Malevich's Post-Suprematist Paintings and the Construction of History

by

Marie E. Gasper-Hulvat

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ProQuest LLC.
789 East Eisenhower Parkway
P.O. Box 1346
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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation discusses Kazimir Malevich's post-abstract, post-suprematist figurative work by drawing upon semiotic and post-structuralist theories, addressing questions such as: Why did Malevich return to painting figures after adamantly abandoning them for pure abstraction? How do these figures re-figure or resist abstraction? Why did he paint inexact replicas of his own pre-Suprematist works, and why did he give them dates that were similar, or even prior, to the dates of their prototypes? How did he manage to put on an exhibition of his intellectually challenging, subversive works in 1929, at the first moments of sustained state support for proto-socialist realism, at one of the most important museums of Russian art in the Soviet Union, the Tretiakov Gallery in Moscow? How are contemporaneously contested identities of the artist, the Russian peasant, and the Soviet citizen reflected and refracted in the paintings displayed at this exhibition?

The first chapter comprises an introductory survey of pertinent scholarly literature, and discusses methodological grounding within both Russian and Western sources. The second chapter concerns a semiotic reading of the circumstances and documents surrounding the 1929 "retrospective" exhibition, which for the most part displayed paintings composed in the eighteen months prior to the exhibition, but

inscribed with dates from the 1900's and 1910's. This chapter includes a close reading of Alexei Fedorov-Davidov's pamphlet-catalogue accompanying the exhibition, particularly within the context of early Stalinist Marxist discourse, and it discusses how the artist's images of peasants confounded contemporary systems of representation and disrupted attempts to secure a sense of Soviet identity.

Chapter three proposes that postmodern discourses, as opposed to the discourses of modernity within which Malevich's works are most often examined, might be fruitfully employed to frame the artist's circa-1929 work. The fourth chapter considers the ways in which certain paintings from the 1929 exhibition explicitly duplicate works from earlier in Malevich's career, many of which had been destroyed, lost, or otherwise rendered inaccessible. Attention is given to how these paintings participated in contemporaneous and more recent discourses of originality, the copy, and conventionality.

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Chapter One: Introduction

T. J. Clark begins his meditation upon modernism, *Farewell to an Idea*, with a painting by Kazimir Severinovich Malevich – *Complicated Premonition (Torso in a Yellow Shirt)* (circa 1932, Russian Museum Ж-9477) [Figure 1], which he employs rhetorically as one of four "artifacts" of modernism to be excavated by a hypothetical archaeologist of the distant future.[1] Without any context for the work's production, he asks, what could that remote future researcher possibly come to conclude about the modern era? Moreover, looking back upon that era today, what can we conclude, knowing its context? Such questions set the stage for his theoretically intensive consideration of modernism.

Clark's attention to Malevich, however, is fleeting, and his use of the artist's striking image, notably reproduced in full-color as an opening plate for his introductory chapter, along with its portentous title, draws his reader into the rhetorical question which is the premise of his prologue; Malevich's deeply compelling yet unwaveringly silent central figure, placed within a geometric field of color planes, raises more questions than it provides answers, both within the form of the image as well as in Clark's discussion of it. Clark never returns to the image in the remaining four hundred pages of his treatise, choosing instead to focus a chapter upon Malevich and his circle of

[1] T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999) 1, 5.

followers a decade prior to when the reproduced work would be painted.[2] Nevertheless, Clark's enduring questions about how one can approach the modernist artifact remain critical for this painting, along with the dozens of others which Malevich created during the final eight years of his life.

Clark's abandonment of *Complicated Premonition* in favor of an earlier moment in Malevich's career is quite understandable. He forthrightly asserts his decision to include in his discussion those moments and works which present themselves as emblematic of modernism, as consummate examples from which to deduce a more generalized glimpse of what constituted the modern moment. And Malevich's *Complicated Premonition*, as bold, striking, and enticingly mysterious as it might be, is not emblematic of the modern, unlike the moment in Vitebsk in 1920 which Clark chooses to dissect instead.[3] Indeed, *Complicated Premonition*, as part of a large body of work which Malevich created between 1928 and his death in 1935, maintains a highly complex relationship with modernism and its boundaries, and scholars such as Clark are indeed the ones who have helped delineate such boundaries.

Nevertheless, the point I seek to make, by way of this example, is that thus far in art historical literature, the figurative works which Malevich created late in his career, including *Complicated Premonition*, have tended to remain peripheral – both within

[2] Nor will I return to *Complicated Premonition* in the two hundred-odd pages of my treatise, for ultimately this painting remains an outlier (and not a potentially revealing one) to the general parameters of my approach. However, much of the theoretical material which I will employ and propose, particularly that of the second half of my fourth chapter, might apply as well to this image.

[3] For a general overview of the development of the Russian Avant-Garde over the span of time between Clark's Vitebsk moment and the painting of *Complicated Premonition*, see John E. Bowlt, "The Failed Utopia: Russian Art 1917-32," *Art in America* (July 1971) 40-51.

Malevich studies and within critical interrogations of modernism such as Clark's. Some major questions about these works still need to be given sustained attention from a perspective which takes into account contemporary methodological approaches to art historical inquiry. Questions such as, why did Malevich return to figuration? How does his depiction of Russian peasants relate to contemporary debates regarding national identity? What inspired him to paint so many works in such a very short expanse of time? Why do some of these works resemble canvases from his early career, and others not? It will be my aim in this dissertation to address such questions, particularly with respect to works the artist created in 1928 and 1929, framing my considerations within the theoretical paradigms of semiotic and cultural theorists. In this introductory chapter, I will provide an overview of the history and historiography of these works, outlining some basic art historical problems that they pose and giving a summary of the literature published thus far regarding the late figurative paintings in general, as well as those specifically created in 1928 and 1929. Additionally, I will provide a few indications as to my own general methodological approach, along with a brief introduction to the theorists and scholars upon whose work I will draw.

The set of nearly a hundred extant canvases representing our knowledge of Malevich's late oeuvre consists almost exclusively of figurative compositions created during the early Stalinist era, and have posed consternating problems to art historians since the late 1970s, when they first came to light after forty-odd years tucked away in

the storage rooms of Soviet museums, kept secretly safe by generations of Soviet curators.[4] One of the problems with these figurative paintings consists in the fact that Malevich is well known as one of the principal fathers of abstraction, and his inclusion in the art historical canon is almost always limited to his infamous *Black Square* from 1915. Moreover, Malevich was arguably the most vehement father of abstraction in pursuit of his perceived transfiguration of the human experience through painting. His suprematist period, from circa 1915 to circa 1919, was followed by a period during which he abandoned painting pretty much entirely, as far as archival evidence indicates, in favor of pursuing pedagogical endeavors, theoretical research, and the creation of three-dimensional utopian architectural models. And thus one of the questions that Malevich's late-career canvases pose is, how does one move from the infamous *Black Square*, or more significantly, the late suprematist white-on-white canvases, to painting the human figure again? Indeed, it was a problem which Malevich himself took very seriously and a problem which particularly underlies the paintings created in 1928 and 1929, a period of intense creative production and his first moments of return to easel painting.

[4] Yevgenia Petrova explains that the paintings were "temporarily" housed in the Russian Museum until 1977, when, after the museum had paid handsome sums to Malevich's surviving heirs for some of the works (the rest were formally donated to the museum by the heirs), the museum formally acquired the collection. It is not surprising that little, if anything, was written about these paintings prior to an article by Charlotte Douglas in 1978 (Charlotte Douglas, "Malevich's Painting—Some Problems of Chronology," *Soviet Union* 1978: 301-326.), since the museum's curators had not yet officially established the institution's legal status with respect to the paintings, let alone whether they could, under political pressures, safely show the works to anyone. Yevgenia Petrova, "Kazimir Malevich's Legacy Revisited," Yevgenia Petrova, ed., *The Russian Avant-Garde: Personality and School, Academic papers from the conferences accompanying the exhibitions* Kazimir Malevich in the Russian Museum *and* Malevich's Circle *(Russian Museum, St Petersburg, 2000)* (St. Petersburg: The State Russian Museum, Palace Editions, 2000) 115.

Yet another fascinating problem which these works pose is that one of the diverse categories into which some of the paintings might be grouped could anachronistically be called "early" works. Canvases in "Impressionist" styles, such as *Spring. Landscape with a Small House* (1928-1929, inscribed 1905, Russian Museum Ж-9483) [Figure 2] and *Women Bathers* (circa 1930, inscribed 1908, Russian Museum Ж-9481) [Figure 3], and canvases which reprised compositions from his pre-suprematist period, such as *Haymaking* (1928-1929, inscribed 1909-1910, Tretiakov Gallery Inv. 10612) [Figure 4], amongst a multitude of other examples, bear dates inscribed by the artist that assert a significantly earlier creation for these canvases – in the early 1900s and 1910s – than when he actually painted them. Indeed, I will argue in the chapters that follow that Malevich seems to have been making, with debatable earnestness, an attempt at rewriting the history of his painting career in accordance with his own recently-developed theories about the scientific progression of artistic styles.

A third facet of the complexities surrounding a scholarly consideration of these works concerns the circumstances under which Malevich found a relatively exceptional opportunity to manipulate historical narrative; such circumstances were deeply intertwined with the turmoil experienced at the inauguration of the Stalinist era and its influence upon the art and artists of the Soviet Union. In 1927, Malevich had obtained long sought-after approval to conduct a professional expedition to Warsaw and Berlin and he arranged to take with him the majority of his own early paintings still in his possession in order to mount exhibitions in both of these cities. While in Berlin, the second stop on his tour, he met up with numerous important Western European

contemporary artists and gave a lecture concerning his theories about the development of art.[5] Malevich abruptly ended his sojourn in Berlin after only a few short months abroad, after receiving a message from home, the contents of which are unknown.[6] His Berlin exhibition still on display, and with hopes of further exhibiting elsewhere in Western Europe, Malevich left the majority of his early work in the care of trusted friends in Germany; he would never again see these paintings.

Back in Russia, Malevich's circumstances rapidly deteriorated; on his return from Germany, it is reported that he was subjected to interrogation simply for the reason that he had been exposed to the contaminating influences of Western art.[7] Yet quite unexpectedly in 1929, he was offered a retrospective to be mounted at the Tretiakov Gallery in Moscow, the preeminent institution of Russian art in the Soviet capital.[8] However, with this retrospective, Malevich found himself in a highly problematic situation: he had obtained an invaluable opportunity to once more attempt to convince someone—the public, the authorities, other artists—of his value and contribution to the causes of Communism and the Soviet Union, yet he possessed a significant lacuna of material evidence by which to make his case. Unable to give up on his cause of formal painterly occupations, Malevich transformed this problem into an opportunity to explore, on canvas, many of the theories with which he had been toying

[5] The charts which accompanied this lecture provide fascinating and puzzling juxtapositions of images from various moments in the history of art. A discussion of them can be found in Linda S. Boersma, "On Art, Art Analysis and Art Education: The Theoretical Charts of Kazimir Malevich," in *Kazimir Malevich 1878-1935* (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1988) 206-223.
[6] Charlotte Douglas, *Kazimir Malevich* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994) 34.
[7] Andréi Nakov, *Kazimir Malewicz: Catalogue Raisonné* (Paris: Adam Biro, 2002).
[8] I will discuss in further detail the specifics of this exhibition and its possible impetuses in my second chapter.

for the past decade, the results of which are some of the most striking and deeply affective paintings he ever created.

However, Malevich's newly-created paintings did not effect any substantial improvement in the artist's circumstances, and, following a subsequent short-lived exhibition in Kiev, in fact were confiscated after public protest closed the Ukrainian show. (They were eventually returned to him two years later.) The artist would be detained for over a month in late 1930 and interrogated regarding his involvement with non-objective, "bourgeois" art. He spent his final years in poverty. Nevertheless, Malevich continued to paint up until the point at which his cancer-ridden body would no longer allow him to continue. Shortly after his death in 1935, his wife and daughter transferred the artistic contents of his apartment to the State Russian Museum, containing some eighty paintings, including most of the works created for the 1929 show.[9]

For more than forty years, Malevich was generally taken at his word regarding the early dates inscribed upon the backs of his canvases and little formal scholarly consideration was given to the possibility that the dates ascribed by the artist might have had no relation to the actual dates on which paint had been applied to these canvases.[10] In 1978, however, American scholar Charlotte Douglas published a

[9] Douglas (1994) 35-37. Myroslava M. Mudrak, "Malevich and His Ukrainian Contemporaries" in *Rethinking Malevich: Proceedings of a Conference in Celebration of the 125th Anniversary of Kazimir Malevich's Birth*, ed. Charlotte Douglas and Christina Lodder (London: The Pindar Press, 2007), 114-115.
[10] This is evidenced by the catalogue written for the show and reviews that appeared in contemporary publications. Aleksei Fedorov-Davydov, *Vystavka proizvedenii K. S. Malevicha* (Moscow: State Tretiakov Gallery 1929) 7-8. Translated in full as Appendix below. Translated into French in Krisztina Passuth, "La Dernière Exposition en URSS de Malevič: L'Art de K.S. Malevič par A. Fedorov-Davydov," trans. Dominique

groundbreaking article detailing how many of the paintings presumed to be "early" works of Malevich were in fact created explicitly for the 1929 exhibition.[11] However, Douglas' inquiry focused primarily upon those canvases which present between one and three primary figures composed of geometric forms, suspended against a background characterized by a stark break in coloration along a centrally-located horizon line, such as *Girls in a Field* (1928-1929, inscribed 1912, Russian Museum Ж-9433) [Figure 5] or *Peasants* (1928-1929, Russian Museum Ж-9480) [Figure 6]. But through the late 1980s, many other paintings, such as *Spring. Landscape with a Small House* and *Women Bathers*, continued to be labeled as having been created much earlier than they actually were.[12] It would not be until the publication of a landmark 2000 exhibition and catalogue, *Kazimir Malevich in the Russian Museum*, that a complete revision of the chronology of Malevich's career would be firmly established.[13]

Since Douglas' 1978 article, and particularly since the State Russian Museum exhibition in 2000, scholars have attempted to provide plausible explanations for the existence, creation, and form of these paintings. In what follows, I will give a brief survey of the literature concerning Malevich's late paintings, insofar as it pertains to the canvases which were created for the 1929 exhibition. In doing so, I will organize my discussion by considering the various types of interlocutionary subjects to which

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Moyen, *Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne* vol. 3 (1980) 146-148. S. Yefimovich, "Vistavka tvoriv khudozhnika K. S. Malevicha v Kiivskii Kartinii Galerei," *Radianske mystetstvo* 14: 44, 1930, 3-7. Translated into Russian in I. A. Vakar and T. N. Mikhienko, author-editors, *Malevich o sebe: Sovremenniki o Maleviche* (Moscow: RA, 2004), vol. 2: 548-551.

[11] Douglas, "Malevich's Painting—Some Problems of Chronology."

[12] See, for example, the exhibition catalogue, *Kazimir Malevich 1878-1935* (1988).

[13] Yevgenia Petrova, ed., *Kazimir Malevich in the Russian Museum* (St. Petersburg: State Russian Museum and Palace Editions, 2000).

scholars juxtapose Malevich's work. First I will consider the authors who have situated these works within the broad historical circumstances of Russia in the throes of Stalin's First Five-Year Plan,[14] and, second, within the context of the politics of the art world at the same moment, the *point de naissance* of socialist realism. Third, I will examine those scholars who juxtapose Malevich's earlier written and painted work with the later paintings. Fourth, there are those researchers who see ways in which Malevich's works are indebted to the works of his European counterparts to the West. Last, I will give due credit to the mostly quite recent scholarship which examines the later Malevich paintings in conversation with his contemporary published works and private correspondence.

1)

Broad historical narratives generally have come to the consensus that the late 1920s and early 1930s were extremely difficult in the Soviet Union, particularly in Malevich's native Ukraine. Dissent was increasingly frowned upon, with anything potentially conceivable as a deviation from or criticism of the party line being punishable with interrogation, detention, or worse. Forced grain requisitions and forced collectivization of the peasantry, particularly in the Ukraine, the bread basket of the

[14] The First Five-Year Plan, issued in 1928 and declared accomplished ahead of schedule in 1932, comprised a list of goals designed to advance the Soviet Union economically to the point of military and industrial self-sufficiency. It demanded improvements in efficiency and rapid industrialization across the board, particularly in the realms of agriculture, raw materials production, and electrification.

Soviet Union, led to famine conditions and the death of millions in 1932 and 1933.[15] Given that so many of Malevich's paintings from this period depicted peasants, many scholars have proposed that his images serve as commentary upon the contemporary plight of this class of people, who inhabited many of the artist's happy childhood memories.[16]

Attempting to discern the motivations and opinions of an historical personage remains challenging, if not problematic, particularly if the individual chose not to produce or preserve any documentation regarding the matter in question. What sort of opinion, if any, Malevich might have had about the situation in the Ukraine during the period in which he created these later images of peasants remains unclear, although it is certain that he was aware of the increasing lack of toleration of any non-Party thought or expression. In an interview in the 1990s, Konstantin Rozhdestvensky, one of

[15] Ronald Grigor Suny writes that in the Ukraine, "collectivization was carried out more rapidly, and probably more violently, than in the Russian republic. … The height of the famine was reached in early 1933. Corpses lined the roads, whole families disappeared, and instances of cannibalism were reported. … an estimated 5 million people died. … Famine, unlike food shortages, is not the result of natural disaster but of government failure. Moscow's procurement policies led to the famine, and Stalin was determined to break the back of the independent Ukrainian peasantry, the local Ukrainian Communists, and the nationalist intelligentsia. His regime both initiated the famine through its excessive extractions of grain and allowed it to continue by ignoring the evident consequences of the state's actions." *The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) 227-228.

[16] At least as indicated in his autobiography, written likely in 1934, a context which may have substantially colored his reminiscences. He wrote, "While the peasants, grown-ups and children alike, worked on the plantation all through the summer and autumn, I, the future artist, feasted my eyes on the fields and colourful workers who were weeding or digging up the beets. Platoons of colourfully dressed girls stepped in single file across the field. It was a war. The troops in multi-coloured dresses fought the weeds, preventing the beets from being smothered by harmful plants. I liked watching those fields in the morning, when the sun was still low and the warbling skylarks soared … There seemed to be no end to the sugar beet plantations which merged with the distant skyline … embracing the villages with their green hands. My childhood passed among all those villages." Kazimir Malevich, "Biograficheskii ocherk," in *Sobranie Sochinenii v Piati Tomakh*, ed. A. S. Shatskikh et al. (Moscow: Gileia, 1995-2004), vol. 5: 338-376. Translated by Julia Karpovich in Gerry Souter, *Malevich: Journey to Infinity* (New York: Parkstone Press International, 2008) 13, 16.

Malevich's students, asserted that although Malevich's work was created in the midst of an extremely tragic situation for the peasantry, they nevertheless were produced without concern for political issues.[17] And although one might construe a line from a 1929 publication by Malevich, stating that, "the content of our era cannot be reduced to showing pigs being fattened on a Soviet farm, or 'golden cornfields' being harvested," as acerbic commentary upon Soviet agricultural practices, it could also simply represent a criticism of the subject matter of contemporary artistic production.[18]

Amongst the range of published discussions of the question of the peasantry and contemporary political events and policy, Malevich scholar Andréi Nakov suggests that the peasant theme may have been chosen not as commentary upon contemporary catastrophes, but as a ploy to create "a social alibi" within the context of the Soviet promotion of workers.[19] On the other hand, a recently-published monograph by Gerry Souter credits the general political situation in Russia for Malevich's unfortunate circumstances during the last several years of his life and contends that Malevich antedated his paintings as a survival tactic to conceal his motivations and intentions from the Secret Police.[20] However, there is no evidence that such an explicit interest was taken in Malevich's work by the OGPU (Unified State Political Directorate) in 1928 and 1929, as Souter asserts. I would hesitate even to include Souter in this discussion,

[17] *Malevich o sebe* vol. 2: 305. Cited by Anna Wexler Katsnelson, "Aesopian Tales: The Visual Culture of the Late Russian Avant-Garde," dissertation (Cambridge: Harvard University, 2007) 107-108.
[18] This quote in particular refers to Sergei Eisenstein's film, *The Old and the New*, which depicts collectivization. Kazimir Malevich, "Painterly Laws in the Problems of Cinema," translated in Margarita Tupitsyn, *Malevich and Film* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002) 156.
[19] Andréi Nakov, *Malevich: Painting the Absolute* (Burlington, VT: Lund Humphries, 2010) vol. 4: 120.
[20] Souter 7.

given that his work is clearly directed at a popular audience, rather than an academic one, if it were not so exceptionally and exaggeratedly emblematic of a certain bent which is all too prevalent in discussions of Soviet topics (particularly from the early Soviet period) within a Western context. Souter's work is a notable hyperbole of the types of arguments which explain Malevich's oeuvre in terms of the politics of his era – and from the unspoken perspective of Cold War-era paradigms.

In a more nuanced approach, Jean-Claude Marcadé contends that Malevich's late peasant paintings represent a sparsely camouflaged political protest against Soviet authority. Marcadé interprets the traditional peasant beard in paintings such as *Head of a Peasant* (1928-1929, Russian Museum Ж-9473) [Figure 7] as a muzzle, with the fields behind the peasant signifying a "quasi-idyllic," nostalgic scene upon which Soviet authority is encroaching. For Marcadé, such paintings fundamentally represent a political message; he states, "Malevich was the only painter who demonstrated the dramatic situation of the Russian and Ukrainian peasantry at the moment of the criminal forced collectivization," thus making explicit the connection between contemporary events and their representation upon Malevich's canvas.[21]

Andrew Wachtel takes this stance one step further, insisting that the paintings produce a prescient vision of "unprecedented suffering" based in a fundamentally realist orientation.[22] A more generalized view, meanwhile, is taken by Alexei

[21] Jean-Claude Marcadé, "Malévitch face à Staline," *L'Œil* March 1998: 64.
[22] Andrew Wachtel, "Meaningful Voids: Facelessness in Platonov and Malevich" in *Russian Literature, Modernism and the Visual Arts*, ed. Catriona Kelly and Stephen Lovell (Cambridge University Press, 2000) 270-272.

Kurbanovsky, who claims that embedded in these paintings one can find an "unconscious [on the part of the artist] social warning" against fascist regimes treating humans as machines.[23] The arguments of all three of these scholars, however, make a major and debatable assumption that Malevich could have been aware of the extent of the tragedy taking place in his own country. It is worth noting that the full scope of the Stalinist regime's human rights violations would not come to light until much later and continues to be debated to this day.[24] And in a 2010 dissertation, Masha Chlenova cites Irina Vakar's research into the iconographic and stylistic origins of Malevich's later images of peasants in order to argue that because such choices were almost certainly made prior to 1929, the content of these paintings cannot have been intended to bear upon the tragic events that would befall the peasant population predominantly in the years to come.[25]

Respected Russian scholar Dmitri Sarabianov offers a further refined interpretation of Malevich's paintings' relationship to the contemporary political situation, one which conforms much more readily to Malevich's philosophical tendencies, in their depths of meaning and ambiguity. Sarabianov likens Malevich to Kafka and reads the paintings' figures as reacting to an unnamed, faceless evil presence

[23] Alexei Kurbanovsky, "Kazimir Malevich and Aspects of Early-Twentieth-Century European Theoretical Thought," Petrova, ed., *The Russian Avant-Garde: Personality and School* 56.
[24] For more regarding the debate concerning the scope of terror under Stalin, see Robert W. Thurston, *Life and Terror in Stalin's Russia 1934-1941* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).
[25] Masha Chlenova, "Transformations of the Avant-Garde in Soviet Public Culture, 1928-1933" Ph.D. dissertation (Columbia University, 2010) 241-242.

that dominates human existence, rather than as a rebellion against a specific entity.[26] (In a separate monograph on the artist, Sarabianov raises the question of the paintings' relation to their historical circumstances, but contends that the works themselves must answer to such a query.)[27] In a similar vein, Andréi Nakov characterizes Malevich's post-suprematist figurative forms as "ultimately intended to save man's supremely perishable experience from destruction" through "conferring a fixed form" upon images of human beings, as part of an overarching "struggle against death," all of which, Nakov parenthetically remarks, was "a particularly timely preoccupation in the Soviet Union of the '20s."[28] Thus even Nakov reveals his propensity to get caught up in the potential pitfalls of contextual causality.

One must proceed exceptionally cautiously when making arguments based upon broad historical circumstances such as these, which one might say are prone to a certain reductionism and accompanying abandonment of specificity. To assume that these works present any sort of realism, either autobiographically or as a commentary upon politics or contemporary events, remains problematic.[29] Malevich made vehement (although not always entirely persuasive) arguments against the viability of realist approaches in artistic production, as I will show elsewhere. To discuss context is, of course, important in effective art historical argumentation; however, in my own

[26] Dmitrii Sarabianov, "Malevich at the Time of the 'Great Break'," *Malevich: Artist and Theoretician*. (Paris: Flammarion, 1990) 146.
[27] Dmitrii Sarabianov, "Zhivopis' Kazimira Malevicha," *Kazimir Malevich Zhivopis' Teoriia* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1993) 154.
[28] Nakov, *Painting the Absolute* vol. 3: 244-246.
[29] Thomas Seifrid makes a similar argument in his summary and analysis of the scholarly literature on Malevich's contemporary, Russian writer Andrei Platonov. *Andrei Platonov: Uncertainties of Spirit* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 16-17.

exploration of particular contextual elements surrounding Malevich's work, I will seek to understand commonalities and connections, rather than to assert causation.

2)

Beyond broad politico-historical circumstances, art historians have also considered the more particularized politics of the Soviet art world in 1929 as context for these paintings. While socialist realism would not be formulated as an official doctrine for another five years, its general principles were taking hold in an increasingly large number of circles and garnering the majority of official support by the time of Malevich's retrospective.[30] Moreover, by this point in time Soviet arts policy had certainly been effectively centralized, although the consistency of such policy and of its implementation remains a subject for further discussion in my second chapter. Several scholars have used the circumstances of the early Stalinist-era art world to explain various aspects of the Malevich paintings exhibited at the Tretiakov. For example, a curious statement is made by Douglas in her 1994 monograph, positing the antedating of these paintings as a means of "concealing the incriminating absence" of the paintings left in Berlin; this statement seems to imply that Soviet authorities might have objected to Malevich's choice to leave the works in the West. While it is unclear what evidence Douglas employs to come to this conclusion, elsewhere she articulates her belief that Malevich's early work was hardly regarded in 1929 by those same authorities as

[30] C. Vaughan James, *Soviet Socialist Realism: Origins and Theory* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973).

important to preserve for posterity.[31] It is entirely possible that Malevich believed his act of leaving the paintings in the West might pose problems for him in the future, or that something in his interrogation upon his return from Germany prompted him to believe that the authorities would have looked unfavorably upon his removal of the mass of works from his home country.

In an attempt to bridge the seeming chasm between Soviet aims and Malevich's art, John Bowlt makes an interesting case for these paintings as representations of a political agenda that he claims Malevich shared with broadly-conceived Soviet aims to improve upon the human race by means of scientific, evolutionary advancement. Bowlt conceives of the late Malevich images as depicting a "super peasant" whose strength and ability to produce food for a hungry nation were unrivaled.[32] However, it is important to note in this respect that although Bolshevik and avant-garde agendas may have run somewhat parallel during the earliest years of Communist rule, by the late 1920s the agendas of the government and the few remaining former avant-gardists had rapidly diverged, a state of affairs which might render Bowlt's employment of pre-Revolutionary motivations anachronistic.

Douglas considers Malevich's relationship with the powers of the Soviet art world to be "schizophrenic," particularly given the sudden advent of an invitation to put on a retrospective show at the Tretiakov, despite the fact that his present state

[31] Douglas (1994) 34-35.
[32] John E. Bowlt, "Body Beautiful: The Artistic Search for the Perfect Physique," in *Laboratory of Dreams: The Russian Avant-Garde and Cultural Experiment*, ed. John E. Bowlt and Olga Matich (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1996) p. 49, 51. John E. Bowlt, "The Peasant Motif in the Work of Kazimir Malevich," *Slavic and East European Arts* Winter 1990: 51-61.

employment was repeatedly threatened.[33] Douglas also highlights her belief that Malevich was highly concerned about what Douglas terms "the verdict of history." She asserts that he designed his later work and its eccentric chronology as a strategy to secure the long-term survival of his work within artistic and curatorial milieux and to cement his place within the history of Russian art.[34] If true, this motivation illustrates Malevich's prescient understanding and enduring hope that the forces which controlled Russian art at the time of his death would not be in control forever.

Petrova notes in passing, though within a context that lacks sufficient space for a full argument for her case, that Malevich's return to figuration was the result of a desire on the artist's part to increase public accessibility. She claims that he made necessary concessions to contemporary viewers' tastes by introducing "elements of objectivity" into his paintings, with recognizable "figurative symbols."[35] Chlenova takes a somewhat similar, though much more fully elaborated, approach in her 2010 dissertation, in which one chapter is devoted to Malevich's and fellow avant-gardist Vladimir Tatlin's 1929-1933 exhibition history, claiming that Malevich's works reflect a "drive to make works that would exist in a dialogue with the most immediate needs of Soviet society and be relevant for their contemporaries, rather than any purely external pressure from the increasingly authoritarian Stalinist regime."[36] Chlenova's argument is amply supported

[33] Douglas (1994) 34-35.
[34] Douglas, "Malevich and De Chirico," *Rethinking Malevich* 292.
[35] Yevgenia Petrova, "Malevich's Works in the Russian Museum and their New Datings," *Kazimir Malevich in the Russian Museum* 12.
[36] Chlenova 31.

through analysis of early Soviet exhibition practices and rhetoric and is one to which I will make reference in later chapters.

In a 2007 dissertation, half of which concerns Malevich's post-suprematist work, Anna Wexler Katsnelson argues that Malevich's paintings operate by means of mechanisms of camouflage, in the employment of the "Aesopian language" of double-texts.[37] For Katsnelson, Malevich engaged the forms of the human figure in his paintings, while simultaneously breaking down these forms in ways which, theoretically, would only be decipherable to those familiar with the contexts of formal experiment in which Malevich had previously operated. Yet, according to Katsnelson, Malevich's "Aesopian" communication fundamentally failed, for his work continued to be criticized for its "bourgeois" formalist properties and thus he was unable to effectively camouflage anything underneath a cloak of figurative realism.[38]

Last, though not in terms of Malevich's late peasant paintings, but of his late impressionist works (which I will discuss in Chapter Three), Elena Basner proposes that one particular strategy Malevich employed in order to avoid accusations of bourgeois formal experimentation was the production of canvases styled after well-known European artistic trends of the previous century. She discusses the late Malevich "impressionist" canvases as "laboratory experiments" which provided the artist, and other remnants of the avant-garde, with a means to experiment with color and texture

[37] Katsnelson 24.
[38] Ibid 159.

in an arguably safer genre than formal abstraction, without capitulating to state-sponsored style.[39]

When considering such questions of the artist's relationship with so-called authorities, it behooves the interpreter to be wary of construing such entities as constituting any sort of unified, anti-intelligentsia monolith, particularly during the early Stalinist era.[40] It is tempting to oversimplify Malevich's story in this respect, particularly given latent cultural narratives which tend to absolutize Stalinist power. I will seek in the chapters that follow to present the story of Malevich's paintings in ways which complicate the conventional narrative of monolithic Soviet power and censorship.

3)

Sarabianov attributes Malevich's late-career work, in part, to the artist's "own aspiration to rethink his creative platform, [and] his purely pedagogical desire to 'process' all the phases through which he had passed en route to Suprematism," as part of a reconstruction of "an entire complex of reasons for the changes in Malevich's artistic process."[41] Such an assertion is characteristic of broad tendencies in the

[39] Elena Basner, "Impressionism in the Art and Teaching of Kazimir Malevich," Petrova, ed., *The Russian Avant-Garde: Personality and School* 70-73.
[40] See, for example, Mikhail Epstein's discussion of the tendency for arguments to fall into one of two opposing perspectives that define the intelligentsia either as "persecuted, heterodox … victim" or else individuals who foisted "parasitic ideology" upon "the robbed and physically extirpated people." Mikhail Epstein, *Amerussia: Selected Essays*, trans. Thomas Dolack et al. (Moscow: Serebrianyi niti, 2007) 176.
[41] Dmitrii Sarabianov, "Kazimir Malevich and His Art, 1900-1930," *Kazimir Malevich 1878-1935* (1988) 72.

scholarly literature to consider these later works in light of the artists' earlier techniques and philosophies.

Amongst such approaches we can include T.J. Clark's, whose single mention of the late peasant paintings as a set argues that Malevich's iconoclasm over most of his career resulted from a sense that he could not depict his chosen subject at the time—the infinite reality which was most important to him. However, Clark asserts that when "new" subjects arose in the late 1920s ("the peasant, the proletariat, taking possession of the material world"), the artist seems to have thought that he had found at long last a means to effectively depict them.[42] From yet another perspective, Nakov asserts that with these figurative paintings, Malevich was operating, "in the symbolic dimension of his intuition," where he might uncover "an image by no means beholden to the 'world of appearances' but directly governed by sublimated sensations." He explains how Malevich transitioned from Suprematism to figuration, through the employment of "sensations filtered through abstract, conceptual i.e. non-objective visual configurations."[43]

In a completely different tone, Andrew Spira has recently published a full-scale dismissal of the artistic merit of these paintings by means of unfavorably comparing the late Malevich paintings with earlier suprematist works. Spira argues that either duplicates or inferior works comprise the late Malevich oeuvre and the meaning of these works, unlike the suprematist ones, does not retain universal significance. Rather,

[42] Clark 435, endnote 147.
[43] Nakov, *Painting the Absolute* vol. 3: 244.

Spira characterizes the figures in these images as vacant, "monotonous," and "asthmatic." According to Spira, the truth of Malevich's life's work remained in the *Black Square* and the later paintings served as an "expedient compromise" for the artist in trying circumstances.[44] If, in fact, we might legitimately establish some sort of epitome within the span of Malevich's painterly practice and such a high point were determined to be suprematism, then Spira's condemnatory attitude towards the late Malevich works is hardly surprising. For the later works do indeed bring into question the premises of the suprematist project, which in itself raises a relevant line of inquiry that extends beyond any attempt to determine the "inferiority" of certain works of art with respect to others.

As to considering the question of the antedating of these paintings – a question which bears significantly upon their relationship to earlier works – one theory that has emerged concerns a suggestion that the dates placed upon the backs of these canvases reflect the *point de naissance* of the idea for a given painting. Troels Andersen, the editor of a four-volume English translation of Malevich's writings,[45] first proposed in a 1970 monograph that perhaps the confusing chronology of the artist's oeuvre, which at that time remained unresolved, was the product of Malevich's reflections upon the origins of a given theme or motif.[46]

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[44] Andrew Spira, *The Avant-Garde Icon: Russian Avant-Garde Art and the Icon Painting Tradition* (Burlington, VT: Lund Humphries, 2008) 161-164.
[45] K. S. Malevich, *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, *The World as non-objectivity: Unpublished Writings 1922-1925*, and *The Artist, Infinity, and Suprematism: Unpublished Writings 1913-1933*, ed. Troels Andersen, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1968, 1976, and 1978).
[46] Troels Andersen, *Malevich* (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1970) 61.

In a somewhat similar, though far more conjectural, vein, Rainer Crone and David Moos propose that "it is not inconceivable that Malevich might have reflected upon early works later in life and taken the liberty to alter them" (i.e., the earlier canvases themselves). Their perspective elicits clever, albeit likely inaccurate, results; they suggest that if their theory were correct and the artist did repaint earlier canvases "in the context of new philosophical insight," then the whole conventional practice of dating paintings "is undermined, and, indeed, ingeniously circumvented by an artist assuming a position which aspired to transmogrify and transcend the boundaries of reality." They then propose that, "the entire pedantic and positivistic notion of ascribing fixed dates to specific paintings may be a task that simply does not apply to the work of Malevich."[47] Ultimately, it is probably a good thing that Crone and Moos confined these musings to a footnote, for the intensive conservation research conducted since their book was published (1991), in preparation for the 2000 catalogue, *Kazimir Malevich in the Russian Museum*, serves to disprove thoroughly any such theories. It very well may be that such a rejection of conventional structures of chronology may have characterized Malevich's approach, but if earlier works represent Andersen's *point de naissance* of the later canvases, it would appear to be in a purely conceptual, rather than material, capacity.

[47] Rainer Crone and David Moos, *Kazimir Malevich: The Climax of Disclosure* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991) 208, footnote #20.

Amongst the scholarly descendants of Andersen's *point de naissance* theory might also be counted Nakov's *catalogue raisonné* of Malevich's work.[48] Nakov groups works together based on an idiosyncratic pseudo-chronological order, in which some later works are grouped with "similar" earlier canvases, while other later figurative works stand apart from the earlier period. Thus, a painting such as *Haymaking* from 1928-1929 [Figure 4] (dated on the reverse as "*motiv* 1909") is noted by Nakov as "*motif de* 1911-1912, *version* 1928-1929," and is placed alongside the composition which it reproduces: *Haymaking* (1912, Nizhni Novgorod Museum of Fine Art Ж-343) [Figure 8], which is labeled more simply, "*fin* 1911 – *début* 1912;" on the other hand, *Head of a Peasant* is placed more than two hundred pages later, despite the fact that, as I will elaborate in my fourth chapter, it too duplicates images from the pre-suprematist period.[49] The catalogue as a whole is organized thematically into sections of "Figurative," "Suprematist," and "Post-Suprematist" compositions, which brings new connections between early and late works to light, although also operates to the detriment of an understanding of chronological progression and historical context.

Such an approach inherently prioritizes a retrospective view and there certainly is merit to such interpretations, for there are clearly some striking similarities between Malevich's pre-suprematist compositions and those made immediately prior to the 1929 exhibition. To group these works together on the pages of the catalogue elicits remarkable resonances that one might otherwise miss. Nevertheless, Nakov somewhat

[48] Nakov's Catalogue is the first sustained, systematic attempt to list, locate, and date all known Malevich works.
[49] Nakov, *Catalogue Raisonné* 112-113, 353.

perplexingly, given the context of a *catalogue raisonné*, does not take Malevich at his word regarding the (inaccurate) dates of the later compositions. For example, with the previously-mentioned *Haymaking* (1928-1929), Nakov dates the "motifs" of the compositions to later dates than Malevich himself inscribed. Additionally, Nakov places many paintings, particularly the "Impressionist" ones, within the "Figurative" (i.e. pre-suprematist) category of his catalogue, yet such paintings possess very little resemblance to those works which we know with certainty Malevich created in the years of 1903-1906 (the dates inscribed by the artist to "Impressionist" works).

The full rationale behind Nakov's decision-making regarding these paintings, their dates, and his organizational strategy are more fully discussed in Nakov's recently-published monograph written purportedly to accompany the catalogue.[50] However, this monograph presents far more problems, above and beyond those elicited by the catalogue, than it resolves. Among Malevich scholars working today, Nakov is arguably most intimately familiar with the artist, his works, his writings, and those few people who knew the artist and were still alive in the past forty-odd years. As such, he has a very personal, almost self-identificatory relationship with Malevich's specter—perhaps too close and too personal.[51] What is substantially lacking and what renders Nakov's

[50] Nakov, *Painting the Absolute*. For commentary on the catalogue prior to the publication of Nakov's monograph, see Yve-Alain Bois, "Back to the Future: The New Malevich," *Bookforum* Winter 2003, accessed online 11/13/09 http://www.bookforum.com/archive/win_03/bois.html.

[51] Nakov was able to make contact with and gain the intimate trust of individuals whose perspectives provide invaluable insight into the artist's career, opinions, and legacy. However, if Nakov documented his conversations with such individuals, he does not give citations within his monograph as to any archiving of interviews. And given that many of these exchanges presumably took place with relatively elderly individuals in the pre-Glasnost'-era Soviet Union, it is not all that surprising that such documentation is lacking. It is quite conceivable that the level of trust Nakov had established with surviving friends and family members of the artist would have precluded archivization.

scholarship highly debatable, is any sense of critical self-reflection, of identifying his approaches as his own, rather than those of the artist or some other purportedly normative entity. For just one example, Nakov makes a statement that when Malevich was initially accosted by the dominant proto-socialist realist artists' organization AKhRR, he "viewed its attacks with the disdain and lack of concern they deserved."[52] The absence of a grounding basis of references to primary source materials renders his assertions, though perhaps not invalid, lacking in substance; he seems to assume that it should be sufficient to take his word for such qualitative assumptions that characterize phrases like "genuinely modern artists," or when he discusses the "'new' Post-Futurist or simply modern man (in the sense in which the latter term was used widely in the '20s)," and neglects to provide his reader any substantial material or references with which to expand upon just what exactly he means by such terms.[53]

When Nakov cites information which he learned via informal conversations (for example, when he claims that many of the paintings displayed at the 1929 exhibition were "initially destined for the exhibition he was still hoping to organize in Western Europe (in Germany and, if possible, Paris)"),[54] we have a situation in which the circumstances of Malevich's life have been filtered both through the memory of Nakov's interviewees and then again through the author's own memory and interpretive choices. As it is, Nakov seems to tell Malevich's story in the way in which he (Nakov) imagines the artist would have wanted it told. Throughout, Nakov very openly seeks to

[52] Nakov, *Painting the Absolute* vol. 3: 236.
[53] Ibid. vol. 3: 242-243.
[54] Ibid. vol. 4: 119.

support Malevich's interests, speaking derisively or approvingly of various ideas, individuals, and organizations as determined by his own conception of what the artist would have approved.

In yet a different, quite viable attempt to connect Malevich's previous work to the later figurative canvases on the level of formal resemblance, the aforementioned scholars Bowlt and Petrova interpret the peasant figures in late Malevich works as being born in the costume designs that Malevich created for the 1913 trans-rational opera, *Victory Over the Sun*.[55] The figures in these drawings, particularly the "strongmen," are composed of brightly-colored geometric forms, and they present highly ironic interpretations of classic Russian stereotyped characters. Clearly Malevich's late-career characters owe much to such stereotyped forms, albeit stripped of their irony. Additionally, the late Malevich peasants bear striking resemblance to the figural forms and compositional elements of several propaganda *lubki* (a Russian form of the broadsheet) which Malevich created in 1914 at the outbreak of the First World War [Figure 9]. The analogies between these two sets of works remain to be presented in the scholarly literature – a situation which this dissertation will begin to address.

