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FORM VS ANTI-FORMS (SHAPELESS)

FORMA A ANTYFORMY (FORMY BEZKSZTAŁTNE)

Abstract

The aim of the essay is to discuss the ‘diacrisis’ between the Form and the shapeless forms starting from an etymological ascent through the philosophical, aesthetic and theoretical point of view of several authors (Plato, Aristoteles, Kant, Husserl, Focillon, Bataille, Valéry, Pareyson) to architectonic reflection (Eisenman). The two concepts of Form and Anti-Form (shapeless) are declined also under the perspective of the corresponding dialectic between modern and postmodern as defined in the opposing couples proposed by Ihab Hassan. These antinomies are at the base of the progressive and afflictive virtualization and derealization of architectural artifacts in a perspective that some have called ‘post-human’.

Keywords: form, anti-form (shapeless form), diacrisis, modern and postmodern

Streszczenie

Celem eseju jest omówienie „diakryzy” między Formą a formami bezkształtnymi, wychodząc od podejścia etymologicznego, poprzez filozoficzny, estetyczny i teoretyczny punkt widzenia kilku autorów (Platon, Arystoteles, Kant, Husserl, Focillon, Bataille, Valéry, Pareyson) aż do refleksji architektonicznej (Eisenman). Te dwa pojęcia, Formy i (bezkształtnej) Antyformy, są tu analizowane również z perspektywy odpowiadającej im dialektyki między nowoczesnością a ponowoczesnością, ujętej w przeciwnych parach zaproponowanych przez Ihaba Hassana. Antynomie te leżą u podstaw postępującej i dotkliwej wirtualizacji oraz derealizacji artefaktów architektonicznych w ujęciu, które niektórzy nazwali „postludzkiem”.

Słowa kluczowe: forma, antyforma (forma bezkształtna), diakryza, nowoczesność i postmodernizm

1. PREMISE

To illustrate the diacrisis¹ between the two terms Form and Anti-Form (shapeless forms) in the title isn’t an easy challenge, it is enough to say that the first is a noun deliberately kept in the singular and the second an adjective rendered in the plural. In apparently paradoxical terms, it should be noted that while in the notion of form it finds a very wide plurality of meanings and articulations in that of shapeless, this multiplicity of declinations is notably reduced although there are positions which have underlined the propulsive potential opposed to the usual limiting designation for denial.

¹ ‘Separation or dissolution of the same’ from: item “Metasincrisi” in M.A. Marchi, *Dizionario tecnico-etimologico-filologico*, Pirola, Milano 1928, p. 520.

2. ETHYMOLOGY

On the level of etymological ascent, the term ‘form’ in reference to Greek or Latin origin offers significations not only distant and multiple but sometimes opposing. For the Greeks there were many ways to designate the concept of form²: εἶδος (intelligible form), ἰδέα (from the theme ἰδεῖν ‘see’), εἰδωλον (image, idol, double, apparition, illusion, specter) πλάσμα, (shaped thing, form), ῥυθμός (form/sequence/ disposition of the parts in a whole, affine to ῥέω, ‘scroll’); μορφή (sensitive form, outward appearance), τρόπος (affine to τρέπω “turn; use with other use”) σχῆμα (way in which a thing occurs). In Latin, *fōrma* takes the meaning of form, appearance, beauty and derives – in addition to the resonance of μορφή – from the verb *phōrein* (the act of bringing, from the word *phormōs*: ‘hamper’) and from the Sanskrit root *dhar-* which in Latin means *far-*, *for-* (*fir-mus*, which also comes from ‘smoke’) which has the meaning of ‘hold’, ‘support’, ‘contain’, or using the root *thar-* the word comes from the Greek *thrā-nos* (seat) which in turn derives from the Sanskrit *dhar-i-man* which means: ‘stable, fixed figure’ (hence: Fermo, Fòro, Freno, Fulcro)³. Because of these ancestral etymological roots, the term would denote an external ‘figure’ of the matter or the way of disposition in parts of things but also a ‘model’ to give the matter a determined figure. If the Greek articulates the meaning of form into many names with a graduation from the abstract ideal plane – connected to the theory in the classical opposition εἶδος/εἰδωλον⁴ to the dissolutive consequences, according to the Plato’s interpretation of a pure and ‘truly real’ concept in sensible and illusory (falsely real) manifestation of images – passing through descriptions of ways of seeing, flowing, shaping into form as a concrete and external manifestation in which the matter is configured; conversely the Latin derivation – even if contain some inconsistencies in the volatility of the prefix *far-* – prefers ‘actions on the matter’ (i.e. carry, support, contain etc.) to determine a regimentation conformation by ordered and regulated dispositions on models, based on verified models capable of producing beauty and conformity of external appearance. The Greek acceptance, broader and denser in possibilities, and the Latin one, more concrete and determinant of matter, flow into the modern definition of the term with the ambiguities and semantic shifts that can be imagined slipping that it can be imagined. In fact, the headword ‘form’ (13th century) in a very general way denotes: “the appearance of an object, sufficient to characterize it externally”. In the current acceptance, one can find various similar words, such as ‘figure’ (from Latin *figura*, from the theme of *figĕre* ‘shape, model’) and above all – as Vittorio Ugo⁶ points out – ‘image’ (from Greek εἰκών -όνος [eikón]). These synonyms generate quite a few misunderstandings, considering “the fact that an architectural work has an image (or rather a plurality of images) doesn’t authorize it to be reduced to an image”, since “its value lies almost exclusively in its ability to refer completely to a ‘form’ (as a diagram), through the appropriate codification”.

