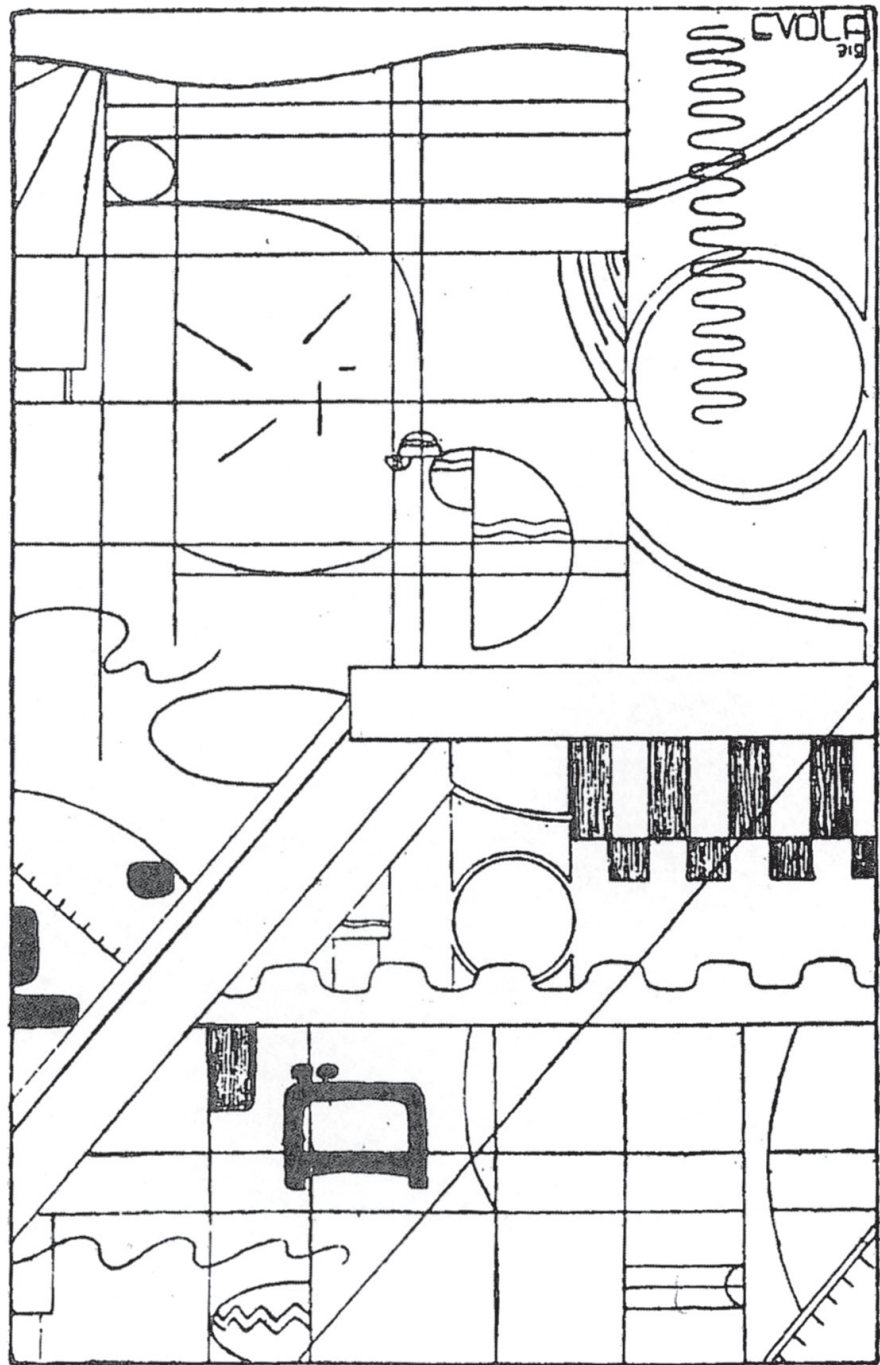
Piet Mondrian, *Composition 1A, Lozenge with Four Lines*, 1930; *Composition (Tableau) 2*, 1922, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; from Rosalind Krauss, *Grids*, in «October», Vol. 9, Summer 1979.

deem the symbolist culture from various forms of decadentism by offering the only viable alternative to the aesthetic deterioration of a repertoire of archetypal images from which symbolism could not free itself, as Albino Galvano (1988, pp. 71-90; 111-133) argues.