Ultimately, when we discuss issues regarding the relationship of Malevich's late-career figurative paintings to his earlier work, we are making an attempt to establish a sense of continuity within the artist's overall oeuvre. In this vein, in an interview published in 1978, Anna Leporskaya, Malevich's pupil and dedicated assistant,

[55] Bowlt, "Body Beautiful" and "The Peasant Motif." Petrova, "Malevich's Works in the Russian Museum and their New Datings," *Kazimir Malevich in the Russian Museum* 13.

emphasized the continuity of the master's late paintings with his earlier work.[56] For Leporskaya, there was no abandonment in these works, no reversion from abstract heights. Rather, this committed follower explained that the late peasant pictures depict the evolution of Malevich's ideas regarding color, and they reflect the profound and unified spiritual content evident in all of his work.

The art historians who have built upon this spirit of continuity, such as Sarabianov and Petrova, provide convincing arguments for an overarching explanation of the form of Malevich's late work. For Petrova, the paintings present suprematist people baptized in a new suprematist faith, the next stage in the growth of the suprematist project, "a new religion, and a new people led by God to a new life."[57] Tellingly, her term, "non-figurative suprematism," implies a "figurative" stage for Malevich's system of non-objective art—the late-career works which we are discussing here. In other words, Petrova proposes that the peasant paintings which came after the abstract, white-on-white works simply represent a continuation of the suprematist project.[58] For Sarabianov, the late Malevich work represents a synthesis of earlier stylistic elements, a linking of figural compositions with the suprematism which came after them. He sees the late peasant cycle as a transposition of the early peasant works into the suprematist vocabulary.[59]

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[56] Anna Leporskaya, "The Beginnings and the End of Figurative Painting—and Suprematism," in *Kasimir Malewitsch zum 100. Geburtstag* (Cologne, Galerie Gmurzynska, 1978) 69.
[57] Yevgenia Petrova, "The Origins of Early Twentieth-Century Russian Art," *Origins of the Russian Avant-Garde: celebrating the 300th anniversary of St. Petersburg* (Palace Editions: 2003) 21.
[58] Petrova, "Malevich's Works in the Russian Museum and their New Datings," *Kazimir Malevich in the Russian Museum* 11.
[59] Sarabianov, "'Great Break'" 146.

In the chapters that follow, I will also propose arguments with respect to ideas of transposition of the suprematist vocabulary. However, such arguments will have a notably different tenor from Sarabianov's, Petrova's, and Leporskaya's. The arguments which these scholars and colleagues of Malevich have made rest upon a fundamental assumption which I will question, though not unreservedly refute: that identifying and perpetuating a sense of continuity between disparate phases in an artist's oeuvre is a desirable and necessary art historical task. Within the Russian avant-garde context, Yve-Alain Bois has challenged such an assumption in a 1988 review of an exhibition featuring Malevich's student, El Lissitzky. Bois remarks, regarding similar questions of continuity and discontinuity in the formal production over the course of Lissitzky's career, that "The result of trying to see everything in everything, of denying ruptures, is to deny any historic particularity."[60] Indeed, interpretations of Malevich's later figurative works which explain their forms by means of reference to earlier works from the artist's suprematist era, as well as prior to it, do seem to run the danger of neglecting – perhaps for important and tangible reasons – the historic particularity of the early Stalinist era, the consequences of Malevich's trip to Berlin, and the artistic milieu which engendered socialist realism.

But even more than that, such emphases upon continuity belie a fundamental paradigmatic orientation which my work here will attempt to step outside, or perhaps *beside*. This orientation represents an implicit legacy of modernism which continues to structure many conventional representations of art history, "as a line of works […] in the

[60] Yve-Alain Bois, "El Lissitzky: Radical Reversibility," *Art in America* April 1988: 160-181.

historicist terms (*post hoc, ergo propter hoc*) of influence and continuity," to use art historian Hal Foster's words.[61] Discussions of continuity feed upon the construction of authorship as a coherent unity, characterized by "quality and stylistic uniformity" (semiotic art historians Mieke Bal's and Norman Bryson's terms),[62] whereby the identification of continuity within the work of an artist is paramount to identifying the overarching value of the artist's oeuvre – for if the artist's identity is multiple rather than singular, the coherent whole that is a modernist conception of a "master" is threatened. Indeed, if much of Malevich scholarship thus far can be understood in terms of its participation within modernist structures of meaning – structures within which the artist himself participated – what this dissertation will seek to do, in part, is to articulate ways in which Malevich scholarship might be explored within other paradigms. Arguably, Malevich had no participation – or at least no conscious one – in such paradigms, but they bear significantly upon how institutional structures of art historical discourse are currently being shaped in museums, classrooms, and journals, and perhaps will be shaped in the future.

4)

Amongst the paradigms that I wish to challenge in this work also remain those which address continuities between artists – questions of "influence" and "lineage."

[61] Hal Foster, "Re: Post," *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984) 190.
[62] Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, "Semiotics and Art History," *The Art Bulletin* vol. 73 no. 2 (Jun 1991) 181.

Despite the increasing isolation of Russia from countries to its west in the late 1920s, Malevich hardly created his late-career paintings in the absence of exposure to a variety of cosmopolitan influences. He certainly encountered a diverse array of contemporary art during his journey to Warsaw and Berlin in 1927, as well as at home insofar as exhibitions of non-Russian art continued in Russian galleries and museums.[63] Furthermore, Malevich's twenty years of experiences with and observations concerning the works of other artists gave him plenty of material upon which to draw conclusions and inspiration for his own creative work.

Benjamin Buchloh includes Malevich in a group of avant-garde painters, including Picasso and Severini, whom he reads as having embraced the "traditional values of high art" in a post-First-World-War turn to realist or figurative styles and abandonment of earlier abstract tendencies.[64] He claims that this turn occurred when these artists were confronted with the institutionalization of their once revolutionary strategies, and he asserts that their revival of classicism resulted from their refusal to acknowledge that younger, up-and-coming artists had developed these masters' ideas in interesting, innovative ways, "like senile old rulers who refuse to step down."[65] Although Buchloh's discussion of Malevich pertains specifically to the 1933 portraits the artist produced of himself and his wife in Renaissance-like poses and attire, his criticism rings true even in the 1929 context. By that moment, avant-garde networks had largely

[63] The last major exhibition of contemporary Western art to be held within Russia during this era occurred in the fall of 1928. Matthew Cullerne Bown, *Art Under Stalin* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1991) 62.
[64] Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting," *October* Vol. 16, Spring 1981: 42.
[65] Ibid. 49.

collapsed and Malevich had arguably become a member of the old guard. However, Buchloh includes Malevich within a group of artists the remainder of whom are of an unambiguous Western European origin, failing to take into account Malevich's geographical and political specificity, where interactions between the old guard and the newly-minted powers-that-be were significantly different from anywhere else in contemporary Europe, despite the concurrent rise of totalitarian regimes. The question of how the paintings exhibited in 1929 relate to an avant-garde remains a complicated one, so much so that I will return to it more fully in later chapters.

With respect to other artists of the European avant-garde, Douglas has made a significant case for the profound influence of Giorgio De Chirico upon the entire post-1927 oeuvre of Malevich.[66] Douglas argues that De Chirico acted as an "unseen partner" in Malevich's creative processes during the final years of his life. She finds multiple notable formal and philosophical similarities between Malevich's works and a variety of De Chirico's paintings from every phase of the Italian-French artist's career. Douglas makes a compelling case that there seems to have been some sort of deep-rooted influence of the one artist upon the other, whether or not all of the similarities in technique or composition can be attributed to direct appropriation. Conveniently, if such an influence had been acknowledged by Malevich on some level, his antedating would have allowed him to create evidence for a stylistic precedence over this well-

[66] Douglas, "Malevich and De Chirico," *Rethinking Malevich.*

known Western artist, particularly with respect to De Chirico's Surrealist style, a fact that did not go unnoted in the reviews for his 1929 exhibition.[67]

Finally, Myroslava Mudrak makes a compelling argument for the influence of Malevich's Ukrainian counterparts upon the artist's late-career oeuvre.[68] In 1928, Malevich obtained a teaching position at the Kiev Art Institute and spent half of each month in that city until 1930, when the circumstances that caused the abrupt closure of his exhibition at the Kiev Art Gallery soon terminated his teaching post at the institute as well.[69] Malevich had spent his earliest years as an artist in Kiev, studying with the realist artist Mykola Pymonenko, and Mudrak demonstrates that some of Malevich's later compositions directly relate to the compositions of his first significant teacher.[70] Furthermore, Mudrak explains how the contemporary atmosphere at the Kiev Art Institute informed Malevich's paintings. In particular, the monolithic figures of the late peasant works can be tied to the influence of an early 1920s movement in Ukrainian art known as Boichukism, named for the artist Mykhailo Boichuk, whose work was popular in the early 1920s, but which had fallen out of favor by the time Malevich arrived at the Ukrainian institution.

Bal and Bryson describe arguments resembling Douglas' and Mudrak's as operating under the "trope of metonymy, of contiguous elements, a trope whose

[67] Yefimovich.
[68] Mudrak, "Malevich and His Ukrainian Contemporaries," *Rethinking Malevich* 82-120.
[69] Douglas (1994) 34. Katsnelson 68.
[70] According to Douglas, Irina Vakar first presented the resemblances between Malevich's and Pymonenko's works in a 1988 paper given at the Russian Museum. Douglas (1994) 37.

presence is the mark of modernization within art-historical discourses."[71] Douglas and Mudrak take great pains to identify "proof of actual contact" (Bal's and Bryson's phrase) between Malevich and the defining influences for whom they are making their cases. And such cases are hardly inconsequential. They provide valuable insight into the transnational connections made by Malevich despite his relatively severe imposed isolation under Soviet rule (he was forbidden to leave the country following his 1927 journey abroad, despite repeated requests to do so), and they demonstrate the inability of totalitarian power structures to permanently and completely seal up the permeability of artistic influence. Douglas' and Mudrak's arguments do not explicitly address such issues as these, however; rather, they focus upon the establishment of "provable participation in the series of causation" (again, Bal and Bryson). Such a series, like links in a chain, becomes problematic, however, because, as Bal and Bryson note, "metonymy is endless," the chain of contiguous connections never ends; one can feasibly follow such links interminably.

Yet Douglas and Mudrak do not fall into any such trap, bringing firm and distinct closure to their arguments. Bal and Bryson write of just exactly such a methodological approach: "Closure is the privilege, as well as the essential function, of the 'author'; through this figure the chains will be brought together in a movement of convergence and penultimacy, before 'the end' finally appears on the screen." The problem, here, according to Bal and Bryson, remains an implicit "denial of the actual continuation of

[71] Bal and Bryson 183.

the contiguities in which the narrator stands."[72] Without explicit acknowledgement of the specific paradigms, philosophies, and assumptions upon which their arguments stand, Douglas and Mudrak reinforce a certain normativity within art historical discourse whereby the fundamental semiotic nature of art historical texts and analyses – the constitutive identity of art historical research within its own field of signs and contiguities – is repressed. I will seek in this dissertation to challenge that normativity, with the acknowledgment that I must also necessarily operate within and around its structures.

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In the past decade and a half, Malevich studies have been dramatically enriched by the authoritative publication in Russian of the artist's writings. A five-volume set of tomes, published from 1995 to 2004, presented all the official and unofficial written documents composed by the artist, carefully transcribed and translated when necessary into Russian, with careful attention to preserving the meaning of the author as much as was decipherable.[73] (Malevich's use of language has consistently remained problematic. He mixed Russian, Ukrainian, and Polish, in both academic language and argot, according to his whim. He employed abundant irony and even sarcasm, with few markers, other than very particular and abstruse contexts, with which to identify it. He made ample use as well of puzzling juxtapositions of words and images, arguably the

[72] Bal and Bryson 183-184.
[73] Kazimir Malevich, *Sobranie Sochinenii v Piati Tomakh*.

legacy of his involvement in transrational avant-garde poetry and art.)[74] These volumes provided texts and analyses of previously inaccessible documents related to the years of the artist's late paintings. Additionally, a two-volume 2004 publication of Malevich's correspondence, entitled *Malevich o sebe* (*Malevich on himself*), provided new insight into the private and semi-public thoughts of the artist in the critical years of 1927-1935. Given this new trove of textual resources, there was bound to be much more to say about the artist and his late works.

Paul Galvez was one of the first scholars to examine critically the late Malevich paintings in light of the artist's contemporary theories.[75] Galvez explains the construct of the "additional element," which was articulated by Malevich in the 1927 text, "1/45 An Introduction to the Theory of the Additional Element in Painting."[76] This complicated construct, by which the artist explained his normative structure for interpreting the entire scope of the history of art, ascribes the advent of new artistic styles to an "additional element" based upon a particular formal line. According to Malevich, in the birth and growth of any given style, this form, or "element," would infect the art of a group of painters to the point of taking it over and creating a new style. Galvez makes a compelling case that in the late figurative works, Malevich attempted to introduce a

[74] The significance of all this has just begun to be worked out, for example by Katsnelson's extensive discussion of the artist's employment of the word "grub." (Katsnelson 53-64.) All in all, however, Malevich's body of written work leads to muddled and inconclusive results. Analyses based heavily upon the artist's written work cannot help but be vividly colored by the lenses of the given interpreter, which, when said lenses are acknowledged and explained, can nevertheless prove fruitful.

[75] Paul Galvez, "Avance rapide. Le dernier Malevitch," *Les Cahiers du Musée national d'art mderne* 79, May 2002. 83-99.

[76] Malevich, *The World as Non-Objectivity* 147-194. For a further discussion of the various versions of this text, see Galvez p. 96, endnote 3 and Andersen's notes at the end of the translation in *The World as Non-Objectivity*.

new additional element – the cross – into the representational art of his time. Galvez's theory has fascinating implications for the semiotic interpretation of these paintings; he makes a pointed and well-argued case that Malevich's later painting was intimately connected with his pedagogical activities and theories, one of which was the theory of this "additional element."[77]

Yet another scholar, Margarita Tupitsyn, draws upon Malevich's texts, including 1929's "Painterly Laws in the Problems of Cinema"[78] and 1928's "The Cinema, Gramophone, Radio and Artistic Culture,"[79] along with a letter written by Malevich to Meyerhold in 1928 supporting a claim that Malevich's antedating introduced a fluctuation between reality and fiction which encoded movement and temporality into his late paintings.[80] Tupitsyn asserts that such an encoding was related to Malevich's contemporary interest in the medium of film, with its potential for communicating through movement and temporality.

Katsnelson's 2007 dissertation, the first half of which explores a post-structuralist reading particularly of Malevich's late peasant paintings, puts forth an analysis primarily drawing upon Malevich's contemporary correspondence in order to elucidate the meaning and agenda behind his paintings. Effectively, she argues that Malevich expressed his "real" thoughts in his personal correspondence, whilst couching them in camouflage in his paintings. In particular, she gives a convincing discussion of

[77] Sarabianov deems the pedagogical motivations behind the creation of these paintings as Malevich's "pedagogical impulse." Sarabianov, "Zhivopis'" 154.
[78] Translated in Tupitsyn.
[79] Malevich, *The Artist, Infinity, and Suprematism* 163-176.
[80] Ibid. 81-85.

Malevich's self-identification as generated from the peasant world, with reference to Malevich's excursus in his private correspondence concerning food.[81]

Another recent contribution to the field comes from Adrian Barr, who has published an article derived from the proceedings of the 2004 "Rethinking Malevich" conference, sponsored by the Malevich Society.[82] Barr's work examines a series of articles published by Malevich in Ukrainian between 1928 and 1930.[83] These articles concern the stylistic development of art and were published in the journal *Nova Generatsiia*. According to Barr, they illustrate a significant revision of Malevich's philosophical system, a revision which allowed the painter to justifiably return to figuration. Barr argues that the later paintings allowed for a resolution of the impasse arrived at in the white-on-white paintings of the late 1910s. The last canvases Malevich created prior to his temporary abandonment of painting, these works took the abstract system of suprematism to its conclusion of ultimate non-objectivity by completely abolishing the distinction between ground and object upon their surfaces of white brushstrokes.

For Barr, the *Nova Generatsiia* articles display Malevich's recognition of "sensation" as received by a painter. This "sensation" changed or deformed the visible world in ways that produced "art" – as opposed to utilitarian creations – which reflected the object-filled world without attention to the artist's "sensation." This theory,

[81] Katsnelson 55-64.
[82] Adrian Barr, "From *Vozbuzhdenie* to *Oshchushchenie*: Theoretical Shifts, Nova Generatsiia, and the Late Paintings," *Rethinking Malevich* 203-220.
[83] Malevich, *Essays on Art* vol. II: 7-46.

according to Barr, helped Malevich to identify a "collective objectless essence" shared by numerous styles throughout the history of art.[84] It permitted his repudiation of the "strict formalist divide between abstraction and figuration" and helped him to achieve, in the late paintings, a "partial subversion" of form, as opposed to its "total dissolution" in the earlier suprematist works.[85]

There remains significant peril in relying upon Malevich's writings to help explicate the artist's creations and actions, for those writings themselves are equally as complex and polysemous as any work of visual art or set of motivations. As Bal and Bryson note, "it cannot be taken for granted that the evidence that makes up 'context' is going to be any simpler or more legible than the visual text upon which such evidence is to operate."[86] They argue against the use of context – within which we can readily accommodate the written texts produced by an artist – for the purposes of establishing any sort of certainty or determination with respect to the "text," or work of art, which serves as a point of focus. Context cannot *de facto* operate upon a text in order "to order its uncertainties," in Bal's and Bryson's words, for that context stands itself as a text with its own set of uncertainties.

I am deeply indebted to this corpus of literature, as outlined above, and I will continue throughout my work here to draw selectively upon the insights of these

[84] Barr, *Rethinking Malevich* 211-212.
[85] Ibid. 218-219.
[86] Bal and Bryson 177.

scholars. However, unlike Douglas, who asserts the importance of scholarly objectivity when approaching the subject of Malevich,[87] I understand scholarship to be inflected always by arbitrary and biased choices from the infinite expanse of related material. By design, Malevich's paintings, whether figurative or abstract, remain signifiers which are loosely disengaged from any given set of signifieds. They deliberately avoid fixed meaning, and in order to bring any kind of convincing meaning to them, one must make choices about textual elements with which to bring them into juxtaposition. As Bal and Bryson state, "Semiotics assumes that not only artworks but the accounts we fashion for them are works of the sign."[88] The fashioning of accounts by means of such choices makes any sort of "objectivity" a hopeless cause and also reveals authors' claims to universal significance and silence regarding their interpretative choices to be hollow. In my own conception of the art historian's task, a clear acknowledgement of one's perspective, one's bias, and one's choices of interlocutors is the only honest and ethical means of proceeding within art historical discourse.

As for my perspective, choices, and bias, my interest in these paintings hinges upon their semiotic implications—formally, contextually, and theoretically. I base this

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[87] Douglas calls for an "unbiased scholarly biography" of Malevich in her introductory article to the 2007 text, *Rethinking Malevich*, a publication funded by the Malevich Society. (Charlotte Douglas, "Preface," *Rethinking Malevich* vi.) In this respect, it might be useful to mention that Douglas serves as president of the Malevich Society, which is funded by revenue generated from the sale of some of Malevich's paintings recovered from museums in the early 2000s by his heirs and on whose board also sits the lawyer responsible for creating the restitution lawsuits that resulted in these works' removal from public display.

For more information regarding these affairs, see Petrova, "Legacy Revisited," Petrova, ed., *The Russian Avant-Garde: Personality and School*. Regarding the lawyer responsible for instituting the restitution procedures, see Marc Spiegler, "The Devil and the Art Detective," *Art and Auction* July 2003, available at http://www.marcspiegler.com/Articles/ArtAndAuction/ArtAuction_2003_07_Toussaint.pdf, accessed 12/16/2009.

[88] Bal and Bryson 184.

orientation upon the idea that, to use Bal's and Bryson's words, "Semiotic analysis of visual art does not set out in the first place to produce interpretations of works of art, but rather to investigate how works of art are intelligible to those who view them, the processes by which viewers make sense of what they see."[89] In my semiotic approach, I am concerned not only with Saussurean signifiers and signifieds – the sounds/images and the ideas they are connected to – but moreover with the mutable and tangled relationships between elements of signification and their evocations and consequences within the minds, actions, and utterances of their viewers and producers, both past and present.

For my semiotic grounding in these investigations, I will rely upon both Russian and Western European/American sources. I will draw substantially upon the work of the Moscow-Tartu school of semiotics, particularly that of Boris Uspensky and Iurii Lotman, whose ideas provide complex yet accessible applications of semiotic theory to problems within the context of Russian culture.[90] I will also consider the musings of the

[89] Ibid.

[90] Ju. M. Lotman and B. A. Uspenskij, *The Semiotics of Russian Culture*, ed. Ann Shukman (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Contributions, 1984). Originally published 1977. Boris Uspensky, *A Poetics of Composition: The Structure of the Artistic Text and Typology of a Compositional Form*, trans. Valentina Zavarin and Susan Wittig (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973). Originally published 1970. B. A. Uspensky, *Semiotika Iskusstva* (Moscow: Iazyki Russkoi Kul'tur, 1995). Iurii M. Lotman, Lidiia Ia. Ginsburg, and Boris A. Uspenskii, *The Semiotics of Russian Cultural History*, ed. Alexander D. Nakhimovsky and Alice Stone Nakhimovsky (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985). Yurij Lotman and B. A. Uspensky, "On the Semiotic Mechanism of Culture," *Critical Theory Since 1965*, ed. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1986) 410-422. B. A. Uspenskij, "Semiotics of Art," *Soviet Semiotics: An Anthology*, ed. and trans. Daniel P. Lucid (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977) 171-173. Maxim Waldstein, *The Soviet Empire of Signs: A History of the Tartu School of Semiotics* (Saarbrücken: Verlag Dr. Müller, 2008).

The transliteration of Lotman's and Uspensky's names from the Cyrillic has not been consistent in English translations. While I will retain consistent spelling in my own text, when citing sources I will preserve the transliterative choices of the sources' translators, in order to maintain a more streamlined search process for these texts. I have for the most part relied upon the Library of Congress standards for

postmodern, post-disciplinary humanist Mikhail Epstein, whose discussions of Russo-Soviet topoi, as well as of postmodernism within the Russian context will have a great deal of bearing upon my interpretation of the former avant-garde artist's role within the developing Socialist Realist arts regime.[91] Interlocutors of these two principal subjects within the Russian arena, particularly Boris Gasparov and Boris Groys, will balance my discussions of their theories.[92] Finally, within the context of Russian theoreticians, I will draw upon the work of Malevich's contemporary, Russian formalist Victor Shklovsky, whose frequently cited work on defamiliarization has often been used in analyses of the

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transliteration of Russian words and names. The major exception to this, however, is in Uspensky's name. Although the author's name has been transliterated in a variety of spellings, as I have indicated above, and via the Library of Congress transliteration system would be spelled Uspenskii, the word for "Dormition" as an adjective (in Russian, "*uspenskii*"), as in "Dormition Cathedral" ("*Uspenskii Sobor"*) has generally normalized in transliteration as "Uspensky."

[91] Mikhail Epstein, "Russo-Soviet Topoi," trans. Jeffrey Karlsen, in *The Landscape of Stalinism: The Art and Ideology of Soviet Space*, ed. Evgeny Dobrenko and Eric Naiman (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003) 277-306. Mikhail Epstein, "Chronocide: Prologue to the Resurrection of Time," trans. Edward Skidelsky, *Common Knowledge* 9:2 (2003) 186-198. Mikhail Epstein, *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture*, trans. Anesa Miller-Pogacar (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1995). Mikhail Epstein, "Postmodernism, Communism, and Sots-Art," trans. John Meredig, *Endquote: Sots-Art Literature and Soviet Grand Style*, ed. Marina Balina, Nancy Condee, and Evgeny Dobrenko (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2000) 3-31. Mikhail Epstein, *Amerussia* (2007). Mikhail Epstein, "Response: "Post-" and beyond," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 39.3 (Autumn 1995) 357-366. Mikhail Epstein, "Hyper in 20th Century Culture: The Dialectics of Transition from Modernism to Postmodernism," *Postmodern Culture: An Electronic Journal of Interdisciplinary Criticism* 6.2 (January 1996) (Johns Hopkins. http://muse.jhu.edu/login?uri=/journals/postmodern_culture/v006/6.2epstein.html) (accessed May 4, 2011). Ellen E. Berry and Mikhail N. Epstein, *Transcultural Experiments: Russian and American Models of Creative Communication* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).

[92] Boris Gasparov, "Introduction," *The Semiotics of Russian Cultural History*. Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, trans. Charles Rougle (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992). Boris Groys, "A Style and a Half: Socialist Realism between Modernism and Postmodernism," *Socialist Realism Without Shores*, ed. Thomas Lahusen and Evgeny Dobrenko (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997) 76-90.

work of the Russian avant-garde, and which also, as art historian Anna Chave has demonstrated, extends well beyond that context.[93]

Within the realms of Western scholarship, I will make use of the theories of major poststructuralist thinkers, including Jean Baudrillard, Roland Barthes, and Jacques Derrida.[94] On a specifically art historical level, the seminal article by Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, "Semiotics and Art History," will serve to ground my methodological approach, although perhaps that has already become apparent. In large part what I will seek to do here is to reframe that figure whom we know by the name of Malevich; it is in large part because of the work of Bal and Bryson, along with others like them, that I can viably approach such questions of the elaborate production of authorship and redefine it within frames which take into account stylistic eclecticism and convoluted apparatuses of state and personal power.

Beyond Bal and Bryson, I will build upon Western art historians studying modern art, including the aforementioned T. J. Clark, Anna Chave, and Yve-Alain Bois, as well as Rosalind Krauss and Hal Foster.[95] I am significantly indebted as well within the field of art history and visual culture to the work of individuals devoted specifically to the Russian/Soviet context, beyond those whom I have already cited in this chapter. These include Victoria Bonnell, Matthew Cullerne Bown, and Brandon Taylor, whose analyses

[93] Victor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," (1917) *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, trans. with an introduction by Lee T. Lemon and Marion Reis (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1965) 3-24. Anna C. Chave, *Mark Rothko: Subjects in Abstraction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).
[94] Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*. Yve-Alain Bois, "Malevitch, le carré, le degré zéro*" Macula* 1 (1978): 28-49. Bois, "El Lissitzky: Radical Reversibility." Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, corrected edition, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).
[95] Rosalind Krauss, "The Originality of the Avant-Garde: A Postmodernist Repetition," *October* 18 (Autumn 1981) 47-66. Foster, "Re: Post" *Art After Modernism* 189-201.

of Soviet poster imagery and painting have proven extremely useful in developing my thinking.[96] Moreover, I cannot begin to express my deep and abiding gratefulness for Mary Hannah Byers' extensive and detailed archival research into the history of the Soviet-era Tretiakov Gallery, as put forth in her 2004 dissertation; her clear and organized explanation of the museum's history has provided immeasurable aid in clarifying the historical circumstances of Malevich's exhibition as well as my arguments regarding these circumstances.[97]

Last but not least, this dissertation will make substantial use of the work of scholars of Russian history, literature, and culture in general. In particular, I have gained a much better understanding of Malevich's context through the scholarly efforts of Irina Gutkin, Katerina Clark, Evgeny Dobrenko, Leonid Heller, Svetlana Boym, and Elizabeth Astrid Papazian.[98] As such, my work here will, I hope, continue and expand the scholarly dialogues within which their writings participate. Although my methodology derives

[96] Victoria Bonnell, *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). Matthew Cullerne Bown, *Socialist Realist Painting* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998). Bown, *Art Under Stalin*. Matthew Cullerne Bown and Brandon Taylor, eds., *Art of the Soviets: Painting, sculpture and architecture in a one-party state, 1917-1992* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993).

[97] Mary Hannah Byers, "The Rise of Socialist Realism in the Exhibitions of the State Tret'iakov Gallery 1924-1934," Ph.D. Thesis (University of Glasgow, 2004).

[98] Irina Gutkin, *The Cultural Origins of the Socialist Realist Aesthetic 1890-1934* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1999). Katerina Clark, "Socialist Realism *with* Shores: The Conventions for the Positive Hero," *Socialist Realism Without Shores* 27-50. Evgeny Dobrenko, "The Disaster of Middlebrow Taste, or, Who 'Invented' Socialist Realism?," *Socialist Realism Without Shores* 135-164. Evgeny Dobrenko, *Political Economy of Socialist Realism*, trans. Jesse M. Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007). Leonid Heller, "A World of Prettiness: Socialist Realism and Its Aesthetic Categories," *Socialist Realism Without Shores* 51-75. Svetlana Boym, "Paradoxes of Unified Culture: From Stalin's Fairy Tale to Molotov's Lacquer Box," *Socialist Realism Without Shores* 120-134. Elizabeth Astrid Papazian, *Manufacturing Truth: The Documentary Moment in Early Soviet Culture* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2009).

much more solidly from art historical disciplinary standards, what I have to say might also contribute significantly to expanding the field of Russian studies.

None of these interlocutionary sources, aside from Shklovsky, are contemporaneous with Malevich, and I am making that choice consciously. I am interested not only in Malevich's paintings and their twentieth-century context, but also in the texts produced when the interpretive strategies of the early twenty-first century are applied to these objects. These scholars', in particular Epstein's, Uspensky's, and Lotman's, insights upon the state of Russian culture and its relationship to modernity will prove to be an effective means of interpreting how Malevich's works operated and continue to operate within the Russian context. History writing is inherently a retrospective activity; the means by which we interpret past events are irrevocably colored by how we choose to view the historian's task, and how we view such a task is inherently rooted in our present experience. Thus, this dissertation is as much about Malevich, his interlocutors, and his moment as it is about this writer, her interlocutors, and the history of art during the turn of the first decade of the twenty-first century.

In my second chapter, then, I will situate the paintings that Malevich created for the 1929 Tretiakov exhibition within the contemporary context of the Tretiakov Gallery and prevailing Soviet approaches to dealing with the pre-Revolutionary past. In this endeavor I will be immeasurably assisted by Irina Vakar's detailed article outlining the

circumstances of the exhibition and the limited documents that pertain to it.[99] I will consider the reasons which allowed the exhibition to be mounted, reasons which thenceforth collapsed in upon themselves when the exhibition moved to Kiev in 1930. In particular, I will essay a close reading of the exhibition catalogue, written by the Marxist critic Aleksei Fedorov-Davidov, specifically considering its employment of Soviet ideological language.[100]

In this chapter I will examine the implications of Malevich's antedating enterprise for the ideological orientation of the paintings' presentation, as well as analyze the circumstances of the exhibition and the paintings it displayed in semiotic terms. I will show how I understand these works as representing, to the artist, that which existed at moments in his past, as he remembered and recollected them in the present and as they necessarily *were*, in order to lead up to the present moment; it was not a matter of illustrating what *should have been*, but rather one of reconstructing history, of making a history as it had to be. Last, I will propose a reading of Malevich's images, particularly those of women peasants, which confounded polarizing Soviet systems of representation, thereby disrupting state attempts at normalizing a Russian and more broadly Soviet sense of national identity.

In my third chapter, I will contend that Malevich's late-career figurative production represents an engagement, along with socialist realism and the early

[99] Irina Vakar, "The Kazimir Malevich Exhibition at the Tretyakov Gallery in 1929," Petrova, ed., *The Russian Avant-Garde: Representation and Interpretation* (St. Petersburg: State Russian Museum and Palace Editions, 2001) 121-137.
[100] Fedorov-Davydov, *Vystavka*.

Stalinist political project, with proto-postmodernism. My argument will be grounded in the work of postmodern theorists, particularly Mikhail Esptein's discussions of postmodernism within the Russian context. I will compare Malevich's eclecticism with that of socialist realism, and I will reflect upon the theme of modern versus postmodern experimentation as applied to Malevich's suprematist work versus the circa-1929 paintings. I will consider the possibility that if Malevich's earlier work manifested the avant-garde, his later work manifested the arrière-garde; moreover, I will discuss the ways in which Malevich's antedating project might be understood within such a construct and furthermore in terms of the postmodern concept of the simulacrum. I will question the circa-1929 works' relation to concepts that were fundamentally constitutive of the artist's modernist orientation, including original authorship and the transcendental nature of pure, non-objective abstraction. I will discuss these works as evidence of what came after the failure of utopia, in terms both of Malevich's and Lenin's visions.

In my fourth chapter, I will examine the late Malevich paintings within their ambivalent status as duplicates and replicas. Attention will be given to the reasons why Malevich made multiple copies of the same picture and why in 1928-1929 he repeated motifs and compositions from his early career. I will consider in particular the contrasts between Malevich's approach to reiteration and the socialist realist one. Moreover, I will propose a theoretical construct by which we might place much of the artist's circa-1929 oeuvre within the context of structures of duplication by means of conventionalism. Perhaps through the concept of conventions, as well, I will argue that

we might identify ways in which the forms of some of the circa-1929 figurative paintings participated, to varying extents, within the theoretical foundations of suprematism.

Malevich's late paintings did not operate on the level of duplication which was presently transforming the world around him. The artist's emphasis was upon the worked-ness of his objects, their material character and the interaction of materials and the performances of individual human hands. In attempting to rewrite his history, Malevich ignored and perhaps despised the wisdom that totalitarianism embraced: that one must address and overcome the masses in order to maintain power and that this task could only be accomplished by means of the machine-produced, mass-distributed image. For a totalitarian regime, the duplicate is necessary not to replace what is missing, but rather to exist in a multitude of places at the same moment—to be the "real" truth for many at once. Such was the new way to transform the world—through the masses, not mystical enlightenment. Issues of duplication raise questions as to who holds power over art – the artist, the public, the media, or all those who cooperate or collaborate with, institute or perpetuate, or enforce state structures of violence.

To make choices about how to narrate the story of this art requires the selection of pertinent documents and viable contiguities – an unavoidable and necessary task. However, to imply that it is only legitimate to support the cause of the avant-garde and not to acknowledge that one is thereby making a morally-motivated choice is to be dishonest with one's reader. For one is making a moral judgment about who has the

right to power and to determining the legacy of history—as well as who does not. This dissertation is partly an exercise in exploring my own orientation regarding questions of artistic representation and power, and I hope that it raises, as well as proposes some multilayered answers for, similar questions in the minds of my readers.

Chapter Two: How Malevich's 1929 Exhibition Came to Pass: a semiotic reading

> Already commercial capitalism and the division of labor had torn artistic production away from material reality. With the introduction of machines this gulf between mechanical production and handicraft art became even wider. With the production of artistic "commodity" on an obscure market and the individualism that was generated from it having destroyed monumental architecture and artistic industry, one all the same returned to painting. The wealth-accumulating bourgeois and parasitic nobility restricted art to the maintenance of a narrow circle of the ruling class. Gradually, after its detachment not only from production, but also from other forms of ideology (sciences, politics and others), art also tore away from socio-political life. Its slavish maintenance of bourgeois recreation and luxurious desires was covered up by the ideological "sanctity" of art, the theory of "art for art's sake." And so, along with landscapes, followed by still-lifes, art arrives, before the world war, at last, at the full rejection not only of the subject, but also of all representation of the exterior world. Painting was locked in the narrow circle of simple formal inquiry.
>
> *Alexei Fedorov-Davydov, "Exhibition of the Works of K. S. Malevich," Moscow, 1929.*[101]

Although socialist realism had not yet gripped the Russian visual art world with as great a strength as it had the Russian literary world by 1929, the forces of communist renewal had already actively penetrated all realms of Russian society, although with varying emphases. Given such contextual framing, it is highly curious that Kazimir

[101] Fedorov-Davydov, *Vystavka* 7-8.

Malevich was able to put on a retrospective show (which was hardly retrospective in actuality) at the Tretiakov Gallery in 1929. This year marks a tipping point in Russian culture, and as such we should be careful to assign univocacy to any of the actors involved in the events of this moment.[102] The specifics of the exact circumstances of Malevich's 1929 "retrospective" exhibition have recently been given much needed attention in Russian scholarship, which has been invaluable for deciphering the correspondence between Malevich and the individual decision-makers at the Tretiakov during the months surrounding the exhibition.[103] As happens at cultural tipping points, individual and institutional identities can prove unstable, changeable, and multivalent; the agents of power who allowed the 1929 Malevich exhibition to occur experienced such instability both as actors and subjects within the Stalinist political machine. No single dogma or official can be held solely responsible for this exhibition's existence: a variety of individuals and cultural factors created the exact circumstances which led to its feasibility.[104] Some of the officials at the Tretiakov, such as Mikhail Kristi, who took over the post of Museum Director in September 1928 and was known to have avant-

[102] I employ the term "tipping point" to indicate that moment at which gradual and revocable change suddenly becomes irrevocable, often with calamitous results. The genesis of this term can be found in mathematical theories of catastrophe and was popularized by Malcolm Gladwell's 2000 eponymous bestseller (New York: Little Brown).

[103] Vakar, "The Kazimir Malevich Exhibition," Petrova, ed., *The Russian Avant-Garde: Representation and Interpretation* 121-137.

[104] Such an argument could be applied, of course, at a variety of "tipping points" in Soviet history; as Evgeny Dobrenko notes, "Soviet society was, of course, never a 'monolith,' as official Soviet doctrine and Western Sovietology maintained. In the course of Soviet history, it encompassed complex, often latent sociocultural, national, political, and demographic processes and stratifications." Evgeny Dobrenko, "The Disaster of Middlebrow Taste," *Socialist Realism Without Shores* 159-160. And as Elizabeth Astrid Papazian asserts, "although we may feel, as western readers of Soviet history, that our temporal and spatial distance from the participants in this story confers a sort of critical objectivity on our analyses, this is a conceptual trap. Consciously or unconsciously, we search for heroes who 'resisted' Stalinism in words and deeds and villains who 'collaborated.'" Papazian 13. The tendency to absolutize agency in Soviet studies is further considered by Anna Krylova in "The Tenacious Liberal Subject in Soviet Studies," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 1: Vol. 1 (Winter 2000) 119-146.

garde sympathies (and was possibly even a personal friend of the artist), or even in the Soviet structures of arts administration, such as Anatoli Lunacharski, who had championed a diverse array of artistic endeavors during his tenure, may have been, at least on certain levels, somewhat sympathetic to Malevich.[105] Aside from the individual personalities and choices, what interests me particularly are those societal dynamics which allowed the exhibition to come to pass under the alert and watchful eyes of those who were unsympathetic to the preeminent avant-garde artist and who would, in a few years' time, succeed in declaring socialist realism the only permissible form of Russian art, effectively exiling Malevich from the state monopoly on artistic resources and public exhibition.

Founded in the mid-nineteenth century by the industrialist Pavel Tretiakov, the Tretiakov Gallery, from its beginnings, provided a facility for the collection of the art of the Russian nation. Prior to the Revolution works of the nineteenth-century social realists known as the Wanderers, with some significant contributions from more recent modern movements, had heavily dominated the Gallery's holdings. With the nationalization of the institution in 1918, its holdings dramatically grew by means of the acquisition of the collections of the Orthodox Church and private citizens, rendering the Tretiakov the most expansive and fully representative museum of Russian art in the world.

[105] It is worth noting that Lunacharski was driven from his post as Commissar of the People's Enlightenment (NarKomPros) just a few months before Malevich's exhibition. Mary Hannah Byers, "The Rise of Socialist Realism" 66, 72. Bown, *Socialist Realist Painting* 111.

An exhibition at the Tretiakov represented what was most Russian about Russian art, but Malevich's 1929 show constituted an anomaly in the general program of special, temporary exhibitions held at the Tretiakov in this moment. The five other shows mounted in 1929 all proactively contributed to and promoted the cause of Communism and the advancement of Soviet art. An exhibition featuring satirical window posters from the Russian Civil War, which Matthew Cullerne Bown has called "the first characteristic Soviet works of art," provided thematic and strategic models for a type of art that could effectively function to serve state purposes.[106] Another retrospective featured paintings of Pavel Kuznetsov which represented the cultural textures of the Central Asian republics, reinforcing the notion of an expanding international union of nations under Communist leadership. "Young Art Workers from the City of Leningrad" (mentioned briefly at the end of the Malevich catalog which is quoted above and translated in full as Appendix) purportedly exhibited some of the first works of art produced by Communist proletarians, and an "Exhibition of Works on Revolutionary and Soviet Themes" attempted to illustrate the logical and proper transition between radical art of the Revolutionary period and the more conservative style of works that had since come to be understood as Soviet; both shows reinforced Party aims. And the exhibition, "Art and the Struggle with Drunkenness" promoted an in-favor Communist social agenda.[107]

[106] Bown, *Socialist Realist Painting* 47. The Russian Civil War occurred during the six years following the October Revolution, 1917-1923, though most intensely between 1918 and 1920, and principally concerned fighting between the Reds, or Bolsheviks, and the Whites, a conglomeration of loosely connected anti-Bolshevik entities.
[107] Byers, "The Rise of Socialist Realism" 72-81.

Although the Gallery mounted no exhibitions in 1928, the final show of 1927 had featured late nineteenth-/early twentieth-century Slavophile (neo-nationalist) historical genre painters Vasilii Surikov and Viktor Vasnetsov, and the only shows mounted in 1930 would celebrate the depiction of the Red Army (the Soviet national army) in art and the development and contributions of collective farming.[108] The latter presented almost exclusively photographs and posters, rather than paintings, as a traveling exhibition to be displayed at such farms.[109] All of these exhibitions represented institutional certification and justification of Soviet bases of power, functioning ideologically to produce visual meaning according to state structures of authority.[110] It would appear that, in such an array of exhibitions, Malevich's seemingly non-politically-oriented "retrospective" operated as an outlier. Its content and the means of institutional presentation to the public and political authorities may serve to underline the motivations of the power structures that allowed the exhibition to pass, if only briefly, and also to point to some of the issues, contiguous to the painted "texts," which Stalinist culture repressed.

The preeminent American authority on Malevich, Charlotte Douglas, has described the decision to grant Malevich a retrospective in 1929 as the "epitome" of the

[108] The forced modernization of Russian agriculture into state-run collective farms (*kolkhozi*), begun in 1928, was intended to increase the efficiency of agricultural production by the application of industrial methods to agriculture. Privately-held land, animals, and tools were all requisitioned for the purposes of increasing yields, raising state-demanded crops, and improving food distribution to urban areas.
[109] Byers, "The Rise of Socialist Realism" 54-55, 108-110.
[110] For a discussion of the institutional certification of state power in a different, more recent context, see Brian Wallis, "What's Wrong With This Picture? An Introduction," *Art After Modernism* xv.

"schizophrenic treatment" to which the artist was subjected by Soviet authorities.[111] And perhaps there are reasons enough to ascribe the events of these years to a collective mental illness. However, I believe it is also worth exploring the underlying motivations and circumstances behind the institutional choices and to consider the instability of subjective identity in such a situation. I would not go so far as to say that a malicious intentionality lay behind granting Malevich his retrospective, for to do so would attribute a stability and totality to the decision-makers of the Soviet art world which they did not possess in 1929. Although context stands on perpetually shifting grounds, I do find that the realization of and rhetoric surrounding Malevich's exhibition fit a certain logical schema, rather than a psychosis, which could broadly characterize this particular historical moment.

