

# Black Holes: Artistic metaphors for the contemporaneity

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**Abstract.** This paper investigates the cultural significance of black holes and suns as metaphors in continental European literature and art, drawing on theoretical insights from French continental authors such as Jean-François Lyotard and Ray Brassier. Lyotard suggests that black holes signify the ultimate form of the sublime, representing the displacement of humanity and our unease with our place in the cosmos. On the other hand, Brassier views black holes as a consequence of the entropic dissolution of matter, reflecting physical reality's indifference to subjective or teleological significance. The study also presents a curated collection of literary works and artworks that employ black holes and suns as metaphors, examining the emergence of these metaphorical objects and identifying discursive and epistemological shifts in society. Furthermore, this collaborative research project, involving the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo and the Federal Fluminense University in Brazil, and the Charles University in Prague in the Czech Republic, aims to provide a valuable resource for further academic inquiry.

**Keywords.** Black Holes; Black Suns; Metaphors; Artwork; Literature; Contemporary Continental Philosophy.

## 1. Introduction

Since their inception in the 1960s, black holes and suns have become a prevalent theme in both intellectual and popular discourse as metaphorical objects. They have replaced the traditional sun as a key metaphor in contemporary continental philosophy, and their cultural significance has been widely studied. Jean-François Lyotard argues that the black hole represents the ultimate form of the sublime, as it signifies the absence of an object that has become pure acceleration [8, p. 21]. This idea points to the displacement of humanity and our general distrust in our belonging to the cosmos. Ray Brassier contends that black holes are the ultimate consequence of the entropic dissolution of matter, representing a limit-point at which physical reality becomes indifferent to any teleological or subjective significance [2, p. 197].

The aim of our study is to explore the cultural significance of black holes and suns and how they shape our understanding of the universe and our place within it. Specifically, we seek to examine the emergent metaphorical object of the black hole and its potential to provide a new perspective on the role of humans in the grand scheme of the cosmos. This

fascination with black holes extends to artists and writers, who use them as metaphors. Lyotard notes that they are the cosmic equivalent of dark paintings that cannot be seen [8, p. 21].

In this sense, the use of images and iconoclastic material in philosophy as a source and approach is indeed unconventional in the history of the discipline. Philosophy, traditionally considered an abstract and text-based field, has primarily relied on logical arguments, rational discourse, and written texts as the primary means of inquiry and communication. However, the incorporation of images and iconoclastic material into philosophical methodology offers a fresh and alternative perspective that challenges conventional norms.

According to Shusterman (2012), incorporating diverse modes of expression, such as images and iconoclastic material, into philosophical inquiry can enrich the philosophical discourse by engaging the senses and emotions, stimulating imagination, and opening new avenues for creativity and exploration. Images and iconoclastic material can serve as powerful tools, as they have conveyed complex concepts in a visually compelling manner. They can provide a tangible and sensory experience that engages the reader or viewer in a more immediate

and visceral way. Moreover, images and iconoclastic material can challenge established beliefs, break down traditional thought patterns, and disrupt conventional modes of reasoning, inviting critical reflection, fostering innovative approaches to philosophical inquiry, tapping into the affective dimension of human experience, and creating a more holistic approach to philosophical inquiry.

As Shusterman (2012) argues, the use of images and iconoclastic material in philosophy challenges the traditional dichotomy between reason and imagination, logic and aesthetics, and text and image. It expands the possibilities of philosophical inquiry by incorporating diverse modes of expression and engagement and launching new avenues for creativity and exploration. Through the integration of images and iconoclastic material, philosophers can transcend the traditional boundaries between reason and imagination, logic and aesthetics, and text and image, allowing a more holistic and inclusive approach to philosophical inquiry.

Thus, incorporating images and iconoclastic material in philosophical methodology challenges the conventional norms of the discipline and offers a fresh and innovative approach to philosophical inquiry. It enriches the philosophical discourse by engaging the senses, stimulating imagination, and fostering critical reflection, making it a unique and valuable addition to the methodology of philosophy.

