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Sublime Bigness. An aesthetic dissertation on contemporary architecture

Abstract
The idea of the sublime, since antiquity, has always represented the intimate desire of human beings to elevate their spirit above the immanence. Some products of contemporary architecture, which often are emblems of Bigness, could be possibly enclosed in the category of sublime objects. Along Kant's renowned Analytic of the sublime, the aim of this article is to analyse a possible aesthetic experience of these buildings, recovering and reestablishing the existential and aesthetic issues connected to the sublime.

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Nature has judged man a creature of no mean or ignoble quality, but, as if she were inviting us to some great gathering, she called us into life, in to the whole universe, there to be spectator of her games and eager competitors; and she therefore from the first breathed into our hearts 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*. (Longinus 1995: 276-7, emphasis added)

Despite the different forms it has taken throughout philosophy, the desire of yearning for greatness and unlimited fullness – and at the same time to compete with it – seems to be a constant of human beings. We believe that still today the concept of sublime could help us to understand our contemporaneity, where adjectives like excessive, boundless, shocking, seem to describe adequately several present phenomena.

On the wake of Kant's theory, we would enquire whether nowadays it is still possible to feel the sublime and to define which objects in our experience are able to elicit in us a thought that makes us foresee something *supersensible* in our spirit. Although Remo Bodei in his work *Paesaggi sublimi* (*Sublime Landscapes*) presents, as the subheading suggests, men in front of the savage nature, the landscape experienced by the twenty-century human being seems more and more distant from nature. In fact, the modern man gives the impression to have relegated nature on the margin of, or even outside, the now classic urban scenario. Then, we would reflect on the architectural products which more and more are inhabiting cities, especially on that building style which, challenging measures and proportions, falls within the definition of colossal, gigantic, hyperbolic. We will categorize this kind of architecture, along Rem Koolhaas definition, as *Bigness*. We ought hence to inquire if it is possible to re-*place* the sublime and if, although in different forms, this feeling can accompany the contemporary man throughout the landscape he daily lives, namely the cityscape.

This is not about applying previous categorizations, namely the sublime, to today's reality, but about verifying whether, through a similar analysis towards certain objects, one can explore the possible significances of reality from the experiencing subject's perspective; according also with Clewis: "An approach according to which object typically possessing certain properties or attributes, and perceived in the right context, are paradigmatically disposed to evoke the aesthetic experience of the sublime" (Clewis 2019: 342). Our starting point, the direction of our analysis, could be also resumed by Crowther's statement, who writes about *experiences* of the sublime: "The sublime is not some exclusively

natural experience but a family of experiences that cluster around the basic structure." (Crowther 2016: 58) So, in our work, the basic structure is represented by Kant's theory and the experience analysed is part of this family of experiences.

1. *The object: Supertalls, Megatalls and Bigness*

The tendency to realise buildings not just big, but *exorbitantly* big, has been made possible in the modern age, when the use of different materials, like iron, has completely revolutionised the possibilities of building. Within a little more than one century, a lot of city skylines have changed substantially, under the banner of buildings, generally skyscrapers, which stand out more and more increasingly above the old constructions.

We can name three main categories to define these buildings: Supertalls, Megatalls and Bigness. For the first two, we refer to the classification of The Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat (CTBUH), the world's leading resource focused on the inception, design, construction, and operation of tall buildings and future cities (https://www.ctbuh.org/about/about/). According to this institution, even though is not exact-ly possible to define what a "tall building" is, because it could depend both on context and proportions, there are nevertheless two very clearly defined categories: *Supertalls* and *Megatalls*. The former is a tall building 300 meters (984 feet) or taller, and the latter is a tall building 600 meters (1,968 feet) or taller. There are 145 supertalls and only 3 megatalls completed globally (https://www.ctbuh. org/criteria/): just consider the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, a more than eight-hundred meters skyscraper, or the Gedda Tower, which, once finished, will reach the one-kilometre in height. The ascent of these architectural models seems actually imminent, at least in some parts of the world. However, besides the so-called Supertalls or Megatalls, which represent the most evident example of this phenomenon, it's necessary to include in our analysis also the enormous — and more widespread — structures, which are defined more generically as tall buildings, depending on the context[1]. For instance, the Tre Towers in Milan could be perceived as Supertall buildings depending on the urban and

[1] As mentioned before, the phenomenon is not widespread uniformly, it took hold mainly in Asia. In fact, apart from Russia which has to be considered a transcontinental nation, the only European Supertall skyscraper is The Shard in London. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_tallest_buildings_in_Europe.

historical context, but none of them is more than two hundred meters high.