In what follows, I will seek to produce a brief sketch of a context within which to illuminate this logical schema and to interpret the circumstances of this exhibition, along with its visual and written texts. I seek not to establish any sort of causal argument, for socialist realism, which I will discuss at length, would not become officially imposed until 1934, but nevertheless constituted a crucial contextual element for this exhibition.[112] One can trace the motivations for the establishment of the unified Soviet aesthetic and initial attempts at its pictorial manifestation to at least 1927, when, with

[111] Douglas (1994) 34-35.

[112] Bal and Bryson argue that a non-causal, but nevertheless contextual argument can be a highly effective, although perhaps underrated, art historical tool; they state, "the relation between 'context' and 'text' (or 'artwork') that these terms often take for granted is that history stands prior to artifact; that context generates, produces, gives rise to text, in the same way that a cause gives rise to an effect." However, such a relationship is not necessary, and the reversal of this directionality can often prove quite useful. Bal and Bryson 178.

the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution (the 1917 uprising whereby Vladimir Lenin and his Bolsheviks secured official power over the Russian nation), a renewed sense of urgency to accomplish the goals of this celebrated event reinvigorated the Communist Party.[113] While most generalized accounts mark the October Revolution as the moment of fundamental transformation in the nature of Russian society from a capitalist to a communist one—the event of "social cataclysm"[114]—the changes to the primary system which the Bolsheviks attempted to enact in 1917 remained largely superficial. The establishment of power, by whatever means necessary, took precedence over the transfiguration of Russians into Soviets by semiotic means, while the meager efforts made during that first decade towards the Communist education of the masses produced little effect.[115]

In 1928 and 1929, with the development and implementation of the First Five-Year Plan,[116] the firmly-established Bolshevik government, under Joseph Stalin's leadership, set out in earnest to create the Soviet culture that Lenin had envisioned. At this definitive moment, the avant-garde, revolutionary culture of Lenin's Bolshevism was succeeded by Stalin's Soviet culture.[117] And under Stalin's newly invigorated

[113] Gutkin 34-35.
[114] Lotman and Uspensky employ this term in their discussion of semiotic activity with respect to cultural transition. "On the Semiotic Mechanism of Culture" 410.
[115] In this respect, see for example the case made by Stephen Brown in "Communists and the Red Cavalry: The Political Education of the Konarmiia in the Russian Civil War, 1918-20" *The Slavonic and East European Review*: Vol. 73, No. 1 (Jan. 1995) 82-99.
[116] On the impact of the First Five-Year Plan in the curatorial milieu, see Byers, "The Rise of Socialist Realism" 65.
[117] Dobrenko, "The Disaster of Middlebrow Taste," *Socialist Realism Without Shores* 143. Bown also writes, "The years 1928-9 marked the Great Divide for Soviet society: between collective leadership and the dictatorship of Stalin alone, between a mixed economy and the rigors of full-blown socialist transformation, between a degree of free speech and none at all." Bown, *Socialist Realist Painting* 110.

socialist offensive, rapid changes to semiotic systems (in terms of the basic meanings of words and imagery) and, consequently, cultural production would take place, most notably for our discussion here in the form of the mandates of socialist realism; these changes would require mandatory compliance and when challenged were enforced through economic methods, incarceration, and capital punishment.[118]

Whereas in the literary world, efforts to renew collective fervor for the goals of the October Revolution found their application in the production of new works of the literary arts, in the field of visual arts a significant emphasis fell upon the role of curatorial efforts.[119] Such an emphasis might be construed within the curatorial task to "stockpile the past," without which, as Jean Baudrillard states, "our entire linear and

[118] Bown notes, "Decrees, speeches, articles in the press, bribes, punishments, advice given casually by a party leader over a cup of tea – the Communist Party sought to influence painters by every means." Bown, *Socialist Realist Painting* xviii.

[119] Happily for Malevich (and subsequent generations of his work's admirers), socialist realism began as a literary movement, and in the early years of its development, its expectations of creative works were not applied to the visual arts in as integrated a manner as they were to published works (over which, arguably, the limited number of printing presses within the country could facilitate more top-down control). This remains, I believe, one of the reasons why the 1929 Malevich exhibition could occur, despite the fact that socialist realism gained ever-greater currency during the very same moments. Soviet authorities believed that literary works would have much more of a direct and immediate impact upon the general public than visual art. One gets the sense that paintings, sculptures, and drawings which did not conform to public tastes or communist ideals constituted problems which could be dealt with at a future moment (and they did, in fact, deal with them), but that the compelling narratives of novels which could inspire people to great feats of production – or, alternatively, sabotage – became a far greater priority in the socialist realist reorganization of Soviet artistic production. Gutkin 73. Katerina Clark, "Socialist Realism *with* Shores," *Socialist Realism Without Shores* 27.

Gutkin argues that, "literature, and especially the novel in its socialist realist form, became the measure of the new Soviet culture's success." This does not mean, however, that an artistic counterpart to the socialist realist literary movement would not become increasingly more powerful during the first half of the 1930s. For example, a movement known as AKhRR (Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia) had formed in the early 1920's as a realist alternative to avant-garde tendencies which, at the time, predominated within the (minimally) state-supported Russian art world. By the late 1920s, AKhRR had successfully modeled itself as the proletarian organization of artists (in opposition to the "bourgeois" avant-garde organizations), and its association with RAPP (Russian Association of Proletarian Writers), the organization which had championed the development of the socialist realist novel, bolstered its status. Gutkin 31. One can find a much more expansive discussion of these developments in Bown, *Socialist Realist Painting* 70-129.

accumulative culture collapses," a commentary which applies equally well to Stalinist Russia as it did to Baudrillard's commentary upon late twentieth-century Western culture.[120] In 1928, the Tretiakov Gallery began a complete overhaul of all permanent displays, a reorganization designed to convey the "linear and accumulative" history of the rise of the proletariat within a Leninist-Marxist narrative in order to correctly instruct the newly christened proletarian masses. These efforts aimed to establish and maintain political credibility for the Stalinist system and the Tretiakov Gallery's role within it by presenting, as Baudrillard states, "a visible past, a visible continuum, a visible myth of origin,"[121] through which tangible objects—tangible evidence of historical continuity—provided a story corresponding to the grand narrative of Communist progress. Curators paired historically appropriate works of peasant art with elegant classics of primarily realist art produced by and for the aristocratic and "bourgeois" classes. By viewing art produced for wealthy and aristocratic patrons side by side with peasant works, museum-goers, according to this curatorial logic, would comprehend the illusory nature of the high art's appeal, which had only been accomplished through the brutal subjugation of the impoverished peasantry.[122]

[120] Baudrillard 10.
[121] Ibid.
[122] Unfortunately, the overall effect of such juxtapositions primarily served to illustrate the backwardness and poverty of the peasant classes, whose art inevitably appeared dull, unimaginative, and stifled by archaic iconography in comparison with the charismatic elegance of the so-called "high" art. Extensive wall labels attempted to guide viewers through the proper interpretation of the pairings, although the effectiveness of this method was found to be lacking, due to the inability or unwillingness of the viewers to the read lengthy texts. Mary Hannah Byers, "From 'State of the Art' to 'State Art': The Rise of Socialist Realism at the Tretyakov Gallery," *Reinterpreting Revolutionary Russia: Essays in Honour of James D. White*, ed. Ian D. Thatcher (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) 184-201. Byers, "The Rise of Socialist Realism" 72.

According to Mary Hannah Byers, the rationale behind this reorganization of the Tretiakov's permanent exhibition spaces was soundly based in the Leninist-Marxist philosophy of dialectical materialism, which might be summed up in a phrase taken from the pamphlet-catalogue by Alexei Fedorov-Davydov quoted at the beginning of this chapter: "But every development encounters its contradiction."[123] The dialectical-materialist strategy towards evaluating reality was to actively expose any given theoretical position as false and illusory in light of its antithesis. Unlike Hegelian dialectics, Soviet dialectical materialism did not strive towards any unity or central synthesis in this clash of oppositions, but maintained the ability to subject all positive concepts to the crushing will of the totalitarian state.[124] Via dialectics, those with the most power behind them and greatest dexterity at rhetorical manipulation possessed the ability to expose any given concept and person who espoused it to be lacking in fervent commitment to the aims of the state, thereby engaging in a zero-sum game whose foregone conclusion bolstered the power of the state each time it was played.

The author of the pamphlet-catalogue for the Malevich exhibition, Fedorov-Davydov, served, according to Bown, as "the leading Marxist critic of the 1920s" and illustrated his adept capacity for dialectical-materialist art historical reasoning in contemporary texts such as *Russian Art of Industrialized Capitalism* (1929) and *The*

[123] Fedorov-Davydov, *Vystavka* 8. Byers, "From 'State of the Art'" 198-199. For more on Fedorov-Davydov's curatorial philosophy, see Chlenova 69-92.

[124] In fact, the attempt at synthesis or mediation between opposite positions was considered far more heinous a crime than the espousal of any discredited extreme position. Epstein, "Postmodernism, Communism, and Sots-Art" 11-12. See also Boris Groys, "A Style and a Half," *Socialist Realism Without Shores* 78-79.

Soviet Art Museum (1933).[125] Much useful information regarding Fedorov-Davydov's orientation and the prevailing currents of the curatorial milieu can be deduced from his brief catalogue. After a summary introductory paragraph, Fedorov-Davydov delves into a two-page explanation of Malevich's stylistic progression, for example, noting that, early in his career,

> Trained in the style of naturalism, Malevich quickly arrives at the study of color and light and he seeks to convey the vibration and oscillation of the atmosphere. This early Impressionist period of Malevich's creativity is represented in the exhibition by several works: 'Spring', 'Red fence' and others (1902-08). He then abandoned Impressionism, which ignored the volumetric form of objects, and he pursued the palpability and heaviness of objects … But soon the artist wholly renounces the object, separating it into its component parts, juxtaposing them in various combinations, taken from various points of view in arbitrary compositions (Cubism of 1911 to 1912). … The logical conclusion from here was non-objective art (1913-1918).[126]

This exposition (including the mention of works such as "Spring," which Malevich created in the short period prior the 1929 show) clearly betrays the author's unfamiliarity with what at least some of Malevich's colleagues knew to be the accurate

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[125] Bown, *Socialist Realist Painting* 69. A. Fedorov-Davydov, *Russkoe iskusstvo promyschlennogo kapitalizma* (Moscow: State Academy of Artistic Sciences [Gosudarstvennaya Akademiya khudozhestvennykh nauk], 1929). *Sovetskii khudozhestvennyi muzei* (Moscow: Ogiz—Izogiz, 1933). See also *Russkoe i sovetskoe iskusstvo: statyi i ocherki* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1975).

Svetlana Boym has noted, in fact, that in general, the Soviet art critic, "usually had more training in ideology and the propaganda of culturalization than in art history," although this criticism perhaps did not apply as fully to Fedorov-Davydov as to most other Soviet art critics. Bown describes Fedorov-Davydov as, "probably the most influential and acute critic of painting in mid-decade [1920s]. Like the pre-revolutionary critics, such as Tugendkhold and Efros, and unlike many of his Marxist colleagues, he possessed an eye for actual quality in painting; and his Marxist standpoint gave him, in the conditions of the time, a greater insight into – and perhaps a greater influence over – the course that Soviet art was taking." Svetlana Boym, "Paradoxes of Unified Culture: From Stalin's Fairy Tale to Molotov's Lacquer Box," *Socialist Realism Without Shores* 130. Bown, *Socialist Realist Painting* 87.

[126] Fedorov-Davydov, *Vystavka* 5-6.

chronology of Malevich's stylistic permutations. (Whether this unfamiliarity stemmed from true ignorance or intentional forgetfulness is entirely debatable.) In Fedorov-Davydov's outline, the discussion of the artist's post-Revolutionary activities extends to his three-dimensional suprematist constructions, known as "Planits" and "Archetectons"; his involvement in so-called "production art," wherein he designed a porcelain suprematist tea set, is only briefly mentioned at the tail end of the document. The author makes no mention anywhere, however, of Malevich's busy life teaching, traveling and, most recently, painting through the course of the 1920s. Such substantial omissions give the impression of relatively scanty contributions to the realm of Soviet art, despite Malevich's active engagement in many important initiatives to define and provide foundations for art and artistic institutions under the new government.

The final three and a half pages of the catalogue are devoted to the proper Marxist contextualization of Malevich's work. The last several paragraphs of this section attempt to situate the role of "the laboratory of 'non-objective' art" within the recent developments in Soviet artistic culture:

> Emerging industry very soon set about to develop new structural forms (reinforced concrete) and posed in an integrated manner the problem of the standardized mass production of everyday items. This was where those experiments and data, that were developed in the laboratory of "non-objective" art, were put to use. Without them, the new architecture, furniture, decorative fabrics, banners and layouts of books and newspapers, and, last, the modern success of the new "industrial" art of the cinema, would have all been impossible. Meanwhile, it is only on the foundation of this industrial art as well, as on the foundation of all

> capitalist industry in general, that we can construct the culture and art of the socialist society.[127]

Such a commentary on Fedorov-Davydov's part may have referenced the preceding years under the New Economic Policy (NEP) (1922-1928), which constituted a nationwide program by which the Communist Party hoped to jump-start the Soviet economy by loosening the reins on socialist intervention and simultaneously reshaping the political consciousness of the people.[128] It was thought that the economic structures and cultural transformations developed under NEP could later be employed to provide a more stable foundation for the socialist economy. It appears that Fedorov-Davydov is here applying a theory from the economic realm by analogy to the art world.

However, I believe that the passage quoted at the beginning of this chapter, which lies squarely in the middle of Fedorov-Davydov's prose, constitutes the key to understanding the paradoxical occurrence of this exhibition at the Tretiakov. This excerpt from the Marxist contextualization portion of the catalogue illustrates how Malevich's 1929 retrospective came to pass in large part in order to serve the zero-sum dialectical-materialist game of Stalinism. I will propose that the exhibition constituted the thesis representing the past, which, when exposed against its antithesis of the promising, inclusive Soviet future, revealed itself as petty, exclusive, and possessing disdain for the tastes of the masses.

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[127] Fedorov-Davydov, *Vystavka* 8-9.

[128] Regarding the molding of Soviet political consciousness during the NEP years, see Matthew Lenoe, *Closer to the Masses: Stalinist Culture, Social Revolution, and Soviet Newspapers* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

In the passage which begins, "Already commercial capitalism and the division of labor had torn artistic production away from material reality," Fedorov-Davydov efficiently places Malevich's work within the category of the "bourgeois," capitalist past, the height of formalist decadence. His description of Malevich's work as "ideologically foreign," and a participant in "slavish maintenance of bourgeois recreation and luxurious desires," firmly secures its identity as *other* in opposition to the Soviet vision. The avant-garde work represented the product of an era of "commercial capitalism" and "division of labor," during which, "in all systems of bourgeois culture, the detachment of art from life reached its age of maturity." Most scathingly, Fedorov-Davydov declared the art of this exhibition to be "locked in the narrow circle of simple formal inquiry." Fedorov-Davydov thus situated Malevich's career of artistic production within an earlier, deeply flawed era by means of a carefully crafted discourse that efficiently employed a very particular type of language which facilitated the effects of this text.[129]

This type of language, deemed "Soviet ideological language," according to Russian studies scholar Mikhail Epstein, "actually has an entirely different aim than a 'normal' language. Instead of placing the emphasis on an exchange of information, it

[129] It is important to note that Fedorov-Davydov's polemics were derived from a sense of how best to serve the Communist proletariat, not the result of any sort of top-down directives. As Chlenova asserts, "As a good Soviet Marxist, Fedorov-Davydov was convinced that he was acting in the name of the mass viewers (the revolutionary proletariat) whose class consciousness he sought to express. By publicly inscribing avant-garde artworks within what he saw as a dialectical materialist meta-narrative, he wanted to advance the course of Soviet art. At the same time, he provided mass viewers with an ideological apparatus for critical evaluation, assuming a common ground with his viewers, whom he conceived of either as already conscientious Marxists or as those aspiring to appropriate the one and only ideologically correct understanding. It is from this assumed and largely imaginary viewpoint, and not from the position of higher Soviet authorities that Fedorov-Davydov and his like-minded colleagues operate throughout the cultural revolution." Chlenova 143.

attempts to control and restrict the thinking of the speaker and listener."[130] In such a system, the language, or semiotic code enacts authoritative control over the message to a much greater extent than in other communicative paradigms, whereby the code principally enables, rather than predetermines, message transmission.[131] With Soviet ideological language, messages enable and reinforce code transmission and foster conformity to the value system inherent in the code. Above and beyond the basic nature of any given language, wherein inherent reinforcement (and mutation) of the code occurs by means of any incidence of message transmission, in the case of Soviet ideological language, an active effort is made in the execution of the code to calcify significatory relationships and to preclude manipulations or innovations which could diverge from the normativity inherent in the code. Of course, such an effort remains irrevocably hopeless, for process, rather than product, constitutes the basic nature of the code, and significatory relationships can be calcified no more readily than a sieve can contain water.[132] Nevertheless, with Soviet ideological language, code seeks to proscribe context: the purportedly stable signification of a given message requires both sender and receiver to assume themselves as participating in the stable contextual arena implied by the perceived non-mutation of the code. When such a code

[130] Epstein, *After the Future* 106.

[131] I employ here terms used in the model of communication theorized by Roman Jakobson: *addresser*, in this case the artist, Malevich; *channel*, the physical evidence of communication, in this case the painted canvas; *receiver*, in this case the individual viewer examining the canvas; *context*, which corresponds to the generalized sense of the term, and as I have already mentioned, one can understand as infinitely expanding; *code*, which can be likened to a language and provides meaning to each element and the whole of the message; and *message*, the *what* that is being addressed, or, alternately, received. Karin Boklund-Lagopoulou, Mark Gottdiener, and Alexandros Ph. Lagopoulos, "Editors' Introduction," *Semiotics*, vol. 1, ed. Mark Gottdiener, Karin Boklund-Lagopoulou, and Alexandros Ph. Lagopoulos (London: Sage Publications, 2003) vii-xxxviii, xviii.

[132] See, for example, Bal's and Bryson's discussion of Derrida's concept of perpetual semiosis and the dynamism of signs. Bal and Bryson 177, 192.

constitutes the only permissible form of public communication, the possibility of operation or interpretation within divergent or mutating contexts becomes severely compromised, and the development and growth of the code itself at the hands of its users amounts to a significant, though not insurmountable, challenge.

The pejorative terms used to describe Malevich's art in the 1929 catalogue ("bourgeois," child of "mature capitalism," etc.) can be classified as *ideologemes*, a particularly insidious component of Soviet ideological language which Epstein describes as "not only nominative, but communicative units of speech" that present in one word or phrase both the fact, object, or characteristic, along with the appropriate attitude which the listener/reader (and speaker/writer) should assume towards such a fact, object, or characteristic. "Concealed judgments that take the form of words," an ideologeme unifies both subject and predicate in a single connotative element, in order to efficiently secure it against any dispute of its rationality or verity.[133] The signification of the individual elements must remain stable and unchangeable, for this stability becomes inherent to the very possibility of communication. Thus, no such thing as socially-responsible "bourgeois" behavior, or well-treated workers under "mature capitalism," could exist.

The most aggressively hostile ideologeme which could be wielded against any member or element of Soviet society was *bourgeois-ism* (*burzhuazizm*), the most malignant form of heresy against communist ideals. Petty desires for consumer goods and personal wealth irretrievably trapped the "bourgeois" malcreant; an individualist

[133] Epstein, *After the Future* 107-108.

who basked in the luxury of whatever frivolities he could afford, he constantly grasped for more money, more caviar, more fashionable decorations for his walls. In Epstein's encapsulation of the word's emotional connotation, he is, "Fat and overfed … His greed is so great that it causes him to tremble."[134] Of course, as Epstein also points out, such a mythical creature could in fact only exist in the context of socialism, as opposed to capitalism – in those countries where "ideologically foreign" sentiments predominated – where such "bourgeois" beings purportedly thrived unhindered, preying upon the misfortunes of the working classes.[135] According to Fedorov-Davydov, who uses the term "bourgeois" four times in his short text, the rising industrialists, petty nobility, and expanding ranks of merchants of the pre-Revolutionary period – the era of "mature capitalism" – served to embody this ideologeme in hindsight; their patronage of formalist artists of the avant-garde, implied by the author's reference to "the

[134] Mikhail Epstein, *Amerussia* 224, 226. To transpose a statement from Lotman and Uspensky, under Stalinist rule, insofar as "bourgeoisism" was thought of as non-Communism, non-Communism began to be thought of as "bourgeoisism." (The original text concerns the eleventh-century conversion of the peoples of Kievan Rus' to Christianity: "Insofar as paganism was thought of as non-Orthodoxy, non-Orthodoxy began to be thought of as paganism.") Iurii M. Lotman and Boris A. Uspenskii, "Binary Models in the Dynamics of Russian Culture (to the End of the Eigtheenth Century)," *The Semiotics of Russian Cultural History* 41.

The accusation of "bourgeoisism" was leveled at a variety of unfavorable elements within Soviet society and had little to do with conventional definitions or the term's historical origins, concerning the rise of middle-class burghers in medieval Europe. Despite the fact that a peasant woman's motivations – to maintain possession of her family's milk cow and thus provide her children with daily fresh milk – or Malevich's motivations – to produce works of art in which the formal properties of the painted surface remained paramount – had nothing to do with mercantile exchange, these (and many other) proclivities were labeled as "bourgeois" because they could not otherwise conform to Bolshevik cultural mythology. Andreas Schönle and Jeremy Shine describe this type of labeling as, "a practice of nonreferential signification: discourse is used here not to designate a concrete political reality but to articulate the binary opposition inherent to autocommunication." (*Autocommunication* was Lotman's theory of the communicative apparatus by which cultural entities employ metanarratives in order to define identity and raise cultural status.) Schönle and Shine, "Introduction," *Lotman and Cultural Studies: Encounters and Extensions*, ed. Andreas Schönle (Madison, Wisconsin: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 2006) 11-12.

[135] "This image expresses nothing more than Russian envy and the poor man's confused dream of unearned wealth. ... It would seem that in the West there are no – and never were – the kind of people that the word *burzhuyi* ["the bourgeois"] is used to describe. ... This phenomenon only arises in a once starving person who finally finds himself rich not only in dream." Epstein, *Amerussia* 224, 226.

production of artistic 'commodity' on an obscure market," allowed such creative types their locked-up isolation: "Its slavish maintenance of bourgeois recreation and luxurious desires was covered up by the ideological 'sanctity' of art, the theory of 'art for art's sake.'" These artists "slavishly" strove to produce objects to please and amuse those who funded their "sanctified" ideological existence disconnected from real life and real people.[136]

This disconnection was paramount to the identification of *formalism*, an ideologeme which embodied the judgment that a work of art, or artist, prioritized form (in the case of painting, this might be color, texture of paint, line and shape, etc.) over all other elements of artistic production. The accusation of formalism lay at the heart of Soviet criticism of all artistic manifestations, regardless of genre. Formalism manifested itself in particular to the detriment of ideological commitment to Communist principles and of any connection to the reality of life being experienced in its revolutionary development.[137] The "narrow circle" of such formal investigations conjured an image of the painter locked up in his studio in self-imposed isolation, caught up in his own arcane experiments, detached from and providing no tangible benefit to society's improvement. Fedorov-Davydov's employment of the ideologeme "formal" thereby precluded objection. It constituted both description and verdict all in the same word and explicitly instructed the viewer regarding the appropriately disdainful attitude to this artwork.

[136] Fedorov-Davydov, *Vystavka* 7.
[137] Heller, "A World of Prettiness," *Socialist Realism Without Shores* 52. Mikhail Iampolski, "Censorship as the Triumph of Life," *Socialist Realism Without Shores* 166-168.

From the Stalinist perspective, the pre-Revolutionary past served to define negatively the utopian future, providing an anti-culture to Bolshevik culture.[138] In the paragraphs following the salient passage quoted above, Fedorov-Davydov attempts both to concretize Malevich's work within the past and to explain the nevertheless useful and positive ramifications which this work could facilitate in the present, under the fortuitous auspices of post-Revolutionary developments. Although one needed to understand Malevich, according to Fedorov-Davydov, as an (inherently pre-Revolutionary) "subjectivist" and "dreamer-philosopher," the author nevertheless claims that the artist's work itself "possesses its own, self-sufficient objective value," when properly situated in the capitalist past, which constituted the "foundation" upon which "we can construct the culture and art of the socialist society." Such a contention likely stems from Fedorov-Davydov's contention that visual art should possess a "single, integral idea-content, developed with the maximum simplicity and clarity, before which not only specialist commentators on art but also the simple public would not feel themselves made fools of."[139] As Bown recognizes, Fedorov-Davydov's "eye for actual quality in painting" gave him a limited appreciation of the formal attributes of Malevich's paintings which might prove useful in the full development of a truly Soviet art. Such a "foundation" of the "so-called 'left' art of the early years of the revolution"

[138] Lotman and Uspensky expend significant effort articulating the nature of culture—anti-culture oppositions as characteristic of cultures "oriented primarily towards expression and represented as an aggregate of normative texts, [in which] the basic opposition will be 'correct-incorrect,' i.e., wrong" (the alternative being cultures oriented primarily by means of rules, where the fundamental opposition is organized—nonorganized). Stalinist culture clearly falls into the correct—incorrect paradigm, with its heavy reliance upon the normative texts established by Marx and Lenin. Lotman and Uspensky, "On the Semiotic Mechanism of Culture," 415-416.

[139] Quoted in Bown, *Socialist Realist Painting* 87, cited as *Krasnaya Nov*, 1924, no. 6, p. 343.

served, nonetheless, as the development which "encountered its contradiction" in the rise of communist art.[140] From such a culture/anti-culture point of view, Malevich's exhibition helped to concretize the mirror-image of Bolshevik culture in artistic terms.

Such a strategy of manipulating cultural dynamics was far from alien within the frame of Russian cultural history. An artificially constructed, self-regulating structure by which a given era in Russian history self-consciously created a model of itself frequently assumed the form of a mirror-image, or opposite, of the perceived nature of the preceding cultural structure. Soviet semioticians Iurii Lotman and Boris Uspensky characterize this tendency in terms of "binary models," whereby, within any single historical moment, two diametrically opposed cultural dynamics co-existed. In a diverse array of examples from Russian history, they have illustrated how various up-and-coming cultures have, in effect, turned the cultures which preceded them "inside out" in order to form the structure of the succeeding era.[141]

According to Lotman and Uspensky, in order to exist, the new culture required a preceding culture to replace, for it derived its very nature from that preceding culture. The 'old' served as the negative form of the 'new' – everything that *was not* in the succeeding system. In this manner, the 'old' and 'new' cultures coexisted at the very same moment, for there needed to be a negative against which the positive could define itself. And, in fact, in many instances, the 'new', positive culture, by means of its own self-identification, served to define the nature of the 'old', negative culture, with

[140] Fedorov-Davydov, *Vystavka* 8.
[141] Lotman and Uspensky, "On the Semiotic Mechanism of Culture," 421.

little regard to the actual nature of the preceding era. The nature of the 'old' existed solely for the purposes of affirming the nature of the 'new' and may in fact have had little to do with many of the artifacts and texts derived from earlier chronological eras. Thus, in 1929, the signification of the ideologemes "bourgeois" and "formal" had everything to do with 1929 and very little to do with 1914.[142]

A chief component of Lotman's and Uspensky's schema of binary models of culture, particularly when dealing with polarities of new and old systems, concerns the perceived dynamics of the two opposing cultures. On the one hand, the new, forward-moving component advanced through history with absurd acceleration, while its counterpart, the 'old', represented a stasis in virtual exclusion from any temporal dynamism. They propose that, "culture regarded diachronically gives a picture of currents moving at different rates," akin to a river with a swift undercurrent and placid surface, except that within the frame of Stalinist thinking, the swift-moving current would be the one most visible, with the implication that danger lurked in the unmoving, invisible, unfathomably deep pools. From the Stalinist point of view, those who clung to the "old," "bourgeois" values simply refused to join up with the rapid advancement of history under the auspices of the Soviet regime. From the internal Bolshevik perspective, these decelerated, or stagnant, currents in the stream of history, like many cultural currents before them, according to Lotman and Uspensky, "may seem to be totally detached from the general process and without any influence on it." However, within Lotman's and Uspensky's model, one can observe from a perspective external to

[142] Lotman and Uspenskii, "Binary Models," *The Semiotics of Russian Cultural History* 36-43.

the culture that the decelerated current runs parallel to the accelerated one and in time will serve as a "reserve of movement" which will lurch forward out of its stationary position at some point in the future. When that point arrives, however, these opposing cultural currents do not autonomously switch places, but rather, the new, accelerating culture makes use of the resurfacing "reserve of movement" in complex and unpredictable ways.[143]

From the perspective of Stalinist authorities and Marxist curators, Malevich's art operated within the so-called "old" cultural current characterized by immutability and deceleration. It was in fact necessary, at the birth of socialist realism, to display Malevich's art as "bourgeois" and stagnant, cut off from the productive evolution of human society, not to mention completely unimaginable as doing any surging forward. (Making an argument which strongly supports my own, Chlenova states that it was necessary to "stigmatize" Malevich, as well as by extension much of the pre-Revolutionary avant-garde, "as outmoded and bourgeois," and moreover to "naturalize this stigmatization through the Tretiakov's institutional power.")[144] The perception of the intense rapidity of Communist changes would have been impossible without the complementary perception of the stagnation of the preceding, pre-Revolutionary era.

Of course, the fact that Malevich actually created these works, which represent a significant advancement in his artistic career, at exactly the same moment as the purported rapid societal advancement under Bolshevik rule was taking place,

[143] Lotman and Uspenskij, "Author's Introduction," *The Semiotics of Russian Culture* xii-xiii.
[144] Chlenova 145.

significantly confounds a narrative concerning the inevitable decline of the stagnant, "bourgeois" past in order to make way for the accelerating socialist future. I read Malevich's choice to place inaccurate dates upon his canvases as participating in, if not fostering, this perception of the antithetical nature of the past. In fact, one might construe his ante-dating also as anti-dating – ascribing a nature to the works that was the antithesis of the socialist realist thesis.

In such an interpretation, the conventional art historical reliance upon causation and effect becomes somewhat confused. Did the artist make this choice because he foresaw the strident tone that would be employed in evaluating his work? Perhaps not, but to assume a causal relationship between context and text can prove highly problematic, particularly since, according to Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, "it is sometimes the case that the sequence (from context to text) is actually inferred from its end-point, leading to the kind of metalepsis that Nietzsche has called 'chronological reversal.'"[145] In the pairing of Malevich's paintings with Fedorov-Davydov's pamphlet-catalogue, which of the two constitutes the text and which the context? And if Malevich's canvases chronologically precede Fedorov-Davydov's words, what of the infinitely expandable context of those words? Where does that context lie in such a chronology? Despite the fact that Fedorov-Davydov wrote the pamphlet-catalogue after Malevich performed the act of antedating, this document remains substantially pertinent to a semiotic analysis of that act.

[145] Bal and Bryson 178.

By antedating his works, Malevich created the appearance, intentionally or not, of abiding in a stagnant, "isolated center"[146] excluded from temporal dynamism. In fact, in the Tretiakov's permanent exhibition from around the same moment, wall text printed above a doorway in the room showcasing works from this "stagnant" era made explicit this assessment of the work of many avant-garde artists: "Deteriorated capitalism landed art in a daze of formalism and aimlessness. The victorious October Revolution led artists from this daze toward a new blossoming of the arts."[147] The gesture of antedating allowed for the exhibition of Malevich's paintings because the antedating brought them into alignment with an historical narrative drawn from the internal perspective of unsympathetic and more powerful entities. Malevich's actions may not have resulted so much from a desire to "fool" someone (something colleagues of the former avant-garde accused him of),[148] than perhaps from a strategy to conform to this perception of his own participation in the 'old' culture. It is my interpretation that, by means of the antedating act, Malevich attempted to perform a semiotic process that Lotman terms "transcoding." This process presents texts from one semiotic system within an utterly foreign semiotic arena, resulting in the attempt to translate a (fundamentally discursive) text into an (equally discursive) text intelligible within the foreign code, despite the two systems' fundamental mutual untranslatability, to say nothing of their mutability.[149]

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[146] Lotman's and Uspensky's term. "Author's Introduction," *The Semiotics of Russian Culture* xii.
[147] Byers, "From 'State of the Art'" 196.
[148] Letter from El Lissitzky to Sophie Kuppers, dated July 19, 1930. Reprinted in *Malevich o sebe*, vol. II: 218.
[149] See Schönle and Shine 23-24.

It seems that, in part, the figurative works created for and shortly after the 1929 exhibition, with their incorrect dates, constituted Malevich's poorly-conceived effort at transcoding his earlier futurist, alogical, and suprematist works. As early as 1922 he remarked that, "Anyone can maintain that he is unconcerned whether his work will be understood or not. But no one should demand that it be understood."[150] And in a 1927 letter to Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, he sought to "make haste to deny the misunderstandings that have crept in" to a recently-published article.[151] I interpret these statements as an indication that the prospect of having his work misinterpreted had borne upon Malevich's thinking for quite a while. Such a transcoding process may have sought to convey those principles of painterly form, color, and surface texture, which had guided the creation of his earlier work, within the more easily readable figurative outlines of the landscape and people of Russia – characteristics that were thematically appropriate to socialist realism.

However, due to the fundamental mutual untranslatability of Malevich's semiotic code and the semiotic code that would come to produce socialist realism, such an attempt at transcoding, insofar as we can propose one, predominantly resulted in failure, since the antedating allowed for the facility of these works' ascription to the era of dazed "formalism and aimlessness." Nevertheless, Fedorov-Davydov's initial summary of Malevich's stylistic progression does provide a very basic overview of the

[150] "On the Subjective and Objective in Art or On Art in General" (1922) in *Kazimir Malewitsch zum 100. Geburtstag* 47.
[151] K. S. Malevich, "Letter to Moholy-Nagy," *The Artist, Infinity, Suprematism* 157, 236. Andersen notes in the endnotes, "The article by Ernst Kallai: Malerei und Photographie, appeared in 'i 10', 1927, pp. 148-157. Moholy-Nagy introduced the article and suggested a discussion on the topic."

painterly problems which Malevich's works attempted to address over the course of his pre-Revolutionary career. The author even asserts, in the penultimate paragraph, that "the formal artistic culture of Malevich can produce rich, fruitful results," in the hands of "working-class youth," who could "employ all the formal experiments" and those findings derived from them in aid of producing new, ideologically-based Soviet art. Although such an application of his formal discoveries hardly coincided with Malevich's own perception of the value and philosophy of his art, it nevertheless reflected evidence of a severely limited effectiveness in the transcoding of these discourses.

Even so, the reception and subsequent seizure in Kiev of Malevich's circa 1929 canvases reflected semiotic breakdown, in which the artist's utterances[152] – his paintings – already fraught with intentional ambiguity and thereby particularly vulnerable to distortion in their transmission, fell victim to the potential bottomless pits of communicative failure with which the entire process of communication – of encoding, transmitting, then decoding – is deeply fraught. Such potholes, even wormholes, resulted from a substantial divergence between the semiotic codes maintained by the sender and receivers. Although the codes within which Malevich's viewers operated remained far from univocal at this moment, these paintings failed to produce meaningful decoding within the semiotic systems of average Soviet art viewers.

[152] I use the term "utterances" in the semiotic sense, in particular in reference to the work of J. L. Austin, whose discussions of the performative nature of speech acts served as foundation for the discipline of performance studies. In a semiotic context, an "utterance" need not necessarily be verbal, but can extend to a variety of communicative acts.

Malevich's earlier work (particularly in the abstract/non-objective style of suprematism) had attempted to manipulate and confound semiotic signification and previously-accepted codes of artistic communication in order to exploit what Uspensky terms "polysemantic valence."[153] Malevich made choices in the creation of his post-1927 figurative works which retained such emphases, thereby producing discursive texts that were intentionally challenging to most of his viewers. He made such a choice likely not out of spite or disdain for viewers, but as the only viable means to effectively communicate at all.[154] For without the obtuseness of the code, the idea that the code itself is up for debate cannot be effectively communicated. On the other hand, the well-educated Communist generally subscribed to the belief that semiotic relationships embodied exact correspondences all related to the overarching truth of reality: the victory of the proletariat over the ruling classes. No room for multidimensionality existed for such a viewer; one could interpret a painting, or frankly any channel of communication, only within the one valid, stable, and overarching code, that within which the dialect of Soviet ideological language operated. The semiotic debacle which Malevich's work faced in 1929 existed not only as a factor of divergent codes between sender and receiver, but also as a factor of divergent beliefs on the part of each party regarding the nature of codes themselves. If these works represented any form of transcoding, they represented it in such a complex manner that their unintelligibility

[153] Uspenskij, "Semiotics of Art" 171.

[154] Although perhaps making this conclusion gives Malevich too much credit; in a 1928 unpublished manuscript, he states, "this is what every ordinary citizen thinks… They, the keepers of the trash of custom, have always – because of their naiveté and mental retardedness – seen art as a special, perfect wastepaper basket." Malevich, "The Cinema, Gramophone, Radio and Artistic Culture," *The Artist, Infinity, Suprematism* 169-170.

within the foreign code became completely inevitable. The code which these painted texts employ significantly undermined the legitimacy of the foreign code itself, thereby effectively annulling any possibility of effective conveyance within that foreign code.

At the same time, Malevich's frenetic preparation for the 1929 exhibition – he created forty of the fifty-three works exhibited in 1929 during the eighteen months or so preceding their display – reflected a certain anxious, almost desperate desire to fit himself, without completely abandoning his own terms, back into a social discourse which was rapidly leaving him in its wake. He noted in 1927, "Art has thereby lost the capacity to reflect life – necessary life – the artist has paid for this materially, the masters of life have stopped paying him money for his work,"[155] and furthermore, in 1928, "we are close to the fall of all artistic culture in general."[156] Malevich suffered from harder times and more substantial evidence of active disfavor on the part of authorities directly responsible for his livelihood in the years leading up to this exhibition than he had experienced at any other point in his life. Over the course of the 1920s, the artist transitioned from serving as an elected member of important state-sponsored, art-related committees and working as the director of an art school in Vitebsk,[157] to struggling as a researcher relegated to a small tacked-on department at the State Institute for the History of Art in Moscow, where, he wrote, "My experimental

[155] Malevich, "Suprematism," *The Artist, Infinity, Suprematism* 155.
[156] Malevich, "The Cinema, Gramophone, Radio and Artistic Culture," *The Artist, Infinity, Suprematism* 173.
[157] Malevich's summary of these accomplishments can be found in a 1929 letter to Glaviskustvo: *The Artist, Infinity, Suprematism* 217.

work seemed monstrously offensive […] Immediately conditions became difficult. The jaws of the historians closed fitfully, harder and harder. But they did not manage to bite through me."[158] He noted in a letter, upon leaving Warsaw for Berlin in 1927, that, "As far as I am concerned there is a definite risk that from the 1st of October I must carry on working as an artist, and only as an artist," i.e. not as a teacher (although he would proceed to secure a part-time instructor position in Kiev to which he would commute monthly), or as a State-sponsored researcher.[159] This gradual disconnection from the powerful agents of the Soviet art world without doubt reflected bureaucratic machinations, but also directly reflected general public opinion regarding the nature and function of art.[160]

Malevich put great stock in the preservationist capacities of the museum as an institution. He wrote in 1927:

> … it appears that when life has set art free, it has become even more valuable, it is preserved in museums, not as an expedient thing, but as non-objective art as such. … 'Utilitarian' things would not have been preserved in museums if the hand of the artist had not touched them …
>
> Things created without any sensation of art do not contain this absolute, unchanging element: such things are not preserved in museums but handed over to time, and if they are preserved, then only as a fact of human abstruseness. Such a thing is an object, it shows instability, transience, whereas artistic things are non-objective, i.e. stable, unchangeable. …

[158] Ibid. 218.
[159] Ibid. 214.
[160] For example, with respect to avant-garde theater productions of directors such as Meyerhold, contemporaneous public comments reflected substantial confusion as to what one was supposed to make of avant-garde work: "'I just didn't get it'; 'The thing seemed very difficult and very confusing to me' … 'There's a lot of absurdity in the new productions. It doesn't produce any general impression.'" Dobrenko, "The Disaster of Middlebrow Taste," *Socialist Realism Without Shores* 139.

> … when they [artistic things] liberate themselves from the unnecessary, i.e. that which is foreign to them, then they acquire great value and are kept in special locations, called museums.[161]

Thus for Malevich, the status of the "stable, unchangeable" art object was defined and enforced by the institution of the museum. That which did not become part of museum collections, which was not preserved, "shows instability, transience," did not acquire value and represented what was "utilitarian," what had not been "touched" by "the hand of the artist," and which had been "created without any sensation of art," thus lacking the "absolute, unchanging element." The act of displaying his works in a museum amounted, by Malevich's thinking, to an acknowledgement of their status as art, as reflecting the "hand of the artist."

One gets the sense of a hesitating entreaty in Malevich's work to put this show together. Such an entreaty may have resulted from attempting to cover up the fact that he had abandoned the bulk of his career's work to the hands of Germans (as Douglas has asserted),[162] or simply constituted a consequence of a fear generated by the realization of the extent of state control over his existence.[163] (Along with manuscripts he left in Berlin in 1927, he wrote a declaration which began, "In the event of my death

[161] Malevich, "Suprematism," *The Artist, Infinity, Suprematism* 147, 153-154.
[162] Douglas (1994) 34-35.
[163] My analysis here is inspired by Seifrid's discussion of Platonov during the years of early Stalinism. *Andrei Platonov: Uncertainties of Spirit* 137-142.

or permanent imprisonment …," an indication that he remained well aware of the distinct possibility at hand of either of these two eventualities.)[164]

Nevertheless, a sudden alteration of acceptability, of a Soviet artist's position with respect to authoritarian elements was not unique to Malevich's situation in 1929. The conflicting intentionality behind the exhibition of the canvases and their subsequent confiscation reflects dramatic shifts in cultural and semiotic activity which pervaded the Soviet system at this moment.[165] The artist realized the gravely substantial potential for his own permanent obsolescence within the development of Russian culture; in a 1929 letter petitioning for a review of the seemingly arbitrary elimination of his department at the State Institute for the History of Art, he wrote pleadingly, "I therefore beg you to reconsider the decision of the GIII [The State Institute for the History of Art], for I consider that such a reform is not normal."[166] Not only was he strapped for resources, and would face exceeding impoverishment if deprived of his meager salary from this position; as one of the leaders of the avant-garde and a former head of an important art school during the early Soviet years, not to mention an intelligent and insightful artist with a deep love for his country, he would have found the possibility of a systematic program to make him obsolete would have been deeply troubling – and deeply motivating.