In other words, abstract art does not issue exclusively from the process of mental abstraction applied to nature – in order to reach the self-sufficiency of its own means proposed by Cézanne and by Cubism –, but rather from «a need of Absolute, which cannot be satisfied if not by renouncing to phenomenal appearances» (Menna 1982, p. 43).

Now, considering abstract art from the spiritual rather than from the analytical point of view means that, precisely due to such non-objective reductionism, it is possible to access deeper, transcendent levels of signification, as argued by Tuchman (1986), and this approach is equally legitimate in historiographical terms.

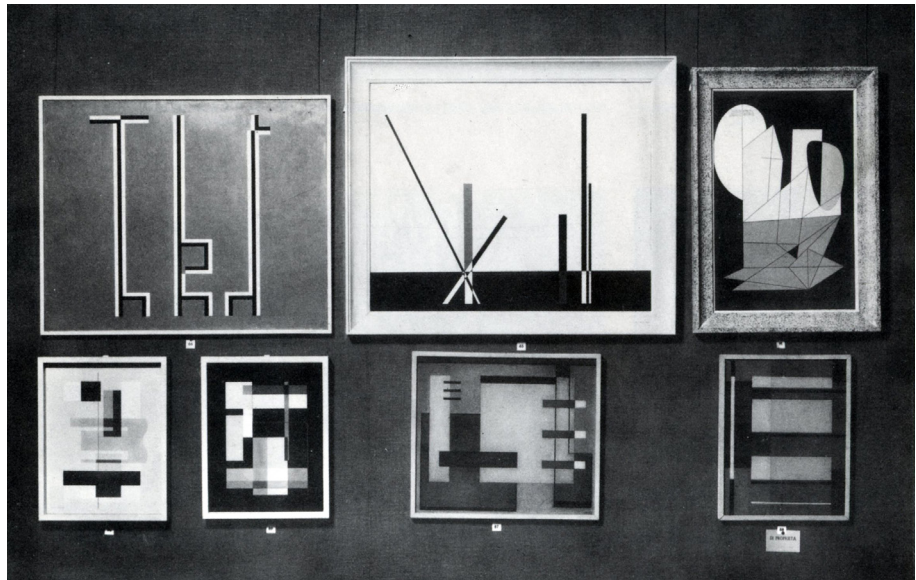
Kandinskij published *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* in 1910, and if within a few years Malevič's Black Square would annihilate language once and for all by declaring the impossibility to represent the world, its apparent nihilism actually conceals the status of threshold towards the sacred dimension. Equating the Black Square with the icon of the Orthodox tradition is not an interpretative fact – it is what substantiated the Suprematist research since the beginning, in 1915, and differentiated it from Tatlin's Constructivist research.

**Fig. 4**

Julius Evola, *Composizione n. 3*, 1919; from Julius Evola, *Arte Astratta*, Rome 1920.

Even in Mondrian, whose analytical reason is apparently free of irrational drives, there seem to be deep roots that draw inspiration from theosophical spiritualism.

The same argument explains the delay with which abstract art reached Italy: spiritual inspiration is the common denominator, albeit with obvious differences, of Evola, Belli and Ciliberti. And if for Evola, at least the Dadaist Evola of the small notebook *Arte astratta* (1920), the one of *mystical abstractionism*, stripping the expressive medium of any content in order to tap into its abstract potential is an alchemic (Valento 1984) and esoteric enterprise aimed at reaching a higher status of the being, not unlike the one pursued by mystics and clairvoyants, Carlo Belli's analytical and rational pursuits inspired by the theory of pure visibility tap into Rosmini's radical spiritualism. Being an expression of the spirit, art has nothing to do with the world and becomes abstract as the revelation of God, God being an innate concept in man. In *Kn* (1930), considered by Kandinskij with

**Fig. 5**

Wall devoted to abstract painters at the III Quadriennale di Roma, 1939, top Osvaldo Licini and Atanasio Soldati, bottom Mario Radice and Manlio Rho.

good reason as the “Gospel of abstract art”, the professions of aesthetic and religious faith coincide.