The last category is the most interesting, because it does not strictly make a categorisation based on a measurable highness, but on its size and structural complexity. The reference is Rem Koolhaas' manifesto entitled *Bigness or the problem of Large* (1994), where he defines the Bigness as a separate architectural category, imposing itself over a certain scale: "The best reason to broach Bigness is the one given by climbers of Mount Everest: 'because it is there'; Bigness is ultimate architecture. It seems incredible that the size of a building alone embodies an ideological program, independent of the will of its architects" (Koolhaas 1995: 495).

Bigness (this term with a capital "B" is used as a real noun) main characteristic is not the size, but the *immeasurable* size, indefinable but at the same time overpassing the other two categories. Bigness is posed by the architect beyond the architecture itself, which along this perspective is transformed, and seems to be faced with a sort of surrender, a collapse, if compared to its traditional role. The diffusion of this kind of structures is described in a climax, where the reader foretells a sort of advance of Bigness to the detriment of the city, to the point that the city is identified (maybe swallowed) by Bigness itself: "Bigness no longer needs the city: it competes with the city; it represents the city; it preempts the city; or better still, it is the city" (Koolhaas 1995: 515).

On the one hand, Bigness is actually revolutionising the own concept of the city and the inhabiting, as with the Sky Mile Tower case (the construction is expected by 2045 for a height of 1700 metres) where the project is conceived within a wider renovation of the entire Tokyo (see https:// www.kpf.com/projects/next-tokyo); on the other hand, Koolhaas describes this process as an antagonism, not always clear, between city and Bigness. Indeed, we have to question if we can carefully start talking about the future demise of a specific way of inhabiting, that is the city, in favour of a living-solution which elicits completely different agencies and experience into dwellers, both spatial and relational, where "its size alone will explode the texture of normal life" (Koolhaas 1978: 89). Nevertheless, something different seems to happen. Looking at the development of cities more than twenty years after Koolhaas' work, there does not seem to be a real antithesis between Bigness and city. Indeed, we have in a certain way achieved the same outcome stated by the architect: Bigness is becoming the city itself, but not in a catastrophic sense. We could consider the breakage provoked by these structures as a harmony which has incurably come apart, or as an already-new form of unity, which

certainly is no more organic, but which is already a city when is erected, in the moment in which it begins to signify together with other buildings. In other words, the relation between Bigness and city could be seen as a mere irreparable contrast (which often sounds like a nostalgic position in view of the mutation undergone by the cityscape: "Fuck the contest!" writes Koolhaas provocatively) or try to consider the ascent of this model from another point of view, as an already solved contrast. Finally, we can conceive the question from the point of view traced by Calvino in *Invisible Cities*, when, speaking about Olinda, he imagines the urbanisation process as a continuous and living genesis:

The old walls expand bearing the old quarters with them, enlarged, but maintaining their proportions on a broader horizon at the edges of the city; they surround the slightly newer quarters, which also grew up on the margins and became thinner to make room for still more recent ones pressing from inside; and so, on and on, to the heart of the city, a totally new Olinda which, in its reduced dimensions retains the features and the flow of lymph of the first Olinda and all the Olindas that have blossomed one from the other; and within this innermost circle there are already blossoming – through it is hard to discern them – the next Olinda and those that will grow after it. (Calvino 1972: 150-1)

Whether we consider the development of these constructions positive or negative, we have to focus on the significances of these models. Architectural forms – maybe we must emphasise it especially during these times – are representations, as well as each kind of art, of the spirit of the time. Then, there is no doubt that the proliferation of specific models, but also their repetition bordering the sequential, implicates precise significances (Gregotti 2013: 221-2). In these dynamic, the role of architecture as well as the one of the architect changes profoundly: architects, or today better to say "archistars" (Lo Ricco, Micheli 2003), trespass on city planning, contributing to re-design completely the urban context and revolutionise essentially the experience and the aesthetics of the city. A path historically begun with Haussmann, and then continued by the modern dream with Le Corbusier and the American urbanists of the 20th century, but that today is strongly alive, although under different forms and different powers.