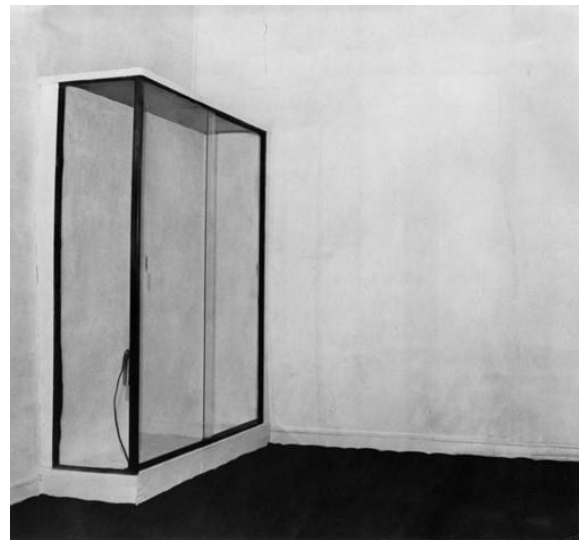
## 2. GOAL

Our research project aims to identify and analyze works of art and literature that employ black holes as metaphors. We will undertake a literary and iconological analysis of a diverse collection of papers, books, paintings, sculptures, installations, and other creative works, with the goal of providing a comprehensive and curated resource for further academic inquiry. Through this effort, we aim to shed light on the cultural significance of black holes as metaphorical objects and their place in continental European literature and art.

This collaborative research project between Brazil (namely, the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo, and the Federal Fluminense University) and the Czech Republic (Charles University in Prague) aimed to create a comprehensive and curated resource for further academic inquiry into the cultural significance of black holes as metaphorical objects in continental European literature and art. Lyotard (1991) indicates that the universe, as we know it today, appears to us as a black hole, highlighting its importance in contemporary philosophy and culture. Hence, our research project drew upon theoretical concepts from philosophers such as the above-mentioned, and Ray Brassier, who see philosophy as a practice of destabilization and critique.

Furthermore, revealing the emergent metaphorical

object of the black hole and suns, we aimed to identify discursive and epistemological changes in society by examining their persistent use as central metaphorical objects. To achieve this, we curated a collection of literary works and academic papers that use black holes and suns in this sense and collected a range of artistic works such as paintings, sculptures, and installations, with a focus on post-War works, particularly those interested in exploring the infinite and mysterious nature of black holes and suns.



**Fig. 1** - *Le Vide*, by Yves Klein (1958)

## 3. DEVELOPMENT

Guided by theoretical insights from continental French authors, we developed our research project to explore the cultural significance of black holes as metaphorical objects in continental European literature and art. Lyotard's book "The Inhuman: Reflections on Time" inspired our investigation into the displacement of the human subject and its relation to the universe. He argues that the modern human subject can no longer comprehend the totality of the universe and its relation to time, displaced by the infinite and the unknown, such as black holes and suns. This idea resonates with our research, as black holes have emerged as central metaphorical objects in contemporary continental philosophy, reflecting a general distrust in the human subject's place in the cosmos.

In addition, Brassier's book "Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction" focuses on the philosophical implications of scientific discoveries in contemporary cosmology, particularly the concept of cosmic extinction. He argues that the universe is indifferent to human concerns, and the inevitability of death is the only certainty in life. This notion of cosmic indifference is reflected in the cultural significance of black holes, which are often depicted as cosmic monsters that devour everything in their

path. Brassier's (2007) ideas on cosmic indifference and extinction are significant for understanding black holes as metaphorical objects in contemporary art and philosophy: for him, the universe is not made for us, but precisely the opposite; we are made for the universe.