The same is true for Franco Ciliberti’s *primordialism*, whereby *primordium* [the earliest stage] indicates a dimension hovering between mythical and spiritual, which concerns «our communion with the infinite» (Ciliberti 2003, p. 69) and is to be pursued in the origin of the creative act. For the purposes of our discussion, it is perhaps worth noting that, as a student of the history of religions in Rome, Ciliberti was acquainted with academics like Raffaele Pettazzoni, Ernesto Buonauiuti, Giuseppe Tucci, who were scholars of spiritualism and Oriental religions – Tucci, as Evola himself, was not even foreign to the world of theosophy – and that the first Italian edition of Kandinskij’s *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1940) was promoted and translated by Colonna di Cesarò, an avowed supporter of Steinerian anthroposophy. After Laterza and Hoepli passed, the essay was published by Religio, a publishing house managed by Buonauiuti, a “modernist priest” who was in conflict with the Church’s official line (Caramel 2011 and Di Raddo 2020).

4.

It is, however, at the level of *medium* that “formalist” and “absolutist” approaches (Roque 2004) finally coincide. If the renunciation of the perspectival representation and the assumption of the literal two-dimensionality of the painting surface are the main means used to shift the sense of painting from the phenomenal world to the formal structure, it is precisely through such flatness that access to the Mystical can be regained.

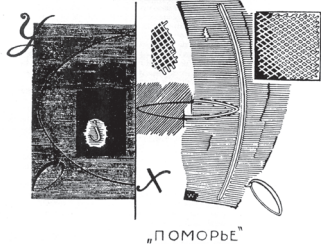
In this regard, I find the convergence of Wilhelm Worringer and Pavel Florenskij, two very different authors who belong to far away contexts, quite telling. And if the former is never absent in the arguments about the origins of abstract art, the role of the latter in the development of the avant-garde is more contradictory. Deep down, Florenskij was an enemy of the avant-garde. From the pages of «Lef», Father Florenskij and his protector, rector Favorsky, were openly accused of having corrupted the Vchutemas by filling the heads of students with issues of a symbolic and mystical nature (Misler 1990, pp. 3-51).

Yet, without Florenskij and his meditation about the icon, even Malevič would be impossible to understand, because it would be impossible to un-