Finally, besides the economic and practical implications, we can state that this current phenomenon is changing radically, at least in some part of the globe, the model of the city *on a human scale*, which perhaps enclosed the very essence of the city. Nevertheless, we are now observing the results: these architectural forms seem transcend

the architecture itself, which in addition to creating appropriate spaces for human needs, creates also a precise aesthetic experience of cityscapes and defines anew the very essence of the urban space for who is called to live the city, as citizen or simply as *flâneurs*.

2. *The subject: Analytic of the sublime*

Whether or not we decide to use the terms "hyper-architecture" or "post-architecture" (Koolhaas 1995: 516) to define the architecture overpassing a certain scale, as Koolhaas does, it is important to clarify what arrives to the beholder's eye. It is necessary then to go beyond the architectural value embodied by this category of structures and to analyse the aesthetic experience of the subject in front of these buildings, and then, maybe, coming back to the object. We will attempt to face this issue involving the category of the sublime, which is manifestly recalled by oversize buildings, like Bigness.

The concept of sublime is always defined in relation to a greatness, as Saint Girons states, "the sublime is first of all the risk of greatness, or better, the greatness conceived as risk" (Saint Girons 2003: 41). Regretfully, in contemporaneity this term is often associated to tall constructions, with regard to the most popular etymological significance of the word, namely *sub* and *limine*. The word is just referred to something outstanding high, frequently even ignoring the inner reference to architecture: "limine" indicates indeed something that is upon the architrave of doorstep (Bodei 2008: 21). Conceiving the sublime in this way makes the concept little more than a mere adjective, without grasping its proper oblique character and its ethical shades. Today, the sublime could also be seen as something "in decline" (Scolari 2009: 40), in relation to a weak architecture which aims merely to awe the subject: "Buildings and squares seem predisposed to enchant, to excite and even to surpass the senses, and not to speak to the reason, to set up a speech under the sign of rationality with observers and users" (Scolari 2009: 54). Even if "contemporary psychologists have sometime studied the sublime under another name, awe" (Clewis 2019: 1), this definition doesn't express the complex panorama generated by this "aesthetic quality" (Clewis 2019: 3), that is the sublime. So, it's necessary to retrace briefly the theoretical lines of this concept to comprehend whether today is still possible to speak of an authentic sublime.

In Kant's third *Critique* the sublime represents the moment in which, during the analysis of the aesthetic judgement, intervenes the reason,

diverting the reflection from a purely aesthetic sphere to a moral one. In the philosopher's view, the sublime brings the subject a long way from the starting point, that is the sensible experience: it directly recalls the concepts of the *visible* space occupied by the object, and that of the *invisible* space occupied by the sentiment, the authentic sublime, elicited by it.

If Kant's complex issue about the sublime – focusing on the mathematic one – had to be summed up in few sentences, we could say that what is absolutely great, beyond all comparison (Kant 1790: 103), puts in crisis the capacity of representation: imagination, appointed to connect faculties, is not able to efficiently mediate between sensory and intellect. The subject cannot measure mathematically the space perceived as absolutely great, but he is called to gauge by sight. The imagination failure, in grasping that phenomenon, involves the faculty which makes us think beyond the representable, the reason, which brings the subject to foreseen his transcendental destination: "This inadequacy itself is the arousal in us of the feeling that we have within us a supersensible power; and what is absolutely large is not an object of sense, but is the use that judgment makes naturally of certain objects so as to [arouse] this (feeling) [...]"(Kant 1790: 106).

In fact, the Analytic of the Sublime is important because, although it arises from the aesthetics, it transcends it. Kant doesn't show what the sublime objects are, but which are the processes trigged in the human soul: how our imagination is limited and how, instead, our reason is able to think the infinite as a given whole. The space disclosed by the sublime is something fundamental, which is not all about the judgement: the judgement paves the way for the moral field. Starting from this reality, which is able to elicit in us the sentiment of the sublime, we can foresee the exceptional quality of human being. In other worlds, we can transcend the real and extend our soul.

Since contemporary architecture presents absolutely great constructions, one has to wonder whether these kinds of objects, through their formal characteristics, are able to elicit a process analogous to the one described by Kant: to go beyond the appearances and to feel a sentiment of admiration for the breadth of our reason.