The origin of the word ‘shapeless’ is of a completely different kind sign, while on the one hand, is of more recent formation (first half of the 14th century), on the other hand, it has no

² V. Ugo, *Forma- σχῆμα. Geometrie della materia costruita* [in:] *idem, Architetture ad vocem... Verso un glossario dei termini di architettura*, Guerini Studio, Milan 1996, p. 41 e sgg.

³ Cfr. *Vocabolario etimologico della lingua Italiana*, di Ottorino Pianigiani, web edition.

⁴ E. Cassirer, *Eidos ad Eidolon. Il problema del bello e dell’arte nei dialoghi di Platone*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano 2009.

⁵ *Ad vocem* “forma” in G. De Voto, G.C. Oli, *Vocabolario della lingua italiana*, Le Monnier, Firenze 2011.

⁶ V. Ugo, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

origin other than Latin *informis* (comes from *fōrma* with negative prefix *in-*). By connecting this root to the term ‘amōrfo’ it arrives at the Greek ἀμορφος as ‘shapeless’ (consisting of ἀ privative and μορφή) denoting what is “without a definite form: amorphous matter”⁷. The shapeless is therefore that which “has nothing distinct in its structure”, which, not being ordered, would not yet have a definite, stable, recognizable form and, therefore, is available for transmutation. It’s interesting to note how the verb in-form – that shares with a shapeless an etymological similar construction – instead alludes to ‘giving form’, to instructing how to ‘give structure’ to something doesn’t yet have it.

3. ESTETIC AND PHILOSOPHY

On the aesthetic and philosophical and theoretical level, the multiple values of the term ‘form’ assume the sense of an “ordering principle that gives unity and coherence to a multiplicity of elements”. While for Plato⁸, form is primarily the essence (*eidos*) and the cause of *phenomena*, of which they are imperfect copy, from *eidos* it is possible, through a progressive abstraction, to make intelligible the authentic sense of things; for Aristotle – preferring *morphé* over *eidos* – form is inextricably linked to the matter representing its efficient and final cause assuming nevertheless a logical primacy as “of everything it can speak because it has a form and not for its material appearance as such”⁹. If the matter has only potentially the possibility to assume a real *facies*, the form makes it possible in act to this step, determining incessantly the becoming, transmuting the potential-matter in act-form and vice versa the potential-act until the ‘pure act’ represented by motionless engine/God that holds all the powers. Two different directions: that of Plato that of the ideas produces sensitive images from which it is possible to intuit the essence, and that of Aristotle that in the *physis* recognizes the dynamics between form and matter up to the final synthesis in the absolute form disconnected from the matter. The Aristotelian option will be recalled by both St. Thomas in applying to the matter a *signatura* that reveals the divine presence, and by Hegel in the concept of the absolute Spirit. For Kant, remarking on the ordering role of form in a transcendental sense, the pure forms of intuition become conditions of the possibility of knowledge, in which matter is to be understood as “that which corresponds to sensation” and form “that for which the multiple of the phenomenon can be ordered” by *a-priori*. Analogously, from the order given to sensitivity, even the categories of the Intellect are determined by Reason (I think) in synthetic-formal terms. If the settings of Cassirer and Panofsky in the Kantian groove assume the ‘symbolic forms’ as unifying principles of a multiple and indistinct (shapeless) datum, then Husserl’s *phenomenology* – allowing an *epoché* in which ‘it puts in brackets’ the world, suspending the judgment of the existence of things – is connected with Plato in the consideration that *phenomena* must be investigated in their manifestation in order to grasp