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[164] Malevich, *The Artist, Infinity, Suprematism* 215.

[165] In a turn of events similar to Malevich's experience of being granted an officially-condoned exhibition after several years of attempts to receive some sign of continued official recognition as an artist, only to have his works confiscated only a few months later, novelist Andrei Platonov fortuitously found himself in 1929 in the position of finally being able to once again publish a new novel, *Chevengur*; the publishing process had reached the stage of typesetting when the printing was suddenly halted, never to be resumed. Seifrid 11.

[166] Malevich, *The Artist, Infinity, Suprematism* 219.

We might take Malevich as a prime example of the archetypal struggle of a subject to establish and determine a secure identity within the rapidly mutating discourses of meaning under the auspices of expanding authoritarian control (and general societal acceptance of such control, for as Bown asserts, to absolve the general populace of responsibility via a top-down model of totalitarianism removes a significant portion of the picture of an authoritarian regime).[167] Based on his previously-quoted thoughts regarding museums, it is evident that he struggled with contemporary debates and developments surrounding the function of these institutions, whose leaders increasingly found themselves having to rethink their most basic operations and orientations and whose leaders' choices necessarily operated within political considerations which assigned little value to Malevich's notions of "purity of sensation." According to Irina Gutkin, within the Soviet paradigm, there existed three types of people: first, ahead-of-their-time, "future people" (*budetliane*)[168] who had already taken that monumental step into the almost tangible future, that complete optimization of fully communal reality. They were shockworkers (*udarniki*)[169] who accomplished fantastical feats of strength, stamina, and ability in order to spark the general populace into the fervor necessary to take that step into the imminent future. Second, ordinary, normal people hung in limbo; they could not quite make that full step into their future potential, yet they were not irredeemably stuck in the old ways; capable of enlightenment, they would eventually, with proper intervention, attain the status of

[167] Bown, *Socialist Realist Painting* xvii.
[168] This term may perhaps have been appropriated by the Communists from the pre-Revolutionary avant-garde.
[169] "Shockworker" denoted an extraordinarily productive worker and was a term employed in a variety of Communist contexts.

"future people." Last, the category of "former people" (Gutkin's term) comprised those individuals unable to shake off their attachments to past selfish ideals. Such people, "the has-beens," lay beyond redemption; they dwelt in the darkness of the past, having been so blinded by their attachment to old ideas that they could never succeed in achieving enlightenment.[170]

Malevich had always understood himself as no ordinary person, but as a fully enlightened, "future person" (although perhaps in the avant-garde sense of the term, rather than the Communist one) whose work – writings, art objects, performances, and teaching – would serve as prophecies to bring enlightenment to the "ordinary" people around him. His infamous *Black Square*, that "living, regal infant," he believed would shock its viewers into understanding the pure, basic nature of creation, thereby achieving enlightenment through "the zero of form."[171] However, in the Bolshevik schema of future, ordinary, and "former" people, Malevich's identity, it seems, could be construed as nothing other than that of a "former person," and his participation in the binary of "old" versus "new" by means of his antedating can be interpreted as securing such an identity, yet within a semiotic system which was completely alien to him.

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[170] Irina Gutkin describes "former people" as such: "The former people, or the has-beens, practically nonbeings, were regarded as the 'remnants of the past'—still found entrenched in Soviet life. These unfortunates were unable to 'shake off the old Adam' and to break with the past and therefore were not fit to join the new humanity that Soviet society was believed to be; they eked out a pitiful, uninspired, and isolated existence beyond the pale of the socialist construction. They included *meshchanstvo*, or selfishly materialistic petty bourgeoisie …, but also anyone else who failed to see the great achievements of the 'first country of socialism.' Former people were believed to be a breeding ground for the wreckers and saboteurs conspiring to undermine the construction of communism." Gutkin 117.

[171] Kazimir Malevich, "From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism, 1915," *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde Theory and Criticism 1902-1934*, ed. and trans. John E. Bowlt, revised and enlarged edition (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1988) 133.

How can one operate successfully with a securely condemnable identity within a foreign culture and a highly insecure (but highly respected) identity in one's native (and increasingly endangered) tongue? As Lotman and Uspensky noted, the operation of semiotic codes in the binary model, with right-side-up codes interacting with upside-down ones, can lead to a picture of high complexity and intriguing manifestations of attempted translation.[172] Whether or not one concurs, or even cooperates, with the authoritarian imposition of a semiotic system, having to conduct one's existence within a system which regards one's self as "practically a nonbeing" poses a significant threat to the stability of one's identity within any semiotic system.

Furthermore, if we understand the subject as a function of the texts of a semiotic system, then we can figure Malevich's identity as a function of those semiotic systems within which he operated, willingly or not. As the semiotic system of Stalinist Russia gradually ossified his identity into that of a "former person," Malevich's only option for attempting to operate as an autonomous subject remained to participate in the discourse of the Stalinist paradigm. When subjective identity is irrevocably intertwined with discursive paradigms, the means to achieve novelty – to create – remains to attempt the impossible yet necessary feat of transcoding. Thus, the way to become something other than a "nonbeing" consists of embracing "nonbeing"-ness, one's nature as a "former person," in order to force a collision between the authoritarian discourse and a discourse, such as that created within Malevich's artistic theories, in which meaning and identity operated in a dramatically different fashion.

[172] Lotman and Uspenskii, "Binary Models," *The Semiotics of Russian Cultural History* 65.

Malevich's choices served to undermine Bolshevik proto-socialist realist trajectories, by contrast, while simultaneously operating in apparent concurrence with them.

Inasmuch as the act of exhibiting these works in 1929 may have hinged substantially upon the polarization between "old" and "new," "bourgeois" and communist, ignorance and enlightenment, all of which lay at the foundation of the Bolshevik paradigm, the content of the works themselves operated in ways that confounded the polarizing model of the Bolshevik system. These images subtly rejected both "bourgeois" and Communist conventions and defied the contemporary iconography of their subject matter in order to destabilize those very conventions, the very binaries upon which the Soviet system stabilized itself.

Two works in particular, *Girls in a Field* [Figure 5] and *Women Reapers* [Figure 10] (1928-1929, inscribed 1905, Russian Museum Ж-9450), can be employed as emblematic of the depiction of the subject of the peasantry and rural or provincial landscapes in the majority of the forty new paintings created for the 1929 Tretiakov show. The highly contested arenas of contemporary debate in which these visual texts operated included a discussion regarding the nature of art itself and also a concurrent revision of the ontology of the peasantry.

A particularly salient aspect of the debate regarding the nature of art itself hinged upon a concern for the temporal location of depicted narratives. In terms of these two Malevich images, nothing in the representational content of *Girls in a Field* or

Women Reapers indicates that they represent contemporary women of 1929. Not much explicitly indicates that they are women of the distant future or distant past, either. Their location in time and history remains fraught with ambiguity. In *Girls in a Field*, three female figures stand in a row facing the viewer, their arms locked straight at their sides, their feet and stocky legs solidly anchored to the ground. Their bodies, gendered female by the trapezoidal forms of their skirts and shirts, fill the entire canvas space, bottom to top, left to right. Their clothes hang rigidly away from their bodies like metallic armor. Faceless, their heads consist only of juxtaposed planes of paint, distinguished from one another by means either of pigment or simply of the matte or glossy texture of the paint. Their hands hang unoccupied at the ends of their arms, like felt mittens. Simple shoes, that remind one more of house slippers than those dedicated to field work, cover their feet.

Behind their three bodies, a series of striped hills rises to the horizon, whose line divides the upper-most solid blue tier of the painting, along with the figures' monochromatic heads, from the remainder of the busily multi-colored surface. The three figures stand utterly motionless, frozen in physiologically stable positions, solid and immovable, an impenetrable flank. Their bodies block visual access to the fields behind, whose bright stripes of color might reflect the diversity of cultivation in traditional peasant plots, with long swaths of flax, oats, potatoes, buckwheat, and fallow soil. Their colors could also evoke the temporal cycle of seasonal transition: the mutation from gray to green, yellow, black, and finally to white, only to begin anew. The paint layers accumulate one on top of the other, melding into one another between

blue, pink, and green, or white, yellow, and pink, falling upon one another successively as manure, plow, seeds, sickle, and snow fall upon the land with each consecutive season of hope for a sufficient harvest.

In *Women Reapers*, three female figures, in this instance with bodies depicted by means of curves and amplitude, again appear, but only one stands to face the viewer. The two figures flanking her stoop over, uninterrupted in their work and, despite Malevich's pronouncement that, "The production of stories cannot be staged as an artistic phenomenon,"[173] the forms of these women impute narrative action to the central figure, who seems to be interrupted from performing similar tasks. The women's clothes remain stiff, the skirts hanging from their sides more like homespun, line-dried linen than the metallic armor of *Girls in a Field*, although the shadows upon the central figure's sides vaguely remind one of the coloristic strategies of the other painting. The women's feet appear wrapped in traditional Russian peasant bast shoes, made from birch bark, covering a protective and warming layer of bulky woolen socks. A blue head scarf covers the head of the woman on the right and the outlines of a forehead and nose define her profile against the field behind her. The woman in the center wears what could be read as a yellow head covering, or alternatively as hair, the form of which ambiguously merges with white clouds in the sky behind it, producing a sort of aureole. Her face contains fully defined features—eyes, nose, and mouth, all set in a firm, unwelcoming, impenetrable stare.

[173] Malevich, "The Cinema, Gramophone, Radio and Artistic Culture," *The Artist, Infinity, Suprematism* 169.

The central figure's arms hang slightly apart from her sides, with clenched hands, one of which holds a sickle, seemingly momentarily suspended from its habitual slicing of sheaths from the field behind her, halfway cleared of its waist-high growth of precious gold grain. Two recently bundled sheaths lay on the jabbing surface of the freshly-cut ground to her left and back; the woman on the left turns her back to the viewer mid-bundling, the woman on the right lays down a sheath upon the ground. The women's bodies cast long, darkly-colored shadows in the early morning or late evening of harvest-time; they have already been long at work and will labor for many hours more. Clouds of blue, white, pink, and orange dapple the sky behind the central woman's head, reflecting the bright colors of the rising or setting sun and the darkness which preceded or will follow. In the background, wide swaths of fields roll one upon another behind the figures. Five trees, perhaps cottonwoods, dot the landscape. Above the right-most woman's body, between the trees appear rows perhaps of vegetable gardens, with more swaths of grain fields even further in the distance. To the left of the central figure stand two tiny figures in the distance, above whom rises a hill upon which stands a small town, with a barely-distinguishable blue-dome-topped white church at its center.

We might characterize *Girls in a Field* and *Women Reapers* by what Uspensky terms "temporal indefiniteness," whereby the attempt to locate temporally these paintings in any sort of historical schema would require the assignment of

characteristics not evidenced pictorially.[174] Such ambiguity leads to a multiplicity of possible readings, an effect which generally characterized all of Malevich's work. Perhaps due to this ambiguity, perhaps due to the agrarian subject matter, one overwhelmingly senses that the time depicted in these works is not finished or complete – nothing has actually happened, but rather, the depicted actions and states of being are happening before one's eyes.

In grammatical terms, one could say that these images operate in the imperfective aspect. Unlike in English or many Romance languages, in Russian, the aspect of a verb is determined not by its form in conjugation, but by the very verb itself. Each action, in the Russian language, is signified by an often, but not always, phonetically-related aspectual pair—an imperfective verb and a perfective verb, the first indicating a repeated, frequent, or in-progress action, the second a single, closed off occurrence. Thus within the Russian context, an imperfective verb retains a syntactic distinction by which the actions it describes maintain a fundamentally dissimilar nature to that which is complete and singular, or perfective.

The depiction of repetitive actions and the multicolored stripes denoting fields both emphasize in these paintings the cyclic nature of time. The images present themselves to the viewer as depicting something non-unique, incomplete, forever recurring.[175] The endlessly repeating fields stretching to the horizon map the expanse of

[174] Uspensky, *A Poetics of Composition* 80.

[175] As Uspensky notes, in literary works, the "use of the imperfective verb forms … which generally indicated repeated action, expresses the nonuniqueness of the scene, its typicality as it takes place over a

time implicated in the imperfective temporality of these paintings. It has been argued that, within the Russian psyche, the boundaries of the endlessly repeating fields and steppes always remain unattainable, as land falls in endless progression under the gallops of the mythical *bogatyr*''s steed, or the steel wheels rolling upon rails, never to be contained within the boundaries of the horizon, or of the canvas which depicts it.[176] This boundlessness, whose signification might be found in the depiction of that forever unattainable horizon line, remain inherently an imperfective concept, for one can never conquer the horizon in any sort of perfective, complete accomplishment.

Despite their imperfect, endlessly recurring temporal nature, these images depict a way of life which the apparatuses of modernity were plowing under, with the collectivization efforts of Stalin's First Five-Year Plan. The abandonment of traditional agricultural ways, in fact, constituted a formative aspect of Malevich's experience of his own youth, or at least his memory of that youth around the time of these paintings' creation. According to Malevich's autobiography, compiled in 1933 just a few years before his death, the artist's father worked when he was a child as an engineer for sugar beet factories, recently constructed in rural Ukrainian towns to take advantage of the growing modern demand for processed sugar.[177] Long before the advent of Soviet tractors and collectivized agriculture, modern industrialization had already come to settle upon the fertile soil of the Russian empire. If Malevich's images of peasants

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period of time. As a result of this technique, temporal definiteness fades, and time, rather than being represented in sequentially developing actions, is cyclic." Uspensky, *A Poetics of Composition* 152.

[176] Mikhail Epstein, "Russo-Soviet Topoi," *The Landscape of Stalinism* 287-288. The *bogatyr'* was an ancient Russian heroic warrior.

[177] Malevich, "Autobiography" ("Glavy iz avtobiografii khudozhnika"), *Malevich o sebe*, vol. I: 17.

depict their subjects in the imperfect aspect, they do so in the past tense, for the interruption of the traditional cycle of agrarian peasant life had already begun, even before the artist's own birth.[178] One can perceive in these works a certain air of nostalgia, a harkening to a way of being that only remained fully real in the culture's simulation of its own past.

According to Epstein, in Russia one finds a distinctive tendency to provincialize that perceptibly real, but fully simulated, past; marginalized and alienated from the sophistication of the immediate present, Russia can never fully detach the past from, nor fully integrate it into, the present.[179] Like the provinces in relation to their mutually-defining urban center, the past fuels the very existence of the present; it constitutes not simply the reservoir of narratives, but moreover a generative mechanism of narrative.[180] Without the past, the ability to tell the story of the present and future becomes disabled—the present needs the past, just as the city needs the provinces, to provide the raw materials of its existence.

In his images of provincial and rural existence, Malevich utilizes this generative mechanism in order to construct a narrative of significant meaning for the present. One might frame such meaning by the forces of modernity, industrialization, and

[178] The erosion of any cycle is, of course, a gradual process and remnants of traditional peasant ways can certainly still be found (though not without significant trouble) in the Russian and Ukrainian countryside even today, ironically, perhaps most notably in the fenced-off lands surrounding Chernobyl. See Holly Morris, "A Country of Women," *More* March 31, 2011 (accessed online on 8/11/2011 at http://www.more.com/chernobyl-women-nuclear-holly-morris).

[179] Regarding the "provincialization of the past" in Russian culture, see Epstein, *Amerussia* 110, 112. With his formative years being spent in the provinces, Malevich's identity always hovered in the space between the provinces and the major cities in which he later dwelt. He never was fully of the city, but he was hardly a peasant either; his existence remained on the margins of both realms, an interloper to each.

[180] Lotman and Uspenskii, "Binary Models," *The Semiotics of Russian Cultural History* 65.

collectivization, yet this meaning does not necessarily stand openly in opposition to or in defiance of such forces. Rather, the meaning inherent in the temporality of the representational content of *Women Reapers*, or *Girls in a Field*, depends upon the ambivalent relationship of present to past, capital to province, and vice versa. If the imperfect temporality of these paintings is stated in the past tense, its nature as provincialized past stands as a means for the generation of imperfect utterances in the present and future tenses.

In contrast to such a temporal orientation, the socialist realist paradigm operated, if not fully in the perfective aspect, always with a singular, perfective accomplishment at the forefront of the depicted narrative. As Katerina Clark explains, "The enormous complexity of universal history is distilled in socialist realism as a normative progression from dark to light."[181] This passage from obscurity to illumination found its ideal expression in the narrative form of the socialist realist novel, at the end of which, according to the dictates of the genre, occurs "the kairotic moment of passage to consciousness"—a "moment" which, in the Communist historical narrative, stood metaphorically for the broadly construed present.[182] Within the socialist realist worldview, society as a whole stood just one "breathtaking leap" away

[181] Katerina Clark, "Socialist Realism *with* Shores," *Socialist Realism Without Shores* 28.
[182] Ibid. 48.

from the anticipated future. The "kairotic" moment[183] took place in the here and now, and the socialist realist work of visual art (like the ancient Russian icon of earlier eras) would facilitate individual and communal enlightenment, transfiguration into the ideal pictured before them. The very nature of time and history were predicated by the socialist realist style, and the (perfective) action of transformation from an ignorant state of being into an enlightened one inherently defined this nature.

A Soviet viewer could appreciate the rewards and benefits of this perfective, fully accomplished transformation through such now classic socialist realist works as Alexander Deineka's *Collective Farm Worker on a Bicycle* (1935) [Figure 11] and Vasily Efanov's *An Unforgettable Meeting* (1936-37) [Figure 12], wherein notably female figures enjoy the freedoms enabled by technological progress and emancipation and the honors justly due to those who had been transformed and enlightened (into workers possessing superhuman stamina and abilities). The *de facto* perfective nature of the events depicted in *An Unforgettable Meeting* lies in both the accomplishment which elicited the award and honor to meet Stalin and also the meeting itself. And although *Collective Farm Worker on a Bicycle* represents, on initial reading, an imperfective action—rid*ing* a bicycle—the context provided by the title, which defines the figure as a collective farm worker, or *kolkhoznitsa*, represented a stark distinction from the Barthesian "semic" code, by which background cultural stereotypes bring meaning to an

[183] The term "kairotic" refers to the ancient Greek *kairos*, a term which denotes a qualitative temporal nature, that moment between the steadied ticks of chronological time in which an opening into something beyond normal time can be accessed, potentially effecting transformation of that normal time.

encountered text.[184] The cultural stereotype of an agricultural worker would never before have coincided with this novel figure riding a bike, implying a perfective, "kairotic" moment of transformation which must have occurred in order to facilitate the existence of this otherwise seemingly absurd imperfective activity of an agricultural worker riding a bicycle. This "kairotic" moment, the narrative subtext beneath the depicted imperfective activity, would become the dominant text occupying the minds of many of its contemporary viewers, because of the sharp contrast between the depicted image and the semic code.

Such a contrast between commonly accepted perceptions of reality and the image of reality in a socialist realist depiction (and the attending implication of "kairotic" transformation) constituted a defining element in the fulfillment of the demands of the style. In order to appear "realistic" and accessible to the common citizen, a socialist realist work was not to be futuristically impractical; maintenance of a direct link to the present moment remained absolutely necessary. One could have imagined it as existing in the here and now. Yet, when compared to the otherwise perceived circumstances of the here and now, it needed to appear markedly better, further along the linear progression of the establishment of the socialist society, and to project an image of this ideal society which would, according to Soviet ideology, eventually become perfect(ive)ly actualized. Socialist realist temporality, as Gutkin has pointed out, became problematic because, on the one hand, this idealized expected future had not yet been fully wrought in the present, while, on the other hand, the present needed to

[184] Bal and Bryson 203.

serve as some sort of reflection, or "approximation" of that future reality.[185] And, problematically, the present simultaneously could serve as well as a reflection of the darkness of the past – the holdover from pre-Revolutionary days. In the socialist realist worldview, the day-to-day drudgery of darker times would reveal itself as a distant memory in that future anticipated moment of the efficiently operating socialist society, after which drudgery would be replaced by well-earned reward and enjoyment.

As Evgeny Dobrenko has shown, socialist realism as a cultural phenomenon came about neither as a doctrine imposed through hierarchical means, nor as an organic development arising from the spirit of the people. Rather, it came into being through a process of hybridization, wherein the preferences of the masses guided the arts policy decisions of the authorities, which in turn influenced the tastes of, or were rejected by, common laborers.[186] The general public of the early Soviet Union had little tolerance for modernist or otherwise intellectually challenging art and literature.[187] Their tastes tended much more towards accessible, heroic, and narrative art with sufficient realism to be comprehensible and relevant, but also with sufficient optimistic distinction from commonly perceived reality to provide moral instruction as to how to improve life and society.[188]

[185] Gutkin 36-37.
[186] Dobrenko, "The Disaster of Middlebrow Taste," *Socialist Realism Without Shores*.
[187] For example, Dobrenko notes that in terms of written texts, mass readers desired that "poetry should be free of 'futurism,'" in other words, without incomprehensible words or juxtapositions, and that novels should be "absorbing and full of adventures, simply narrated." Ibid. 144-154.
[188] Ibid. 144-154.

The socialist realist work of art provided a compelling narrative with which to completely engage its audience, in order to most effectively instruct and inspire that proletarian audience to create its own socialist future. According to Leonid Heller, socialist realism demanded of art three primary characteristics: "ideological commitment" (the organization of a work of art revolving around a motivational tenet or premise); "Party-mindedness" (the alignment of this motivation with the Communist cause and to building the socialist society), or, as Bown states, "party obeisance";[189] and "national spirit" or "popular spirit" (a complicated construct related to the perceived identity of the Russian people as a whole).[190] Writers and artists were responsible for convincing the proletariat not only of their own pivotal role in creating the new society, but also of their identity itself, as the proletariat. Thus, inasmuch as socialist realist artists were tasked with the responsibility of reflecting the spirit of the Russian people in their art, that art was itself responsible for eliciting, out of that spirit, certain socially-minded characteristics which the Bolsheviks considered innate to the Russian character.

The Russian word for "the people" is *narod*, and Epstein has proposed that, "If it is correct that in the beginning was the word, that the world was created by the word, then the word which created the Russia of the twentieth century was the word 'people' [*'narod'*]."[191] The determination of what and who constituted *narod* was performed in an exceedingly contested space, one which, from the very beginning of their political

[189] Bown, *Socialist Realist Painting* 111.
[190] Heller, "A World of Prettiness," *Socialist Realism Without Shores* 52-53.
[191] Epstein, *Amerussia* 164.

efforts, the Bolsheviks desired and needed to control in order to permanently secure power. The debate concerning the identity of *narod* had immediate bearing upon the perceived qualities of the spirit of the people, *narodnost'* and its application within the development of the socialist realist model.

The question of the identity of *narod* remains much greater than one of simple ethnography – one cannot define *narod* simply in terms of class, ethnicity, or geography. The identity of *narod* concerns the identity of the Russian nation itself. In Soviet Russia, the issue of the overarching character of the nation and its people intertwined inextricably with the issue of the identity of the peasantry. In political, artistic, and cultural realms, the Soviets put much effort into semantically distinguishing the character of the people (*narodnost'*) from the character of the simple folk (*prostonarodnost'*), a term which came to function more in an ethnographic capacity as indication of a somewhat backwards, not advanced culture with heavy reliance upon traditional customs, attitudes, and beliefs.[192]

Russia's peasants had created unwelcome complications for the Bolsheviks from the very beginning. As is often noted, establishing communism in Russia was inherently and deeply problematic, because, based on Karl Marx's and Friedrich Engels' theories, a communist society required a proletariat. A proletariat arose as a consequence of capitalist, industrial development, but modern industrial development had not yet firmly established itself in Russia even by the turn of the twentieth century. Russia

[192] Boym, "Paradoxes of Unified Culture," *Socialist Realism Without Shores* 127. Dobrenko, "The Disaster of Middlebrow Taste," *Socialist Realism Without Shores* 157. Epstein, *Amerussia* 162.

possessed no substantial class of industrial workers to take over ownership of the means of production when the Revolution declared this to be the case. Instead, Russia maintained an immense population of singularly disgruntled peasants, who had only seen freedom from serfdom half a century beforehand, only to face even worse living conditions after emancipation than they had before, and who were at best ambivalent towards novel communist ideas.

At worst, the rural peasantry acted in openly aggressive and hostile ways towards the predominantly urban Communists. Even from the beginning of Bolshevik rule, during the Russian Civil War, the peasantry remained instinctively suspicious of the Communists and their efforts to educate and communalize peasant populations. Although they were enticed by Communist promises of enfranchisement and resources to improve the health and welfare of their families, rumors (some of which proved true) abounded that the Communists wanted to make every aspect of peasant life – from the family cow to living quarters to wives – communally shared by all. From the alternative perspective, Communists perceived the typical peasant as an individualistic, property-grubbing, unthinking and misinformed subscriber to "petty-bourgeois" values, who refused to relinquish control of what little resources he or she had in order to serve the greater good.[193]

[193] Brown, "Communists and the Red Cavalry" 82-99. The refusal of many peasants to join collective farms was attributed by Communists to an insidious "bourgeois" sentiment amongst these populations. Refusal to relinquish livestock (to the extent that widespread premature slaughter of livestock plagued the countryside), to surrender tools and wagons, and to cede land which had been cultivated for generations by the same family, all to the hands of the farm collectives, was deemed the most heinous manifestation of petty "bourgeois" individualism. From the Bolshevik perspective, such greediness not only hurt the

From the Bolshevik point of view, therefore, the notion of *narodnost'* needed to be firmly secured to an identity which was not aligned with the traditional values of the Russian peasant household: family-held land, livestock, and home; and reliance upon church and ancient pagan customs to guide them through the rhythms of life. Instead, *narodnost'* needed to be made evident in an archetype that could pertain to the lives of agricultural laborers (since the vast majority of the Russian population at the time of the October Revolution could be classified as such, or as one generation removed from such), but also to a broader spectrum of the population than those who still identified and labored as peasants. Under Soviet rule, the term *narodnost'* came to signify a nebulous, broadly-construed popular spirit, which one could find equally well in the city as in the countryside. And artists' connection to *narodnost'*, the life of the people, and the reality of daily experiences, served as an antidote to formalist tendencies. A connection to *narod* would draw them down out of their studios, like a ritual of atonement, only after which they might be able to successfully produce art for the masses.[194]

One might understand the meaning of *narodnost'* as the weave of a textile blanketing Russia's vast landscape. It was a term with which every Russian identified, each in a slightly different manner, and which pointed to ever slightly divergent trajectories of meaning for each individual in a process of constant semiosis. Particularly for *narodnost'*, to use Bal's and Bryson's words, "any dichotomistic theory of

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collective's ability to succeed, but ultimately reflected a blatant disrespect for the entire nation, which depended upon these agricultural collectives for its sustenance.

[194] This concept of ritual atonement is developed by Iampolski in "Censorship as the Triumph of Life," *Socialist Realism Without Shores*, 165-177.

the sign, such as Saussure's pair signifier/signified" remained incompatible with the ways in which the meaning of this sign, or term, operated. "The interpretant [that image or idea evoked in the mind of the perceiver or employer of the sign/term] is constantly shifting,"[195] and even within the perception of a single person, this active transformation of meaning evoked multifaceted and oftentimes even inconsistent strata of signification. The sum of such strata, across the wide spectrum of the culture's employment of the term *narodnost'*, constituted a conceptual base on which one could evaluate the legitimacy and value of any given cultural production, given the primacy of the role of the people within Bolshevik rhetoric.

Epstein argues that *narod* cannot exist without its antithesis, the intelligentsia. Equally paramount to forming Russian culture, the intelligentsia provides the thinking, while *narod* provides the doing, the acting. Epstein characterizes this opposition as spanning the stretch between the poles of "pure and universal consciousness" and "pure existence." But only in the eyes of the intelligentsia do the people represent the quintessence of existence and embodiment and vice versa.[196] Membership in both poles is a rare exception to the general cultural dynamics. According to Epstein, one can understand few cultural players as participating in both the thinking *and* doing of cultural activity, and for those few, membership in *narod* is generally honorary. Those very few cultural icons of the intelligentsia (Pushkin or Tolstoy, for example), though not

[195] The term "interpretant" is a key element of Piercean semiotics, whereby "the process of semiosis works through three positions: a perceptible or visually perceptible item—the sign or *representamen*—that stands in for something else; the mental image, called the *interpretant*, that the recipient forms of the object; and the thing for which the sign stands—the *object* or *referent*." Bal and Bryson 187-188.
[196] Epstein, *Amerussia* 184.

in possession of a birthright or occupational claim to *narod* identity, manage to attain honorary membership in *narod* through their sufferings and travails in pursuit of creative accomplishments.[197] In moving beyond one's "bourgeois" or aristocratic origins through a demonstration of full conversion to the spirit of the people, the Russian intellectual might obtain a sort of "absolution" for his fault of being utterly absorbed in consciousness and, correspondingly, detached from material, embodied existence.

We might observe aspirations for such "absolution" in two photographs of Malevich from 1931 [Figures 13 and 14]. Self-fashioned in a traditional peasant tunic tied at the waist, he carries a sickle, as if prepared to swipe several dozen sheaths of wheat to the ground. Such self-fashioning, as Anna Wexler Katsnelson has demonstrated,[198] was typical Malevich behavior, yet despite the many ways in which he envisioned himself belonging to the people, or channeling the spirit of the people, Malevich never did quite belong to the collective body of *narod*. No less than most of his Revolutionary and Bolshevik counterparts, Malevich undeniably remained a cosmopolitan, a thinker, by some accounts a visionary—a member of the intelligentsia and, as Fedorov-Davydov deemed him, "a dreamer-philosopher."[199] Malevich's series of white-on-white paintings from the late 1910s could arguably represent "pure consciousness," that quintessentially constitutive element of intelligentsia identity, according to Epstein. Despite having grown up in rural environments, Malevich did not and had never served as a manual laborer, a peasant, an embodiment of "pure

[197] Ibid.158.
[198] One of the most convincing arguments in Katsnelson's discussion of Malevich revolves around the artist's self-identification as generated within the realm of the peasant world. Katsnelson 53-60.
[199] Fedorov-Davydov, *Vystavka* 9.

existence;" his genealogy, which might be traced to noble origins,[200] as well as his education and profession, placed him firmly and irrevocably within the intelligentsia side of this polarity.

Malevich's painted evocation of the peasantry in his post-suprematist years represents precisely the sort of designation to which Epstein refers when he writes, "the intelligentsia … feels itself to be superfluous in this life and [thus] endows its antithesis—the people—with completeness of existence."[201] In the late 1920s, Malevich indeed faced the superfluity of his own artistic production in contrast with the spirit of the people (*narodnost'*) which had developed through the hardships of the previous ten years. In light of this realization, he abandoned his adamant commitment to purity of consciousness and painted form, and he created a series of images which highlighted the core of existence – the body. Malevich embraced the embodiment of non-"superfluous" existence[202] within the Russian cultural context: the very salt of the earth, the body of the Russian peasant (and indeed, those bodily forms which had occupied him artistically in his early career – a topic which I will address in my fourth chapter).

Malevich could only create his expression of the Russian peasant body, though, through means which drew upon his experience of abstract pictorial forms. For example, with *Girls in a Field*, the lines between this painting's shapes and forms at first appear clean and orderly, almost like plastic cut-outs. But upon more closely inspecting

[200] Nakov, *Painting the Absolute* vol. 4: 12.
[201] Epstein, *Amerussia* 184.
[202] To paraphrase Epstein, ibid.

the painted canvas, these divisions reveal themselves to be a messy, almost sloppy, overlapping of paints, revealing an acute attention to the nature of the materials and implements used to create the art object, just as his earlier suprematist works did.

With *Women Reapers*, we find equally compelling formal details that belie the artist's suprematist background. The painted surface of the field surrounding the women's feet is rough, full of short brushstrokes, and the accumulation of these brushstrokes in tufts of weeds, forms of shadows, and wrappings of birch and wool demonstrates almost an Impressionistic or pointillist character. The women's clothing, however, retains a solidity and purity of form and color entirely unlike its background. Short green brushstrokes also compose the green color block that constitutes the skirt of the central figure, but these strokes resemble nothing so much as paint; many small cracks within its surface,and the unevenness of the paint's application, which allows the darkness underneath to seep through with varying intensity, further emphasize the nature of these forms as paint rather than as representative. The white of the central figure's shirt reveals itself more as a study in white than a flat surface of white; gradations of pinks, grays, blues, greens, and yellows play out within its borders. One can observe similar manipulations of color and of the effects of multiple layers of paint one upon the other throughout Malevich's oeuvre, perhaps most notably in his famous *Black Square* paintings.

Malevich's contributions, through paintings such as these, to the cultural activity of his era remained solidly within the realm of consciousness and thought; his

membership in *narod*, if plausible, could only ever be honorary. Thus his expression of embodied existence focused ultimately upon the painterly form of this body—the painterly form being that which remained most familiar to the (abstract) painter, upon which he based his prior life's work. And it would be to such painterly forms that Soviet authorities – and common folk as well – would object when these paintings, with all their complex and profound associations to the concept of *narodnost'*, encountered the less adaptive and more calcified interpretive strategies and semiotic codes of their contemporary viewers, a situation not entirely dissimilar to the reception of his suprematist work in 1915.

An alternative means of framing the discourse of *narodnost'* and Malevich's circa-1929 paintings' participation in this discourse might be found in contemporary developments in the iconography of the Russian peasant female figure. In particular, this figure appears within the context of political posters, which constituted a prominent popular art form in 1920s and 1930s Russia. In traditional folk iconography, primarily that portrayed in *lubki* (singular: *lubok*)—primarily eighteenth- and nineteenth-century, mass-produced and widely distributed broadsheets containing one or more images accompanied by text—peasant women typically appeared as hearty, healthy emblems of fertility, with wide hips and ample breasts. However, such imagery posed a serious problem for Bolshevik propagandists. For many urban Bolshevik sympathizers, this iconography of the hearty peasant woman symbolized the stereotypical *baba*, a

distinctively pejorative appellation for a woman, referring to the perceived backwardness and ignorance of peasant life.[203] The connotation of "*baba*" evoked an image of a closed-minded, tightly-grasping woman, who routinely withstood the brutality of her husband, priests, and (tsarist) governmental authority figures. The stereotypical peasant woman, in the minds of many urbanites, hardly constituted a heroic figure who solidly bore the elements and the vicissitudes of time. She much more closely resembled the comedic character portrayed in Malevich's 1914 war propaganda *lubok*, "An Austrian went to Radziwill" [Figure 9], one of a series of *lubki* he created, along with other avant-garde artists and poets, to promote the war effort at the beginning of the war, for the short period that such activities remained fashionable. With bulging breasts and a hearty laugh, this *baba* skewers miniature soldiers with the ease of tossing a pile of hay to her family cow. In Russian culture, the *baba* served on certain levels as the embodiment of nourishment, protection, and fertility, but certainly not as the embodiment of intelligence or enlightened political savvy.

In order to subvert popularly-held notions of the character of the matriarchal peasant figure, around 1929 Soviet political poster artists attempted to create a new iconography of the female peasant, one whose semiotic identity embodied the antithesis of the conventionalized *baba*.[204] These posters, as Victoria Bonnell has

[203] Bonnell 82.

[204] Prior to about 1930, the peasant was typically depicted in Soviet posters exclusively as a bearded man clothed in a homespun shirt tied around the waist; rarely was the peasant woman depicted, and when she was, she was always a contingent figure, placed in a composition with a male counterpart—peasant or factory worker—or, if only female figures were depicted, she was always accompanied by a (usually short-haired) female factory worker. Victoria Bonnell, *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) 79-99.

pointed out, served to reassign connotation to the idea of the "peasant woman," from hearty, fertile mother to strong, modern, and enfranchised worker.[205] With short hair and a scarf tied behind her neck (as opposed to under her chin), a slim figure and understated breasts, she resembled nothing more so than a Soviet factory worker. A tractor replaced her characteristic attribute, the sickle, and she called out to her fellow peasant women to come join the collective farm, which would emancipate them from the dark, dank, smoky peasant hut; serve them food in a cafeteria; provide them with state-of-the-art childcare; and allow them time to educate themselves.[206] The semantic identity of the *kolkhoznitsa*, or female collective farm worker, would come to represent during the 1930s the quintessential embodiment of Russian womanhood; we can see a reflection of this iconography in the previously-discussed *Collective Farm Worker on a Bicycle* [Figure 11].[207] The iconic *kolkhoznitsa* embodied a spirit of industriousness, initiative, prosperity, and enrichment supported by communal endeavor and efficiency and of strength and stamina despite the most trying of circumstances.

This iconographic transformation almost certainly did not reflect any effort to transform actual hearty peasant mothers and grandmothers into efficient, bicycle-riding industrial agricultural laborers. Semiotic manipulation, not critical realism, constituted the task of Soviet propagandists and artists as a general group. The work of semiotic reassignment was directed primarily at the urban base from which the Bolsheviks drew most of their support and who likely had no first-hand experience, in the early moments

[205] Bonnell 101-123.
[206] See illustration 3.7 in Bonnell.
[207] Gutkin 113.

of the agricultural collectivization offensive, of the peasant population's subjection to state-enforced or state-encouraged violence and, furthermore, no capacities for comprehending the extent and ramifications of this violence. On the other hand, the visual impression created by mass-produced posters depicting contented *kolkhoznitzi* may have strongly influenced urban impressions of Soviet reforms outside metropolitan areas.

However, Malevich's representations of peasant women in *Girls in a Field* and *Women Reapers* lay far removed from the iconographic types of both the *baba* and the *kolkhoznitsa*. Although formal properties of the peasants from the 1914 *lubki* certainly informed his decomposition of the peasant form into color and geometric blocks in his paintings of peasants in the late 1920's, the emotional and semiotic tenor of the painted figures differs dramatically from both his earlier work and the images of peasant women appearing in contemporary political posters. One can clearly find a context for these paintings within the contested identity of the female peasant body and, by extension, the nature of fertility of both body and soil. Malevich's women and girls are neither silly and ignorant, nor industrious and motivated.[208] They simply consist of their form; one can find their identity in their sturdy bodies, their snugly wrapped feet, and their seemingly methodical, rhythmic progress through fields. They represent an archetype

[208] With respect to Bonnell's analysis of the iconography of head scarves (Bonnell 102), Malevich's peasant women retain the ambiguity so characteristic of his work as a whole. In *Girls in a Field*, the oval form of the head takes precedence over any form signifying a head covering; in *Women Reapers*, the head scarf of the central figure is clearly tied behind her head as opposed to under her chin. However, her hair, whether short like a *kolkhoznitsa*'s or traditionally long, melds into the similarly-colored forms of clouds behind her head. In fact, in only one composition produced in the 1928-1929 period is a below-the-chin head scarf explicitly denoted: *Harvesting. Study for the Painting*. In every single other composition depicting women, the head scarf is either ambiguous (compare *Woman Reaper. Study.* with *Woman Reaper*) or absent.

of the peasant woman which reflects the artist's own experience and observations of the native maternal archetype of Russian culture. Malevich's renderings resonate in a much more complex harmony with the forms of the female peasant body than the single, cloying notes of the era's exaggerated, politically-motivated caricatures. Malevich's peasant women reveal something deeply foundational about the Russian peasant and folk character in general – *narodnost'* – as concepts which one could not limit to the confines of a cliché.

These paintings require of their viewers a significant effort to make semiotic sense of their imaging – effort which, due to the paintings' deliberate semiotic ambiguity, will lead to infinitely diverse and individualized interpretations. The stiff-jawed face of the central figure in *Women Reapers* and the faceless, color-paned bodies of *Girls in a Field* refuse to participate in the polarizing stereotypes, the false binary imposed by the manipulations of Soviet propagandists. They circumvent the symbolic nature of these two opposing signs, whose referential capacity is facilitated, like all symbols, by a culturally-based knowledge of their typical meaning.[209]

These paintings refute the artificially-imposed framing of the iconography of contemporary poster arts, and they expose the character of the Russian peasant woman—and by extension that of *narod* in general—as significantly more complex than a caricature. As Bal and Bryson note, "as soon as the idea of a delimiting frame is questioned and the possibility of dynamic semiosis is admitted, the relation of

[209] Bal and Bryson remark that, within the category of symbols, "The interpretant formed by the reader is possible because the latter knows what things usually mean in the culture in which the sign functions." Bal and Bryson 191.

opposition must give way to that of nonoppositional difference."[210] By asserting the viewers' right to define for themselves – through interpretation of ambiguity and diversity – the nature of Russia's peasant heritage, these paintings chip at the very base of urban popular support for Bolshevik peasant policy. They reject the image of the *kolkhoznitsa* by proffering alternative images – not necessarily through their iconographic nature, but by their nature as compelling alternatives. For in the iconographic system of the *kolkhoznitsa*, there exists but one type of alternative to her form: the sabotaging, money- and property-grubbing, ignorant *baba*. To produce a different image reflecting the many-sided nature of peasant existence posed a substantial threat to the stability of the overriding cultural binary and the obligation to forget all that did not rhyme with *kolkhoznitsa*. In *Girls in a Field* and *Women Reapers*, no clearly-defined 'new' or 'old' culture,[211] no enlightenment or ignorance existed – only field, soil, plant, sky, body, skin, cloth, paint, and canvas endure.

As Baudrillard comments, "it is dangerous to unmask images, since they dissimulate the fact that there is nothing behind them."[212] By revealing something about the emptiness of Soviet iconographic types of female peasants, Malevich's paintings stood poised to potentially disrupt the tenuous semiotic system upon which

[210] Ibid. 193.
[211] What one might understand as "new" or "old" in these works relies heavily, of course, upon the associations and choices made by the viewer. One could argue that the evocation of a nostalgic, perhaps idealized peasant existence in paintings like *Women Reapers*, with its hearty figures, fertile fields, and village church looking down upon it all, is balanced by the futuristic, almost robotic nature of the figures in *Girls in a Field*. Nevertheless, neither of these evocations of temporal difference coincide with the Bolshevik interpretation of the future and past of the peasantry.
[212] Baudrillard 5.

Stalinism operated. To dissimulate the simulation that created meaning underlying Stalinist structures of power meant to undermine those very structures themselves.

Chapter Three: How Malevich Returned to Figurative Painting: a rendition of postmodernism in Stalinist Russia

When Malevich visited Berlin in 1927, he was invited to present a lecture, which he devoted to the subject of artistic education, a topic that had dominated his professional life for several years prior. Despite his claim, in the notes which accompanied these lectures, that the task of artistic instruction was to banish "the disease of eclecticism" from students' work, the output that Malevich created for and shortly after his 1929 exhibition at the Tretiakov Gallery in Moscow was of a decidedly eclectic nature.[213] As discussed in the previous chapter, about half of the works from these years, particularly the earlier portion, belong to a semi-discrete set of "peasant"-type works representing one or more human figures upon a landscape-like background. But the other half (and these groups are not entirely distinct from one another) represent a broad range of appropriated stylistic tendencies.