The fact that the sublime is referred by Kant to a sentiment arisen from the encounter with natural objects – and by contrast with none artefact object – face us the first problem to be solved: to admit a such class of objects in the inquiry. Secondly, we need to clarify whether and how this class of objects elicits in the subject the feeling of sublime, in other words,

if occurs that *substitution* (*subreption*) which confuses the respect towards the object with the one towards our idea of humanity (Kant 1790: 114). This perspective is in accordance with a notable recent study about the sublime, carried out by Emily Brady, who – even though she doesn't consider arts as sublime in the original sense – states that "arts can convey sublimity, while not actually being sublime themselves" (Brady 2013: 120) and also that "some works of architecture do possess the scale necessary for sublimity, and evoke the kinds of reactions that might render them new paradigm cases alongside the natural ones provided by the 'original sublime'" (Brady 2013: 142). In fact, we are not talking about whether or not architecture could be sublime, but, once again, whether according to some parameters, we can recover this feeling together with its theoretical package, inspired by Kant's theory of sublime.

In Kant's theory, the purpose of sublime must be subjective and hence it must not present any internal aim. However, right among the pages of the third *Critique* one can find some tools to overcome this problem. In fact, on the one hand, Kant excludes explicitly the architectural object from his argumentation – "we must point to the sublime not in products of art (e.g., buildings, columns, etc.), where both the form and the magnitude are determined by a human purpose" (Kant 1790: 109) – on the other hand, in the § 26, the author refers to two examples taken from architecture. The Pyramids and Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome are conceived as case studies where the measure is estimated, evaluated aesthetically and imagination is rebuffed trying to figure the idea of the whole. So, in a certain way, it seems appropriate to include the architectural object in the sublime category, even though it has a clear aim.

Moreover, also a natural object, like the starry sky, could have an aim – to get oriented – but, Kant states, "we must base our judgment regarding it [the object] merely on how we see it" and "merely in terms of what manifests itself to the eye" (Kant 1790: 130). In short, one must trust just in the immediate *aesthetic* intuition. The subject should at first *limit* himself to the object image, leaving aside what he knows about it, realising, speaking in phenomenological terms, a sort of *epoché*[2].

[2] A similar process, a preliminary reduction of imagination, has been described by Mikel Dufrenne in the *Phenomenology of aesthetic experience*, aiming to the analysis of the aesthetic object's experience in the broad sense. In fact, in the second phase of the aesthetic experience, according to him, the spectator must repress empiric imagination in its associative capacity and keep just its transcendental functions, thanks to

Nevertheless, exercising an *epoché* it seems actually unpracticable: the subject – who often is just a passer-by – cannot be asked to adopt a specific attitude, at least not in these terms. Another scenario seems more plausible: when someone is in front, or better at the foot or even at the top, of a skyscraper, the thought about the object's purpose easily vanishes. The subject's gaze is not interested in the functions performed by the building, rather the building itself requires that the beholder considers it just in its formal aspect, instead of its *practical aims*.

When architecture turns into Bigness, the relation between inside and outside no longer embodies an efficacious correspondence: for instance, the massive use of reflecting surfaces used as external material of facades doesn't allow the beholder even to *imagine* what is going on inside buildings. In other cases, the vastness of the construction doesn't allow to determinate it clearly: "The distance between core and envelope increases to the point where the facade can no longer reveal what happens inside." (Koolhaas 1995: 500-1) In the same way, the frequent absence of elements, like windows for instance, makes the object aseptic, where the principal purpose of buildings – the inhabiting – remains inscrutable, making the structure a homogenized monolith or a set of curvilinear structures, lowered from the sky. The balance between form and function is broken. The battle is over: the function is taken for granted, the shape, acquiring colossal dimensions, has swallowed the function, not just metaphorically.

Finally, this kind of buildings presents at first its formal rather than its functional aspect. It can be said with Gadamer that "where the original intention becomes completely unrecognizable […] then the building itself becomes incomprehensible" (Gadamer 1960: 149). Although the philosopher spoke about the wear of time which changes buildings in ruins, it could be useful for our case: indeed, the original purpose of Bigness is not *immediately* recognisable from the start. The building is, also in this case, something incomprehensible.