⁷ “amorfo” *ad vocem* in Aa. Vv., *Vocabolario Treccani*: <http://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/amorfo/>

⁸ For Plato, the beauty of elementary forms is [...] *qualities (which) also inform painting and other similar arts, weaving, embroidery, architecture and the manufacture of any other furnishings, and also the nature of bodies and of other organisms; in all this there is decorum or ugliness. The lack of decorum, rhythm and harmony is related to the baseness of language and character, while the opposite qualities are sisters and imitations of the opposite, that is of a wise and honest character.* Plato, *The Republic*, 401a.

⁹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, VII, 1035a.

their noumenal essence. The psychologic acquisitions of *Gestalt* are of different sign that in articulating the rules of percept (good form, proximity, similarity, good continuity, destiny, figure-background, induced movement) will investigate the ways of understanding and conceptualization of the form then taken up again by the neurosciences. Structuralism, in linking the concept of form to that of submitting structure and considering the work as a unit (whole) that can be decomposed and analyzed into constituent parts to reveal its syntactic links, will have numerous applications in artistic and literary aesthetics. The connected post-structuralism (Derrida, Deleuze, Lyotard), on the contrary, dissolves – starting from the negation of the *grands récits* on Nietzschean and Heideggerian presuppositions and with the concept of *différance* – the investigation on the articulation (whole-parts) of the logocentric structures in the incessant practices of the deconstructionism, postmodernist relativism through the hermeneutics of the text.

On the aesthetic level¹⁰ – recovering the Latin root that denotes beauty in *formosus* – the form coincides with the outward appearance of things that envelops and forces like a *habitus* and can only be ‘beautiful’ in the sense of orderly, completed, balanced. In an academic sense, the form thus becomes a ‘rule’ capable of evaluating the correctness of an artifact and a ‘model’ producing ‘figures’ ending up in an ‘empty formalism’ opposing the content rather than the matter. In Hegel’s *Estetica* the form is assumed as “the sensitive appearance in which the idea is exteriorized” and the measure of its adaptation to the idea-content will also be – as in classical art – the measure of its adaptation to beauty. The hermeneutical aesthetics will focus the interest on the understanding of the form through a mainly individual investigation, inscribing itself in the well-known distinction between ideographic (human sciences) and nomothetic (natural sciences) sciences. In morphological/morphogenetic approaches, form is assumed as an organism to be studied for invariances and transformations, and in Goethe represents “something that moves, becomes, passes [for which] the theory of forms is a theory of metamorphosis”. The passage, intuitive but not empirical, between the theme/form-basis (*Urphänomen*) through variations allows a process of formation (*Bildung*) and defines morphogenesis as an incessant qualitative increase. This approach will arrive at the romantic physiognomy in which for Schlegel “form is a significant external, the speaking physiognomy of a thing” in which the metamorphosis, through the intensive/vital principle assumed as ‘elusive formal germ’ will open, with irony, to the shapeless, to the ugly, to the grotesque for which the classic form, formed and closed, will be inaccessible, finally arriving at the *Aesthetic of Ugliness* of Rosenkranz. The form in these exegeses and after Nietzsche will not, as Pareyson points out, be more ascribable to internal/eternal schematism but to the form-forming (embryo)/form-formed (actual). Also, the *Gestalt* will recover, in a platonic sense – for which beauty returns to be synonymous with order – some Goethean notions in the identification of “totality as not reducible to the sum of its parts”. On the wake of the Goethean morphology and its developments, it will arrange on one side the structuralist hypotheses outlined above and on the other, the biological/naturalistic hypotheses of the living and geometric world (with a reference to the Plato’s *Timeo* in the positions of René Thom¹¹) passing through the phenomena of ‘self-presentation’ exploring a conscious/

¹⁰ In this paragraph, it will follow as a guide and reference, hermeneusis proposed by Falvio Cuniberto in the item “forma” in G. Carchia, P. D’Angelo (eds.), *Dizionario di Estetica*, eds., Laterza, Rome-Bari 2007.