We can find within this stylistically-eclectic portion of the ca. 1929 paintings unmistakable emulation of impressionist, postimpressionist, fauvist, and other more recent modern European styles. Malevich's acts of stylistic appropriation have been fruitfully explored in recent scholarship. Malevich's adoption of the techniques, themes, and compositions of paintings by Impressionist and Post-Impressionist artists as varied as Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Vincent Van Gogh, and Paul Cézanne, is characterized

[213] This discussion of eclecticism can be found in Chart 17 from the Berlin lectures, pictured in Linda S. Boersma, "On Art, Art Analysis and Art Education: The Theoretical Charts of Kazimir Malevich," in *Kazimir Malevich 1878-1935* (1988) 220 (illustration 210).

by Elena Basner as a tactic to pursue formal inquiry within a style which momentarily garnered greater political acceptability in the eyes of some conservative Soviet authorities.[214] Charlotte Douglas has drawn a great number of connections between Giorgio de Chirico's imagery and Malevich's later work, particularly in terms of the forms used in the peasant-themed paintings.[215] Also, Rainer Crone and David Moos associate Malevich's *Women Bathers* [Figure 3] with Cézanne's 1881-1882 *Bathers*, identifying common compositional features between the works such as, "the shallow yet clearly defined foreground space; passage of foliage off to one side functioning as a repoussoir element; interceding body of water complicating the relationship between foreground and background; and the protective arching trees fusing with the sky."[216]

I might add to their analyses that Matisse's 1905-1908 engagement with the same motif might equally stand as antecedent to Malevich's *Women Bathers*, with its manipulation of color and line in starkly pale bodies, which are defined by faintly discernible contours and are all placed against a brightly-colored background. And although the resemblance has yet to be otherwise explored in the scholarly literature, as far as I am aware, one can also find unmistakable appropriation of Amedeo Modigliani's characteristic portrait structure in Malevich's 1929 *Blue Portrait* (inscribed 2[9] 1908, Russian Museum Ж-9406) [Figure 15], with its elongated face, abnormally large and long neck, pulled-back hair which contrasts little with the background (as opposed to the high contrast between the pale face and the dark background and

[214] Basner, "Impressionism in the Art and Teaching of Kazimir Malevich," Petrova, ed., *The Russian Avant-Garde: Personality and School* 70-73.
[215] Douglas, "Malevich and De Chirico," *Rethinking Malevich* 254-293.
[216] Crone and Moos 39.

clothing), and the arrangement of the pictorial space to include only the head and a portion of the torso. One could continue to draw such stylistic associations to antecedent artists and paintings indefinitely.

It certainly remains possible that the varied stylistic character of Malevich's late figurative works was designed to serve as the artist's example, in his reconstructed history (via the ascription to the works of dates anterior to their actual creation, or antedating) of his own artistic development, of his own journey banishing "the disease of eclecticism." Such a pedagogical impulse would not be unreasonable, given the priority that teaching activities still occupied in his professional life even up through the first years of the 1930s.[217] Nevertheless, my purpose here is to make an argument based upon cultural contexts and theoretical paradigms, rather than authorial intention. It will be my contention in this chapter that Malevich's circa 1929 works represent an engagement – perhaps an unwilling and certainly an unacknowledged one – with proto-postmodernism. Furthermore, I will seek to show that the cultural contexts with which I will frame these works, notably the socialist realist style and the political system of Stalinism, reflect activity that can be identified as existing within the realm of what late-twentieth-century theorists have come to identify as the postmodern. In this I am responding in part to Mikhail Epstein's call for further theoretical scholarship "to locate the totalitarian art of the 1930s-1950s within twentieth century cultural movements, to

[217] Malevich expert Dmitri Sarabianov has termed the motivations behind the creation of these paintings related to Malevich's teaching activities a "pedagogical impulse;" Russian avant-garde scholar Jane Sharp has noted that Malevich's pedagogical practices, engaged at the same moment as the production of these paintings, "allowed him, together with his students, to *perform his own history*" (italics mine). Sarabianov, "Zhivopis' Kazimira Malevicha" 154. Jane Ashton Sharp, *Russian Modernism between East and West: Natal'ia Goncharova and the Moscow Avant-Garde* (Cambridge University Press, 2006) 266-267.

elucidate the relationship of socialist realism not only with the early twentieth century avant-garde, but also with late twentieth century postmodernism."[218] However, I am responding to this call in a direction that Epstein might not have anticipated, for thus far he has situated the early Soviet period within the postmodern discourse without extending his inquiry to Malevich's work, or to other art produced under, but not in support of, the rising authoritarian forces of the early 1930s.[219]

According to Stuart Sim, "a return to the use of older styles and artistic methods," constituted a defining characteristic of the postmodern.[220] Proto-socialist realist artists, who were Malevich's contemporaries in 1929, engaged in appropriative activities alongside Malevich, although with much different results from the avant-garde artist's. For the proto-socialist realist, attempts at stylistic eclecticism resulted from a rejection of the kind of stylistic purity which modernist artists like Malevich himself had dictated. For example, in 1918, Malevich praised recent advancements whereby "music has passed from the boudoir melodies of tender lilac to *pure sound as such*. All art has freed its face from foreign elements."[221] This search for freedom from elements external to the pure essence of any artistic practice constituted a foundational element

[218] Epstein, "Response: "Post-" and beyond" 357-358.
[219] Although I have been using Epstein's theories broadly to discuss Malevich's work, the extent of Epstein's own commentary specifically upon Malevich remains a single comment that, "James Joyce … was a Modernist. The same can be said of Kazimir Malevich, who erased the multiplicity of colors of the visible world in order to uncover its geometric foundation, the 'black square.'" Epstein, "Hyper in 20th Century Culture" paragraph 5.
[220] Stuart Sim, "Postmodernism," *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, 2nd Edition, ed. Stuart Sim (London: Routledge, 2005) 289-290.
[221] Malevich, "Architecture as a Slap in the Face to Ferro-Concrete," *Essays on Art: 1915-1928*, vol. I: 60. Italics mine.

of modernist practice, particularly in retrospect. And as Hal Foster has noted, in the postmodern reading of modernism, "each art has a code or nature, and art proceeds as the code is revealed, the nature purged of the extraneous … the artist, immersed in artistic practice, his or her true history, was rendered autonomous, transcendentally critical."[222] However, it was to this immersion, autonomy, and transcendence that socialist realist artists and their Party supporters objected.

By employing for socialist purposes what could be learned from the advancements made by diverse styles such as classicism, romanticism, realism, and even futurism, the socialist realist project sought to develop an amalgam, adaptable to Soviet ideological needs, of the purportedly best aspects of many highly-regarded styles which preceded it. Socialist realist eclecticism reflected a wider cultural penchant for techniques of quotation, whereby the voice of the individual was purportedly erased and replaced by societally- and Party-approved utterances from trustworthy authorities. By employing quotational strategies, the socialist realist artist could effectively create works which expressed the spirit of the people and their beloved (and idolized) leaders rather than expressed the unique perspective of the authorial self.

We can observe such citational strategies in a 1925 Isaak Brodsky painting, *At the Coffin of the Leader* [Figure 16], wherein a large crowd, an overabundance of exuberant floral arrangements, and overarching palms all surround the body of Lenin laying in its coffin.[223] Lenin's wife, Stalin, and many of Lenin's closest followers look on in mourning

[222] Foster, "Re: Post," *Art After Modernism* 190.

[223] It should be noted that there were many works of art in the canon of Russian painting from the years between the mid-1920s and mid-1930s which did not, in fact, strongly reflect the characteristics of

under the brilliant, extravagant lights of what appears to be a ballroom, adorned with wall banners and luxurious carpets. The composition of this staged scene explicitly provided viewers with unambiguous pointers for how to assume their own appropriate role within the work, in the places of two generic simple folk set apart in the foreground from the coffin and multitudinous crowd. The upper register of the work, with its sweeping vertical lines of palms, chandeliers, and banners towering over a horizontally-oriented lower register consisting of a gathered crowd is reminiscent of nineteenth-century (Western European-inspired) Russian engravings of court gatherings, with the effect of generating a sense of grandeur and historical place. The stylistic markers of realism in the clothing, particularly that of the two figures in the foreground, and the limited though nevertheless apparent perspectival distortion (accomplished, for example, through the contrast between the tree in the left-hand foreground and the much smaller weeping woman beside it and in the accumulation of the depth of faces in the crowd on the right-hand side of the painting and between the coffin and the

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mature socialist realist eclecticism; Brodsky's work represented, at the very early year of 1925, an outlier amongst contemporary works. This was an era when artists were still working out the official Soviet style, resulting in much trial (and what would later be perceived as error), when art conforming to Brodsky's model became the standard to which other art was compared.

One should also be aware that Malevich harbored neither love nor respect for artists like Brodsky. They represented for him the epitome of depravity under the guise of artistry, the abandonment of all principled efforts at revealing truth or beauty in imagistic form. For example, in a December 1929 letter to Kiril Shutko, Malevich wrote of "the present day psyche" (with respect to the general tenor of the art world, i.e. the impending rise of socialist realism – "monumental political painting") as following "erroneous" tendencies: "Monumental political painting is being put forward. For this erroneous line to be put in order we need to set a very clear and precise course." In a 1932 letter to Ivan Kliun, Malevich criticized proto-socialist realist artists, without naming any specific individuals, calling them "locusts": "From the artists who have now seized the academia, the basest [attitude] … a blockade all around … And these locusts, devouring the young forces of the generation as stalks of wheat, it needs to drop dead at some point after all." Epstein, *After the Future* 203, 206-207. *Malevich o sebe* vol. I: 204, 235. Translations from Katsnelson 77, 94-95.

window) remind the viewer of the stylistic attributes of the nineteenth-century Russian social realist movement known as the Wanderers.

The detailed rendering of the facial characteristics of the painting's primary figures evoke a sense, though, of contemporaneous, futurist-inspired photomontage, as if the visages had been clipped from newspaper coverage and pasted into their appropriate positions in the image, thereby somewhat awkwardly facilitating even further the impression of accuracy and truthfulness. The painting's straightforward, "realistic" and trustworthy qualities nevertheless belie quite complex and messy historical events, whose narrative resolution had not yet been fully worked out in 1925 when this painting was created. However, when such resolution was achieved, the official Soviet historical narrative would soon come to quite closely resemble the one which Brodsky pictured here.

In *At the Coffin of the Leader*, Brodsky appeared to speak metaphorically, in typical postmodern fashion, not for an artificially integral (modernist) self, but for someone else; his utterance, in this painting, was "spoken" on behalf of the two common folk standing in the foreground: everyman and everywoman. Brodsky's iteration of what has purportedly already been seen, of the fictionalized event these two peasants ostensibly attended, both secured the validity of the image as purportedly collective memory, rather than personal observation, and furthermore ascribed the artist's ideological agenda to someone who held and whom he sought to imbue with greater power and charisma in the eyes of the viewer than the artist himself. Although such a strategy retained deep roots in a modernist orientation, with a reliance upon

purportedly infallible sources of authority, it nevertheless prefigured the postmodern era in the ways by which it manipulated viewer engagement and apparatuses of trust in the validity of the image.

On the other hand, Malevich's eclecticism might be understood to operate within postmodern themes on completely different levels from Brodsky's. Employing the rubrics of diverse, canonically respected European artists allowed Malevich to take on what Soviet semiotician Boris Uspensky has termed a "non-authorial point of view."[224] Malevich's eclectic works adopted a point of view, a means of looking upon and representing the world, which did not in fact belong to the artist himself. Adopting these non-authorial points of view allowed the artist to experiment in territories otherwise closed to him by political strictures, but also by the dogmatic pronouncements of his vociferous self. To speak in the voice of another opened a magnificent territory of freedom in which to investigate otherwise unexplored ideas with impunity, releasing him from notions of origins and originality which had held him captive to his most advanced avant-garde ideals—those which pertained to pure abstraction. As Rosalind Krauss has noted, "In deconstructing the sister notions of origin and originality, postmodernism establishes a schism between itself and the conceptual

[224] Uspensky writes, "We are interested in this problem: whose point of view does the author assume when he evaluates and perceives ideologically the world which he describes. This point of view, either concealed or openly acknowledged, may belong to the author himself; or it may be the normative system of the narrator, as distinct from that of the author (and perhaps in conflict with the author's norm); or it may belong to one of the characters." Further on, he notes, "the author may deliberately speak in a voice other than his own." Uspensky, *A Poetics of Composition* 8, 11.

domain of the avant-garde."[225] Such a schism could be effectively navigated by the employment of this kind of "non-authorial point of view."

The eclecticism of these later works afforded Malevich the opportunity to perform artistic experiments in a fashion he had theretofore not encountered. We might accommodate this form of experimentation much more readily within the rubrics of postmodernism than we might ever classify it under the results-oriented tyranny of modernity. Ellen Berry and Mikhail Epstein have characterized the nature of postmodern experimentation as operating within a "subjunctive modality," in which the desired result of experiments is uncertainty and potentiality. The goal *is* the possibility inherent in the unfinished. This is, they propose, in contrast to the imperative modality of the modernist experiment, which sought to produce certain and true results. Berry and Epstein write, "If science seeks to establish through experimentation what is, and the avant-garde tries to affirm what should be, postmodern experiments … highlight the uncertainty and multiplicity involved in the process of experimentation to propose a range of possible cultural genres or cultural worlds."[226]

Malevich's earlier suprematist experiments from 1915 to the early 1920s and even his pedagogical and architectural experiments through the mid-1920s were predicated upon a scientific or medical model, eliciting concrete results and "diagnoses."[227] Malevich expected his experiments in suprematist painting in the 1910s to produce, via shock and surprise, measurable transformations in the thinking

[225] Krauss 66.
[226] Berry and Epstein 7.
[227] Galvez 84-85. Evgenii Kovtun, "Kazimir Malevich: His Creative Path," *Kazimir Malevich 1878-1935* (1988) 166.

processes of their viewers: "Only when the conscious habit of seeing nature's little nooks, Madonnas and Venuses in pictures disappears will we witness a purely painterly work of art."[228] Thus Malevich opened his treatise introducing suprematism to the world—with the goal in mind that the "purely painterly" works of art which he thus introduced would disrupt and abolish those "conscious habits" which plagued the minds of viewers. With suprematism, he claimed, "I have released all the birds from the eternal cage and flung open the gates to the animals in the zoological gardens. May they tear to bits and devour the leftovers of your art."[229] Thus, he posited the metaphorical effects of releasing suprematism upon the world.

Malevich's suprematist experiments led to further refinement of his theories regarding the subtle relationships between colors, shapes, and weights. Furthermore, he understood his laboratory-based experiments in the early 1920s as having led to tangible results; in a 1929 letter, he noted that, with respect to a tea service which he had designed,

> My experimental work on the use of Suprematist forms in the chinaware industry was very successful, as regards new china designs. … the factory produced great quantities of china with Suprematist drawings both for local industry and for export. … the Suprematist china sets were displayed everywhere in the West at Soviet exhibitions where they were successful … In one sphere something which was considered abstract, non-objective, proved useful, a renewal which benefits the state establishments.[230]

Thus he attempted to prove that his abstract, non-objective experiments had produced tangible, quantifiable results. Along with his endeavor in porcelain design, Malevich's

[228] Malevich, "From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism" 118.
[229] Malevich, "From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism" 135.
[230] Malevich, *The Artist, Infinity, Suprematism* 217-218.

transition in the 1920's away from the medium of painting and into the medium of architectural sculptures (his "architektons") alone manifested an increasing interest in the results-oriented applicability of his aesthetic theories to the material world.

However, if these earlier experiments led to a certainty of theories and tangibility of objects, his experiments in painting at the end of the 1920s and early 1930s led to the opposite: destabilization of theories and withdrawal from tangible objects into the worlds of diverse artistic styles. I should note, however, that Malevich may have considered his employment of these diverse styles to be much less eclectic than it might appear today. He counted a much broader array of artists as "Impressionists" than is presently commonly accepted under that art historical designation. He wrote in a manuscript entitled "Impressionism" from sometime after 1929:

> Analyses of post-Impressionist works, for example by Matisse, Cézanne, Van Gogh, Bonnard, Maurice Denis and a whole row of others, testify to the range of the Impressionist sphere of influence on the culture of painting. We can divide this sphere into three sections, the pre-Impressionist, the Impressionist and the post-Impressionist period. In the first period we find the painters Delacroix, Constable, in the second – Claude Monet and Paul Signac, Cross, Seurat, in the third group – Edouard Manet, Auguste Renoir, Pisarro, Sisley. Besides these groups one can form a fourth, a fifth, and a sixth group of painters who found themselves under the influence of Impressionism: Maurice Denis, Degas, Toulouse-Lautrec, Fantin-Latour, Berthe Morisot, Guys, in the fifth group: Paul Signac, in the sixth group: Henri Matisse.[231]

Nevertheless, whether or not he classified the artists he emulated as being "under the influence of Impressionism" or not – and it is notable that neither de Chirico nor Modigliani appear in Malevich's list – the experiments in which he employed the

[231] Ibid. 191-192.

techniques of these (named and unnamed) artists elicited plurality and uncertainty, the possibility of painting within a field of multiple orientations. The adoption of one artist's renowned style and then another's, the application of a de Chirico motif in one painting and a Matisse-like figure in another, represented a rejection of certainty, truth, and result itself, in favor of an embrace of the process of experimentation alone, an engagement of possibility.

If his circa-1929 works indeed represented a retrospective attempt to rewrite the history of pre-suprematist Malevich, in conformity with the artist's recently-expressed ideas about the formation of the painter and the role of artistic instruction (as conveyed in the charts for his Berlin lectures), then they manifest an exploration of and a meditation upon the process of artistic development, upon the exploratory journey. In an alternate universe, by way of the fictional narrative derived from the inaccurately ascribed dates, this journey ostensibly led to fruitful, identifiable results: artistic discovery and enlightenment to the possibilities of exploiting the formal properties of art. Purportedly, such enlightenment would lead to the development of suprematism. But under the actual chronological circumstances, this exploratory journey was the result itself—a set of fascinating drafts with no concluding summation, a subjunctive postulation of what might have been. I propose that we can view such an approach to the experimental process as tending towards the embrace of uncertainty characteristic of postmodernism.

While Malevich's inscription of inaccurate dates upon his canvases may have served as a foil to camouflage the eclectic nature of the paintings' experimental tendencies, the antedating act itself provides intriguing subject matter to examine in terms of postmodernism. While modernism tended to focus in a forward-thinking manner upon inevitable, destined progress as a consequence of human endeavor over the passage of time, postmodernism casted doubt upon such notions and placed renewed emphasis upon the potential for fruitful dialogue between the past and the present.[232] By placing dates upon his works which long preceded their actual creation, Malevich in effect created works that were born "old," whose time had long passed before they even existed. If Malevich's avant-garde, abstract suprematist works sought to bring the future to the present, to step ahead of the march of culture, his antedated, figurative works from the 1929 exhibition sought to bring the present into the past, to step behind the cultural trajectory, to actively participate in the arrière-garde.

Like much art of the postmodern era, which, according to Berry, "falls behind deliberately, inventing aesthetic forms of backwardness," Malevich's antedating project conceived what already constituted the "new" from long ago.[233] As such, it participated in a typical temporal experience of the Soviet communist project itself. Epstein describes the temporal state of the Soviet experience as having "a strange leapfrog effect," whereby one found oneself simultaneously before and after, either somewhere after the future, or else before the past.[234] For where else could one locate oneself in

[232] Sim 289-290.
[233] Berry, *Transcultural Experiments* 64.
[234] Epstein, *After the Future* xii-xiv.

time, living in the late 1920s and early 1930s, when the promised classless society of the future had already reverted to a reconfigured version of the past? Even at this point in time, cronies of the Communist Party received preferential treatment with regards to state-controlled employment and residences, and to the extent that "luxury" goods were available, obtained access to them whilst they remained unavailable to everyone else.[235] If the future had already arrived in 1929, it had somehow cruelly slipped out of the grip of the present and already into the past, or else the present still relentlessly grasped a past prior to the promised, purportedly already accomplished, future.

As Crone and Moos suggest, "Dating – i.e. the search for a retrospective exactitude – might have been construed in the mind of Malevich as an antiquated and old fashioned concept that needed regeneration through disruption."[236] Malevich's antedated paintings began their existence as purported evidence of long-passed artistic development, thereby confounding a modernist teleology, whereby definiteness and material realization remained attributes of the past. Epstein contends that, "Postmodernism is essentially a reaction to utopianism, the intellectual disease of obsession with the future that infected the latter half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth." Instead of anticipating a future "thought to be definite, attainable, and realizable" (Epstein's words), these works participated in a temporal continuum that could be more accurately characterized as postmodern, in which the

[235] Concerning the consequences of policy decisions made at the beginning of the 1930s, Gutkin notes that, "It was not the workers' labor that was best rewarded; rather, it was the Party and state apparatus … the industrial and managerial class, and the so-called creative intelligentsia (the artistic and academic elite) that received the most and the best privileges: the best apartments and summer homes … and access to consumer goods distributed through special outlets closed to the general public …" Gutkin 99.
[236] Crone and Moos 208, fn # 20.

past embodied attributes of indeterminateness, possibility, and unfixedness. Epstein proposes that, "Postmodernism, with its aversion to utopias, inverted the signs and reached for the past, but in so doing, gave it the attributes of the future: indeterminateness, incomprehensibility, polysemy, and the ironic play of possibilities."[237] By application of Epstein's theories to Malevich's works, we can further extend our analysis by considering that the temporal indeterminateness of these paintings was reinforced by the illogic and incomprehensibility of the dates themselves, which seem to have been assigned largely arbitrarily, so much so that some works, such as *Three Girls* (1928, inscribed "~~1909~~ 1910-1911," Russian Museum Ж-9396), exhibited dates that the artist himself had scratched out and revised.

We can find in the entire antedating complex an example of that archetypal postmodern concept, the simulacrum, which we might define, using the words of Jean Baudrillard, as the "model of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal."[238] By producing a counterfeit sequence, a simulation of what might have happened in his career between the years 1903 and 1919, Malevich operated with a postmodern strategy whereby modernist "Reality" was replaced by a fiction which, in Baudrillard's words, "correspond[ed] to a short circuit of reality,"[239] and conformed instead to a perception of what ought to have been real – a "hyperreality."

Malevich was not alone in exploiting the potential for the hyperreal manipulation of historical narrative. The Bolsheviks engaged in large-scale simulacral

[237] Epstein, *After the Future* 330.
[238] Baudrillard 1.
[239] Baudrillard 27.

activities from as early as 1920 with their first major reenactment of *The Storming of the Winter Palace* in Petersburg. In this reenactment, about a hundred thousand spectators observed as a highly choreographed team of thousands of participant-observers reenacted a scripted sequence of events that only remotely resembled those which had occurred three years prior, but that allowed for a much more emotionally moving, streamlined, and memorable heroic narrative than had been afforded the participants in the actual events of the Revolution. This monumental event, a 1927 restaging of which appeared in Sergei Eisenstein's film *October*, (and an event in which Slavoj Žižek has perplexingly and mistakenly claimed, in numerous publications, Malevich's involvement),[240] embodied the beginnings of monumental, highly organized Soviet political pageantry and historical simulation under the guise of factually-based reenactment. Although Malevich's antedating activities operated on a completely different scale and with much different terms than the *Storming of the Winter Palace* reenactment, these enterprises reflected a shared orientation towards the nature of history and narrative. When history itself has become a simulacrum, self-consciously malleable and permeable to the intentions and needs of the present moment, we might catch a glimpse of postmodernism in its infancy.

[240] Žižek's use of the conveniently alliterative phrase, "from Malevich to Meyerhold," in his oft-repeated argument regarding the *Storming of the Winter Palace* performance can be found, to give just a small sampling of sources, in the following: Vladimir Il'ich Lenin and Slavoj Žižek, *Revolution at the gates: a selection of writings from February to October 1917* (London: Verso, 2002) 260. Slavoj Žižek, Rex Butler, and Scott Stephens, *The Universal Exception* (London: Continuum, 2007) 129. Slavoj Žižek, "A Plea for Leninist Intolerance," *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 28, No. 2 (Winter, 2002) 559. Unfortunately, this clever turn of phrase is evidence of the axiom that if you say something often enough, it becomes true; it has been picked up in other scholarly books and articles as a statement of (undocumented and unlikely if not completely impossible) fact. See, for example, Robert Blackson, "Once More … With Feeling: Reenactment in Contemporary Art and Culture," *Art Journal* Vol. 66, no. 1, Spring 2007: 36.

Similarly to the Socialist Realist artists, who, according to Epstein, made a "conscious act of being derivative,"[241] Malevich's citation of other artists' stylistic mannerisms in the production of the Impressionist and other emulative works, even if engaged in for the purpose of freedom to pursue formal exploration, represent an abandonment of the suprematist project and with it modernist notions of originality and uniqueness of authorship. In this light, we can read in these works and in this moment a certain manifestation of the destabilization of modernist authorial identity.

As Bal and Bryson argue, "Like 'context,' 'authorship' is an elaborate work of framing, something we elaborately produce rather than something we simply find," and "what counts as authorship is determined by interpretive strategies." They propose that in the postmodern arena one can identify authorship as a discursive operation which is liable to be appropriated by ideologies that put significant stock in the concept of the author that such discourses produce.[242] The authorial identity of "Malevich," the creator of the works in the 1929 exhibition, was produced by means of a discourse that facilitated much of the functioning of Soviet culture, wherein the "new," transfigured reality superseded the "old," pre-Revolutionary reality (as discussed in my previous chapter).

The authentic, original, modernist "master," Malevich, who painted canvases in 1904 or 1911 simply no longer existed in 1929. Neither for Soviet authorities nor for the artist himself. To speak in 1929 with the voice of an artist from 1912 was effectively

[241] Epstein, "Postmodernism, Communism, and Sots-Art" 15-16.
[242] Bal and Bryson 180-182.

equivalent to speaking from a metaphorical grave. From whichever perspective one approaches, pre-Revolutionary Malevich did not reside in post-Revolutionary Russia: the advent of Communism had either transfigured the pre-Revolutionary artist, or else left him behind in the rubble that resulted from the Bolshevik annihilation of modernity. Either way, the earlier version of the artist/author theoretically no longer existed upon the face of the earth as of 1929. 1929 Malevich could no more speak with the authority and certainty of his former identity than 1912 Malevich could have spoken with the ambivalence and uncertainty of his future self. Whether transfigured like a saint or deceased as a "former person," pre-revolutionary Malevich, in 1929, represented a "dead" author of artistic works. While postmodern theory posited the "death of the author" by means of the denial of notions of originality and the integral authorial genius—notions that certainly factor within Malevich's emulative works—the phrase "death of the author," takes on new meaning by means of Malevich's apparently convincing (judging by the 1929 exhibition catalogue) antedating narrative.

On the other hand, one could equally read Malevich's antedating enterprise as a reaction to the vagaries of authorial identity under proto-postmodernism. Faced with a discursive trajectory that would seek to frame his authorial identity in highly unfavorable terms, Malevich may have devised the antedating project as a strategy to resecure that authorial identity by retroactively reframing the scope of his oeuvre. Of course, the alteration of the archive of physical evidence of his early career did nothing to sway the discursive trajectory, but instead, that trajectory incorporated the newly-produced documentary evidence into its own framing apparatus surrounding the

process of the determination of authorship and further secured Malevich's authorial identity within the narrative of the pre-Soviet past.

If we can understand postmodernism as embracing eclectic styles from the past in contrast to modernism's pure, futuristic orientation and also as problematizing modernism's supposition of integral, original authorship, we furthermore can interpret it in very concrete terms as reacting to modernist tendencies toward artistic abstraction by means of a pronounced return to figuration, which manifested itself in the careers of artists across the spectrum of the modernist-postmodernist continuum.[243] Malevich's post-suprematist work can thus readily be focused within the lens of postmodernism through its inherently figurative nature. A painting such as *Woman with a Rake* (1932-1933, inscribed 1915, "Suprematism in the contours of a peasantwoman," Tretiakov Gallery Inv. 22571) [Figure 17], in contrast to a purely abstract composition such as *Red Square (Painterly Realism of a Peasant Woman in Two Dimensions)* (1915, Russian Museum ЖБ-1643) [Figure 18]—purportedly a composition with very similar "subject" matter, however the titular "subject" might be construed—represented a fundamental rejection of the artistic strategy of suprematism, no matter how much it might simultaneously and paradoxically continue to embrace such a strategy. In *Red Square*, Malevich eschewed representational forms in order to focus entirely upon the painterly aspects of color, facture, and line. In this abstract painting he prioritized the essence of

[243] Sim 289-290.

redness and the dynamism inherent in the tilted juxtaposition of the smaller painted square within the larger square defined by the edges of the canvas.

On the other hand, in *Woman with a Rake*, along with its counterpart in the present-day collection of the Tretiakov Gallery, *Haymaking* (1928-1929) [Figure 4], Malevich embraced those representational terms which *Red Square* eschewed, those "favorite objects and little nooks of nature"—the phrase which the artist used to describe objective (as opposed to nonobjective) art in his 1915 suprematist manifesto.[244] In *Woman with a Rake*, a solitary female form extends vertically across the surface of the canvas against a background of horizontal colored stripes, the middle of which represents a horizon line, as indicated by the smattering of square forms denoting buildings placed upon it, thereby designating the upper wide blue area as sky. A few bars below the red horizon plane, a thin white line extends horizontally over three-quarters of the canvas, terminating in a short vertical line with regularly-spaced scratches emanating from its right side, all serving to signify the form of a rake.

In *Haymaking*, a central figure is readily identifiable as a male Russian peasant by his many attributes – sickle, bucket, and bast shoes – but most importantly, by his beard, the form of which strikes a slightly-tilted balance. Four major elements compose his body: independent forms signifying two legs, the portion of his shirt below his belt, and the upper part of his shirt, which itself is composed of three unified sections of two arms and a torso. The artist applied to each of these elements a coloristic treatment which served to imply a source of bright light streaming from one side, rendering a

[244] Malevich, "From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism" 119.

distinctive and peculiar dimensionality to the surface, reminiscent of the reflection of light off curved sheet metal. On three of these elements, the light appears to stream from the left hand side of the painting, but the light falls incongruously upon the right side of the trapezoid at the waist. This effect helps to distinguish each of the bodily components one from another and creates a paradoxical impression of flatness, contradicting the apparent curvature of the forms.[245]

While the two figures in *Woman with a Rake* and *Haymaking* retain many of the formal particularities, such as this paradoxical flatness, evidenced in *Red Square*, these particularities remain outlined within the contours of unmistakably representational forms. Malevich made it abundantly clear, in a 1925 treatise, "About Posters," that in his opinion, formal qualities trumped semiotic associations and clinging to such associations constituted an act worthy of derision and sarcasm:

> In another case the painter showed an advertisement on which were drawn two crossing lines, calculated to produce a sharp contrast to the existing advertisements in the street. Doubts arose because this created an association with the cross, and the commissioner was scared stiff and finally satisfied with a vignette out of the journal *Rodina*, he ordered Pegasus, the horseman with a torch and below a wreath made of palm leaves and a broken heart.
> Some time ago a poster was made on which 'three burning candles' were represented; the poster was made in such a way that not a single person, young or old, could avoid it, but the firm refused to accept it from the painter because it felt associations of prejudices, three candles burning in a room are lit up for 'the deceased', the board of directors trembled, grew frightened of such an omen and ordered a more pious poster of forget-me-nots and, just in case, celebrated a *te Deum*.[246]

[245] Crone and Moos interpret this effect as a disruption of conventional shading techniques: "Malevich contradicts the logic of such traditional rendering of forms in pictorial space, understood as an illusionistically disposed 'three-dimensional' convention. All of the main forms in Malevich's painting do not display highlights on the 'proper' protruding surfaces." Crone and Moos 43.
[246] Malevich, "About Posters," *The Artist, Infinity, Suprematism* 141.

Thus Malevich unambiguously laid out his position that societally-accepted associations of forms did not by any means remain paramount to the meaning and value of an image, with the implication that one could readily discard such associations at the whim of an artist who found the formal properties of an otherwise representational scheme or configuration useful for a composition, in order to make the image "unavoidable," i.e. draw the eye instinctively to it by means of its formal properties. Furthermore, recollection of the previous (and, in these examples, church-related) pre-Revolutionary significations of forms constituted a demonstration of fearful idiocy. (As Iurii Lotman and Boris Uspensky note with respect to a much earlier period in Russian history— seventeenth-century Nikonian reforms— "'To remember' meant being an ignoramus, 'to forget' was to be enlightened."[247] This proclivity in Russian culture long outlived the century and culture in which Lotman and Uspensky retrospectively observed it and manifested itself equally in Malevich's thinking, as illustrated here, and in Bolshevik culture.)

However, one cannot so easily topple structures of signification. As Bal and Bryson demonstrate, when intertextuality, whereby texts and signs unavoidably refer to other texts and signs in perpetuity, is taken into account, the appropriated sign, "because it is a sign, comes with meaning." And furthermore, whether or not the artist wishes to employ that meaning, "she will inevitably have to deal with it. … By reusing forms taken from earlier works, an artist also takes along the text out of which the borrowed element is broken away, while also constructing a new text with the

[247] Lotman and Uspenskii, "Binary Models," *The Semiotics of Russian Cultural History* 50.

debris."[248] And, as Anna Chave eloquently sums up the problem of signification for abstract artists, "The influence and the perpetuation of existing cultural forms is not something artists can fully escape, either by design or by ignorance."[249] Malevich's statements quoted above seem to indicate that he believed artists should not have to continue to deal with image associations tied to recently-abolished Orthodox belief structures – that with the Bolsheviks' official dismantling of the Church and their subsequent enlightenment of the common people as to the backwardness of religious belief, they likewise abolished the associations attached to the images of the cross or three lit candles. However, the Bolsheviks no more destroyed such associations than they did the church itself, despite their violent persecution of the institution.

We might extend such commentary on semiotic signification to the forms of bodies and landscapes in Malevich's circa-1929 works. By Malevich's logic, the formal elements, which, one can assume, he believed "not a single person, young or old, could avoid," – line, color, and the juxtaposition of forms – took up residence in shapes whose signification would have little to do with the inherent meaning of the painting or its proper connection to its audience. Distraction by such representational forms and their signification constituted entrapment in backwards "prejudices" – caught up in a circle of simple representational inquiry, to parody a phrase from the 1929 exhibition catalogue. (And thus we might surmise what Malevich, were he able to encounter and engage with this dissertation, might think of it.) Nevertheless, one cannot rid these forms of their symbolic signification. And if Malevich truly believed he could accomplish this feat, then

[248] Bal and Bryson 207.
[249] Chave 128.

why did he not choose at this moment to paint similarly-styled portraits of workers or Red Army soldiers instead of peasants?[250] If the signification of forms remained irrelevant, the formal properties of any given shape could theoretically trump semiosis.

However, Malevich instead chose some very particular iconic forms in whose contours he would place his pure formal elements—forms of bodies, peasant or otherwise, and of landscapes resembling the Russian countryside. Malevich's choice to return to such iconic figuration, after having painted *Red Square* and its abstract counterparts, remains far from inconsequential in the interpretation of these works. Scholars such as Benjamin Buchloh, Romy Golan, and Kenneth Silver have read this sort of choice as part of a larger pan-European movement of avant-garde artists towards conservatism following the First World War.[251] And although there remains the persistent question of how much such a choice represented a consequence of political pressures, I am proposing that one might also interpret it in terms of the broad transitional forces moving Russian culture from a modern era into a postmodern one.

Postmodernism, at its etymological roots, arrived after modernism; it constituted that which was no longer modern but which necessarily, by virtue of its

[250] And in fact he did make some effort at such subject matter – in *Red Cavalry* of circa 1932, which I will address in my conclusion, as well as *Portrait of a Shockworker* (1932-1933). But these paintings represented significant aberrations from the typical subject matter of his later work.

[251] Early Futurist, Cubist, and abstract painters from across Europe, including Picasso and Severini in Paris, reacted to the traumatic events of World War I with a return to classical influences. Ken Silver and Romy Golan have argued that the return to figuration in a classical style was directly motivated by the major historical events of the era. This is a pictorial turn to which Malevich would almost certainly have been exposed in his 1927 visits to Poland and Germany, although the effect of this exposure is debatable. Buchloh, "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression." Kenneth E. Silver, *Esprit de Corps: The Art of the Parisian Avant-Garde and the First World War, 1914-1925* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989). Romy Golan, *Modernity and Nostalgia: Art and Politics in France Between the Wars* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995).

ancestry, was informed by the modern, if predominantly in opposition to it. In that most fundamental, constitutive endeavor, modernism's reactionary tendencies turned in upon modernism itself, as postmodernism was born as a *reaction* to its predecessor. Postmodernism rejected modernism's emphasis upon uniqueness, identity, complete certainty, and the power of human reason. To these parental attributes, the rebellious postmodern child asserted plurality, diversity, profound doubt or skepticism, and the ambiguity and irrationality of the human condition. Above all, we might most succinctly characterize modernism by the faith in the ability to comprehensively observe, analyze, and control reality, whereas we might most succinctly characterize postmodernism by the belief in the absence of any overarching, all-encompassing reality or narrative innate to a plurality of narratives or productions of reality, i.e. simulacra.[252]

In semiotic terms, T. J. Clark asserts that one of modernism's two greatest wishes was to turn "the sign back to a bedrock of World/Nature/Sensation/Subjectivity."[253]

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[252] I have adapted these definitions of modernism and postmodernism from Sim 289-290 and Epstein, *After the Future* 189. Particularly with respect to the question of overarching narratives, see Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1984). Additionally, *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines "postmodernism" as, "The state, condition, or period subsequent to that which is modern; … any of various styles, concepts, or points of view involving a conscious departure from modernism, esp. when characterized by a rejection of ideology and theory in favour of a plurality of values and techniques. …" "postmodernism, n.," *OED Online*, March 2011 (Oxford University Press. http://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/238214) (accessed April 30, 2011).

[253] T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea* 9-10. Malevich, "From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism" 118. Epstein similarly defines modernism as "a revolution which strove to abolish the arbitrary character of culture and the relativity of signs in order to affirm the hidden absoluteness of being, regardless of how one defined this essential, authentic being…" Epstein, "Hyper in 20th Century Culture" paragraph 6. Additionally, Baudrillard makes the comment that, with respect to Byzantium, but theoretically extending to medieval Christendom as a whole, "All Western faith and good faith became engaged in this wager on representation: that a sign could refer to the depth of meaning, that a sign could be *exchanged* for meaning, and that something could guarantee this exchange—God, of course." Baudrillard 5. But one might equally extend Baudrillard's commentary to modernism's wager as well – the ground or "depth of meaning" may no longer have been insured by God per se, but the notion of some transcendental or

One might observe such a wish manifesting itself in the October Revolution in the attempt to make the philosophical ideas of Karl Marx recognizable in the "World/Subjectivity." The aim of the Revolution was simple, logical, and concrete: the transference of the means of production into the hands of the victims of capitalist exploitation (the proletariat), thereby eliminating abuse and fostering prosperity, perpetual success, and overall well-being for the masses ("World"). The Revolution, in the minds of its proponents, would constitute a turning point in human history, a unique and transformative event from which the world could never turn back ("Subjectivity"). It would be accomplished through scientifically proven means ("World") and its success in Russia, as well as progressively throughout all the nations of the world, remained an assured eventuality. The Revolutionary masses laid their hopes and lives in the hands of the authors of the Communist project, particularly Lenin and Marx, whose vision of a better world led the way ("Subjectivity"). In a modernist worldview, utopia was achievable; the bedrock of meaning was reachable.

One might also observe how suprematism attempted to turn "the sign back to a bedrock" by seeking to make the transcendental sensation originating from beyond the "ring [or lampshade] of the horizon" sensible in tangible form—"Nature/Sensation," "nature" being that which is tangible in perceivable form and "sensation" being a stable, universally accessible experience of that which lies beyond tangibility. In fact Malevich wrote, in 1927 in the manuscript, "Suprematism": "In the art form which I call

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fundamental basis which could guarantee the relation between sign and meaning nevertheless prevailed through the modern era.

Suprematist, Art has returned to its original stage of *pure sensation*."[254] Twelve years earlier, in "From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism," the founding document of Malevich's signature style, he assumed the possibility of "a purely painterly work of art," and outlined the steps necessary to achieve such purity. This text posited the development of the suprematist artistic movement as a turning point, breaking loose from the strictures that had bound art through the ages. Suprematism would help the world "to attain the new [unique] artistic culture." The age of suprematism constituted a new age of discovery, not to be forced "into the old forms of a bygone age." In other words, this age would not repeat what had already come to pass, but instead utterly rejected the past in favor of the brand new, unique identity of the present, "modern life."[255]

An ostensibly comprehensive critical survey of art from its earliest beginnings ("the savage"), to the art of the ruling classes ("the academy"), to the most recent manifestations of the avant-garde, occupied the majority of "From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism." Even the form of the title, *from* cubism and futurism, *to* suprematism, betrayed the modernist point of view, implying a definitive movement and advancement through history, assuming the innate value and certain benefit of progress by means of human cognition. Still in 1927, he wrote that "non-objectivity in art is an art of pure sensations, it is milk without the bottle, living by itself under its own aspect, leading its own life independently from the shape of the bottle which does not express

[254] Malevich, "Suprematism," *The Artist, Infinity, Suprematism* 144. Italics mine.
[255] Malevich, "From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism" 118-120.

its essence, sensations and taste."[256] In this analogy he seemed to imply that "milk" or "pure sensation" could exist without containment, independent from any form, but as its own pure essence – i.e. signifying nothing but its own pure self.

But what could be done when that "pure sensation" was perceived as nothing but a figment of Malevich's imagination, rather than the ground upon which all of his "Reality" stood? What happened when Clark's metaphorical "bedrock" rejected the sign, or revealed itself to be quicksand? What could one choose as the appropriate course of action when one began to suspect that making tangible such a concept as communism, or the mystical propensity of suprematism, was a task doomed to failure?[257] What resolution could one find when this attempt at transformation into the tangible revealed itself as never *not* losing something critical to the very constitutive nature of the concept itself? What did one do when confronted with the grim and sometimes gruesome image of the failure of mass utopian fervor?

At some point in time (and of course, not just one, but many points, as the intangible process of historical change wove its tentacles in and out of people's lives) between Lenin's death in 1924 and the end of Stalin's First Five-Year Plan in 1932, Soviet society faced and actively repressed the grim image of what it had become under the spell of modernist ideology. This transition, according to Epstein, involved "the ideological and semiotic dissolution of reality … and the elimination of modernist

[256] Malevich, "Suprematism," *The Artist, Infinity, Suprematism* 144-145.