Of course, the subject always has a sort of preliminary awareness by which the object is posed – he knows that what he's staring at is a building, as well as he knows that the object he has in front, for instance, is a mountain – yet it's still necessary to comprehend whether our apprehension goes towards a logic comprehension or towards an *aesthetic comprehension*, as Kant would say (Kant 1790: 108). The object, in the case of

which a "pure" representation of the object is possible, so as to apply a proper aesthetic attitude. See Dufrenne 1973.

a huge architecture, is given, but the shape, whose immediate feature is the size, exceed the purpose. There is no immediately comprehensible reason, there are no practical motives why the shape or the bigness of the structure are functional to what happens inside and often neither to the place where it's located. Hence, if according to this thought Bigness is not immediately comprehensible, namely its purpose is not visible, it can be taken into consideration by the aesthetic judgement. In short, the aim of *a* building is well-known, but these ones are realized with a style which overpasses the aim itself, making them possible just for a pure aesthetic comprehension.

Once admitted this class of colossal architectures, or afflicted by "gigantism" (Soleri 1981b), into the family of experience named sublime (Crowther 2016: 58), first one needs to understand how faculties are involved and how they play in the experience of a certain cityscape. Secondly, it is also important to understand on which ground the failure of imagination, together with the recourse of reason, leads the subject. So, with reference to Kant's theory, the experience of the sublime can be divided in two moments.

3. *The critical stage*

The first stage is strictly experiential, when the subject has to do directly with the building as the object of perception in its formality. This moment is bound to the displeasure for the crisis of representation: imagination, due to the magnitude of the object, is not able to estimate properly the size. This phase, which in the first instance could be considered as just negative, corresponds – in Kant's words – to the upset and the embarrass which can be felt by the subject during the apprehension and the aesthetic comprehension: "Comprehension becomes more and more difficult the farther apprehension progresses, and it soon reaches its maximum, namely the aesthetically largest basic measure for an estimation of magnitude" (Kant 1790: 108). The problem is grounded in the human physiology: at a close range it is not possible to embrace in a single glance that object; the breadth of gaze is limited (on the other hand if one gets too far, as with the example of the Pyramids, one cannot completely grasp the impression of greatness of the object). In the same way, some examples of architectures put the subject in crisis due to their magnitude, since, to be more precisely, trying to create proper representations, they put in crisis the representational capacity itself: the subject is not able to grasp

immediately the whole of an object. We can try, in order to clarify our position about the discomfort felt by the subject, to answer the paradoxical questions surfaced by Forsey:

What of the cognitive failure I have occasionally experienced in the face of the *New York Times* crossword puzzle, or complex mathematical problems that truly humble me? […] What of the vulnerability I feel when riding my bicycle in rush-hour traffic and making it – just home safely? Why are these sorts of experiences not also sublime or, at any rate, equal candidates for the kind of pleasure that a subjective account would properly call sublime? (Forsey 2007: 12)

The crisis generated by these kinds of spectacles is very precise. It is not about a vague sense of impotence, or a temporary vulnerability due to external cause, it is more than that. First, the sublime feeling evoked by the object is related to the impotence of our faculties, to the vulnerability we feel about the incapacity of structuring properly an experience in front of determinates unmeasurable objects; in other words, all these considerations happen during a perceptual experience of an object with peculiar characteristics. Secondly, the cognitive failure or vulnerability are part of every-day-life and can be caused by countless phenomena, not necessary by something sublime. Moreover, the critical stage is just a passage, not the final result, although fundamental: the authentic sublime originates into the crisis, understood here in its radical significance, as the crucial moment in which it's necessary to distinguish, namely to exercise the capacity of judgement; something which, through its initial negativity, impels us to its own overcoming: it is a "possibility of" (see Franzini 2015).

Only passing through the critical moment one can achieve the following stage: in its dialogical power, the crisis induces the engagement of reason to solve the impasse, to lead the subject beyond the negative moment, namely "critic", where the categories through which the perception is usually systematised are no more sufficient. In this case the conflict is inside the imagination itself – it is "an internal limit" (Saint Girons, 2005: 136) – so the subject experiences the failure of this faculty and a real lack. Imagination is "violated" (Lyotard 1995: 71).

The critical moment is something essential and defining of the sublime, not just a necessary painfully phase to achieve the authentic fullness of this feeling. This "bewilderment" (Kant 1790: 108), as Kant calls it, is first of all important in itself. The crisis forces us to a total suspension and to reconnect us to our original dimension. The short circuit created between the apprehensive moment and the (aesthetic) comprehension reminds us

that we are primarily sensitive beings. This brings back to the roots not just of our experience as an original modality of knowledge, but also of the subject himself as sensitive being.