Moreover, metaphorical objects are particularly important as they can reveal latent and subterranean trends within our cultural landscape that might not be easily discernible from an everyday perspective. As physiologists of civilization, we must observe and understand the symptoms of deeper and obscure aspects of our society that impact our culture in various ways. This strand of cultural analysis, which emphasizes the importance of cultural criticism and semiological analysis, finds its most renowned member in Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche utilized the prevalence of Christian images and morals to identify a crisis in Western culture. He famously stated, "I am no earthquake; I am merely the seismograph," highlighting how he was not defending the growing nihilism present in his books, but rather describing what he saw. In reality, nihilism was Nietzsche's greatest enemy.

Nietzsche saw an inherent contradiction between the morality of the good and the bad, the slave morality and the morality of the strong. The former is characterized by resentment and reaction, while the latter is characterized by creativity and spontaneous action. His works carefully demonstrated the dithyrambic sounds of the dawn of modernity. The current crisis within Western culture is characterized mainly by a rejection of previous meta-narratives that describe and imbue the world with meaning (religious, cultural, scientific, philosophical). There is a growing loss of meaning in world culture as we become more and more alienated and displaced from our surroundings. Additionally, resulting in atomized and fragmentary social circles and discontinuous cultural lineages are a result of the stable or univocal traditions dissolution. All of these themes were present in Nietzsche's works and are further discussed in J. F. Lyotard's books, especially "La Condition Postmoderne."

Our observations on black holes are, in a sense, an extension of the first diagnosis espoused by Nietzsche. We agree that there is a clear displacement and estrangement that characterizes our cultural identity. We feel a malaise, a lack of roots, a dissonance between ourselves and the rest of the silent, cold, and unrelenting universe. However, there is a fundamental difference: while Nietzsche was a staunch critic of Christianity and its project, he also remained deeply indebted to Christianity as a whole. His most famous work, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra," is written in a parabolic literary style, mimicking and somewhat parodying the Christian evangelicals. Brassier argues that even though Nietzsche was correct in his criticisms of Christianity, he ultimately failed in embracing the inevitable nihilism that arises as a consequence of the cultural

and spiritual crisis. His attempts at warding off the growing absence of sense and meaning in the world are useless because, according to Brassier, we must embrace the recognition that we are exiles in a senseless, strange world. We should not take sides with one philosopher or the other, but we must overcome the predicament of the association of Nietzsche's project with Christianity. One of the novelties of Brassier's "reawakening" of the debate on nihilism, crisis, and human displacement in the world is its "secular" aspect. The philosopher deprives the debate of its previous mythical nostalgia and spiritual undertones and, following Lyotard, utilizes images of solar catastrophe, black suns, death of the sun, and black holes as the quintessential images of our current predicament. Brassier argues that thought lies facing destruction and takes Freud's theory of the death drive as a starting point.

Additionally, our research also aimed to curate a collection of literary works, academic papers, and artworks that employ black holes and suns as metaphors. We drew upon a wide range of sources, including works by French philosophers, and the artwork of several artists, like Yves Klein. Thus, Deleuze, in "Dialogues II" [3, p. 62], briefly discusses the concept of "black light as a "light that comes from nowhere, that cannot be located, and that takes us to the limits of visibility". He then draws a comparison to black holes, stating that they are "black holes of light," representing "an intensity of non-visible light that absorbs all visible light". He uses this comparison to explore the idea of the limits of representation and the need for new forms of thought and expression that go beyond conventional ways of seeing and understanding the world. Moreover, Derrida's (1982) concept of *différance*, a movement of difference that produces and constitutes meanings, provides a useful lens through which to examine the diverse collection of literary and philosophical papers that we compiled.