[257] Whether or not "mystical" is the correct term to employ here is up for debate. Victor Tupitsyn addresses the question of Malevich's relation to metaphysics, including its distinction from mysticism, in the article, "Incitement and Thought: The Texts of Malevich," in Margarita Tupitsyn, *Malevich and Film* 144.

stylistic purity and refinement."[258] As such, modernist ideology somehow made way for postmodern strategies of plurality and simulacra, which, as Epstein argues, were in fact the only ways that one could put Marxism into operation in the Russian context.[259] The application of Marxist ideology, with its heavy emphasis upon material reality as the ultimate means for determining ideological legitimacy, to "a culture in which reality had always been a function of the powerful State imagination," resulted, according to Epstein, in a quintessentially postmodern construction: "materialism as a form and tool of ideology."[260] The material no longer stood on its own merits as manifestation of a fundamental, unchangeable truth. He proposes that under the full ideologization of material form, reality became realism, which transformed material reality into a manipulable text. He deems this process, "the full semiotization of reality," and remarks that, "Realities have always been produced in Russia from the minds of the ruling elite, but once produced, they were imposed with such force and determination that these ideological constructions became hyperrealities."[261] Reality did not possess meaning when it became a factor of ideology; reality instead was *given* meaning *through* ideology.

One of the most profound implications of what Epstein refers to as Soviet Marxism's "semiotization" of materiality was that the socialist task became, above all, as Evgeny Dobrenko has shown, a representational project, rather than an economic or

[258] Epstein, *After the Future* 206, 208.
[259] Epstein, "Postmodernism, Communism, and Sots-Art" 9-10.
[260] Epstein, *After the Future* 204.
[261] Ibid. 197.

political one.[262] And, as Elizabeth Papazian asserts, the task of the Soviet author (and by extension, artist) revealed itself to be the decoding of the semioticized reality in order to expose its correspondence to the pastiche ideology of Soviet Marxism, which, as the only valid ideology, had been molded into the image of whatever opposing ideologies it encountered.[263] Hence we encounter the paramount importance of socialist realism to the Soviet project. Socialist realist artists created the tangible, material output of the Soviet Marxist semiotic task. Communism itself was not made tangible—what was brought into the representational realm was no longer an attempt at securing a line to a bedrock of truth or "Reality," but rather to a convincing and Party-supported narrative which substituted for reality.

At some point during the first part of this same transition period in Soviet society between 1924 and 1932, perhaps in connection with Malevich's 1927 journey to Warsaw and Berlin, the noble goals and logical substructure of "From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism" began to crack as well, and calculated unoriginality and equivocacy began to supersede Malevich's steadfast commitment to uniqueness and

[262] Dobrenko, *Political Economy of Socialist Realism* xi.

[263] Papazian 11. As concerns pastiche ideology, the expression of postmodernism became manifest in a the adaptation and application of Marxism itself, or rather, that complex of totalitarian ideologies which came to be defined as "Marxism" in the Soviet context, or "Soviet Marxism" (as distinguished from the philosophical system propounded by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels). According to Epstein, as opposed to what existed in the West, where, over the course of the twentieth century, Marxism faced competing ideologies which forced its proponents to continually define and redefine Marxism's boundaries, articulating what Marxism was *not*, in the Soviet Union, when Marxism became the only allowable ideology, it proceeded to subsume all other possible ideologies (which could have been, in a modernist context, distinct and "pure"), articulating everything *as* Marxism. As the source for all justification, Soviet Marxism and its texts became the definitive primary sources for all agents within the society. As Epstein notes, "Marxism in the USSR, owing to its omnipresence, became everything and nothing--a parody of ideological thought as such." According to Epstein, as the sole means for making an argument in this society, the ideology of Soviet Marxism became a pastiche of all those ideologies which would have otherwise competed with it. Epstein, "Postmodernism, Communism, and Sots-Art" 9-10.

ensconced ideals, although he never could have compromised his sense of self-worth by admitting as much. When Malevich published his manifesto introducing suprematism to the world in 1915, he prophesied that objects would "vanish like smoke," and "the new artistic culture" would materialize by means of "advances toward creation as an end in itself." Yet the *Black Square*, which he called a "living, regal infant," and defined as "the first step of pure creation in art," did not lead to a metaphorical avalanche of subsequent steps, cascading into an all-encompassing manifestation of pure artistic creation.[264] Malevich's art from his later figurative period constitutes an aftereffect of the failure of a revolution (artistic or otherwise) to blow through and apocalyptically abolish the broken, petty, grasping social (and artistic) pre-revolutionary environment in order to uncover a brave, beautiful, freshly cleansed world.[265]

A revolution did blow through. It left in its wake not purification, but messy, complicated destruction. As Ralf Bell states it, "The dream of 'cosmic celebrations' seemed to be over, utopia was showing its half-life time. From the mists of the Communist new beginning, instead of white non-objectiveness, a barren world of black things and figures was emerging."[266] The political revolution reinstated institutions of tyranny which resembled in remarkable ways those dismantled and declared obsolete by the stormy revolution. And the revolution which blew through the art world under the leadership of Malevich and his avant-garde colleagues failed to irrevocably alter the production of the artistic world, or the tastes of the art-viewing populace at large.

[264] Malevich, "From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism" 118-119, 133.
[265] Gutkin 83-84, 101. For more regarding apocalyptic tendencies in Russian culture, see David Bethea, *The Shape of Apocalypse in Modern Russian Fiction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).
[266] Ralf Bell, "The Century of Disillusionment," *The Beauty of Failure / The Failure of Beauty* (Barcelona: Fundació Joan Miró, 2004) (28 May – 24 October 2004) 126-127.

When given the opportunity to mold culture into that beautiful new world, these artists were met with insurmountable material insufficiencies. When, in 1920, the state-funded and Malevich-led UNOVIS program transformed the city of Vitebsk into a suprematist billboard, the large geometric figures painted across the brick faces of buildings failed to transfigure the consciousness of the general populace. Instead, such public art tended, on the whole, to make passers-by angry and frustrated with the frivolous art-related expenditures of this new, so-called everyman's government, when they were struggling more than ever before to put food on the table.[267]

Malevich's post-1928 work reflected tendencies towards the postmodern because it constituted what he created *after* his vision of utopia failed to become fully manifest. This work reflected, in its abandonment of abstract purity and its embrace of figuration, a profound disappointment and disillusionment with the "Great Experiment" of both avant-garde art and the Communist system itself.[268] It represented a direction in which to take painting after painting *as such*—wherein painting had "freed itself from

[267] More regarding the reasons for the failure of the Vitebsk project and avant-garde involvement in early Soviet public art projects can be found in Catherine I. Kudriavtseva, "Art in the Service of Politics: Lenin's Plan for Monumental Propaganda," MA thesis (University of Oklahoma, 2000).

[268] The first English-language survey of the avant-garde art movement in Russia was authored by Camilla Gray and published in 1962 under the title, *The Great Experiment: Russian Art 1863-1922*. Gray's ideological bias, reflected in her title, can be read between the lines of the concluding sentences of this work: "For, as in Russia itself, so all over Western Europe artists were fired by the experiment of Communism which was so courageously being worked out there; from all over Western Europe artists looked to Russia for the realization of their 'new vision', for in Communism they saw the answer to the sad isolation of the artist from society which the capitalist economy had introduced. In Russia, under this new-born régime, they felt a *great experiment* was being made in which, for the first time since the Middle Ages, the artist and his art were embodied in the make-up of the common life, art was given a working job, and the artist considered a responsible member of society." (Italics mine) A revised paperback version of her text was published in 1971. Likely for political reasons, the title of her work was changed for the paperback version into the less ideologically-charged, *The Russian Experiment in Art: 1863-1922*. Camilla Gray, *The Russian Experiment in Art: 1863-1922*, revised and enlarged by Marian Burleigh-Motley (London: Thames and Hudson, 1962, 1971, 1986).

foreign elements"[269]—failed to take hold as the dominant approach to the medium. With his desires dashed to transform not only art, but life as a whole, into something true ("Art requires *truth*, not *sincerity*"),[270] Malevich's return to figuration exemplified not an admission that he found the abstract orientation of his earlier works, along with his vehement defense of this orientation, to have been wrong. Rather the figurative works signified an inversion of the entire project in which truth and mystical transformation were the object. The failure of that strategy necessitated a complete reevaluation of the modernist project and the creation of a new strategy, one in which a number of different, discrepant voices—as opposed to the univocal voice of the master—could provide insight into something resembling a truth.

In 1920 Malevich wrote:

> The world stands before man as an invariable fact of reality, as unshakeable reality (as people say), yet two people cannot enter this unshakeable reality, as actuality, and produce from it one sum; they cannot measure it identically. However many people enter this reality, each will bring a different reality, and some will bring nothing, for they will see nothing real—each will bring his judgment on the thing that he went to see and their judgment will be reality, proving that the object under discussion does not exist, for even the judgments themselves, in mutual exchange, create very many shades of contradiction.[271]

In this passage we might detect the inklings of an alternative conception of representation and perhaps a tentative glimpse into how Malevich might have comprehended the idea of polysemy. His explanation of multiple valid perspectives on reality bears a resemblance to postmodern notions of the lenses through which all

[269] Malevich, "Architecture as a Slap in the Face to Ferro-Concrete," *Essays on Art* vol. I: 60.
[270] Malevich, "From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism" 119.
[271] Malevich, "God is Not Cast Down," *Essays on Art* vol. I: 195-196.

perception occurs, although one senses that with Malevich even in this passage, the assumption remained that the "reality" into which each of these "many people enter" was still conceived as a single, integral entity. Malevich continues,

> Therefore what we call reality is infinity without weight, measure, time or space, absolute or relative, never traced in a form. It can be neither conceived nor comprehended. There is nothing that can be comprehended, and at the same time there exists this eternal 'nothing'. Man is continually concerned that everything should be substantiated and reflected upon, and only then will he attempt to construct a thing, building it on a firm scientifically-based foundation, forgetting that he is building the firm foundation for the thing on something that has no foundation. So much for his unshakeable, objective logic.[272]

The accusation that "man … construct[s] a thing, building it on a firm scientifically-based foundation, forgetting that he is building the firm foundation for the thing on something that has no foundation," seems to foreshadow Malevich's own theoretical failings at the modernist enterprise, for the foundation he built of the formal properties of painting, isolated and disconnected from representational capacities, was a foundation built on "something that has no foundation." The aforementioned "milk" could not exist without the shape of its bottle – in the end, it simply spilled on the floor and assumed the form of a puddle on the floorboards. Whether acknowledged or not, signification happens and fills the space of semiosis upon which a sign finds itself. So much for his unshakeable, non-objective art.

Nevertheless, by means of figuration, Malevich found a way out of the conundrum of uncontained "milk"/unavoidable semiosis. In his circa-1929 paintings, he encountered a solution in which innovation's stranglehold upon value was confounded.

[272] Ibid.

In the figurative orientation of these works, a pair of stylistic oppositions did not need to be mutually exclusive and the very basis of the earlier, failed project was disrupted and destabilized. Instead, the abandoned approach was rendered the mirror image of itself. *Woman with a Rake* and *Haymaking* did not make steps in the procession of advancements started by the "living, regal infant," but rather, took that which gave power to *Black Square*—texture, color, form—and transformed those exact same elements into the figurative inverse of *Black Square*'s abstraction.

However, the figurative nature of the circa-1929 work did not preclude pronounced attention to particular formal issues which shared equal weight of focus with the figurative forms and thus substantial content on non-representational levels. For example, as opposed to a study of the archetypal male Russian peasant, *Haymaking* could be read predominantly as a study in the form of the arc and in degrees of color modulation. The arcs of five (or six, depending on what you count) irregularly-spaced forms fill the top-most register of this painting, in the forms of four haystacks and the hair on the central figure's head (mirrored in reverse in the lower edge of the beard), all echoing one another in both their dimensions and degree of curvature. The shoulders and arms of the central figure form the dominant arc at the center of the composition, repeated, with a skewed forearm, in the shoulders and arms of the figure to his left. The blade of the scythe in the central figure's hand is contained between two non-parallel vertical arcs, and the contours of the land behind him are each formed in distinctively angled and curved arcs. (Despite the initial impression that some of these

may be straight lines, they all in fact curve subtly.) These contours create the effect of a gently lilting topography, reflecting the feel of rolling foothills, such as those visible upon the horizon, as opposed to the flat steppe plains depicted in works such as *Woman with a Rake*.

Even the facial features, so often missing from the heads of Malevich's later peasants, of the central figure in *Haymaking* reflect the geometric focus of the work, in the disparately-arched eyebrows, the conjoined arches forming the edges of each eye and both upper and lower edges of the beard. The gently tilted upper arc of the beard constitutes both an angled continuation of the shoulder upon the left and also of the peach-colored swath of background on the right, thus emphasizing its arc form and its non-parallel congruence with other parts of the body and the landscape. In composing this work, rather than utilizing a single pair of intersecting dominant arcs, as he did in *Suprematism (Supremus No. 58)* (known as "Yellow and Black") (1916, Russian Museum ЖБ-1687) [Figure 19], Malevich made the geometric form of the arc the subject of *Haymaking* through its pervasive and never exactly parallel or identical reiteration.

Modulation between pairs of colors also vies for attention as the dominating subject of *Haymaking*. Upon the body of the main figure, as well as of the figure to the left, white is carefully merged with and then transformed into red, or black, thereby creating upon the surface of these bodies a curved dimensionality. Upon the fields beneath their feet, colors transform, depending on the swath, from white to green, or blue to green, or light green to dark green, or even yellow to green at the far right. In

contrast, the blue shaded half of each haystack is explicitly demarcated from the illuminated green half by a line of slightly brighter green.

One can find yet another different strategy of color modulation in the bodies of the remaining figures in the background. Here, instead of the gentle transition between colors found upon the two largest figures, or the abrupt line drawn between colors on the haystacks, we find simplified color blocks performing the shading effect. In the woman's figure to the right and in the small bodies of the six women between the haystacks, color schemes and lighting effects similar to the central and leftmost figures' bodies are employed, but the modulation is accomplished by means of two color blocks separated by an intermediary tone. These blocks give the painting an impression of being a work still in progress, as an interim step towards accomplishing the technique of graduated color transitions used for the dominant figures—an illustration of process, rather than result. Nevertheless the blocking appears to be entirely deliberate, given their unambiguous outlines, particularly upon the skirt of the rightmost figure. A formal focus upon color modulation also appears in an earlier painting, *Suprematism* (known as "Yellow plane in dissolution") (1917-1918, Stedelijk Museum A-7670) [Figure 20]. However, *Haymaking* significantly complicates the simplicity of the earlier work by contrasting similar gradual transitions with the abruptness of sharply abutting colors and manipulation of transitional swaths of color.

Woman with a Rake, on the other hand, could be read as a study in the simultaneous depiction of both fixedness and subtle dynamism. The female figure in this painting is composed of a juxtaposition and layering of geometric forms, whose

non-interpenetrating colors distinctly divide the left half of the body from the right, so that black and red dominate the left side, white and blue, the right. The right side is also ever so slightly contracted, or, alternatively, the left enlarged, with the right shoulder slightly lower than the left and the right hem line ever so slightly higher than the left. The right foot, however, contradicts any impression of distance that might have been created by the contraction of the right half of the body, as the foot steps forward ahead of the left foot into the lowest horizontal stripe of the background surface.

The discrepancy in size and placement of similar bodily and clothing elements on opposing sides of the body create a disjunctive sense of movement in the overall figure. For example, the contraction of the right-hand side results in the blue right-hand hemline to lay as if one proportionally-sized step higher than the red left-hand edge. This discrepancy in heights gives the impression of the way a long skirt moves when being walked in, where one side of it hangs slightly lower according to the movement of the hips and knees. Similarly, the edges of the dress at the wristbands convey a sense of imbalance or uneasiness and attendant motion in the swaying of arms; the wristband on the right is contained entirely within the white stripe of the background, while the wristband on the left is positioned ever so slightly higher, layered atop the line distinguishing the white stripe from the black one above it.

However, the non-dynamic elements of the composition confound the dynamism conveyed through these subtle discrepancies between the placements of corresponding figural/geometric pairs. The static background stripes serve as a contrast to the dynamic elements, by providing level planes against which the discrepant levels

of hem and wristbands have been juxtaposed. More curiously, the perfectly level rake, whose line extends evenly across almost the entire surface of the painting, disrupts the sense of motion created by the disparate levels of wristbands. If one of the shoulder-arm-wrist set were positioned higher than the other, as it appears they are, the level of the rake would reflect this discrepancy of heights and the left side of the rake would rise higher than the right. But the rake remains unambiguously level with the background, in spite of the apparent motion or contraction of the arms holding it. Furthermore, the perfectly plumb vertical line which divides one side of the body from the other (and runs parallel, though not concurrently, with the line that distinguishes one side of the head and neck from the other) also confounds the sense of movement created by the disparate hemline and foot positions. A perfectly aligned vertical orientation of the body contradicts the tilted, asymmetrical positioning of hip and pelvic alignment, indicating how the body sways mid-stride.

Taken together, the static lines of the rake and the vertical dividing line of the body create an underlying cruciform composition within the painting. The approximately perpendicular intersection of two lines or rectangular forms constituted a geometrical element that Malevich had actively employed since the 1910s and that remained an essential form of the suprematist repertoire even through the late 1920s, as it appeared in one of the only two purely abstract works created for the 1929 Tretiakov exhibition, *Suprematism* (1928-1929, Russian Museum Ж-9490) [Figure 21]. In Malevich's work, the cruciform element corresponded in parallel—or just off-parallel, as was the case in *Suprematism* (1928-1929)—to the physical presence of the canvas itself,

drawing its edges in to meet each other in an intersection at the middle of the work, as opposed to conjoining at the corners of a square, as in *Red Square* [Figure 18].[273]

The application of the cross form to a figural composition enabled a dynamic effect which Malevich had not been able to execute in a purely abstract work such as *Suprematism* from 1928-1929. In this and earlier cross-based compositions, the artist had achieved an effect of perceived movement through asymmetrical and only just off-parallel juxtapositions of quadrilateral forms to compose each painting's dominant intersection of perpendicular elements. In the 1928-1929 *Suprematism*, Malevich created a tenuous and delicate balance between forms by means of varying weights, orientations, juxtapositions, and colors. However, when applied to the expectedly symmetrical form of the human figure, this technique yielded ambiguous and intriguing results. The expectation of bodily symmetricality could be subtly disrupted in order to draw attention to the perception of the forms' movement. The limbs and appendages of the body could lie upon the canvas in their anticipated positions (as opposed to, for example, a cubist technique in which the body parts appeared in unexpected positions), except he could ever so slightly adjust their placement upon the striped background in order to render them just off normal, disrupted. At the same time this disruption itself could be confounded by markers that reinforced symmetricality, in the intersecting lines that bisect the composition.

[273] Paul Galvez makes a compelling argument that, "it is the tendency of Malevich to organize the majority of his compositions around the form of a cross which constitutes the most important aspect [of the post-suprematist work], in the sense that it is there that is manifested most clearly his quest for the next additional element," a concept drawn from Malevich's theoretical writings referring to "a unique essential form, an elementary particle … [that] is solely responsible for a given artistic style." Galvez 83, 85-86.

In one of Epstein's most insightful discussions of the relationship between modernism and postmodernism, he notes that we can understand these two historical phenomena as operating within two distinct phases of an encompassing "hyper" characterization. Modernism represented a "super-reality" of truth and essence, while postmodernism represented a "pseudo-reality" of the same entities modernism found to be true and essential. According to Epstein, the "hyper," in both instances, "by virtue of its artificially constructed character, is the 'extract,' the 'quintessence' as it were, of one particular property or sign to the exclusion of all others."[274] So, for example, under the reign of modernism, an aspect of economics such as the "means of production" or "capital," taken to its "hyper-" degree, became the key to mass enlightenment and prosperity, the manipulation of which constituted the true and essential element necessary to achieve complete economic transformation. Under the reign of postmodernism, "capital" revealed itself as illusory, intangible, and nonessential; the ability to effectively manipulate it and its capacity to effect significant economic transformation were brought into doubt, replaced by the overpowering, intangible, and unpredictable currency of informal networks of human relationships (an aspect of which was known as *blat* in Soviet society).[275]

Under Epstein's theory of the "hyper," by heightening a quality to its superlative degree, the quality itself became manifest in such excess that it revealed itself to be illusionary, thereby flipping over to reveal its antithesis. By applying Epstein's theory to

[274] Epstein, "Hyper in 20th Century Culture" paragraph 56.
[275] In Soviet Russia, the term *blat* referred to a pervasive network of social connections, favors, bribes (monetary or otherwise) and other agreements which largely facilitated the daily functioning of economic, political, and cultural systems.

Malevich's work, we could say that when abstract form and color were heightened to the point of flipping over, figure revealed itself. Epstein writes, "'Hyper' is such a 'super' that through excess and transgression [it] undermines its own reality and reveals itself as a 'pseudo.'"[276] It appears to me that suprematism took abstraction to its excess, to its "super" form – but once achieved, this super form exposed itself to be lacking in the truth and essence it had promised it would reveal. It turned out that color and form – taken to the point of being nothing more than just color and form – were in the end *just color and form*, without any attendant superpowers. Malevich's suprematist paintings from the 1910s represented the "super" form of abstraction, of the "hyper" concept of formalism in painting. His post-suprematist figurative paintings, circa 1929, represented the "pseudo" form of this same "hyper" concept, revealing the illusory nature of excessively heightened abstraction by means of presenting the essence of abstraction expressed within the confines of its very antithesis – figuration.

Paintings such as *Woman with a Rake* and *Haymaking* represent both what *is* – and what *is not* – abstract. They cannot be abstract, nor non-abstract. The forms of these paintings interact in complex ways akin to suprematist forms, yet those selfsame forms represent physical objects, they explicitly participate in semiotic, iconographic conventions. These paintings effect a Shklovskian defamiliarization of abstraction itself, causing the viewer to be taken aback, shocked and surprised into unfamiliar ways of thinking, by the expected appearance of Malevich's trademark abstract formalism, but within the highly unexpected confines of bodies, fields, and haystacks. They disrupt the

[276] Epstein, "Hyper in 20th Century Culture" paragraph 63.

habitualization or "automatism of perception" on the part of a viewer who has been exposed to *Black Square* and its progeny; they prolong "the process of perception [as] an aesthetic end in itself." To transpose Victor Shklovsky's assertion that "art exists … to make the stone *stony*," these paintings exist *to make form formal* (or perhaps, to continue with the metaphor of the spilled milk, *to make form formless*).[277]

The interpenetration of abstract formal attributes within the borders of object-signifying forms also disrupts viewers' conventional process of engagement with and disengagement from the painted image, which Uspensky describes thus:

> In a work of art, … there is presented to us a special world, with its own space and time, its own ideological system, and its own standards of behavior. In relation to that world, we assume (at least in our first perceptions of it) the position of an alien spectator, which is necessarily external. Gradually, we enter into it, becoming more familiar with its standards, accustoming ourselves to it, until we begin to perceive this world as if from within, rather than from without. We, as readers or observers, now assume a point of view internal to the particular work. Then we are faced with the necessity of leaving that world and returning to our own point of view, the point of view from which we had to a large extent disengaged ourselves while we were experiencing (reading, seeing, and so forth) the artistic work.[278]

Works such as *Woman with a Rake* and *Haymaking* confound the conventional process of transition from detachment to participation and back to detachment, as described by Uspensky. Initially, the disruption of this process is achieved simply by means of these paintings' lack of physical frames, which denies the viewer the traditional demarcation of the painterly space of that "special world," something which Malevich's abstract suprematist paintings do as well. The naked edges of the taut canvas refuse the

[277] Shklovsky 12-13.
[278] Uspensky, *A Poetics of Composition* 137.

presumption of a "space and time [with] its own ideological system, and its own standards of behavior." The spectator cannot assume to be "alien" to the painting, which reveals itself straightaway as nothing more than stretched fabric, with smatterings of paint trailing off at the edges. The viewer must accept that the object belongs to their own external world. In any attempt to enter into the painted canvas, the observer is rebuffed and disengaged from an internal point of view by means of the abstract properties of the forms contained therein. One cannot effectively or in a prolonged manner enter into any sort of narrative, for there is very little narrative to begin with and what is there is inherently distracted from by the formal qualities of the image itself, which becomes more and more engaging the closer one investigates it.

What distinguishes the circa-1929 figurative paintings from the earlier suprematist ones is that, while the images' formal elements prevent the viewer from getting substantially caught up in iconographic mythology, one cannot dwell forever upon the paint itself either, for its basic nature is somehow broken down by its containment within and complicity with figuration. Color cannot exist simply and only as color, when it clearly demarcates the outlines of hands, hips, houses, and hills. In an attempt to enter in, to engage, we are rebuffed and disengaged, only to be caught back up into the figuration and again rebuffed. These paintings both invite and reject viewer engagement. His figurative paintings do not produce "stories;"[279] they deny viewers the opiate of abandoning their external points of view in order to submerge themselves within the internal narrative of a representational work of art – to get lost in "little

[279] Malevich wrote in 1928, "The production of stories cannot be staged as an artistic phenomenon." "The Cinema, Gramophone, Radio and Artistic Culture," *The Artist, Infinity, Suprematism* 169.

nooks of nature." But these works, perhaps confounding Malevich's intentions, also refuse the self-satisfaction of the aesthete's external point of view, whereby its figurativeness somehow taints an appreciation for the work simply for its abstract qualities and painterly essence. I seek to contend here that the paintings confound both of these positions and leave the viewer somewhere on the frameless edge of the painting, able neither to fully engage and enter within, nor pull away and detach cleanly.

These works offer the enticement of narrative yet abruptly revoke narrative from the viewer's grasp. They offer profound exploration of formal balance and color transition, while simultaneously shattering any illusions about the modernist purity of those very same forms and colors, for such purity cannot be maintained within the confines of object iconography (as opposed to "*bezpredmetnost'*" – "objectlessness," Malevich's goal for his earlier abstract work). These paintings destabilize the dichotomy between the abstract and the figurative, between engagement and detachment, and the expected chronological progression of old to new.

My analysis of the complicated relationship of these works to abstraction and to Malevich's earlier purely abstract works, leads to a position that problematizes contemporary reception practices today. To place *Woman with a Rake* and *Haymaking* alongside Malevich's earlier abstract suprematist works, as they currently hang within the permanent exhibition at the New Tretiakov Gallery in Moscow, suggests a continuity of identity on the part of the artist which is consistent neither with the events which occurred between the moments of their respective creations, nor with the

characteristics of the objects themselves.[280] Not only does the curatorial placement of these two works correspond to the general artist-centered, roughly chronological organization of these galleries as a whole. It also exemplifies a wide trend in Malevich studies to situate later figurative paintings as continuous with earlier examples of the painter's artistic production and theoretical writings.[281] However, my contention in this chapter has been that such works also represent an ambiguous rupture with the artist's past work and, in fact, on a level of philosophical underpinnings have much in common with contemporaneous works of proto-socialist realism.

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[280] In Moscow today, these two works are displayed in a collection of twentieth- and twenty-first century works at the New Tretiakov Gallery building, a 1985 annex of a monumental Soviet-era behemoth acquired to supplement the limited space of the more centrally-located main Tretiakov complex. The paintings hang in the Avant-Garde section of the gallery's expansive public spaces which occupy the building's third and fourth floors. The room in which these paintings hang is preceded, roughly chronologically, by rooms full of Goncharovas and Kandinskys. As might be expected, they are placed in the same room as the other (much earlier) Malevich works on display from the general Tretiakov collection.

Following Malevich's 1929 exhibition, only two of the exhibition's newly-created paintings—one being *Haymaking*—remained in the Tretiakov's possession. After the brief subsequent exhibition in Kiev in 1930, the remaining works were confiscated by governmental authorities, to be returned much later to the artist. Following the artist's death in 1935, these works, along with many others from his estate, were donated to the State Russian Museum in Petersburg, in whose possession they remain today. There has arisen, in post-Soviet Russia, some contention over the validity of this so-called donation, a subject which Yevgenia Petrova has thoroughly and adequately addressed in an article defending the museum's continued ownership of these works. *Woman with a Rake* is one of only a few other paintings from the period between Malevich's return from Germany in 1927 and his death in 1935 that came into the Tretiakov's inventory, primarily through a set of acquisitions from the 1932-1933 exhibition, "Artists of the USSR over Fifteen Years." The remainder of the vast array of Malevich's artistic output from this period found its way, for the most part, to the State Russian Museum in Petersburg. The notable exceptions to this are two paintings from 1930-1931, *Running Man* and *White Horse*, which were anonymously donated to the Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, in 1978. In both Russian museums, however, it has only been in the post-Soviet era that any of these paintings have been treated to the light of gallery exhibition, for their display, let alone acknowledgement of their existence, proved highly problematic under Communist rule.

Petrova, "Kazimir Malevich's Legacy Revisited," Petrova, ed., *The Russian Avant-Garde: Personality and School* 112-118. S. M. Ivanitsky, "Kazimir Malevich in the State Tretiakov Gallery," *Kazimir Malevich 1878-1935* (1988) 34-43. Nakov, *Catalogue Raisonné* 375.

[281] See, for example, Barr, *Rethinking Malevich* 203-220. Petrova, "Malevich's Works in the Russian Museum and their New Datings," *Kazimir Malevich in the Russian Museum* 11. Sarabianov, "'Great Break'" 146.

I am not suggesting that the gallery placement of these two paintings is incorrect. Rather, I am proposing that a different understanding might emerge and, towards that end, positing that the placement of these works on the very opposite side of this gigantic building, in the halls of proto-socialist realism, might be equally appropriate given a chronological and socio-historical framing. I am offering that we might think not only of the art historical narratives involved, but also the historical context. The curatorial choice to place these works in the same room as one of the four known renditions of *Black Square* rests upon the impression of an autonomous, integrated individual author – as we have seen, an inherently modernist conception, one in which the institutions operating within the discursive field of art history are heavily invested.[282] In fact, such a placement isolates these works from their period counterparts and creates an artificial sense of an independent stylistic progression through Malevich's career, disconnected from undue outside influence. Walking through the sequence of the New Tretiakov's rooms, one finds oneself in and out of chronological sequence, first in the 1910s with works from the heyday of the Russian avant-garde, then in the 1910s coupled with the late 1920s and early 1930s with Malevich's works (perhaps unknowingly, if one happens not to read the wall labels of the few outlier paintings), only then to proceed later through rooms upon rooms of proto-socialist realist works from the 1920s. In the spirit of Malevich's own antedating, his later figurative works tend to be presented, both in museum spaces and scholarly texts, as if they had been created at a moment prior to their actual existence, as if

[282] Bal and Bryson 182.

characterized and influenced predominantly by the past, rather than balanced and inflected by the actual moment of their creation.

In this chapter, I argue that a method of analysis of these paintings which relies upon modernist notions of authorship, originality, and detachment from context remains inadequate because the culture of the Soviet Union in which they were created was no longer itself fully engaged with the modernist enterprise. I argue that one can substantially, though not fully, interpret early Stalinism and proto-socialist realism in terms of critical theory with respect to postmodernism. And foremost, I examine what it might mean to think about Malevich's later works, particularly those created circa 1929, as participating in a postmodern paradigm.

However, I have yet to qualify the ways in which the texts and contexts of these works do not fit within a postmodern scheme of interpretation. As Foster proposes, "to delimit [the end of modernism] … in terms of an absolute break seems problematic."[283] Indeed, the hypothesis that postmodernism constituted a dramatic rupture with modernism within the Soviet context cannot be fully, nor accurately, borne out, for there remained far too many elements within such a framing that valiantly held to the ethos of modernity, or failed to achieve certain key characteristics which would come to define postmodernity. For example, the Stalinist era and its semiotic project did not possess the ability, enabled subsequently by full-scale postmodernism, to recognize within itself the seeds of its own pseudo-reality. One could understand, at this moment, that images such as *Collective Farm Worker on a Bicycle* [Figure 11] did not represent

[283] Foster 200.

every Soviet citizen's experience of reality, if only by comparison with one's own experience of that reality. (And in fact, to observe and paint in the fashion of nineteenth-century critical realists such as the Party favorite Ilya Repin or British painter Richard Redgrave, by depicting images of the average Soviet citizen's present-day societally-inflicted hardships, would have ignobly brought into doubt and criticized the aims and accomplishments of Communism itself, particularly after more than ten years of Bolshevik rule.) What one could not understand (or at least not admit to understanding), during the early Stalinist era, was that many of the proto-socialist realist images in fact represented fairy tales themselves, aggressive exaggerations of the most gratuitously desirable elements of the Communist dream – not the goals of some distant and sought-after future, but the extension of the desires of the present in Epstein's hyper-pseudo mode. The belief that the fairy tale reflected perceivable truth about the order of the universe and orientation of the future, rather than a self-reflective phantasm of the present moment, constituted a tether that anchored socialist realism to modernism, with the presumption that there remained inherent, non-relative value to socialist realist mythology.

The socialist realist artist produced simulacra: estimations of reality which served, for viewers, as replacements for reality itself. Such replacements were designed to alter the viewers' perception of reality, to train them into seeing the socialist realist estimation of reality wherever they looked. But the socialist realist artist produced these simulacra in earnest sincerity, as a prophet on the cusp of a complete overhaul of reality itself. Underscoring the absence of self-irony in the production of the

simulacrum, or admission of complicity in the hyperreal, one finds the fundamental element which prevents socialist realism from fully participating in a postmodern paradigm: Truth. For under the Stalinist regime, truth remained a tangible, identifiable entity, achievable through the dialectical materialist process. From the Soviet perspective, dialectical materialism did not constitute a zero-sum game: the sum of its transactions had the ability to arrive at, if not the full truth itself, a reasonable approximation of the truth. Within the dialectical materialist debate, one assumed the cognitive faculties of a collective decision-making body to be infallible. From a postmodern point of view, one could not maintain such faith in the inviolable integrity of human logic and access to truth because the very faculties of human cognition were themselves deconstructed to the point where truth itself became inherently unstable and malleable. As such, socialist realism occupied a liminal space which neither modernism nor postmodernism could adequately delineate, but which the theoretical constructs of both might illuminate.

We can find support for such an approach to the problems of a purported rupture between modernism and postmodernism in Russian studies literature, which has not received Epstein's commentary regarding the rise of postmodernism in the Soviet Union without controversy. For American scholar Edith Clowes, a hyperreality created by socialist realists only exists as a recognizable entity in retrospect, with the advent of a post-socialist realist era. She claims that the Stalinist era profoundly lacked any sort of "postmodern sensibility." Clowes questions Epstein's claim that

postmodernism gained a significant foothold in the Stalinist era.[284] However, her discussion of his argument, based on the idea that this era failed to "admit its own complicity," bears remarkable resemblance to Epstein's own qualification of the limitations of applying postmodern theoretical concerns to the era. He writes, "socialist realism paved the way for postmodernism and just missed sowing the seeds of self-irony, remaining absolutely serious, bombastic, and prophetic."[285] Epstein embraces and Clowes neglects the concept that the Stalinist era's failure to be "fully" postmodern allows for a much more complex and nuanced exploration of the ways in which it succeeded at the very same enterprise.

Boris Groys also criticizes Epstein's proposal to situate socialist realism within certain aspects of postmodernism. Groys' argument hinges upon the shared pursuit of purity maintained by both modernists and socialist realists; as opposed to a reactionary development of the postmodern movement, he contends that the conflict between the socialist realist movement and modernism fundamentally constituted "an intermodernist dispute," characterized by opposing opinions regarding the correct relationship between art, politics, and the market. Ultimately, Groys comes to the conclusion that, "Socialist realism was, if you will, a 'style and a half': its proto-postmodernist strategy of appropriation continued to serve the modernist ideal of historical exclusiveness, internal purity, and autonomy from everything

[284] Edith W. Clowes, "Simulacrum as S(t)imulation? Postmodernist Theory and Russian Cultural Criticism," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 39.3 (Autumn 1995) 339-340.
[285] Epstein, "Postmodernism, Communism, and Sots-Art" 13, 14-15.

external."[286] This "style and a half," though, does not appear all that dissimilar to Epstein's "interim," "transitional," and "liminal" characterization of the socialist realist era.[287] And furthermore, we might more broadly interpret Groy's contention that the opposition of socialist realism to the avant-garde remained firmly rooted in the modernist realm, within Epstein's generalized conception of the overall modernist-postmodernist dichotomy, "as the two complementary aspects of one cultural paradigm."[288] Although these two theorists have much to say to criticize one another, with inherently different nuances to their arguments, it seems that their viewpoints possess much in common.[289]

However one views this debate, there can be no denying that Russia in the 1920s and 1930s bore witness to a broad cultural shift which, according to Papazian, we can understand as a turning "away from immediacy, non-fiction, non-narrative, and abstract artistic forms toward history, fiction, narrative, and iconic forms."[290] For example, the works of the socialist realists avoided the immediacy of present, not fictional crises in order to present historical vignettes that established narratives, along with their attendant meanings and iconic symbols, which were all designed to help viewers deal with the present day in frequently inadequate metaphorical ways. Artists like Brodsky

[286] Groys, "A Style and a Half," *Socialist Realism Without Shores* 76.
[287] Epstein, "Postmodernism, Communism, and Sots-Art" 14-15, 21.
[288] Epstein, "Hyper in 20th Century Culture" paragraph 8.
[289] Svetlana Boym also contributes to this debate in a passing comment, stating, "Socialist realism is postmodern in one sense only: historically, it comes after modernism; ideologically, it discards its heritage." However, since the article in which this statement appears (as a footnote) is primarily concerned with the divergence between avant-garde and socialist realist practices, not with the cultural paradigmatic context of these topics, she does little else to expand upon a defense of this statement, and thus it is unclear how the nuances of her opinion might compare to facets of Epstein's own arguments. Boym, "Paradoxes of Unified Culture," *Socialist Realism Without Shores* 132-133, footnote 9.
[290] Papazian 18.

facilitated their viewers' management of their own experience of reality by means of fiction. Malevich, along paradoxically similar trajectories, stepped back from the immediacy of paint (in form, color, and texture). He returned to his own history and the wider history of modernist art, and he employed the iconic forms of peasant bodies, whose iconographic power remained far more forceful, due to conventional semiotic associations, than that of isolated squares and lines, whose semiotic associations remained far more ambiguous. We might read the process of transition in which both Malevich and Brodsky participated not just as one from immediacy to history and abstract to iconic, but also in terms of the theoretical groundings and experience of the culture, from modern to postmodern.

In particular, Malevich's participation in this transition might revolve around the consequences of destabilization—of identity, certainty, historical progression, and even meaning itself. Outside of the framing which I have attempted to construct in this chapter, one could readily interpret Malevich's reactionary impulses towards previous movements, eclectic experimentation, slapdash attitudes towards accuracy of dating (something with which Malevich had in fact been quite comfortable even early in his career),[291] and the emphasis on formal attributes within figurative representation, all as characteristics of a modern artist or movement. However, his experimentation in a subjunctive modality, the fashioning of history to conform to the needs of the present, his ambivalent disillusionment with his own deeply-held convictions, and the

[291] For example, even in 1915, Malevich claimed to have painted *Black Square* two years prior, in his development of scenery for the opera *Victory Over the Sun*.

destabilization of the abstract by means of the figurative all become significantly more theoretically fruitful when held under the lens of postmodernism.

I would argue that Malevich's anticipation of what would become theorized as postmodern resulted primarily from an accident, rather than purposeful engagement. It represented a function of the pressures of a society which had already begun its journey into the postmodern era. While even into the 1930s Malevich would continue in his writings to rail against the "erroneous" tendencies of "monumental political painting," and to assume that such errors could, in a typically modernist fashion, still be "put in order,"[292] his paintings from this era, in their return to iconographic "objectness," betray a very un-modern disillusionment with previous "objectlessness," or else a compromise or abandonment of previously held modernist notions about the purity of the abstract. He may have experimented with an eclectic array of styles and falsified dates of creation for the purposes of creating a fictionalized account of his own artistic development in accordance with his pedagogical theories, so as to provide evidence of their validity to authorities, but the circumstances of this experimentation and antedating yielded an output which we can understand and explain much more fully under a postmodern paradigm than a modern one.

While socialist realism and Stalinism adamantly rejected modernism, but failed to achieve key characteristics (namely ironic self-acknowledgment) innate to postmodernism, we can read Malevich's career during the final years of his life as taking a different, though likely still not self-conscious, path from socialist realism along the

[292] Malevich, December 1929 letter to Kiril Shutko, *Malevich o sebe* vol. I: 204, 235. Translations from Katsnelson 77, 94-95.

dividing liminal space between these two cultural trajectories. As we have seen, aspects of a renunciation of the modernist project appear abundantly evident in his paintings from this period, but he never in his writings renounced modernism nor his adherence to the paramount role of "pure sensation" in artistic production, that inherently modernist concept upon which he built the structure of the suprematist philosophy. Nevertheless, one cannot help but to read the sincerity of these paintings today with a touch of irony. If we choose to read works such as *Haymaking* as self-portraiture (a not unreasonable reading, given Malevich's concurrent preference for a similar cut of hairstyle and photographic evidence of self-fashioning in terms of peasant idioms [Figures 13 and 14]), whether intentional or not, they reflect the irony of the artist's predicament. By picturing the artist through the iconic form that represented that segment of Russian society which most embodied its own sense of historical identity and, ironically, most suffered from persecution and deprivation at the hands of Stalin's totalitarian government, these paintings retroactively facilitate dark commentary upon the role of the artist in that same society.

Furthermore, it perhaps remains the most ironic aspect of Malevich's life that he had found himself in a situation wherein, in order to paint that which he desired most as a focus for his creative work (abstract, formal properties), he would find it necessary to paint its exact opposite in the form of figurative art. In his circa 1929 works, the only way Malevich could see clear to continue building upon the discoveries he had made in 1915 was simultaneously both to repeat and abandon them. This decision, while likely related to his own established discourse of abstraction, cannot be divorced from the

confines imposed by the forces of faceless, insensible, and societally sanctioned (or ignored) oppression, and as such it might be recognizable as a maneuver within the postmodern vocabulary. Such a recognition on our part remains valid whether Malevich realized it or not, which of course he could not have—for it remains only the privilege of the historian to impose the theoretical frameworks of the past's future back onto that past.