ПАВЕЛ ФЛОРЕНСКИЙ

МНИМОСТИ

В ГЕОМЕТРИИ

**Fig. 6**

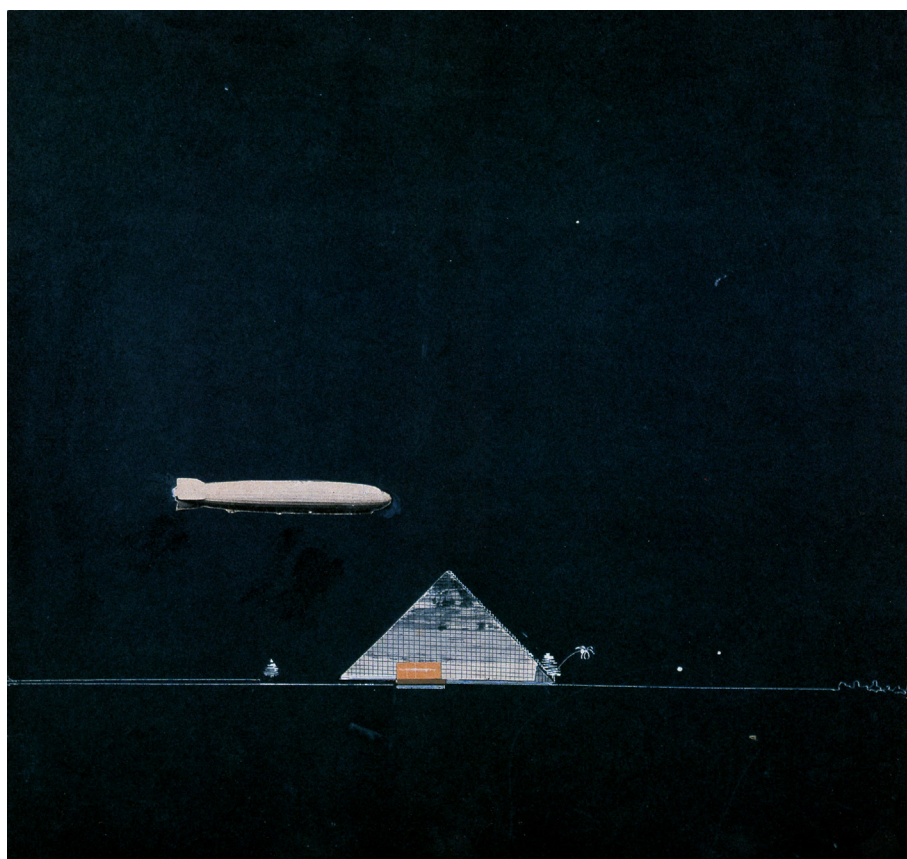
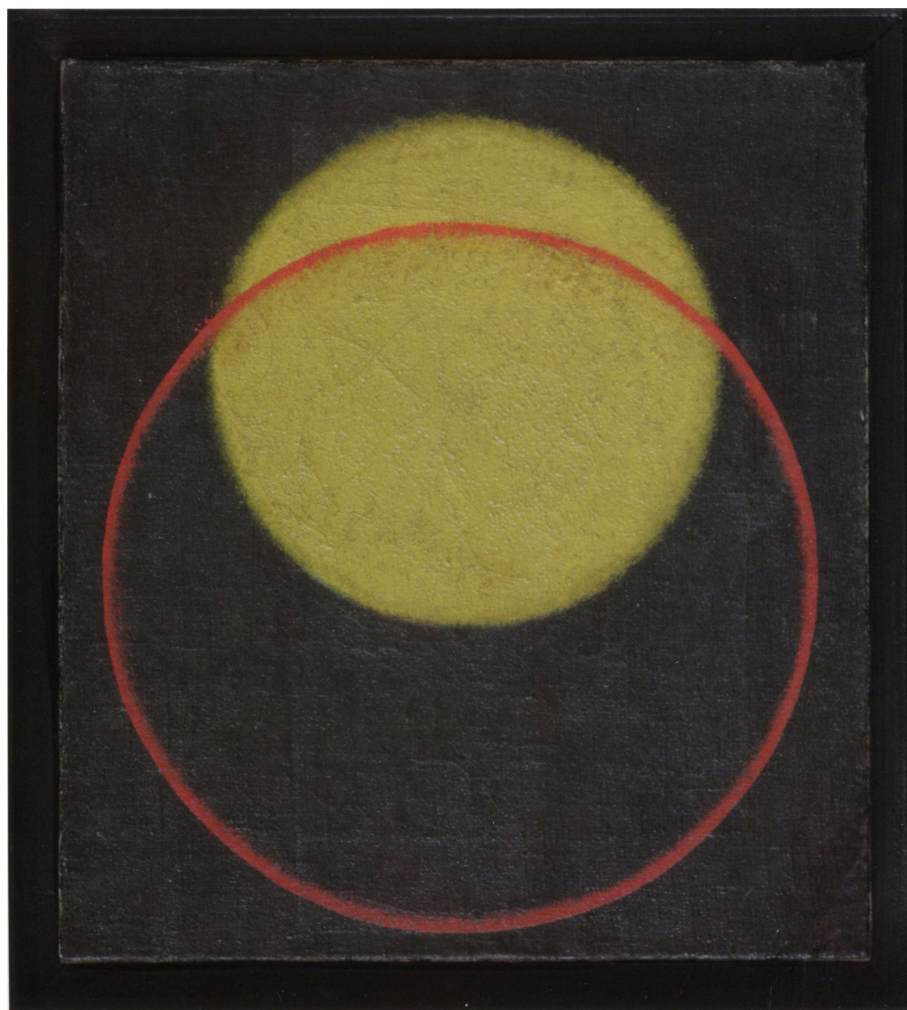
Vladimir A. Favorskij, Cover for Pavel A. Florenskij's book, *Mnimosti v geometrii*, wood engraving, 1922.

Fig. 7

Aleksandr Rodčenko, *Non-objective Composition n. 61*, 1918, Tula Museum of Fine Arts.

Fig. 8

Ivan Leonidov, *Palace of Culture for the Proletarskij District*, 1930.