One artistic example is "Landscape with Black Sun," (Fig. 2) a captivating painting by Mordecai Ardon painted in 1961. The painting is an oil on canvas artwork that measures 78.7 x 100 cm and is currently housed at the Jewish Museum of New York. The artwork is an outstanding example of Ardon's use of symbolism and his ability to explore complex themes through his art. The painting features a black hole at the center of a desolate landscape. The landscape itself is barren, and there is no sign of life. The sun, which is usually associated with warmth and light, is replaced by a black hole, creating a sense of dread and hopelessness. The painting represents the artist's interest in the Kabbalah and its darkness, emptiness, and nothingness concepts. The black hole in the painting is symbolic of the void or emptiness in life. It represents the absence of meaning and purpose, leaving the viewer with a sense of despair and hopelessness.



**Fig. 2** - *Landscape with Black Sun*, by Mordecai Ardon (1961).

Ardon's use of color is significant, with dark and muted colors dominating the painting, further emphasizing the bleakness of the scene. One of the striking aspects of the painting is the way Ardon creates a sense of movement in the composition. The use of bold lines and curves creates a sense of flow, leading the viewer's eyes around the painting. The dynamic composition draws the viewer into the painting, making them feel like they are a part of the bleak landscape. Therefore, *Landscape with Black Sun* is an outstanding work of art that is thought-provoking and emotionally impactful. The painting's themes of darkness and emptiness may seem depressing, but Ardon's use of symbolism and dynamic composition make it a powerful and engaging work of art.



**Fig. 3** - *Descent Into Limbo*, by Anish Kapoor (1992)

Among other artworks we identified were Anish Kapoor's painting "Descent Into Limbo," (1992) (Fig. 3) which evokes a sense of cosmic terror and uncertainty, and Yves Klein's sculpture "Le Vide," (1958) (Fig. 1) which represents an empty space that invites the viewer to contemplate the infinite and the unknown. Regarding literary artwork, this passage from "The Silence" [5, p. 30] is an example that sums this contemporary, paradigmatic that characterizes the philosophical problems of our time: "Einstein and black holes in space. He said it and then we saw it.

Billions of times more massive than our sun. He said it many decades ago. His universe became ours. Black holes. The event horizon. The atomic clocks. Seeing the unseeable. North-central Chile...". These pieces, along with many others, provide a visual representation of the cultural significance of black holes and their role as metaphorical objects in contemporary art and philosophy.

## 4. METHODOLOGY

The success of this research project depended heavily on its methodology, which was designed to effectively map and compile literary and artistic works that use black holes as metaphors. To achieve this goal, the researchers employed a range of digital search tools and academic databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, and Google Books. They also leveraged systems from various museums and galleries, such as the British Museum and the Jewish Museum of New York, to gather a diverse collection of fine art sources. Throughout the project, the researchers maintained regular communication between Brazil and the Czech Republic through Zoom meetings and messaging apps, enabling them to receive guidance on material selection and share theoretical and historical knowledge about the research subject. They also read academic articles and literary works critically, which often led to unexpected discoveries and redirected them to other writers' works. We have also tried to exclude science fiction works to focus on the chosen field of study, as it seemed to be out of our interest scope.

The methodology was designed to produce a vast array of sources and material for further academic inquiry into the themes and motifs of continental European literature and art. The researchers meticulously cataloged and organized all the materials, making them available online in Google Drive for easy access by their supervisor. In general, the methodology employed in this research project was systematic, rigorous, and highly effective in achieving the project's goal of creating a comprehensive and curated resource for further academic inquiry.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In summary, our research project achieved its objective of creating an extensive and well-organized resource for academic inquiry into the cultural significance of black holes and suns as metaphorical and meaningful objects. By employing an innovative methodology, we identified and curated a total of 28 academic papers and books, and 37 artworks, that utilized black holes as metaphors. Our methodology involved utilizing various digital search tools and academic databases to map and curate continental European literature and art that incorporated black holes and suns as metaphors. Our collaboration with

Professor Váša (Charles University in Prague), fostered cross-institutional academic cooperation and cultural exchange. We categorized and systematized all materials, making them easily accessible to both countries. Overall, our research project provides an important and comprehensive resource for further exploration and research into the black hole as a metaphorical object, and its potential to shape our understanding of the human experience in the cosmos.

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