¹¹ According to the mathematician René Thom, the outside world would not be chaotic but precisely innervated by a series of rational/relational structures even if complex.

unconscious creativity similar to the concept of *mimikry* or *camouflage*. A relevant singularity is represented by the formal theory of Henri Focillon, in which each work “is an attempt towards the unique; it affirms itself as a whole, as an absolute; and, at the same time, it’s part of a system of complex relationships (...) it’s matter and spirit, it’s form and content” and arises from an active encounter between the formal vocation of man and the formal vocation of the matter. In his *Vie des Formes*¹² the connection between forms and life is expressed following Balzac¹³ in the assertion: “life is form, and form is the world of life” and “the work doesn’t exist as a form”, a form that in all its fullness is assumed as “construction of space and matter which it manifests itself as the balance of the masses (...)” where “the form can become a formula or rule, that is abrupt arrest, an exemplary type, but it’s primarily a mobile life in a changing world”. In this formulation there is the claim of the discourse on the form, passing through the Style as a stabilizing principle of the metamorphosis, as essence of the art avoiding to confuse this content with its representation in image (sign) since “the sign means that the form is to ‘reaffirm that the fundamental content of the form is the *formal* content’” since “[...] nothing, in some cases, is better founded than showing the forms submitted to an internal logic (series of syntactic relations) that organizes them”. In this scope, for Adorno¹⁴ “what an artist can say, he says only by giving a form” and for Luigi Pareyson in his *Teoria della Formatività*¹⁵ the form is “the success of a process of formation”.

4. THE TRIUMPH OF SHAPELESS

This search for the stability of form corresponds in recent years to the progressive revaluation of the shapeless as a transgression of form but also as a promise, as a possibility. In an artistic context from Futurism to *Art Brut* and to the *informal* where the shapeless is an *Art autre* (*Tapié*) no longer defined by the form but by its antithesis. At the same time, on a theoretical level, the thesis of George Bataille argues that the shapeless “serves to downgrade” and to transgress the form, to de-sublimate it being able to trigger new processes. The ‘sample’ of the shapeless is in his *Documents*, in fact, he writes:

Shapeless. A dictionary would start from the moment in which it no longer gave sense but the tasks of the word. So shapeless is not just an adjective with this meaning but a term that serves to downgrade, requiring in general that everything has its form. What designates has no rights of its own in any sense and it is crushed everywhere like a spider or an earthworm. It would really be necessary, because academic men were happy, that the universe took form. The whole philosophy has no other purpose; it is to give a frock coat to what it is, a mathematical frock coat. On the other hand, is to affirm that the universe resembles nothing and it is shapeless, that is, the universe is something like a spider or a spit.¹⁶

This obscure definition/prediction, in our opinion, is contradicted by the reflection of Paul Valéry, who when in *Degas Danse Dessin*, observing the floors on which the ballet dancers are reflected, states:

¹² H. Focillon, *Vie des Formes suivi de Éloge de la main*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 1943.

¹³ In fact, he states: “Everything is form, and life itself is a form”.

¹⁴ Th.W. Adorno, *Parva aesthetica*, ed. R. Masiero, Feltrinelli, Milano 1979.

¹⁵ L. Pareyson, *Estetica. Teoria della formatività*, Edizioni di Filosofia, Torino 1954.

¹⁶ G. Bataille, *Informe* [in:] *Documents*, Dedalo, Bari 1974, p. 165.