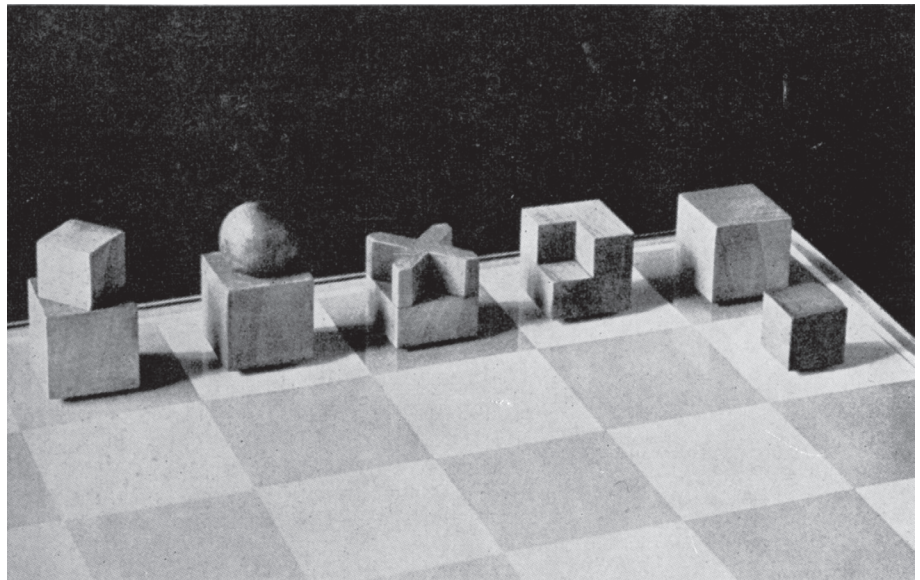


Fig. 9
Josef Hartwig, Bauhaus Chess
Set, 1924.

derstand the value of the surface-plane as a medium to reach the absolute, its being a visible diaphragm of the Invisible. Only due to the opaque surface of the icon where, unlike the transparency of the Renaissance perspectival window, color is light and perspective is denied, is it possible to cross the border between earthly and spiritual.

Should one address, instead, Worringer and his concept of abstraction, the latter again emerges as deeply oppositional and transcendental to the world. *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* is a seminal text. The author imagines the history of art as a constant alternation of two opposing urges – the urge to abstraction and the urge to empathy. And if empathy is understood as the drive of man towards nature and the organic that leads to a naturalistic art, abstraction can only be understood as the opposite movement, or the will to wrest the object from the flow of phenomena in order to release it from any earthy substance and make it *absolute*. According to the author, the empathetic attitude corresponds to a «pantheistic relationship of confidence between man and the phenomena of the external world» (Worringer 1975, p. 36), while the urge to abstraction is the outcome of an inner unrest inspired by phenomenal mobility and, in a religious respect, corresponds to a transcendental attitude typical of all monotheistic religions.

In short, it is necessary to abolish any form of representation, and erase three-dimensionality, because, only by effacing «the last trace of connection with, and dependence on, life, that the highest absolute form, the purest abstraction has been achieved; here is law, here is necessity, while everywhere else the caprice of the organic prevails» (Worringer 1975, p. 41).

5.

Then, it seems to me that the purpose of schools like the Bauhaus and Vchutemas was historically to restore a volumetric substance to an abstraction whose function as threshold to the Absolute was consubstantial to its condition of flatness.

Bringing the abstract experimentations back into the world, to the movement of light and shadows, meant bringing language back to its phenomenal verification, going back to where language *says*, thereby abandoning the aesthetic dimension of tautology.

In other words, it meant bringing the sense of language back to its use, as argued by Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations*. The principle

of abstraction becomes formal pedagogy for furniture, objects and buildings precisely to concur to the design purpose.

At the end, when many, in the post-war period, pointed their finger against that tradition, they would question precisely its clear linguistic status: International style as an average common language, elementary enough to be applied to the world, because «imagining a language means imagining a form of life» (Wittgenstein 1967, § 19).

Perhaps, the most historically important role of the Bauhaus was precisely taking Kandinskij, Mondrian and Malevič – the school devoted a Bauhausbücher to each of them – and subduing them to design, or to reality; exhausting the ancient power of the aesthetic and mystical act, detaching them from the walls, by turning their language from reflexive to transitive; and it was necessary to regain the third dimension in order to do that.