Lyotard states it clearly in one of his works dedicated to the sublime, where the affection of the sublime makes more evident the aesthetic affection in general. The philosopher overturns the perspective on the sensory experience, balancing anew the classic dichotomy subject/object in favour of sensible data: he doesn't speak about a subject (which he named "anima" [soul]) who grasps the sensible datum; but rather about the sensible datum, l'*aistheton*, which "en fait surgir une âme" (Lyotard 1993: 205). In spite of the decontructivist outcomes of Lyotard, who would question or suspend the subjectivity principle itself, this passage must seriously make us think: the soul is, at least in principle, the sensation by which is affected. That is what human being is all about: he is enlivened, Lyotard says: "l'*existe*" (Lyotard 1993: 205), due to the sensible data. Hence under this light, the aesthetic is not just the beginning of each knowledge, but it acquires a crucial significance: it founds what the philosopher calls *anima minima*, that is the indispensable glimmer of "I", which cannot be avoided. The sublime, so conceived, reduces greatly its breadth and has to be considered just an event among the events of existence (or perhaps it would be better to say "non-existence"), where artworks would be just episodic moments of salvation from the "anaesthetic". After all, Lyotard's view leaves a sort of *horror vacui*, similar in tonality to the "tranquility tinged with terror" (Burke 1759: 136) described by Burke.

Without reaching the extreme outcomes of the author, we need instead to set aside the *anima minima*, conceiving it not reduced as the unique and last possible certitude, but rather as a beginning, or, to say it better, an ever-new recommencement of the aesthetic being of humans. A recommencement which nowadays is more and more needed. We are far too dead, lifeless souls, living more and more in an ideal dimension beyond the sensible, in an aseptic world where communities become increasingly virtual, where exchanges happen through screens and encounters vanish. In this scenario, it seems like architecture must die together with the old-fashion sensible world, conceived by now "a leftover become cumbersome" (Baudrillard 2009: 27). On the contrary, architecture stresses its sensible roots, acting exactly as the *medium* it is, challenging our perception. According to Agamben, the apparatuses we are dealing with today produce a subjectivation "except in larval or, as it were, spectral form" (Agamben 2006: 21); instead the Bigness tries to

overturn this conception: starting from the inevitable imposition of its presence (in the name of greatness), once again it redefines us as gaze, subjects, spectators, dwellers of space. Architecture becomes an *apparatus*, taking us back at least at the *anima minima*, where our own identity of subjects is at stake.

Hence the first partial conclusion is that architecture, so *conceived*, steers us towards some form of positive ontology of sensation. The *anima minima* is what we need to recover today, our essential core, what is awaken from the bigness experience shock. These days, to still evoke the mystery of sensation seems even more urgent than achieving awareness of the breadth of our faculties. To be still able to feel to be *affected* by the real, it seems already an ambitious goal.

4. *The space of reason and imagination*

In Kant's theory, the extension of the soul opens in fact another space and embodies the actual sublime, when the human reason, starting from the finitude of intuition, reaches ideally the infinity. The authentic shock – the one, according to Kant, producing admiration, namely "an amazement that does not cease once the novelty is gone" (Kant 1790: 133) – is indispensable in order for the senses to give the way to the reason, so that a space beyond the physical is disclosed: the space of thought[3].

In the experience of Bigness, once overpassed the critical moment, where does the intervention of reason lead us? Can we still achieve the intuition of the infinity?

Although nowadays the technological progression allows to realise structures previously unthinkable, both in form and size, human beings can *just* aim to an absolute greatness, namely the infinity, which they'll never be able to really achieve. Huge constructions, which seem to elevate human beings at the same level or even above Nature, bring us endlessly back to our dimension, to our finitude, in a single word, to our

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[3] This aspect of Kant's theory could be reconducted to Burke's imagination engagement in perceiving vastness, as recalled by Brady: "These ideas clearly prefigure Kant's mathematical sublime and his notion of imagination expanding as 'it advances to infinity'" (Brady 2013: 26). Especially the way in which Burke briefly describes the notion of an "artificial infinite", as something dealing with succession and uniformity (Burke 1759: 139-43; Saint Girons 2003: 68), truly concerns the categories of tall buildings and Bigness.

humanity. The myth of Babel, where humans want to build a tower tall up to God, which however has to descend to see what happens, recurs in a modern interpretation: the Nature or the absolute remains an unachievable horizon, which is called forth by these constructions just indirectly. Finally, as in Kant's sublime Nature, also in Bigness there will always be an infinitely-big to achieve, empirically unattainable by definition, but attainable just ideally through the use of reason. In synthesis, such architectures, so conceived as aesthetic objects, are able to recover the sentiment of sublime through our cityscapes, taking back the absolutely-big evoked by Nature in our everyday experience as citizens, but also to disclose the thought about the absolutely-great inside us.