I sometimes thought of the shapeless. There are things, spots, contours, volumes that, in a certain way, have an existence, de facto: they are only perceived by us, but not known; we cannot reduce them to a single law, deduce their whole from an analysis of their parts, reconstruct them with logical operations. We can modify them very freely, they have no other property than to occupy an area of space [...] To say that they are shapeless things is not to say that they have no forms, but that their forms do not find in us anything that allows us to replace them with a precise sign that you trace with a certain recognition. And, in fact, the shapeless forms leave no other memory than that of a possibility: no more than a series of notes does not give rise to a melody, a puddle, a rock, a cloud, a piece of shoreline, are not reducible [analyzed]. But I don't want to insist on these considerations that lead very far.¹⁷

If the shapeless (forms), as reified (substantiated) for Bataille, is matter in its first giving – *sine ulla structura* or *skēmata* – for Valéry for its indeterminate and un-analyzable condition, it alludes to a mere possibility of being in-formed. A possibility that in fact remains uncertain without an ordering action as: “The work of art isn't a creation; it's a construction in which analysis, calculation and planning conduct the main role”. On the different interpretation of these two texts, it's possible to derive a corresponding dialectic between the modern and postmodern as defined in the opposing couples proposed by Ihab Hassan¹⁸. The distinction between Form (conjunctiva, closed) and Anti-form (disjunctive, open) can be attributed to the couples: Hypotaxis/Parataxis; Root-depth/Rhizome-surface; Origin-cause/*Difference-Différance*-trace and of course Meaning/Significant.

5. ARCHITECTURE

These last considerations allow us, in conclusion, to apply these antinomies to the architectural discourse trying to show how the dialectic between form and shapeless forms is at the base of the progressive and afflictive virtualization and derealization of architectural artifacts in a perspective that some have called *post-human*¹⁹. In this sense, Peter Eisenman, unexpectedly, in an essay in 1963²⁰, reflecting on the formal foundations of architecture, goes on to formulate an architectural equation where the identified terms – concept, or intent, function, structure, technique and form – ultimately interact, where form represents a magnitude above all others, because “architecture essentially gives form”. The form can be generic/platonic (linear or centroidal) or specific and, referring to the vague definition of ‘configuration’ or ‘connection between parts and whole’, Eisenman considers it's necessary to introduce the notions of movement and comprehensibility for which “the need for formal clarity and unequivocal references to archetypal solids becomes even more urgent”. Contrary to the stability and clarity of the form of the

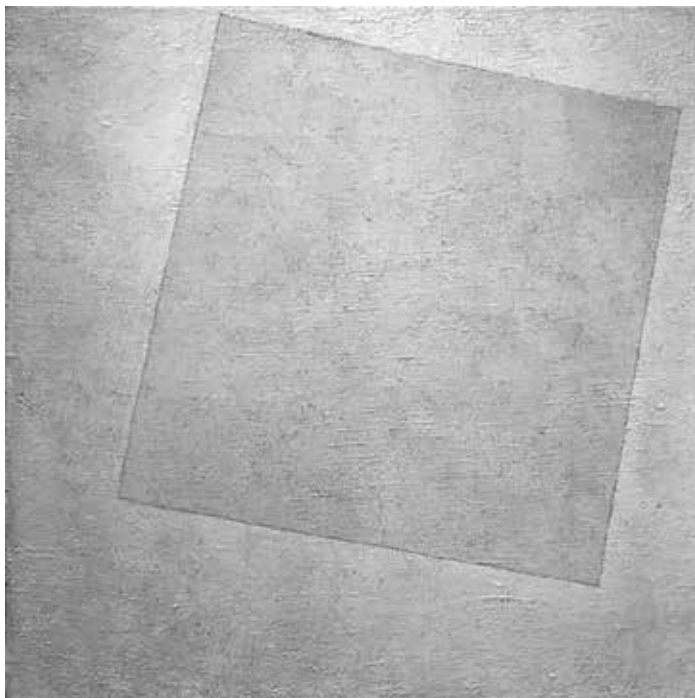
¹⁷ P. Valéry, *Du sol et de l'informe* [in:] *idem, Degas Danse Dessin* (1938), after [in:] *idem, Œuvres*, II, éd. Hytier, Gallimard, Paris 1960, p. 1194.

¹⁸ I. Hassan, *La questione del postmoderno* [in:] *Postmoderno e letteratura*, P. Carravetta, P. Spedicato (eds.), Bompiani, Milano 1984, pp. 99–106.

¹⁹ R. Marchesini, *Post-human. Verso nuovi modelli di esistenza*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2002, p. 174.