Interestingly, the very first elements of the Froebel gifts, whose pedagogic and progressive value, in spite of the symbolism they emerge from, is not questioned, are precisely the primary solids. The child immediately receives a sphere, a cube and a cylinder and, at a later stage, increasingly complex volumetric partitions of the cube: two-dimensional abstraction only intervenes with the seventh gift. There is a deep difference between the surface of a two-dimensional plane and the surface as the face of a solid. The function of *medium* is always denied to the face of a solid, regardless of how such function occurs, in an either objective or non-objective direction, while the two-dimensional plane is always a medium through which something happens, something whose phenomenal substance tends to disappear.

6.

Yet, the destiny of architecture is the phenomenal world, the *cubic*. Unless you opt for the treacherous road of the separation of drawing and built work, which would be worth discussing as a fascinating issue in itself; because, as argued by Hejduk (1980, pp. 9-11), our thinking architecture and therefore even our imagining architecture occurs through a sequencing of two-dimensional images.

However, if we accept that architecture is the play of volumes brought together in light, it remains to be seen how it is possible to preserve the plane, two-dimensionality.

According to Worringer, for the peoples whose artistic will was totally dominated by abstraction and the cubic had an agonizing quality, such as the Egyptians, even the architectures had to provide the impression of a plane surface and therefore the architectural ideal of this culture reached its most coherent expression in the pyramid, because whichever of the four sides the spectator stands, his eye always perceives the figure of the equilateral triangle: thus, «in so far as the cubic can be transmuted into abstraction» (Worringer 1975, p. 103), it was done in the pyramid. Worringer borrows these arguments from Riegl (1953, pp. 32-35) as well as from Hildebrand's *Problem der Form*; for Hildebrand, only when the sculptural figure has a flat appearance, although it is cubic, has it acquired artistic form.

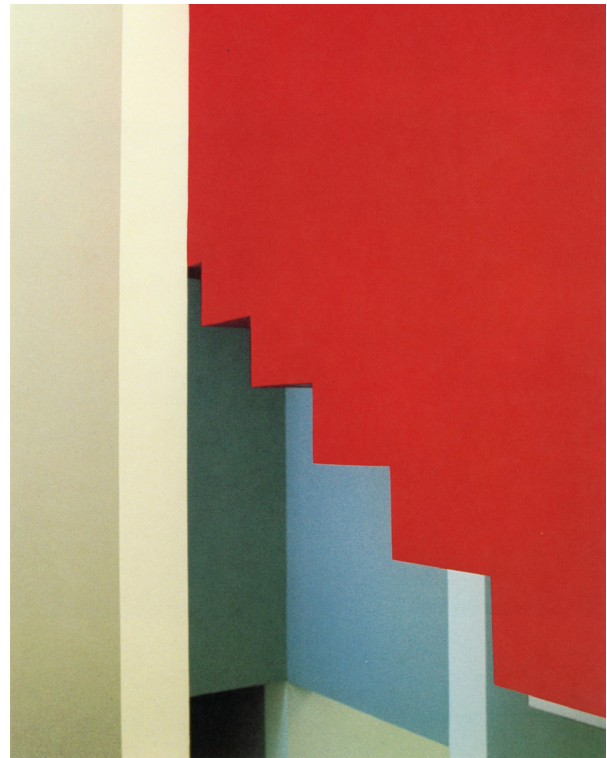
Perhaps, even the dialectics between volumetric masses and two-dimensional power of the wall inherent in Romanic architecture echoes the primordial effort to exorcise the «haphazard and troubled state» in the cubic aspect of things mentioned by Hildebrand (1949, p. 84).

However, pursuing flatness is not the only way to reach the Mystical.



Fig. 10
Franco Purini, *Classificazioni per sezioni di situazioni spaziali*, 1966.

Fig. 11
Peter Eisenman, *House VI*, Frank Residence Cornwall, Connecticut, 1976.
Foto di Judith Turner.



Is it not enough for language to reacquire a conscience of its own structural autonomy, as in Wittgenstein's tautology, to regain a status of showing so as to reopen the gates of the unspeakable?

Down the way of a reflexive language that is propositionally sufficient unto itself, stripped of any phenomenal debris, one obviously encounters an author like Peter Eisenman who, as argued by Rizzi (1996, p. 23), considers formal abstraction as merely the esoteric face of a *writing* the hidden face of which is precisely the Mystical. Obviously, Rizzi relies on the tradition of the Jewish Kabbalah in his reading of Eisenman, but what emerges in the end is that the reflexivity of the artistic language is not a value in itself – only insofar as it opens to the unsayable.