Chapter Four: Malevich Repeats Himself

> Modernism and the avant-garde are functions of what we could call the discourse of originality, and … that discourse serves much wider interests—and is thus fueled by more diverse institutions—than the restricted circle of professional art-making. The theme of originality, encompassing as it does the notions of authenticity, originals, and origins, is the shared discursive practice of the museum, the historian, and the maker of art.
>
> *Rosalind Krauss, "The Originality of the Avant-Garde: A Postmodernist Repetition," 1981.*[293]

> Contrasts of visual impressions, conveyed with the help of color, give the figure depth, roundness, despite the planar interpretation. Coloristic separation of things into their component parts in the work of the period of 1910-1912 yields movement (the same method applies to contemporary French artist Andre Lot. See his "football players"). Malevich achieves the same, without destroying the two-dimensionality and the stillness of the total composition. In "Torso" from 1910-1911, along with the Cubist deconstructions, he advances the treatment of [the form of] the head in a surrealist style, not unlike the works of contemporary Italian artist De Chirico, who used this same method in the 1920s. *Thus the elements of surrealism appear in the work of Malevich much earlier than in Western Europe.*
>
> *S. Yefimovich, "Vistavka tvoriv khudozhnika K. S. Malevicha v Kiivskii Kartinii Galerei" ("Exhibition of Works of the Artist K. S. Malevich at the Kiev Art Gallery"), 1930.*[294]

This excerpt, from one of the few published reviews of Malevich's 1929 exhibition during its brief period on display in Kiev illustrates the pervasiveness of Krauss' modernist "discourse of originality" even at the moment of the birth of socialist

[293] Krauss 58.
[294] Yefimovich, translated into Russian in *Malevich o sebe*, vol. II, 549. Italics mine.

realism, a style which would rely so heavily upon pastiche and appropriation. Ironically, the author of this review employs Malevich's own falsified dates to provide evidence of the artist's stylistic precedence over his Western European counterparts—an effect of the antedating which may not have been all that distant from the thoughts or intentions of the artist himself. With his circa-1929 works, Malevich operated within the modernist discourse of originality, yet in complex and circuitous ways, which is not surprising given his era's ambivalent employment of this discourse.[295] At the same moment as his exhibition, the function of the museum as the preserve of originality was coming into question and the discursive practices of all parties involved in the processes of art making and reception were being disrupted. Evidence of such disruptions in fact can be found at the very institution which organized Malevich's 1929 exhibition; in 1930, the Tretiakov Gallery proceeded to mount exhibitions – an anti-religious exhibition and an exhibition lauding the contributions of collective farming – which defied the modernist discourse of originality and significantly challenged commonly-held notions regarding the content, function, and boundaries of the museum exhibition. These displays consisted almost exclusively of posters and photographs and were not contained within the walls of the museum itself at all, but traveled to the people in the provincial countryside.[296] As Mary Hannah Byers notes,

> Curators and politicians were not long in realizing that this type of narrative exhibition could take place anywhere … with the same texts,

[295] In the spirit of Krauss' designation of the "discourse of originality" and the "discourse of the copy," I use the term "discourse" in the Foucauldian sense to designate a largely self-contained system of communication, belief, and thought encompassing a set of culturally-accepted and -conditioned assumptions, conventions, and viable trajectories for inquiry.
[296] Byers, "The Rise of Socialist Realism" 108-109.

> but using photomechanical reproductions. Museums were subtly undermined by the transforming of paintings into political documents, reproduced and disseminated for their message.[297]

With these developments, the curatorial task shifted from one which placed emphasis on original objects to one which almost exclusively prioritized ideology.

Within this context of ambivalence towards the roles of originality and mechanical reproduction in art making, in 1929 Kazimir Malevich exhibited at his "retrospective" a large number of canvases whose complex painterly surfaces not only represented a rejection of Soviet art policy and ideology, but also challenged and confused basic assumptions about original works of art and their copies, not the least of which involved the antedating charade that misled his Kievan reviewer. Part of the challenge of understanding how Malevich's works interact with the discourses of originality and the copy lies in the fact that several of the paintings in the 1929 exhibition represented direct compositional reproductions of works which the artist had created more than a decade and a half prior. Amongst the figurative compositions displayed in this exhibition, the paintings that unambiguously allude to works dating from 1911 and 1912 include *To Harvesting (Marfa and Vanka)*,[298] *Haymaking* [Figure 4], two versions of *Woman Reaper* [Figures 22 and 23],[299] two versions of *Head of a Peasant* [Figures 7 and 24],[300] *Laundress*,[301] two versions of *Carpenter*,[302] and *Girl*

[297] Byers, "From 'State of the Art'" 188.
[298] Russian Museum, inv. Ж-9492. This work repeats *To Harvesting* from 1912, an image of which was published in the periodical *Ogonëk* in 1913 (Nakov, *Catalogue Raisonné* F-291), but which disappeared prior to 1920. One could also contend that the 1928-1929 composition *Boy (Vanka)* participates in this motif as well, for it constitutes a replication of the detail of the small boy's body on the right-hand side of both of these compositions.
[299] Russian Museum, inv. Ж-9487 and Ж-9460.
[300] Russian Museum, inv. Ж-9473 and Ж-9488.

Without Employment.[303] Moreover, they most often represented copies of missing works: Of these six examples, five reproduce images of works left in Germany after Malevich's visit in 1927.

In fact, the number of circa-1929 Malevich works which might qualify as replicated or copied works could actually be larger, for today we can only ascertain inclusion in such a category by reference to the limited documentation available.[304] If many of the circa-1929 works appear to be "original," non-replicated compositions, it may only be due to the lack of photographs, or the disappearance of many of Malevich's earlier works. There remains limited or no archival evidence of several of his exhibitions, not to mention of his studios and his brother's residence in Moscow, where the artist stored many of his early-career works during the 1920s.[305] With a significant portion of Malevich's work from the circa-1929 period, we may be dealing with

[301] Russian Museum, inv. Ж-9412. This composition repeats that of a 1911 sketch now in the Museum Ludwig, Cologne (inv. Dep. Sig. L. 1979/18) and a 1911 gouache, now in a private collection in Zurich, the latter of which appeared in a 1920 photograph of a retrospective exhibition held of Malevich's work. Given the provenance of this gouache, it is possible that it constituted one of the works which Malevich brought with him to Germany in 1927.

[302] Russian Museum, inv. Ж-9475 and Ж-9394, similar to the 1912 *Carpenter at Rest*. Although the compositions differ slightly, the two nevertheless retain much in common with the earlier painting, which disappeared after the 1927 Berlin exhibition.

[303] Russian Museum, inv. Ж-9462. The correspondences between this painting and an earlier one, *On the Boulevard* (1911, Stedlijk Museum, inv. A-7650), are not as exact as those from my previous examples, but the two compositions share in common a figure sitting upon a park bench, whose horizontal bars constitute a prominent feature of the background, in approximately similar proportions upon the canvas. However, the styles of these two works, not to mention the change of primary subject from a male to a female figure, are substantially different, much more so than any of the previously-mentioned comparisons.

[304] According to Nakov, after 1927 Malevich attempted to produce replicas of many of the works which had been lost or destroyed already during his lifetime. Nakov, *Catalogue Raisonné* 37.

[305] Nakov, *Catalogue Raisonné* 34-35.

simulacra in the sense that, in Baudrillardian terms, the "map" or replicas precede and engender our knowledge of the "territory" of their possible prototypes.[306]

Three particular features remain key to an interrogation of Malevich's iterative practices. First, the previous iterations or prototypes, both known and unknown, did not appear in the exhibition for which the reproductions were created and, in some cases, the prototypes also remained inaccessible to the artist when he created the new versions. Second, the later iterations have been given, to use a figure of speech, "creative" dates, allowing the conclusion to be drawn by partially informed parties (if any such existed) that the works adequately duplicated, if not constituted, the earlier iterations themselves. And third, the previous iterations were perceived as sufficiently significant in the artist's circa-1929 conception of his own history so as to be chosen for reiteration, yet usually in a form which diverged substantially from the previous iteration. Based on these salient features, I seek to examine how Malevich's reiterative practices both operated within and disturbed modernist discourses of originality and singularity, to ascertain what wider interests might have been served or disserved in these practices, and to consider the ways in which Malevich's participation in the discourse of originality (to use Krauss' terminology) can be understood, concurrently with socialist realist practice, as repressing the discourse of the copy.

It is unclear to what extent Malevich's copying activities would have been acceptable to museum and Soviet authorities, for, on the one hand, he was not transparent about his actions and motivations, at least in any documents which have

[306] Baudrillard 1.

survived, but on the other hand, his activities, as long as they represented recreations of the past, did not pose nearly as malicious a threat to the present as they would have if his works represented new creations of the present. Under the new curatorial priorities of the era, the replicated status of Malevich's paintings may have been largely irrelevant, particularly considering that their ideological content in the eyes of the Party, whatever their copied or original nature may have been, remained highly problematic.

Nevertheless, questions of origins and original production loomed large in debates concerning the art of the Stalinist era. Although at this very moment the museum's preserve of originality was being undermined through the prioritization of ideology and the era's capacities for mechanical reproduction, a discourse of originality nevertheless persisted, albeit in a form which differed significantly from the "notions of authenticity, originals, and origins" which Krauss ascribes to the avant-garde. As the political tenor of the Soviet art world shifted along with the rest of Soviet society in the 1920s, the pronouncements and agendas of the avant-garde no longer held the same currency as they had in the first few years following the Revolution. Rather, as Boris Groys has argued with respect to the avant-garde's conception of a society completely transformed by art, as well as its attendant discourses of power and control, the ideas and paradigms employed by the avant-garde were coopted to serve the purposes of conservative entities.[307] Such entities included AKhRR, the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia, which fostered the currents of early Soviet art that eventually coalesced into socialist realism. Organizations like AKhRR became increasingly more

[307] Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism*.

powerful, in proportion to the declining power of the "leftist" progeny of the pre-revolutionary avant-garde—the constructivists and production artists—over the course of the 1920s.

The "originality" which AKhRR promoted hardly resembled any sort of "originality" which avant-garde artists would have recognized. For avant-garde artists, originality pushed the limits of what could be understood as art. Originality defamiliarized imagery and materials, making them unusual, unexpected, shocking, and perhaps even offensive. Originality drew from within the artist; as Malevich wrote in an unpublished manuscript from approximately 1915, "I am the beginning of everything, for in my consciousness worlds are created. I search for God, I search within myself for myself."[308] The integral modernist self would produce the newly-created worlds of artistic invention.

By contrast to Malevich and his avant-garde counterparts, for socialist realism, originality would be highly dependent upon participation in a collectively organized system; originality, paradoxically, would hinge upon "formulaic" conventionality, to use Krauss' term. In this respect, the tactics of socialist realism echo those of nineteenth-century British landscape painting, for which, according to Krauss, "the priorness and repetition of pictures is necessary to the singularity of the picturesque, because for the beholder singularity depends on being recognized as such, a re-cognition made possible only by a prior example."[309] Similarly, the singularity or originality of the socialist realist

[308] Malevich, "I am the Beginning …," *The Artist, Infinity, Suprematism* 12.
[309] Krauss 62.

image was dependent upon the recognition within that image of an exemplary expression of those attributes which came to define the style itself – Party-mindedness, national spirit, and ideological commitment. The originality of the socialist realist image was its conceit. The socialist realist image needed to take on the appearance of originality in order to belong to the popular and pervasive conception of what constituted "art," because within this conception, an artistic work was not created as a copy.[310] For a relatively uneducated and unadventurous public audience, art resembled that which had already been defined as art by the pre-Soviet bourgeois and ruling classes. Soviet authorities came to the conclusion, after the free reign given to avant-garde artists following the Revolution's failure to dramatically transform popular preconceptions, that they were better off manipulating art production from within the confines of what had already been defined as art, rather than attempting to change dramatically the definition itself. In that case, the very notion of what could be considered "original" art was inherently tied to a notion that what constituted art necessarily replicated certain defining characteristics of what had already been collectively recognized as art.

The word, "copy," according to Boym, "tended to be negatively valorized in Stalinist criticism." She writes that, "while copying and reproduction were central to socialist realist practice (as to most artistic practices in general), they were vehemently

[310] Although the transformation of art objects into political documents under Soviet rule led to the widespread distribution of artistic reproductions, the originality and exemplariness of a work of art stood outside of its photomechanical or hack reproduction; only the most exemplary works which epitomized the desirable qualities for a work of art (including "originality") could be considered as candidates for mass dissemination, and such dissemination gave official credence to a work, thereby verifying even more substantially its "originality."

criticized in theory."[311] Socialist realist emphases upon originality narrowly defined the parameters of what constituted art – as derivative and mimetic, but also as conforming to a complementary narrative which emphasized the work of art as a uniquely inspired creation. Socialist realism employed the discourse of originality to demean and repress the corresponding discourse of the copy by holding up the work of nineteenth-century Russian realists as models, despite the fact that the emulation of such "original" works necessarily itself implied reproducing this style and its themes.[312]

In the system of state-sponsored art production which would develop in the 1930s, making copies of other paintings constituted a menial task that was comparable to applying dry-brushed color to photographs. The duplication of well-known "original" Russian and Soviet paintings was generally assigned, according to Bown, to the "weakest artists," and received the lowest commissions offered by the state-run commissioning agency, which was responsible for most remuneration for Soviet artistic production.[313] The discourse of the copy remained confined to a lowly stratum of artistic production which not only did not require, but patently prohibited unique or original inspiration on the part of the artist.

On the other hand, throughout the 1920s and beyond, the normative content of art exhibitions (such as the showcase of "proletarian" art, "Young Art Workers from the City of Leningrad," on display concurrently at the Tretiakov Gallery with Malevich's 1929

[311] Boym, "Paradoxes of Unified Culture," *Socialist Realism Without Shores* 128.
[312] I am paraphrasing Krauss here, when she writes that, "the discourse of originality in which impressionism participates represses and discredits the complementary discourse of the copy." Krauss 64.
[313] Bown, *Socialist Realist Painting* 136-137.

"retrospective"), remained the single-author, hand-painted canvas, specifically known within the proto-socialist realist and socialist realist context as the *kartina*. The *kartina* was epitomized in the work of Brodsky, whose "fastidious academic technique, scrupulous historical research, [and] combined use of both photographs and drawings from life in the execution of a large canvas," according to Bown, became normative for socialist realist practice.[314] The *kartina* was necessarily realist, ideological, and narrative. It depicted grand panoramic scenes, ideally of military or industrial exploits, or of events of national political significance and functioned as documentary of such exploits and events.

Interestingly, in AKhRR an intra-organizational dispute which pertained significantly to the discourse of originality arose with respect to the *kartina*. For AKhRR's older members,the *kartina* typified the ideal painted work of art. On the other hand, many younger members in the late 1920s apparently thought the organization ought to prioritize the collective work of mural painting, agitational activities in factory settings, and team-based work, as opposed to the individual work of oil painting. Such a prioritization, while primarily focused upon the discourse of the collective, as a consequence would have deemphasized the discourse of originality inscribed in the form of the *kartina*. However, despite this dispute and although collective art-making activities performed an important role in socialist realist practice, the *kartina*, with its individual, nameable author and its "original" depiction of its prescribed subject matter, nevertheless remained the normative form of Soviet art throughout the socialist realist

[314] Bown, *Art Under Stalin* 46-47.

era.[315] The discourse of originality in the hands of socialist realists reinforced the perception of the normalcy of past realist styles, themselves established as normative by the collecting habits of prerevolutionary industrialists and the Czarist family. Far from effecting defamiliarization or revolutionary transformation, socialist realism employed the modernist discourse of originality to reinforce the status quo. And if the museum's role as the preserve of originality was threatened in the early 1930s, socialist realism's valorization of the *kartina* nevertheless continued to preserve an important role for the institutional exhibition of new and "original" works of art.

In the postmodern era, much intellectual work has been done to dismantle or deemphasize the modernist discourses of originality whether they have been of the avant-garde or realist brand. Significant theoretical scholarship has been devoted to articulating how all works of art and moreover all communicative gestures participate in repetition, citation, and reiteration of previous gestures.[316] As Roland Barthes states, with respect to any given "text" (a term which refers to any form of representation, written or otherwise):

> The intertextual in which every text is held, it itself being the text-between of another text, is not to be confused with some origin of the text: to try to find the 'sources,' the 'influences' of a work, is to fall in with the myth of filiation; the citations which go to make up a text are

[315] Brandon Taylor, "On *AKhRR*," *Art of the Soviets* 69.

[316] In particular I am thinking here of the work of Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes, but also of the extension of their theoretical work into the realm of performance studies, especially in the work of Judith Butler and those, such as Rebecca Schneider, who have followed in her path.

> anonymous, untraceable, and yet *already read*: they are quotations without quotation marks.[317]

If we understand all works of art as intertextual, as standing between other works which they copied and which copy them, the fact that Malevich or the socialist realists produced copied forms of other works remains unremarkable. And indeed to attempt to trace the sources and influences of any given work of socialist realism would be a process of identifying the "already read" in a futile attempt to affirm the "myth of filiation." Yet with Malevich's duplicated works, at least one of the "citations which go to make up [the] text" is not at all anonymous – it is explicitly traceable, at least by one degree of removal. What remain intriguing about Malevich's iterative practice, as well as the approach to copying adopted by socialist realists not long after Malevich's 1929 exhibition, for which he produced most of his copies, are the appearance and disappearance of the images of the prototypes within the copies themselves and the presence or absence of the prototypical physical objects as well.

Examining what happened to many of Malevich's early-career prototypes for his later-career figurative work raises complex, ambiguous, and oftentimes object-specific issues, a state of affairs which is not that different from the artist's own time. Some of his works were distributed to various provincial museums in the early Soviet era, where they, in some cases, may remain today; the artist deliberately left some in Germany upon his visit there in 1927, a number of which would be destroyed in the Second World War; still others were damaged beyond repair during Malevich's lifetime, or given to friends and associates. Whatever the reasons, in 1929, some number of works were

[317] Barthes, "From Work to Text," *Art After Modernism* 172.

inaccessible either to the artist or the Tretiakov Gallery and they could not be included in the "retrospective."

For example, the 1911-1912 painting, *Haymaking* [Figure 8], whose central figure was reproduced in a 1928-1929 work with the same title, now in the Tretiakov Gallery collection [Figure 4],[318] was acquired by the state in 1920 and sent to the Fine Arts Museum in Nizhni Novgorod, in whose collection it remains today. In 1929, Malevich had no reason to believe that this canvas might have been damaged or destroyed, although he may also have possessed little ability to confirm its continued existence. Nevertheless, the canvas could not be made available for the 1929 Moscow exhibition, perhaps due to inadequate transportation resources or other circumstantial impediments, or perhaps even because Malevich himself was unaware of its then current location. Thus, if the artist believed that this work, for example, ought to be part of his "retrospective," then the logical and only possible choice would have been to reproduce it.

A more complicated example might be found in a set of four paintings of women reapers, each of a single woman, bending at the hips to cut wheat sheaths. Two of the set were created in 1912, one at some months' remove from the next, and two in 1928-

[318] The earlier *Haymaking* may also possibly have been replicated by Malevich in a work, also entitled *Haymaking*, now in the Kawamura Memorial Museum of Modern Art in Sakura, Japan. Nakov declares this work to be from 1928-1929. However, I am not sufficiently familiar with this work's relatively non-standard (for Malevich's work) provenance which Nakov lists in his catalogue, nor have I seen it in person, and therefore I am not sufficiently confident either to agree or disagree with Nakov's attribution of the work to Malevich's hand. Since this work does not contribute much, stylistically speaking, to the overall picture of this set of works which the Tretiakov version of *Haymaking* does not already address, I have chosen to leave this painting out of my discussion of the replicas of this theme. Nakov, *Catalogue Raisonné* 113.

1929 [Figures 22 and 23]. One of the two from 1912 [Figure 25] was acquired by the state in 1919 and sent shortly thereafter to the art museum in Astrakhan, where it has remained to this day. The other 1912 canvas journeyed with Malevich to Warsaw and then to Berlin in 1927; it can be seen in the background of a photograph from the Warsaw exhibition [Figure 26]. However, this second 1912 version of *Woman Reaper* never surfaced after the Second World War.

Malevich's reproduction of two works which themselves represented a prototype and its subsequent copy significantly complicates our discussion of his replicating activities. The 1928-1929 creation of not just one, but two additional versions of this composition might serve as indication that the artist specifically intended to reproduce both paintings from 1912, as evidence perhaps of the evolution of his work. However, the two circa-1929 works constitute problematic reproductions of the 1912 canvases and provide convoluted evidence of any sort of evolution from one work to the next, because the two later copies—one ostensibly dated "1908," the other "1909"—differ from one another in particular ways that are notably unlike the differences between the two earlier works, henceforth to be termed the "Astrakhan" and "Berlin" versions. It appears that the Astrakhan version exhibited smoother contours and more solidly-circumscribed, semi-geometrical elements than the Berlin version, although it remains a challenge to ascertain the exact nature of the painting which travelled to Berlin from the photographs which exist of it. The style of the Berlin painting may have closely resembled that of *Floor Polishers* from 1911-1912 [Figure 27], given the dark outlines of the abnormally-large hands and feet that appear in both

works. However, not only do such distinctions not appear between the two 1928-1929 canvases, but neither of these later canvases was produced in a style reminiscent of either the Berlin work or *Floor Polishers*. By contrast, the limbs of the figure in the "1908" version [Figure 22, 1928-1929] appear to be elongated in proportion to the entire body and the head and hands diminished in size, particularly in comparison with the enlarged head and hands as well as the thick limbs of the "1909" work [Figure 23, 1928-1929]; this discrepancy, however, is not reflected between the Astrakhan and Berlin versions.

If we assume Malevich's falsified dates parallel the chronology of the production of the 1912 paintings, the "1908" version would correspond to the Berlin painting (the earliest of the set), the "1909" version to the Astrakhan one. However, if this were the case, the "1908" version lacks notable characteristics of the Berlin version, as detailed above, and furthermore much more closely replicates some aspects of the Astrakhan painting. For example, the skirt of the Berlin painting features curved and highlighted contours, with three distinctive sections reflecting light-colored areas, a strategy for the treatment of the skirt which can be found in almost exact replication in the "1909" work. On the other hand, the Astrakhan and "1908" versions present predominantly flat-planed skirts with gradations of yellow or red appearing only at their left-most edges.[319] Thus Malevich's reproduction of these images could not by any means be

[319] It is interesting to note that in organizing his catalogue, Nakov pairs the Berlin work with the "1908" version, both under the designation, "Woman Reaper I," while he pairs the Astrakhan and "1909" versions under the designation, "Woman Reaper II." (He gives no written justification for this choice, thus it is left to the reader/spectator to draw conclusions based on the pairing.) However, the line between the works and their appropriate pairing is not so clean. Nakov, *Catalogue Raisonné* 108-109.

characterized as precise. It does not appear that an intentionality of exactitude underlay the correspondence between the "originals" and their reproductions. Rather, the correspondence of the 1928-1929 reproductions to their 1912 prototypes manifests in a pastiche of elements drawn from earlier works and later considerations of the theme in what appears to be a relatively arbitrary manner.

One can find yet greater levels of complexity within Malevich's replicating practices in the correspondence of two circa-1929 canvases entitled *Head of a Peasant* [Figures 7 and 24] with earlier versions of this same motif. In this case, we encounter the question of what it means to copy a work when the "original" exists only in memory. The prototypes for these works included two compositions, one entitled simply *Orthodox*, the other, *Orthodox (Portrait of Ivan Kliun)* [Figure 28], which were both exhibited in 1912 and 1913, after which the latter work presumably disappeared (perhaps already by 1920, as Nakov has suggested).[320] The former, pictured at the top center of the photograph taken in 1927 in Warsaw [Figure 26], along with yet another version entitled *Orthodox (Portrait of Ivan Kliun)* (painted some time between 1912 and 1927) [Figure 29], both travelled to Berlin with Malevich, after which both of those versions disappeared. All three of these paintings, particularly the two entitled *Orthodox (Portrait of Ivan Kliun)*, seem to stylistically resemble Malevich's 1912-1913 *Woodcutter* [Figure 30], given the cylindrical and volumetric forms which occupy their backgrounds.

[320] Nakov, *Catalogue Raisonné* 119.

The composition of the 1912 painting entitled *Orthodox (Portrait of Ivan Kliun)* differs significantly from the similar painting created in 1912 (*Orthodox*) in that it involves a variety of straight and angled lines, as opposed to the latter, which is composed, aside from the straight lines of the nose, almost exclusively of arcs. On the other hand, the iteration of *Orthodox (Portrait of Ivan Kliun)* that was created sometime between 1912 and 1927 replicates the background and face of the 1912 *Orthodox (Portrait of Ivan Kliun)* almost exactly, perhaps even as if traced, with only the elimination of a few details in the very top right corner and what appear to be minor adjustments to the forms to account for the five-centimeter discrepancy in the size of the two canvases (80 x 80 in the 1912 version, 80 x 75 in the Berlin version). It is difficult to discern the differences in the color treatment of any of these works, since the only evidence that remains of their existence consists of black and white photographs. Nevertheless, between the 1912-1927 version and the 1912 *Orthodox (Portrait of Ivan Kliun)*, some gradations of gray tones appear different, notably upon the hair and in a few details in the background. Despite such possible differences, the strict correspondence of the linear composition of these two works, created possibly more than a decade apart, serves to illustrate that Malevich could and did create quite precise replicas of his works. Moreover, the first painting of the group, *Orthodox* from 1912, gives evidence that he also at times chose to manipulate and adapt a theme to pursue other formal inquiries.

The fundamental compositional structure and primary figure of the two *Orthodox (Portrait of Ivan Kliun)* paintings are duplicated almost exactly, with only minor

variations, in the two 1928-1929 *Head of a Peasant* canvases.[321] However, the backgrounds differ significantly between the 1928-1929 paintings and their earlier prototypes; the cylindrical, building-like forms of the earlier versions have been replaced by flat planes of color and pastoral scenes. Thus, do these works from 1928-1929 represent adaptations of a theme, or "copies" of their predecessors? It is possible that some of the discrepancies which arise between Malevich's copies and their prototypes resulted as the consequence of externally-determined circumstances, such as lack of access to the prototype while painting the replica, but it remains clear that some of the discrepancies remained entirely a matter of the artist's choice, and it is unclear to what extent these paintings represented variations on a theme and to what extent they represented an intention of duplication.

We might further complicate the multiplicity of the *Head of a Peasant* theme with the introduction of two additional works into the proverbial picture. The first of these, *Perfected Portrait of Ivan Kliun* (1913, Russian Museum ЖВ-1469) [Figure 31], represents a cubist fracturing of the 1912 *Orthodox (Portrait of Ivan Kliun)* composition; the *Perfected Portrait* survived whatever calamity occurred to the previous year's prototype and was acquired by the Russian Museum in 1926, in whose collection it remains today. In this 1913 cubist rendition, we first encounter the splitting of the beard form into two distinct planes, a treatment which would appear again upon the

[321] Nakov suggests that the change in the titling from the earlier to the later works may have been made for political reasons; "Orthodox" might have been too sensitive a term given the contemporaneous persecution of the Church. Nakov, *Painting the Absolute* vol. 3: 267. In Russian, the discrepancy between the terms "Orthodox" and "Peasant" would not have been nearly as substantial as it appears in English translation, given the similarity between the words for "peasant," *krest'yanin*, and "Christian," *khristianin*.

1928-1929 versions. The second work which complicates the picture is a 1929 paper and pencil sketch, entitled *Portrait of a Builder* (Tretiakov Gallery inv. R-10470) [Figure 32] that replicates the 1913 cubist image; the Tretiakov acquired this sketch on the occurrence of the 1929 exhibition. Thus to lay this set of works out in an orderly fashion, when dealing with the *Head of a Peasant* motif, the approximate chronology proceeds as follows: the 1912 *Orthodox* composed of arc forms, the 1912 volumetric *Orthodox (Portrait of Ivan Kliun)*, the 1913 cubist *Perfected Portrait*, the *Orthodox (Portrait of Ivan Kliun)* replica from sometime between 1912 and 1927, the two 1928-1929 versions of *Head of a Peasant* (on the back of one of which the date of 1910 is clearly legible), and the 1929 *Portrait of a Builder* sketch.

Nakov suggests that the 1929 sketch was created at Fedorov-Davydov's request, although it remains unclear as to why this request might have been made, since the 1913 version was one of the few truly early-career works displayed in the "retrospective."[322] The primary compositional differences between the drawing and the 1913 rendition are minimal and consist primarily of a few additional details – a fence and some plants – in the background space. Nevertheless, the fact that Malevich created this graphic replica in 1929 serves as further indication of his ability to produce relatively exact copies, when inclined or able to do so.

This set of works reveals the complex ways in which Malevich approached the process of reiteration. As Malevich painted reproductions of his earlier works in 1928 and 1929, he generally conducted his task with a looser attachment to his prototypes

[322] Nakov, *Catalogue Raisonné* 145.

than he exhibited in many of the replicas he had previously made, such as the (1912-1927) version of *Orthodox (Portrait of Ivan Kliun)* which he left in Berlin. It is possible that the socio-political circumstances of the moment may have motivated some of the alterations which he made in the versions from 1928-1929. But it is also possible, even likely, that repainting earlier works caused him to reconsider the formal problems explored in his past work. When approached with fresh eyes and the perspective provided by the experience and maturity gained over the intervening years, these formal problems led him down a path which increasingly diverged from the one he had taken so many years prior.

Yet these versions from 1928-1929, despite their apparently intentional divergences from previous versions, nevertheless seem to assume the roles of the earlier works which they reiterate. And more specifically, the two versions of *Head of a Peasant* seem to function as replacements for the 1912 *Orthodox* and 1912/1912-1927 *Orthodox (Portrait of Ivan Kliun)* paintings, much in the same way as the replicas of the two versions of *Woman Reaper* functioned. The *Head of a Peasant* compositions clearly were not intended to serve as replacements for the 1913 cubist work, because this work was chosen to be exhibited alongside the 1928-1929 versions. Of the nine paintings displayed at the 1929 exhibition which had not been created in the previous eighteen months, three were in Malevich's cubist or alogical (proto-cubist) styles. Although the artist contributed two new suprematist canvases (including the one reproduced in Figure 21) to the exhibition to supplement two 1916 suprematist compositions loaned from the Russian Museum, he contributed no new works in the alogical or cubist

styles.[323] On the other hand, he contributed a host of paintings which purportedly dated prior to his alogical period (circa 1929), but not a single one of them was accurately dated – they were all 1928-1929 creations. Because of this and because many, but not all, of the prototype paintings from prior to the alogical period were missing or otherwise inaccessible, we might conclude that the 1928-1929 reproductions of works from approximately 1912 served in the 1929 exhibition as replacements for their earlier, missing models.

When confronted with the extent of Malevich's "copied" works, the idea of a pure, original work is dismantled – for which one of the multiple versions of *Woman Reaper* or *Orthodox/Head of a Peasant* do we consider first or original? Do we take them according to Nakov's or the Russian Museum's dates, or Malevich's inaccurate ones? With duplication, adaptation, and reconsideration, each painting in these sets becomes a Derridean "supplement" to the others, stepping before or after or in tandem with another version, adding to the others while simultaneously replacing them. Derrida writes:

> The supplement adds itself, it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the *fullest measure* of presence. It cumulates and accumulates presence. … But the supplement supplements. It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself *in-the-place-of*; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void. If it represents and makes an image, it is by the anterior default of a presence. Compensatory [*suppléant*] and vicarious, the supplement is an adjunct, a subaltern instance which *takes-the-place* [*tient-lieu*].[324]

[323] The two suprematist canvases created in 1928-1929 represent new directions for the style in terms of color choices, but they generally replicate approaches to geometric configurations of earlier suprematist compositions. For a more thorough analysis of these two works, see Chlenova 261-262.
[324] Derrida 144-145.

The 1928-1929 versions of *Woman Reaper* or *Head of a Peasant* serve to enrich the meaning and further the persistence of their prototypes. They are a surplus of their idea, for their idea has already been created – at least twice; their existence always remains *in addition* and causes their prototypes to also acquire the attributes of being adjuncts. The 1928-1929 works fill the void created by the absence of their prototypes. They compensate for the lack of these works by taking their place.

To what extent did this supplementation disrupt modernist notions of originality and to what extent did it repress its own supplementary nature? To answer this question, we should consider once again Malevich's infamous *Black Square* – or perhaps I should say, *Black Squares*, for the artist painted four versions of this canvas, one each in 1915, 1923 or 1924, 1929, and 1930 or 1932, each of slightly different sizes and each in anticipation of different exhibitions.[325] Which version was actually exhibited in the 1929 Tretiakov show is disputed, however. Nakov contends in his *Catalogue Raisonné* that it was the 1929 version.[326] However, Vakar writes that,

> According to a popular legend at the Tretiakov Gallery, Malevich painted [this version] … at the express request of Alexei Fedorov-Davydov. Although this is the date officially listed in the Tretiakov Gallery inventory book – without any basis – the painting was not immediately acquired by the museum. It only entered the Tretiakov Gallery … in 1934.[327]

Vakar implies here that the fact that the work was not immediately acquired by the museum in 1929 might serve as indication that the work may not have been painted in

[325] These dates are based upon what can best be determined from historical documentation; they were not necessarily inscribed with these dates by the artist.
[326] Nakov, *Catalogue Raisonné* 208.
[327] Vakar, "The Kazimir Malevich Exhibition," Petrova, ed., *The Russian Avant-Garde: Representation and Interpretation* 123.

1929 at all, but perhaps later. Moreover, the veracity of the Tretiakov legend is disputed by Dmitry Sarabianov, who states that,

> Malevich was skeptical about the possibility of repeating his pictures. Alexei Fedorov-Davydov once retold the author a conversation that he had had with Malevich in the late 1920s. Fedorov-Davydov … had referred to the bad condition of *Black Square* and suggested that the artist make a repetition of the painting. Malevich categorically refused, saying that such a work could not be repeated.[328]

If this were the case, however, then the more relevant question might be why we have so many copies of Malevich's paintings in his own hand.

For its part, the Russian Museum contends that the version of *Black Square* which was exhibited in 1929 was the 1923-1924 version, side by side with the 1923-1924 versions of *Black Circle* and *Black Cross*. Malevich is not known to have copied *Black Circle* and *Black Cross* in 1929 as well, so it would seem that if these works were included in the 1929 exhibition, as the object list purports that they were, it would have been as the 1923-1924 versions from the collection of the Russian Museum. However, Nakov does not include the 1929 exhibition in the history of either the 1923-1924 or the 1915 versions of *Black Circle* and *Black Cross*, and it is challenging to reconcile such an omission given that he includes, in the comprehensive list of exhibitions at the end of his *Catalogue Raisonné*, the titles of both in the record of works exhibited in the 1929 show.[329] If *Black Circle* and *Black Cross* were in fact exhibited in 1929, it seems likely that they were the 1923-1924 versions. It might seem unlikely and surprising that the

[328] D. Sarabianov and A. Shatskikh, *Kazimir Malevich. Zhivopis'. Teoriya* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1993) 176. Translated in Vakar, "The Kazimir Malevich Exhibition," Petrova, ed., *The Russian Avant-Garde: Representation and Interpretation* 123.
[329] Nakov, *Catalogue Raisonné* 437-438.

1923-1924 *Black Square* would thus not have accompanied the set from the Russian Museum in Leningrad (and the deed of temporary transfer to the Tretiakov indicates that it did),[330] if not for the fact that the Tretiakov in Moscow also had the 1915 version of *Black Square* transferred into its permanent possession in 1929, upon the recent closure of the Moscow-based state institution which had previously held it.

The only scheme of events which I can imagine having produced the need for the 1929 replica of *Black Square* proceeds thusly: If it had been determined that there was only a need for the loan of the *Black Circle* and *Black Cross* paintings from the Russian Museum, because a version of *Black Square* already existed in state possession in Moscow (the 1915 versions of *Black Circle* and *Black Cross* remained in private hands and for whatever reason presumably were unavailable for the exhibition), but once acquired, this version of *Black Square* was deemed to be unfit for exhibition, then a logical course of action may have been to create and display a newly-made replica. However, if this had been the case, why would *Black Square* have been listed upon the deed of temporary transfer? Thus it remains unexplained why a new version of *Black Square* was created in 1929 (if it was created in that year at all) and which version(s) actually hung upon the walls in the exhibition itself—although it seems that if more than one version had been mounted in the exhibition, such an occurrence would have been of notable import. One thing is abundantly clear, however: In 1929, Malevich and the Tretiakov Gallery were faced with a literal surplus of *Black Square* iterations.

[330] *Kazimir Malevich in the Russian Museum*, Document 4, 398-399.

Nevertheless, it seems highly likely none of the versions were ever exhibited together with another.[331] By the logic of both the artist and curator, to display more than one copy of *Black Square* would have been at best redundant, according to the logic of originality, and at worst an acknowledgement of the discourse of the copy. The later copies of *Black Square*, all similarly executed by the hand of the master himself, constituted replacements by this logic, rather than additions, accumulations, or supplements. From this perspective, works such as *Head of a Peasant,* which repeated (to varying degrees) the images of earlier works, did not augment the meaning of their prototypes. Rather, they purportedly retained and stood in for the earlier versions.

However, it is precisely because the three later reproductions of *Black Square* were copies, reiterated at later dates, that they could not simply possess meaning identical to the earliest iteration, nor could the earliest iteration retain its previous meaning once it had been replicated. The temporal distance between the creations of each of the versions facilitated their potential to augment the first (and subsequent) versions, thereby marking the first iteration as *not* integral, *not* self-contained, *not* self-sufficient, but rather multiple, dependent, and enhanced. In referring back to the 1915 version of *Black Square* (whose dimensions the 1929 version comes closest of all the supplementary versions to approximating), the 1929 version pointed not to a pure, original entity, a document of "pure sensation." Instead, it referred to a document which itself constituted a supplement to those "untraceable" and "anonymous"

[331] And Nakov's *Catalogue Raisonné* entries for these objects (p. 205-208) reflect such a characterization, if perhaps to a fault.

documents which it itself cited. Moreover, the 1929 version (along with the other versions as well), simply by duplicating the revolutionary and provocative gesture of a black square upon a white canvas, carried a reference to the historical specificity of the 1915 work: its display at the 0,10 exhibition,[332] the controversy this display aroused,[333] and the deteriorated condition it had acquired over the course of fourteen years of existence, thus leading, perhaps, to the impetus to create a replacement.

Nevertheless, Malevich does not speak of his replicating activities with respect to the 1929 exhibition in his extant writings. The closest we might come to such a reference appears in a letter from May of 1929, in which he wrote to his wife, "I sit at the Tretiakov Gallery from ten in the morning to four in the afternoon, restoring everything. It has proven to be much harder and longer than expected."[334] Vakar concludes that such "restoration" activities must have pertained, at least in part, to the 1915 version of *Black Square* which the Tretiakov had recently acquired, noting that very early restoration efforts had been documented in the object's record at the museum, but she comments, "The length of time required, however, is difficult to explain. There are clearly other circumstances at play here."[335] What these "other circumstances" may have involved remains a mystery. Could it be that Malevich

[332] As Chlenova asserts, "the broader historical and the specifically exhibitionary context is built into most artworks already at their conception as anticipated reactions and planned presentation. The works' intended meaning, in its turn, is inevitably modified, or should we say distorted, by their initial public reception and critical interpretations." Chlenova 223.
[333] See Jane A. Sharp, "The Critical Reception of the 0,10 Exhibition: Malevich and Benua," *The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915-1932* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1992) 38-52.
[334] *Malevich o sebe*, vol. I, 260-261. Translated in Vakar, "The Kazimir Malevich Exhibition," Petrova, ed., *The Russian Avant-Garde: Representation and Interpretation* 123.
[335] Vakar, "The Kazimir Malevich Exhibition," Petrova, ed., *The Russian Avant-Garde: Representation and Interpretation* 123.

considered his reproductions to be “restorations”? Such a presumption seems a bit of a stretch and also somewhat incongruous considering that presumably he must have created most of his reproduced works on his own time and not during the week spent working at the Tretiakov in May 1929.

Whatever the case, it appears that the artist did not attach any particular relevance or importance to his production of copies of his own works; he may have regarded the production of replacements for earlier works as an unfortunate task necessitated by the absence of the prototypes. This task was not worth mentioning, nor, apparently, was the fact that he clearly and almost certainly intentionally altered significant aspects of the prototypes in their replicas. Thus it can likely be concluded that although Malevich engaged in substantial duplicative activities, he did so while repressing their supplementary nature and remaining firmly entrenched within the discourse of originality of his modernist origins. Though his activities might prove to be theoretically fruitful when examined within the discourse of the copy, during a later era which embraces duplicates and replicas – and perhaps represses instead the discourse of originality – such was certainly not the case either for Malevich’s era nor for the artist himself.

It remains unclear if and to what extent contemporary viewers might have understood or cared that these works represented copies; there remains little

documentation of any such reception.[336] Nevertheless, if the copies were perceived as such, it also remains unclear as to what *sort* of copies the works may have been understood as. The absence from the 1929 exhibition of any of the prototypes for which these works served as replacements allowed for a wide ambiguity of conclusions regarding the relationship of the copies to their predecessors, requiring an observer who was aware of their duplicate or replacement status to make certain assumptions, likely none of them fully correct, about the nature of those earlier works.

Highly informed viewers, particularly fellow artists and former followers of the avant-garde who had been familiar with Malevich's work in his earlier days might have considered the paintings to represent "original" works regardless of any dates accompanying them. Some of these paintings diverge from the works that they resemble significantly enough that one might construe them as constituting fundamentally new works, variations on a theme with their own distinct meanings and their own distinct approaches to their own distinct problems. An imagined comparison between the missing older works and their newer counterparts might have taken the shape of the comparison between the *Perfected Portrait of Ivan Kliun* and *Head of a Peasant* compositions exhibited together in the "retrospective." From such a perspective, the conventional value of "originality" and the unique hand of the painter could be preserved. Newer versions could serve as commentary upon earlier works, expanding their meaning and significance in new ways without being duplicative.

[336] Chlenova notes that Boris Ender, a student of Malevich's who was working at the Tretiakov Gallery under Fedorov-Davydov in 1929 may have been the only person to have suspected the works' antedated and copied status. Chlenova 255-256, footnote 65. See also *Malevich o sebe* vol. 2: 273.

Although such an approach would not have reflected the same orientation towards originality that Malevich had in mind when he foisted his *Black Square* upon the world, it would have resembled the sort of originality which was embodied in much of his pre-suprematist work, whose ties to symbolist, futurist, and cubist works of other artists he could not have denied with any credibility.

However, the particularly interesting and somewhat problematic approach – and, I presume the likely approach of almost any of the 1929 exhibition's viewers who were aware that the works constituted replicas – would have been to assume that the copies existed within proverbial quotation marks. If his viewers did understand that the works constituted more recent recreations of earlier works, they would not have had reason to suspect that the paintings in the exhibition represented anything other than documentary renderings of their unavailable prototypes.[337] Such a viewer likely would have relied upon a socially engrained trust in the institution of the museum, which would truthfully provide a documentary view of history, albeit from an expectedly Marxist point of view. But such a viewer would not have anticipated that the museum would pass off contemporary work as pre-Revolutionary, for to exhibit what would have been such extremely controversial contemporary work would hardly have seemed in the museum's best interests.