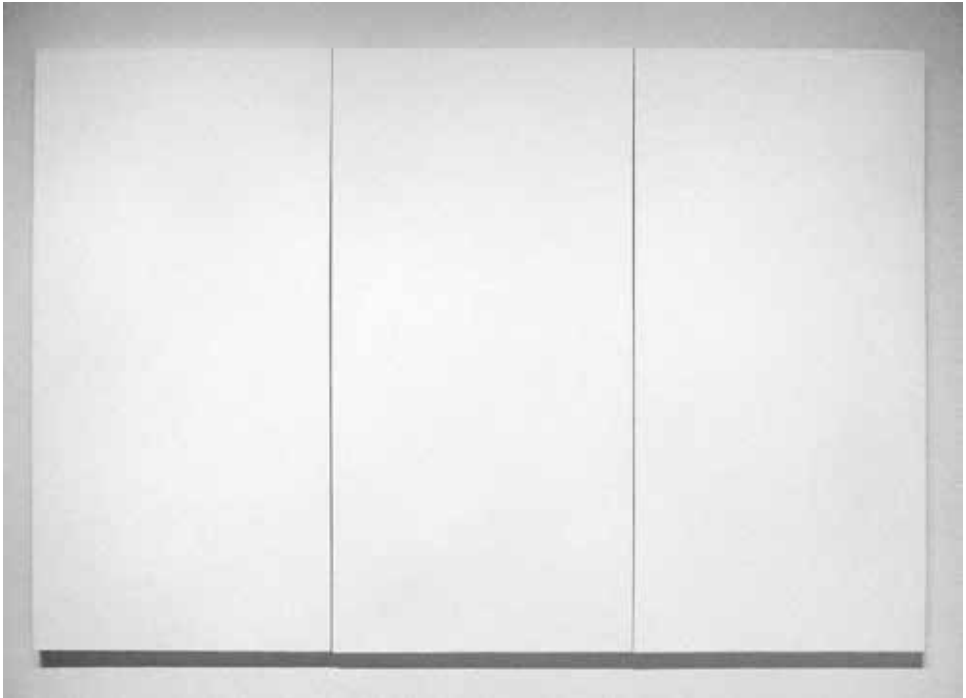
²⁰ P. Eisenman, *Towards an Understanding of Form in Architecture*, “Architectural Design” 1963, No. 10, pp. 457–478.

classical and modern tradition, connected to the essential relationship with construction in these years of *reductio ad imaginem*, we assist – programmatically renouncing to any form of correlative syntax – to the complete disarticulation between image and form: the first responsible for the seductive aggression to the senses and the second relegated to a precarious hyper-formalism that has its counterparts in technological exhibition or in the obnubilated excess of forms in reference to a dubious neo-naturalism. To the construction of a system of hierarchies between the parts (hypotaxis) is substituted by a parataxis which, far from being a list (Rossi) becomes deflagrating, disconnected and metamorphic. The search for the root – both in the sense of foundation and of stability, origin and causation of forms – contrasts with the rhizomatic (Deleuze), multiple and agglutinated fastening that precedes the dissolution of the hollow space into bent and distorted surfaces that breaking the necessary bond with the construction they become the mere support of advertising and marketing messages. Shapeless forms, which far from expressing through the Form the character of the work as the implementation of the theme and meaning, being mere figures of the signifier, indefinitely defer their condition of reality, producing no more than traces of inadequate notes capable to determine certainly not melodic harmonies, but nothing but noise, decomposition, chaos²¹.