Achieving the Absolute means presenting the elements that characterize the artistic language beyond any reference to reality. Reading abstraction as an overturned *Einfühlung* (Nigro Covre 1975, p. XIV) does not mean forcing the entire analytical tradition derived from the pure visibility theory, which is indeed a key component of the achievements of the abstract avantgardes, to make a twist towards the Cosmos? Isn't the autonomy of the linguistic structure a threshold to the Infinite? The *royal doors* mentioned by Florenskij?

It is here, on the edge of this precipice, that Menna stops, and perhaps even Franco Purini stops, although he pursues the *analytical line* to the end, with a logical radicalness, until he reveals language in its deepest grammar abstraction.

7.

However, what if, instead of pursuing propositionally the path of tautology, and of the structural exhibition of the laws that rule the linguistic process, one opted, again with Mallarmé, for the refusal of the ordinary language through the elision of the connection between the word and its object? Because, if the word *brut*, rough, is the one that defines all the circles, the one connected to the actions of narrating, teaching, describing, and shows us things in their presence, or rather in their most immediate

Fig. 12

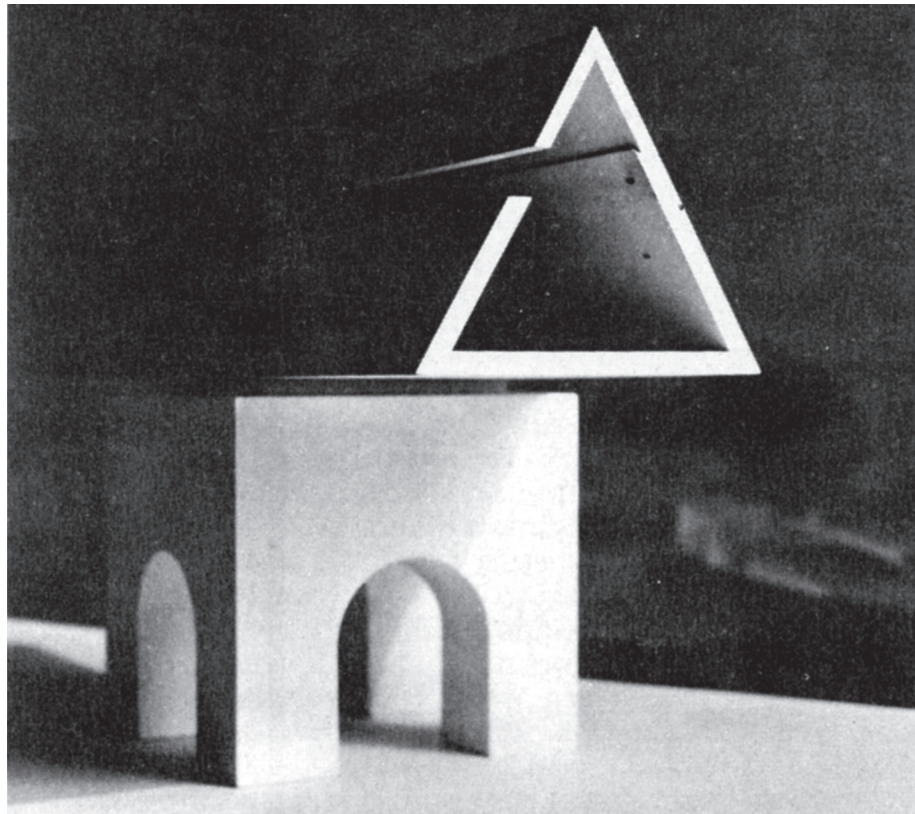
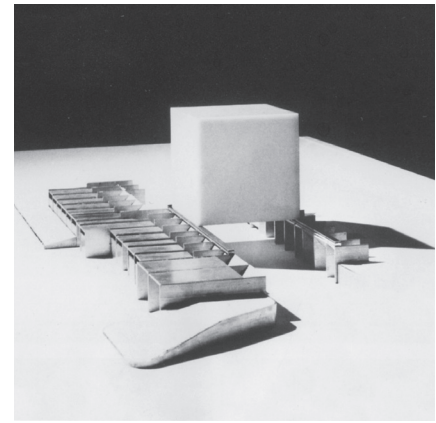
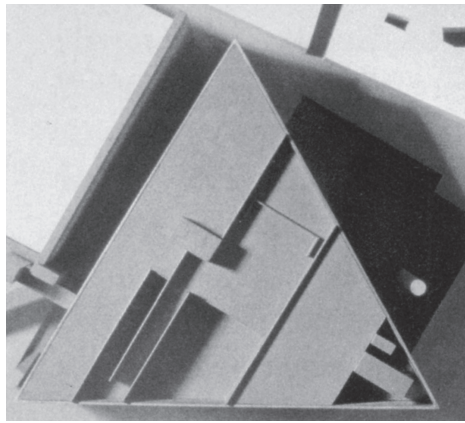
Gianugo Polesello, Offices for the Chamber of Deputies, Rome, 1966.