Let's redefine for the last time the crisis by Franzini's words, which illuminate the nature of the second stage: "Crisis is not just the collapse of reason, but rather, on the contrary, it is its own way to proceed, to be aware of the sense of things, beyond of their surface and appearances, but still starting from them, and over and over again questioning them, undergoing them to a new gaze, a new representation, and a new judgement" (Franzini 2015: 61). So, the second stage of the experience is an actual invitation to a *critical thought*, to experience our capacity of judgement which institutes us as subject, as well as our being sensitive. Hence, this experience makes us see how much more there is besides the *anima minima*, although it is the necessary starting point to rediscover oneself.

An absolutely-big which perhaps doesn't aim to the fullness of reason as absolute enlightenment, but together with the imagination work, as cognitive productive faculty, addresses us towards the search of possible meanings of the reality. The greatness of the sublime is, at the end, a sort of "loan from the supersensible to the sensible" (Saint Girons 1993: 43), so it is not necessary to evoke, as Lyotard does, an ontology of absence (Lyotard 1971: 204), but on the contrary, to turn to an ontology of the presence, starting from which is possible to discover the symbolic strength of certain representations, and to recover architecture as a net of possible significances:

Architecture, again in its broader scope, is not only a shelter for communication and information institutions, a medium, but is also strongly and directly, at times overbearingly, mass information itself. A message, a multiplication of messages which, besides having in the context of the city a character as pervasive as agriculture, also has the intensity and the concentration peculiar to the action of consciousness upon its own flesh, so to speak, almost as if the folding over of the

cerebral cortex would correspond to a folding over of layer upon layer of significance, the significance one can perceive in the most successful cityscapes (Soleri 1981a).

The experience of big architecture aims to discover this stratification of meanings. Architecture, and especially this type, can represent the renewing of the aesthetic judgement as source of ideas. Man can recover in the experience of the sublime a space to renew his thought about infinity, about absoluteness, but also, generally, to open a space of thoughts beyond the appearance.

If there has to be a form of rebellion towards the *apparatuses* promulgated by society, which make all us "subjects in the very of their desubjectification" (Agamben 2006: 19-20), then the recovery of our experiential dimension can primarily reestablish our identity of subjects, exercising our critical and productive thought. It doesn't happen then, as in Lyotard, that the thought drowns and the whole individuality loses and vanishes. The aesthetic experience of skyscrapers *displaces* us, but to make us move towards another space, the one of the ideas of reason and imagination, capable to extend the soul of the subject. The sublime essentially is precisely this: to elevate oneself beyond the limits of one's own existence. So, the subject doesn't lose its centre achieving deconstructed visions, but he reaffirms even more clearly his own unity and his power in displacing himself from sensible reality and proceeding ideally towards something metaphysic.

"La 'modernité' d'aujourd'hui", Lyotard claims, "n'attend pas de l'*aisthesis* qu'elle donne à l'âme la paix du beau consentement, mais *que* l'arrache de justesse au néant." (Lyotard 1993: 207) I don't know if todays it is still possible to speak about what the modern age experts; Without a doubt, *we* expect from *aisthesis* not just a flat and empty passive attitude in front of the images – the peace – but rather *we* must expect that the *aisthesis* reaffirms itself as the primal core of the subject and, far from superficial appearances, evokes the other-than-itself, namely the reason. In conclusion, if architecture elicits more and more a shock by means of awe-inspiring objects, that must avoid the risk to fold in on itself, making architecture just a simulacrum. So, the sublime cannot be "the evidence of incapacity to raise the question of the sense, namely the escape from the critic reasons" (Gregotti 2013: XV), but conversely represents the effort to stand firm into the crisis, reaffirming a *critical* thought. Finally, nowadays architecture needs an experience where the gaze returns the

symbolic complexity of the object and where the sublime can be recovered: restarting from the crisis, recalling human beings to their own productive faculties, remembering their own distinctiveness.

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