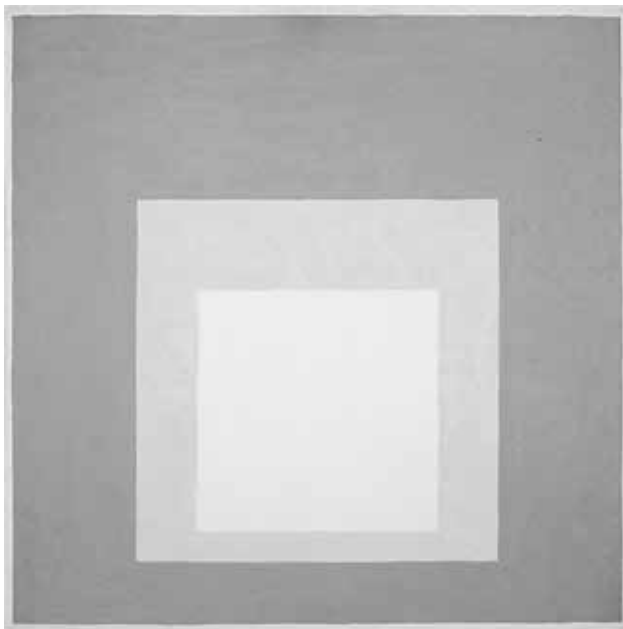


Ill. 1. K. Malevich Malevich *White on White*, 1918 (MoMA_Museum of Modern Art, New York).

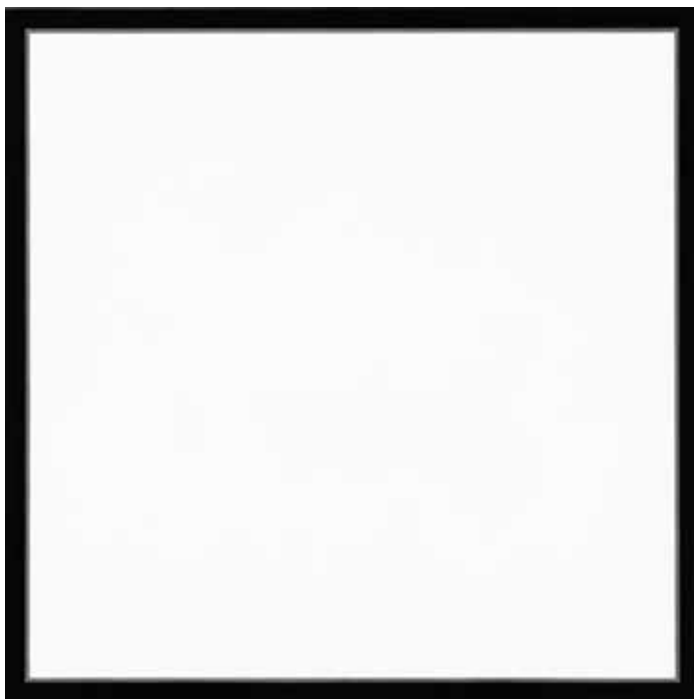
²¹ R. Marchesini, *op. cit.*, p. 174.



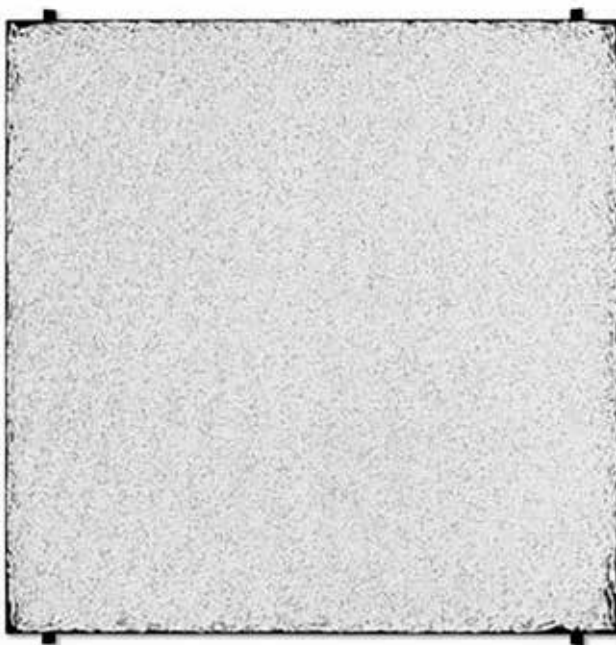
III. 2. R. Rauschenberg, *White Paintings*, 1951 (MoMA_Museum of Modern Art, New York).



III. 3. J. Albers, *Homage to the Square: Lone Whites*, 1963. (The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, Bethany).



Ill. 4. J. Baer, *Untitled (White Square Lavender)*, 1964–1974 (Lisson Gallery, London; Christie's, New York).



Ill. 5. R. Ryman *Bridge*, 1980 (Private Swiss collection, Christie's, New York).

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