Fig. 13

Costantino Dardi, AGIP Gas station, 1968.

Fig. 14

Aldo Rossi with Luca Meda, Iron bridge over via Alemagna and landscape design of the park for the XIII Triennale di Milano, 1964.



representation, the word *essential*, on the other hand, repels things, pushes them out, in a new atmosphere. And, although we need the ordinary word in order to communicate with the world, to expand the boundaries of our world, it is only once the word is freed of the cages of meaning that it can fully develop its potential, and show itself as a *pure* rather than a merely mimetic *notion* (Mallarmé 1897, 1992, pp. 285-303).

Disparition vibratile is how Mallarmé defines the status of the word when it disengages from its referent, which is, by the way, the typical condition of poetry, the result of that sonic, rhythmic, figural process that keeps the poetic text in an independent space, where the word as a semantically closed entity opens up by acquiring meanings that are alien to daily occurrences: «Thus the poet produces a work of pure language, – Blanchot (2018) says – and language in this work is its return to its essence. He creates an object made of language».

I wonder, then, whether it is around this *object made of language* that we can recreate the thread of an entire other family of abstractions, which in the early 1906s arose in opposition to the ordinary language derived from the Bauhaus.

Gianugo Polesello as well as Costantino Dardi come to mind in this respect. For them, the architectural word regresses back to its even geometrical notion – for Polesello since the beginning and forever, for Dardi through several steps –, by isolating and separating itself from the comings and goings of reality and by producing a work of *pure language*⁴.

I am probably out of line when I associate the work of these authors with the concept of Mystical. Also because, by the way, the Wittgenstein of Polesello can be found in the relationships between logic and sense, or rather, «in pursuing logic *through* empirics» (Polesello 1985, p. 9): in other words, the Wittgenstein of the *Investigations*, who considers the structure of language as the result of the influence of use, thereby denying language as something that is given once and for all.

However, who knows for what reason in 1964, when he presented Rossi's design for the Triennale in the magazine «Casabella» directed by Rogers, Polesello (1964), before recognizing the clearly mundane nature of the vocabulary of his friend, alluded to the category of the Mystical. Perhaps in order to correct any misleading category? Or in order to keep it for himself? Or because, all in all, even the rationalism celebrated by his friend, insofar as it expresses a faith that as soon as «enlightens the system while being outside it» (Rossi 1967), is part of that demonstrative dimension of language that is the highway for the Mystical? Whether it occurs as a logic-propositional process or through the semantic exhaustion of the word.

Notes

¹ See «la Repubblica», Milan, October 29, 2019.

² See «la Repubblica», Robinson, December 16, 2018.

³ See Barr A. H. (edited by) (1936) – *Cubism and Abstract Art*. Exhibition catalogue, Museum of Modern Art, New York 1936; Greenberg C. (2011) – “Verso un nuovo Lacoonte” [1940]; “Arte astratta” [1944]. In: Id. (2011) – *L'avventura del modernismo. Antologia critica*, edited by Giuseppe Di Salvatore and Luigi Fassi, Johan & Levi Editore, Milan, 52-64; 65-69.

⁴ Gianugo Polesello reaches not dissimilar conclusions in Valerio Paolo Mosco, see Id. (2019) – “Puro, purezza (Pur, pureté)”. In: *Gianugo Polesello un maestro del Novecento*, edited by Grandinetti P., Dal Fabbro A., Cantarelli R., Lettera Ventidue, Siracusa, 33-41.

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