On the other hand, if these paintings were presumed to be merely documentary of their prototypes, Malevich's role would have been not that of an artist, but that of a

[337] I base this presumption in part upon the legacy of artistic copying within the Russian tradition, particularly within the tradition of icon duplication, whereby replicas were presumed to be faithful and accurate copies of their prototypes.

copyist, thus much less important – with the implication of being much less skillful as well – within the hierarchy of artistic tasks that had been passed down from pre-Soviet institutions of art education and production, subsequently embraced by the Soviet system as well. Malevich's ability to alter the trajectory of his career would prove to be more effective if the works created in order to manipulate it were perceived, if not ideally as retrospective originals themselves, then as reliable copies. Furthermore, the presence in the exhibition of replicas of perhaps recognizable earlier works lent credence to the "retrospective" status of the many non-replacement paintings in the exhibition. If *Head of a Peasant* and *Haymaking* represented relatively accurate evidence of Malevich's early career, then perhaps it might be more readily perceived that *Girls in a Field* or *Women Reapers* did as well.

While Malevich's production of supplements – in the sense of both additions and replacements – to many of his missing and otherwise absent works from his pre-suprematist career constitutes a theoretically fruitful aspect of his iterative practice, we might extend an analysis of this practice to yet additional works which do not, to our knowledge, bear resemblance to works he created earlier in his career. Even though the nine works listed at the beginning of this chapter may not constitute a complete list of works that were newly-created for the 1929 exhibition, it is highly unlikely that there remain thirty-one missing or unknown other early works with direct correspondences to the remaining newly-created paintings from the 1929 exhibition. In other words, some

of these paintings represent new work without explicitly traceable citations of at least one degree within Malevich's own œuvre. Yet such "new" work was hardly free from the processes of replication and reiteration. All of these works represent the engagement of iterative practices facilitated by communicative constructs known as conventions.

Conventions must be relied upon – or, from the opposite perspective, cannot be avoided – in the process of pursuing any iterative practice. A "convention," in semiotic terms, is a culturally agreed-upon way for a particular meaning to attach itself to a sign; in Bal's and Bryson's words, it "is the ground on which interpretation of a symbol comes about."[338] Such agreements are inherently conditional based upon the changing needs of the interpretive community which employs the convention.[339] A convention becomes itself through repetition; it is "a series of recipes," to use Krauss' phrase, that point in a particular way to a specific meaning which can be recognized in other texts which employ similar conventions.[340] These conventional connections between meanings and signs are inherent to imagistic representation and to multiple, repeated, and repeatable acts of cognition. Bal and Bryson write that, "insofar as works of art are works of the sign, their structure is not in fact singular but iterative,"[341] and thus the convention, which impermanently holds a meaning together to a sign, remains iterative as well.

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[338] Bal and Bryson 191.

[339] The term "interpretive community" is borrowed from Stanley Fish, "Interpretive Communities," *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, 2nd ed., ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004) 219.

[340] Krauss 60.

[341] Bal and Bryson 179.

Conventions, however, can remain completely transparent to the viewer. (In fact, as Bal and Bryson note, "Much of art-historical work aims at denaturalizing these conventions, and to bring forth insight into the historical changeability of conventions."[342]) For example, to contemporary viewers, the codes of conventionality which proto-socialist realism employed would have remained invisible, particularly because a salient aspect of the code of realism is the presumption of verisimilitude. Many successful proto-socialist realist paintings and, even more so, socialist realist ones attempted to produce in their viewers the subtle and comfortable impression of already having seen a similar image. These works accomplished such a feat not by copying the exact forms or elements of other compositions, which would have contradicted the socialist realist discourse of originality, but by adhering to certain "rules" which governed the socialist realist genre and which supplied a theoretical and stylistic model to which socialist realist art would conform.

However, while the employment of a convention entails the reproduction of a form which is already recognizable to viewers, this does not necessarily occur in ways that are themselves familiar. To viewers of Malevich's 1929 exhibition, the paintings would have appeared to utilize, in contrast to the comfortable conventions of realist paintings in the "Young Art Workers of the City of Leningrad" show held concurrently at the Tretiakov, highly unfamiliar and perhaps uncomfortable manipulations of recognizable conventions. These works operated within codes which were employed with little interest in eliciting an impression of a direct correspondence to what their

[342] Bal and Bryson 191.

viewers perceived as reality, or how to accurately represent it, yet which nevertheless remained, somewhat absurdly, recognizable. The characters in Malevich's circa-1929 paintings, particularly those which did not fall into the category of works which emulated the styles of impressionist and other Western European modernists, but depicted more or less geometricized figures, were inherently and intentionally stereotypical. They represented not individual, notable figures or faces, nor even "single volunteer[s] for the greater masses," but the idea of *figure* or *face* as such.[343] They provided abstracted versions of other versions – conventionalized representations of conventionally-accepted representations. These paintings presented images which pressed the notion of the extent to which the conventional representation could be further conventionalized or simplified, breaking forms down to the bare basics of what constituted the visual representation of, for example, a human face.

Malevich wrote in his 1927 manuscript, "Suprematism,"

> In this eternal world theatre we never see the true face of man, for whoever you ask who he is, he will answer: I am an artist, acting in a particular theatre of perceptions … Suprematist philosophy … doubts whether this image exists at all in reality, man's face which one should secretly hide. Not a single work representing the face represents the man, it represents only a mask through which flows a certain ugly sensation … New Art, as well as Suprematism, has excluded man's face,

[343] Although Crone and Moos explain this phenomenon in terms of how the people of Malevich's images "are completely de-individualized, functioning as single volunteers for the greater masses," it seems to me that this is not entirely accurate; synecdoche is not necessarily equivalent to conventionalism. Such a statement may have been valid for the socialist realist context, where the individual depicted was intended to stand for the many, but the individual was what was depicted. In Malevich's case, no individual is depicted, no specific single volunteer stands in, synecdochally shedding his or her individuality. The de-individualization in Malevich's paintings is accomplished via conventionalization, paring symbolic form down to a basic significatory element. The part does not stand for the whole in Malevich's paintings; instead, the sign can refer to a multiplicity of referents which constitute the whole. Crone and Moos 175.

> just as the Chinese have excluded the objective-figurative alphabet. They have established a different set of signs for transmitting various sensations, for their sensation is exclusively pure. Thus a sign expressing a certain sensation is not the image of the sensation. The button that lets through current is not the image of current. A picture is not the actual representation, for there is no such face.[344]

In this selection we see how Malevich understood traditional figurative art (and societal interactions in general) as participating "in a particular theatre of perceptions" and representing only "masks"; he presumed that by establishing an alphabet of signs "for transmitting various sensations," those sensations might exist beyond the walls of the "theatre" and its "masks," and emerge from the process of transmission "pure" and untainted by the sign or the process. (As such, Malevich's approach to semiotics seems to be somewhat akin to J.L. Austin's theories regarding the "parasitic … etiolations" of language wherein performative acts, when conducted upon a stage, remain, "in a peculiar way hollow or void." This was in contrast to what Austin considered "ordinary circumstances." It was Derrida and, later, Judith Butler who made a point to illustrate that speech acts upon a stage in fact do not differ significantly in their functions from speech acts under any other circumstances.)[345] Malevich conceives of the suprematist sign as a sort of switch which allows "pure sensation" to flow like electricity to its perceiver. But he is unable to take the next logical step in discerning that even an alphabet of signs, simplified to the point that "there is no such face," nevertheless

[344] Malevich, "Suprematism," *The Artist, Infinity, Suprematism* 151-152.

[345] J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962) 22. For a comprehensive overview of this subject, see James Loxley, *Performativity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007). Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory," Henry Bial, ed., *The Performance Studies Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004) 154-166. Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Introduction to *Performativity and Performance,*" *The Performance Studies Reader* 167-174. D. Soyini Madison and Judith Hamera, "Performance Studies at the Intersections," *The Sage Handbook of Performance Studies* (Thousand Oaks, London, and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006) xi-xxv.

constitutes a simplification of *something*, and it is in the process of simplifying that what he is reducing to a state of alphabetic, as opposed to mimetic, signification are the conventions of pictorial depiction.

An example of Malevich's simplified reproduction of conventional, recognizable forms might appear in a sketch which Malevich produced around 1930 or 1931, *Black Face and Orthodox Cross* (Museum Ludwig, Cologne, inv. Dep. Slg. L. 1979/33) [Figure 33]. This drawing depicts an ovular form with a pointed tip at its bottom and a three-barred Russian Orthodox cross,[346] each form enclosed in its own quadrilateral frame (Yve-Alain Bois has noted that within Malevich's drawings, it is "as if the inscription of a limit was the first mark of 'pictoriality'").[347] This drawing would not necessarily be remarkable, if not for the fact that one can readily interpret it as replicating the conventional forms of one of the oldest and most venerated icons in Russia. This twelfth-century, double-sided icon depicts on one side the Image Not Made By Human Hands (the image of Christ's face, according to legend, as imprinted upon cloth) and on the reverse the Veneration of the Cross. Similar to Malevich's drawing, the form of Christ's head on this icon culminates in a (albeit divided) point at its bottom in the form of a beard; the weight and proportions of the beams of the cross on the icon's reverse likewise resemble Malevich's drawing (albeit in slightly different positions and lengths). The juxtaposition of these two images in Malevich's drawing is distinctly reminiscent of modern printed photographic reproductions of the ancient icon, with the image of one

[346] The Russian Orthodox cross is always depicted with three bars – one for the titulum, the standard center bar for the hands, and a lower one for the feet.
[347] Bois, "Malevitch, le carré, le degré zero" 44.

side of the icon placed on the page directly next to its reverse, which is a visual pairing that could only ever occur in reproduction.

With this sketch, we might observe how Malevich took an already conventionalized image and further enhanced its conventionality by simplifying its forms to the point that they almost slip from the ties of the convention itself. This occurs to the extent that to say that the drawing replicates the icon's images is to make a largely conjectural statement based more upon the conventional knowledge of the viewer than upon the inscrutable intentions of the artist. The abstraction to which these two twelfth-century images may have been treated results in a drawing which almost, but not quite, loses its connection to that which it replicates. Indeed, the simplification of the forms, particularly that of the pointed oval, renders them primarily representations of the iconic forms themselves, rather than of anything which the iconic forms themselves might represent.

Because the existence of a convention is predicated upon repetition, perception of a convention becomes habitual and automatic. In this regard, Shklovsky proposes that:

> Such habituation explains the principles by which, in ordinary speech, we leave phrases unfinished and words half expressed. In this process ideally realized in algebra, things are replaced by symbols. … By this 'algebraic' method of thought we apprehend objects only as shapes with imprecise extensions; we do not see them in their entirety but rather recognize them by their main characteristics. We see the object as

> though it were enveloped in a sack. We know what it is by its configuration, but we see only its silhouette.[348]

Malevich's drawing represents exactly such "shapes with imprecise extensions," rather than objects. And a viewer can easily recognize, for example in Malevich's *Head of a Peasant*, that the two eyes and nose represent features of a face based simply upon their configuration and a furrowed brow, lines of sweat, individual strands of hair, or eyelashes are entirely unnecessary to reach such a conclusion. In Shklovsky's words, "The object perceived thus … fades and does not leave even a first impression; ultimately even the essence of what it was is forgotten. … The process of 'algebrization,' the over-automatization of an object, permits the greatest economy of perceptive effort."[349] By simplifying the human form into basic constituent elements, Malevich has removed for his viewers all but the most automatic of "perceptive efforts" in order to read the figurative aspects of his works. He has employed, even taken advantage of, Shklovsky's "algebrization" to set down simple, easily intelligible formulas for the figures in his painting. Perhaps Malevich's conventionalized figures capitalize upon conventionalization in order to render the figure imperceptible, so that the painterly forms, of which the figure is composed, can become the dominant aspect of what is perceived. By means of the habitual perception of the image's conventional figuration, this figuration can readily be forgotten and one can proceed to apply oneself to the perception of the abstract, non-objective forms of paint itself.

[348] Shklovsky 11.
[349] Ibid. 11-12.

The employment of conventional forms in Malevich's circa-1929 figural compositions might also operate in a manner so as to reinscribe within figural confines another suprematist aim: to disrupt and suspend the distinction of form from ground. The attempt at such a feat, according to Bois, appears most efficiently in the "inaugural gesture" of suprematism – *Black Square*. *Black Square* forces an irreconcilable ambiguity as to the identity of the white area upon the canvas; this area could constitute a ground upon which the black square is positioned, or it could represent the frame of a ground, in which case the black square would constitute the ground. Attempts at disrupting conventions of form and ground appear elsewhere in suprematist works; for example, the suprematist composition known as "Yellow plane in dissolution" [Figure 20] depicts a four-sided figure whose fourth side, as opposed to being delineated like its counterparts from the white ground, dissolves into it. Most of all, Malevich's series of white-on-white suprematist compositions explicitly challenge the form-ground dichotomy, posing the question of, as Bois phrases it, "what is the minimum of difference."[350] In the white-on-white works, form assumes the same tone as ground, yet remains subtly distinguished from it by means of the application of paint and, in some cases, the failure of the paint to completely obscure the preparatory lines drawn upon the canvas.

The closest Malevich might have come to abolishing the distinction between form and ground in his circa-1929 paintings, in a manner similar to the strategies of suprematism, might be found in the painting, *Female Figure* (Russian Museum, Ж-9493)

[350] Bois, "Malevitch, le carré, le degré zero" 31, 43, 49.

[Figure 34]. In this work, a single black- and green-colored figure dominates the center of the painting and is flanked by two similarly-constructed figures (barely discernible in reproduction) whose forms are legible by virtue more so of the direction of the brushstrokes than of any coloristic difference from the white area that surrounds them. However, most of Malevich's later figural paintings explicitly depict quite precise and defined forms set upon backgrounds. In many cases, these are not just monochrome grounds (although some of them are), but grounds with features that employ pictorial codes of landscape depiction – codes by which, for example, one can readily identify a mid-composition horizontal division, particularly one with shades of blue above it, as a horizon line. Thus it would seem that in these works, the difference between figure and ground remains solidly entrenched.

However, I would propose that many of the circa-1929 paintings, particularly of the non-"impressionist" variety, attempt the dissolution of the division between form and ground not in spite of given pictorial codes, but rather because of them – *through* the employment of common pictorial conventions within the Russian and, more broadly, Western traditions. In particular, they might operate by employing stylistic conventions of the depiction of objects and figures which traditionally are not the primary focus of a work of art, but which function as atmospheric, background material.

Boris Uspensky, in his *A Poetics of Composition*, considers the distinction between characters in the "foreground narrative" versus those in the background, and he argues that one can consider the pictorial background, including its figures, as a

"representation within a representation." He proposes that, "what takes place here is an enhancement of the semiotic quality of the representation: the description is not a sign of represented reality, as it is in the case of the central figures, but a sign of a sign of this reality. It is a reinforcement of the conventionality of the description." Uspensky defines conventionality "in terms of the sign as a reference to the expression, rather than to the content." Thus the emphasis of the convention, in his view, is not to be found in its tying of the sign to its meaning within a given interpretive community, but rather in the nature of the sign as a sign, *per se*. Certain signs can therefore in his view be more conventional than others, for certain signs can emphasize more forcefully their status as a sign of a certain content and categorically not as equivalent to the content itself. From his perspective, greater conventionality can be measured by degrees and "the degree of conventionality is determined by the order of the components in the sequence: the sign of a sign of a sign … and so forth."[351]

Uspensky applies his theory of conventionality to the particular case of the medieval Russian icon, remarking upon how the "functionally less important parts" are depicted with a "characteristic ornamentalism" which is lacking from what presumably are the functionally more important parts. He goes so far as to deem certain elements of iconic background depiction as "purely conventional ornaments," presumably with the implication that the heightened abstraction and geometrization of such atmospheric elements as mountains or hills (termed "icon hillocks") has rendered them no longer

[351] Uspensky, *A Poetics of Composition* 162-163. While such an approach might seem to posit the problematic possibility that there could exist a sign with a single – or no – degree of conventionality, Uspensky manages to avoid such a trap.

significatory of actual mountains or hills, but rather of the iconic representation of such forms.[352]

Uspensky equally could have directed his analysis to the "functionally less important" bold geometric forms found upon vestments in icons, or to background figures in nineteenth-century realist painting. Vestment ornamentation, for example, denoted the ecclesiastical, as opposed to monastic, warrior, or angelic, identity of iconic figures, and its bold monochrome shapes upon a white background bear little resemblance to the decoration of contemporaneous vestments, which were covered in intricate embroidery and a multitude of different thread colors. (By contrast, the image of Christ's face in the *Image Not Made By Human Hands*, the functionally *most* important part of all iconic depiction, represents a purportedly indexical trace of an actual face.) The cross forms found upon iconic vestments signify the identity of the object upon which they appear much more so than they signify any sort of tangible cloth.

In application of Uspensky's theories, we might also observe heightened conventionality in background figures in nineteenth-century realist painting, such as the two figures standing upon the barge in Ilya Repin's *Barge Haulers on the Volga* (1870-1873, Russian Museum) [Figure 35], that quintessential Wanderers work which Soviet critics so loved to cite as the exemplification of what was expected of socialist realist painting. These two figures, particularly the red-shirted one to the right, are depicted with none of the specificity of the principle foreground figures; their bodies are defined

[352] Ibid. 163.

primarily by two separated forms denoting legs beneath the form of a long Russian peasant-style tunic, with a dark-colored dot above to designate a head. They are recognizable as persons not so much because they depict actual persons, but rather because they depict the shape of forms which pictorial conventions have taught viewers represent the human figure.

If Malevich's circa-1929 figures stylistically resemble anything from the cumulative history of Russian painting, it might be figures from the backgrounds of such realist and iconic works, certainly much more so than from their foregrounds. Inasmuch as Malevich's cruciform suprematist compositions recall the geometric forms of iconic vestment decorations, his faceless post-suprematist peasants, such as in *Peasants* (1928-1929, Russian Museum Ж-9480) [Figure 6], could serve as stand-ins (albeit without arms) for Repin's barge-riders. Even in Brodsky's *At the Coffin of the Leader* [Figure 16], a light-colored oval form surrounded by a roughly arched darker form and containing two horizontally-aligned dots above a horizontal daub of paint can signify a face, if it is in the background (to the left of Lenin's wife). Uspensky describes such background figures as "secondary" elements "who play the role of 'extras'." They participate in the work of art as part of the environment and "do not 'really' exist in the narrative which forms the foreground." He continues, "In the most characteristic of these cases, … [they] are described not as people but as puppets."[353] It is hardly coincidental that scholars have drawn connections between Malevich's 1913 drawings for costume designs for the transrational opera, *Victory Over the Sun* and his circa-1929

[353] Ibid. 159, 162.

figures.[354] These figures all operate within certain schematic conventions for the depiction of the human body, creating typified "puppets" which do not inhabit any sort of narrative foreground.

In Malevich's circa-1929 work, there are no brushstrokes indicating individual hairs of the beard, or delicate shading along fleshly folds beneath tired eyes, as we find in the *Image Not Made by Human Hands* or on the worn-out faces of the *Barge Haulers*. Instead, in this and many other of Malevich's circa-1929 works, we find bodies and faces alike composed of flat, unelaborated planes of vibrant colors, such as one might find in iconic vestment ornamentation, or composing the planes of a building in the background of an icon. In much of Malevich's circa-1929 figurative work, the conventional background character becomes the only possible character, the only option for a figure. Malevich's figures represent the theatrical "extra" brought to the fore, resulting in a disruption of the dichotomy of foreground and background and moreover of form and ground.

Uspensky posits that the background of an artistic text functions in much the same way as its frame:

> The background and frame belong to the periphery of the artistic text. ... The background of the representation generally serves the same function as the foreground framing. Both are borders of the representation. Both background and foreground frame are in opposition to what takes place in the center of the representation.[355]

[354] Bowlt, "Body Beautiful." Idem., "The Peasant Motif." Petrova, "Malevich's Works in the Russian Museum and their New Datings," *Kazimir Malevich in the Russian Museum* 13.
[355] Uspensky, *A Poetics of Composition* 165.

If the conventionality of Malevich's circa-1929 works represents a heightening of the degree of conventionality coming from the tradition of Russian painting so much so that in effect Malevich's works become works of the background alone, we are left with a composition that has no focus. The question of how one understands and interprets a work that does not posit a central (more specified, less conventionalized) narrative in contrast to a "stationary" background, or which consists solely of periphery, remains principal to the suprematist project, as embodied in the form of the *Black Square*. It is clear that Malevich never abandoned this project, nor his "living, royal infant": In the paintings he created after his 1929 exhibition, Malevich often placed a small inscription of the black square, surrounded by a simple line frame – or sometimes constituted by a simple line frame, when placed upon a black background – as his signature, or in accompaniment to his signature. Although he returned to figuration in 1928, he does not seem to have done so as a deliberate rejection of the issues which had occupied his thinking for so many years prior.

While Malevich may have placed in his foregrounds figures which stylistically resemble the "static," "puppet"-like figures that traditionally inhabited the background of the pictorial space, subtle distinctions between background and foreground within many of Malevich's paintings themselves perpetuate the convention of differentiation between the two conceptual areas of the painted work. If the figures in the periphery, for a provocative example, of Brodsky's *At the Coffin of the Leader* do not possess

identifiable visages as opposed to the readily recognizable faces of the foreground figures, the figures and objects of Malevich's backgrounds do not possess identifiable geometric forms as opposed to the readily recognizable forms of the foreground figures and objects. While the abstracted figural form might have migrated from the backgrounds of icons and realist paintings to the foreground of Malevich's works, the convention of foreground specificity and primacy nevertheless persists in much of Malevich's work.[356]

For example, in *Head of a Peasant* [Figure 24], the background figures are generally treated with slightly rougher, coarser brushstrokes than the central, foreground figure. If one compares, for example, the transition between black and white on the skirt of the left-most background figure with the transition between the same two colors upon the right-hand shoulder of the foreground figure, the brushstrokes of grey onto white are much more legible and much less worked on the skirt than the shoulder, despite the fact that the size of the shoulder area is much larger than the skirt's. The faces of the background figures also differ substantially from the central face that dominates the composition. On the left-hand side, the first and third women in the row have brown, featureless faces. However, on the right hand side, the background faces have been given simple, line-drawn features. Such features are

[356] I am not asserting here that Malevich's work has more in common with Brodsky's work than perhaps it does with Gustave Caillebotte's 1877, *Paris: A Rainy Day*, whose background figures are perhaps equally imprecise in comparison to the foreground figures as Brodsky's are, as is the case, moreover, in many other figurative paintings from the Western tradition. But I am asserting that Malevich's work certainly has more in common with Brodsky's work in terms of questions of background versus foreground specificity, than with, for example, Jan Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* or even Jacques-Louis David's 1805-1808 *The Coronation of Napoleon*, a work which Brodsky's work arguably cites, yet whose background specificity is far more deliberately precise than *At the Coffin of the Leader*'s is.

unusual in Malevich's figures, both of the background and foreground; in his other works, background figures remain featureless and the facial features of foreground figures are composed by means of a variety of geometric forms, similarly to the central face in *Head of a Peasant*. But in these two line-drawn background faces, what is already quite simplified in the foreground becomes super-simplified in the background: its conventionality is heightened.

One can find a particularly clear example of the distinction in Malevich's later work between background and foreground treatments in the painting, *Landscape with a White House* (1928-1929, Russian Museum Ж-9392) [Figure 36], because in this work, the objects painted in the background represent the same object that is depicted in the foreground. The edges of the central white foreground house appear to have been ruled, the windows have cross bars painted upon them, and the side entryway consists of three distinct coloristic elements – a blue rectangle for a door, within a beige rectangular wall, surmounted by a swath of black, presumably designating a small roof. However, the painting technique of the two background houses to the right much more closely resembles this treatment of the central house's entryway roof, with its geometrically indistinct swath of black, than any other aspect of the foreground house. With roughly painted, unruled lines delineating their edges, particularly those of the roofs, tiny non-barred windows which proportionally occupy much less of the space of the house walls than do the windows of the foreground house, and swaths of black paint for the entryways on the left of each building, these two houses which, judging by perspectival distortion, sit at not too great a distance away from the foreground house,

have been painted in such a way that they unambiguously represent background material.

Unlike the two versions of *Head of a Peasant*, in which the foreground figures are exponentially much larger than the background ones, in *Landscape with a White House*, the background houses are only about a sixth of the size of the foreground ones. In fact, the chimney of the foreground house possesses approximately the same dimensions as the larger window on the background white house. Yet the chimney has been composed with noticeably straighter, much more precise lines than the window. The entryways of the two background houses are identifiable as such only due to the placement of a similarly proportioned and more precisely defined form in the same position on the foreground house. Recognition of the imprecise background forms is facilitated by means of correspondence with more legible forms in the foreground; the background forms represent signs of the foreground elements. In other Malevich paintings with background elements, the "semioticized" forms of the background may correspond to foreground elements within the same painting, similarly to *Landscape with a White House*, or otherwise to the foreground forms in other works within the same or a closely related semiotic system – for example, the background figures in *Head of a Peasant* [Figure 24] represent not so much further conventionalized versions of the foreground figure in their own painting as those in *To Harvesting (Marfa and Vanka)* or *Girls in a Field* [Figure 5].

We cannot simply ascribe the inexactitude conferred upon background objects and figures in these paintings either to a lack of ability on the part of an aging artist, nor to the absence of adequate supplies or tools in order to apply the exactitude of the foreground to the miniaturized background. Rather, such attention to the features of the foreground and reliance upon more imprecise forms in the background seem to represent choices made by the artist. If such works represent an attempt to bring the background to the foreground, thereby eliminating the foreground, they have failed on their own terms. Nevertheless, such distinctions between the foregrounds and backgrounds of Malevich's paintings are only evident in those works which possess particular and specific background elements, and many of the circa-1929 paintings do not. The distinction in this regard is very apparent in comparing *Landscape with a White House* and *Landscape with Five Houses* (1928-1929, Russian Museum Ж-9496) [Figure 37], the latter of which depicts a line of similarly-constructed white quadrilaterals topped with black trapezoids upon a plane of blue and above a plane of mottled red. If *Landscape with a White House* maintains the conventions of background-foreground opposition, *Landscape with Five Houses* brings it back into question, for if the latter possesses any sort of background, it consists of pure paint, pure color. Aside from the simple forms of the houses, the subject of the painting consists of little more than paint and color as well.

If Malevich's figures, whether of a foreground, background, or ambiguous ground, represent conventionalized images – pictures of pictures – what distinguishes their employment of conventions from the proto-socialist realist use of them? As Bal and Bryson note, "Even when we think the image is 'realistic,' we are in fact imbued with the convention that suggests that certain kinds of pictorial signs stand for 'reality' more clearly than others."[357] Proto-socialist realism, particularly of the styles that would be most fervently embraced by socialist realists in the following years, aggressively employed conventionalism. Art that looked like already recognizable art – that employed conventions which securely signified the category of "artistic" within the interpretants generated by the majority of viewers (and which had been solidified as those conventions by means of the apparatuses of authoritative control of the previous tsarist regimes) – was most readily approved by the masses. Conventions enabled acceptability, and what was accepted perpetuated the conventions, facilitating their cumulative perception as a natural, default, and unconditioned state.

In the Stalinist context, realist art was presumed to reflect recognizable accuracy with respect to the physical input received by human eyes when confronted with the world. The employment of conventions in contemporaneous realist art stood in opposition to a presumption within Malevich's work of conditioning, of deliberately manipulating visual input – a manipulation which, of course, all works of visual representation employ, realist or not. The distinction between Malevich's employment of conventionality and proto-socialist realism's hinged primarily upon the legibility of

[357] Bal and Bryson 191.

that conventionality. We might say that the purpose of the set of conventional codes within which Malevich operated was to produce images which resembled other, human-made images in ways which evoked the conventions, without actually evoking those images themselves. His use of conventionality was employed to disclose the paintings' own and those other images' conventionality. On the other hand, the purpose of the set of codes within which proto-socialist realism operated was to produce images which disguised their extremely heightened resemblance to one another.

In proto-socialist realist works by Brodsky or Deineka, for example, resemblance was meant to be comforting to the viewer; in Malevich's works, resemblance operates in a manner that requires substantial consideration and questioning on the part of the viewer. With conventionality in Brodsky's images, the viewer is expected – and under threat of political repression, required – to be a passive recipient of the image; with Malevich's paintings, the viewer is expected – although not so much required, especially with the mass proliferation of his imagery today, which has transformed his images into a whole new set of conventions – to be an active participant in the creation of the work of art. The viewer can make a choice to recognize, or ignore, the conventionality of Malevich's paintings, something which is not intended to be an option with socialist realism.

Ultimately, conventionality is the outcome of the repetition of visual imagery, even (and especially) when performed unconsciously. Objects of visual culture are produced through the manipulation and reiteration of signifying elements which have

already acquired meaning within a cultural framework. Conventions ensure that "originality" in a work of art must remain a manufactured attribute, never an inherent one, and that every work of art can only exist as a supplement to previous and future works. Malevich's acts of visual reiteration are not remarkable because they employ strategies of duplication, for duplication is inherently a necessary part of the production of any work of visual art. What does, however, make them remarkable is the self-consciousness with which they employed strategies of copying, as reproductions of his *own* works in an attempt to alter historical record and as reiterations of pictorial conventions in ways which heightened perception of those conventions.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

Actors are always already on the stage, within the terms of the performance.

Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution"[358]

The composition of Malevich's circa 1932 painting, *Red Cavalry* (Russian Museum Ж-9435) [Figure 38] is dominated by a series of unruled parallel lines of varying widths and colors below a modulated blue expanse. A few small figures, four-deep flanks of riders on galloping horses above the central, top-most line, are placed seemingly as an afterthought upon the almost abstract background. This composition surely manifested the same sort of devotion to purely formal artistic concerns that so many of Malevich's late-career (yet purportedly early-career) works likewise display. As such, the fact that *Red Cavalry* bears a post-Revolutionary date ("1918," notably in this instance on the *front* of the canvas, for all viewers to see, unlike Malevich's previous antedating) disrupts the narrative of tsarist past versus Soviet present/future. Instead, the "1918" date suggests continuity and gradual transition from Malevich's "pre-Revolutionary" works (on display beside *Red Cavalry* in its 1933 exhibition) to this "early Soviet" canvas.[359] Although Malevich never would have described it in such terms, *Red*

[358] Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory," *The Performance Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Bial (London and New York: Routledge, 2004) 160.
[359] In 1933 at the "Artists of the RSFSR over Fifteen Years" exhibition at the State Russian Museum in Leningrad, Malevich exhibited this painting amongst a group of his works for the final time in his life in a

Cavalry presented to its viewers aesthetic backwardness as purportedly having been generated during an era when such backwardness ought to have already been abandoned. Nevertheless, a work of art from "1918," in 1933, remained an object with significant remove from the present, a conceptual space of the past which most definitely one could not confuse as being contiguous with the present. Like most of the paintings which Malevich exhibited in his 1929 "retrospective," as discussed in my third chapter, *Red Cavalry* was born "old," an apparition from the past, rather than a vision of the future.

If one applies Judith Butler's insight about gender to the art historical undertaking and considers the artist Malevich as the metaphorical "actor" within the "stage" of the Soviet art world, one might understand *Red Cavalry* either as a capitulation to or subversion of dominant proto-socialist realist "scripts" regarding the appropriate content of art. Drawing upon my discussion of the problematic assumptions of non-objective art in Chapter Three, I propose that in *Red Cavalry*, Malevich has arrived at a contextually logical resolution to the problem of how to deal with symbolic, signifying visual forms. If such forms' signification remained irrelevant, when trumped by the overriding power of formal properties, then arguably such forms might signify anything at will. If subject and semiosis are irrelevant (and merely constitute "associations of prejudices," as his discussion of the rejection of certain graphic design projects asserts),[360] then why not give the "people" what they want? In

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public venue. This exhibition would journey to Moscow six months later, where Malevich's contributions would be dramatically diminished.

[360] Malevich, "About Posters," *The Artist, Infinity, Suprematism* 141.

other words, why not paint images with explicitly Bolshevik content, particularly that most favored of subjects in proto-socialist realist circles, the Red Army?[361]

The name given to this work is particularly revealing. In Russian, the inscription by the artist reads, "*Skachet krasnaia konnitsa iz oktiabrskoi stolitsy, na zashchitu sovetskoi granitsy*." This translates as "The red cavalry gallops from the October capital, in defense of the Soviet border." This is typically shortened as a title to *Skachet krasnaia konnitza* or, in English, simply *Red Cavalry*. Notably, however, Malevich did not employ the word *konarmiia* (literally a contraction of the words for "mounted" and "army"), also generally translated into English as "red cavalry." Both *krasnaia konnitsa* and *konarmiia* commonly referred to the same Russian Civil War mounted regiment.[362] But the choice of *krasnaia konnitza* over *konarmiia* places semiotic emphasis upon the redness of the titular subject – upon a formal property of the artwork, color.

The color of the miniscule, titular figures at the center of this painting evokes unavoidable meaning via Soviet-era pictorial conventions. In the Soviet era, the color red could not exist as a free-floating signifier,[363] whether it was used to paint symbolic

[361] Although the Red Army in general was an appropriately laudable subject for artistic content from shortly after the end of the Civil War (AKhRR's 1922 manifesto indicated that part of the organization's fundamental purpose was to depict images of the Red Army), the Red Cavalry in particular served synechdochally to stand for the entire gamut of Bolshevik military prowess and was heroically valorized in Soviet visual and musical culture as the quintessential embodiment of Communist strength and courage. The depiction of the Red Army, particularly the Red Cavalry, in wide panoramic scenes typified the quintessential, idealized *kartina* within proto-socialist realist practice. Bown, *Art Under Stalin* 33, 46-47.

[362] *Konarmiia* is the title Isaac Babel' gave to his well-known and controversial 1923 set of short stories about this unruly and formidable strike force that played a critical role in the victory of the Reds over the Whites. Isaac Babel', *Red Cavalry* (New York: Norton, 2003).

[363] Arguably no more than the autonomous intersection of two bars at roughly perpendicular angles, as manifested in many of Malevich's suprematist works, might exist as a free-floating signifier in a Christian or purportedly post-Christian era. See also Evgenija Petrova, *Red in Russian Art* (Bad Breisig: Palace Ed, 1997).

horses and riders or the space of a simple quadrilateral. Malevich's red, within the context of Soviet visual culture, created meaning differently than a painting with the color red would elicit in a non-Soviet context. Malevich's red, whether in *Red Cavalry,* in works from the circa-1929 era, or even in suprematist works such as *Red Square* displayed in the Soviet era, necessarily shares connotations across the scope of the contextual visual culture in which works were produced and displayed. This contextual visual culture includes proto-socialist realist paintings such as Deineka's *Collective Farm Worker on a Bicycle*. Drawing upon my discussion of pictorial conventions in Chapter Four, I propose that Malevich's red, in *Red Cavalry*, employs the same culturally agreed-upon meanings for the color red as Deineka's red upon the bicycle rider's dress. The interpretation of the color red within the context of Bolshevik power, Communist ideals, Soviet governance, and Russian historical tradition was a pictorial convention which Malevich could not escape. Moreover, I would argue he explicitly embraced or even emphasized this convention in *Red Cavalry*.

Ultimately, conventions related to the color red facilitate the figurative function of Malevich's image. The undeniably signifying subject of this painting remains highly relevant, and it seems that this is not something which Malevich ignored. Indeed, the date which he inscribed upon the front of his canvas pertains directly to the significatory aspects of this image. The inscription of "18 *god*" (which translates effectively as "the year [19]18") seems to take into account the chronological specificity of the titular subject matter; this subject could not logically have been depicted prior to the Russian Civil War, because it did not exist before the October Revolution. Thus 1918 could

realistically constitute the earliest possible date that one might claim that one had painted an image of the Red Cavalry, based upon a highly superficial logic which took no account of artistic stylistic chronology.

However, the 1918 date also becomes notable in light of the arguments which I make in my second chapter, regarding how Malevich participated via antedating in historical narratives which firmly placed his contemporary work within the pre-Revolutionary past. Granted, this work constituted the "last" canvas that he painted, with a date of "1918," if one takes the artist at his word regarding the antedated chronology of his canvases. Nevertheless, with a date of "1918," the year following the October Revolution, and with unmistakably post-Revolutionary content, *Red Cavalry* defied the historical narrative of the backwardness of the pre-Communist past which had structured his antedating of works in the 1929 exhibition. With "18 *god*" inscribed on *Red Cavalry*, the simple act of placing a date upon a canvas brought clear-cut divisions between "new" and "old" into question and implied a substantial complexity to the artistic production of the Civil War years (or at least the earliest of them) which did not conform to overriding narratives.

Throughout this project, I have made a point to examine Malevich within the context of proto-socialist realist production. As a subject of intellectual scrutiny, Malevich remains embedded within his context; one cannot extricate him from the forces which surrounded him, including and perhaps particularly those individuals and entities which sought to marginalize his creative efforts. That prevailing cultural

attitudes obdurately prioritized artistic production by artists who rejected Malevich's aesthetic insights does not remove the normative enforcement of these priorities from the discourses within which the artist operated. In fact, such a state of affairs firmly cements the place of those prevailing cultural attitudes within the contested space which Malevich's polemics sought to occupy. The artist's actions, choices, and utterances were determined by and chosen from the discursive scripts which pervaded his milieu. His employment of these scripts may have attempted to counteract prevailing currents, thereby reshaping their trajectories. But scripts exist independently of the orators who employ them and can always be picked up by other locutors with substantially divergent motivations and goals.

"Actors are always already on the stage," and for Malevich, the metaphorical stage from which he could not stand apart was one which produced socialist realism.[364] It is clear that Malevich himself did not produce totalitarian art. However, Malevich, no less than any other participant in early Stalinist visual culture, also cannot be disassociated from the cultural terms (the "terms of performance," or alternatively the terms of production, articulation, or utterance) which generated totalitarian structures of visual communication. One cannot escape acting as a participant in and a producer of the contexts and texts within which one establishes identity and livelihood, whether willingly or not. How the texts and contexts respond to one's efforts to redirect their trajectories is simultaneously within and beyond one's personal control, as the events

[364] That is not to say that this "stage" *only* produced socialist realism – the diversity of artistic production within the early Stalinist era clearly contradicts any such presumption. Nevertheless, one of the outcomes of this era was the formation of the socialist realist style.

on the stage progress within and through manipulation of the given scripts. Art and visual culture remain entwined with political issues and power structures, and an oppositional stance does not contradict this state of affairs or disconnect one from that which one opposes.

My goal has been neither to redeem socialist realism, along with its immediate ancestors, nor to denigrate Malevich by comparison with his contemporaries who remain, well after the end of the Cold War and fall of the Soviet Union, far less popular with art historical audiences. Works like Deineka's *Collective Farm Worker on a Bicycle* or Brodsky's *At the Coffin of the Leader* and Malevich's *Girls in a Field* or *Women Reapers* were created within shared contexts. Within most commentaries upon Malevich's later works, it has largely been taken for granted how substantial the stylistic, ideological, and purely formal differences between his works and those of his more aggressively Party-minded contemporaries were. By discussing the philosophical underpinnings of proto-socialist realism and analyzing realist works, I have sought to interrogate the nature of these differences and to step outside the standard narratives. The artificial dichotomy of the old (avant-garde) guard versus the up-and-coming aesthetic conservatives might not have been so polarized after all.

Such questions and considerations remain significant because ultimately, a book like Clark's *Farewell to an Idea* does not begin with or even include an image painted by Brodsky or Deineka. Proto-socialist realism does not have any place within Clark's discussion, as with most discussions of Malevich and modernism broadly. Yet as such,

the Communist-oriented art of the early Stalinist era remains the proverbial elephant in the room of Malevich studies, that major contextual element of whose presence we are all aware, but about which silence prevails. Perhaps the topic is too distasteful of a subject due to its political affiliations, its failure to be sufficiently innovative within the hierarchy of the new, or its aesthetic priorities.

Yet that which is found to be distasteful retains great power. Perhaps here we might take a lesson from late-twentieth-century thinkers and artists who have sought to grapple with the legacies and horrors of the previous century; in particular Anselm Kiefer comes to mind. Notably in Kiefer's 1969 *Occupations* series, through performances of a Nazi salute the artist performatively "occupied" a variety of locations throughout Europe. Kiefer has pressed the point that to ignore history that is conventionally distasteful (and, for this example, legislatively repressed in the artist's native Germany) constitutes a highly ineffective means of dealing productively with disturbing pasts. Choosing to push such ghosts into the darkness can afford them otherwise unmerited influence. It is only through acknowledging, addressing, and engaging with that which has been purposefully neglected that we can begin to come to terms with unpleasant and uncomfortable legacies of the past. By constructing presently meaningful narratives, historical engagement allows contemporary actors operating within today's scripts to understand more fully the influence of historical legacies upon the scripts and identities which create present experience. The potential of conventionally distasteful history to control our manipulations of those scripts and our identities within them remains continually present, whether consciously or

unconsciously. It is a worthwhile project to illuminate such histories, particularly with respect to the individuals, such as Malevich, and texts, such as his later figurative (yet formally rich) paintings, which such distasteful entities opposed and repressed.

I set my research for this project within parameters that might fit comfortably into an art historical paradigm which posits an integral creative subject and a concept of time as divisible into discrete sections: the subject of the artist, Kazimir Malevich, and the work which he produced between 1928 and 1932. But I sought to fracture, disperse, and diffuse the purportedly bracketed, suspended subject. By identifying how the artist exploited conventional Soviet narratives regarding the nature of the pre-Communist past, while simultaneously challenging contemporary Soviet semiotic efforts to redefine national identity, I introduced discontinuity and non-discreteness into the historical conception of the artist's 1929 exhibition and the works that it displayed. By exploring Malevich's engagement with proto-postmodernism, I questioned the romantic, mythological figure of Malevich as a "master" with whom a stylistic unity might be identified. And by closely examining how the artist replicated his own works and employed common pictorial conventions, I interrogated the modernist notion of originality within the context of Malevich's works and their exhibition. My work reveals these seemingly stable historical subjects to be bracketed with fleeting limits upon unbounded historical complexity.

APPENDIX

English translation of *Vystavka Proizvedenii K. S. Malevicha (Выставка Произведений К. С. Малевича)* (1929):

State Tretiakov Gallery

Exhibition of the Works of K. S. Malevich

Moscow – 1929

Published by the State Tretiakov Gallery

The Art of K. S. Malevich

Organized at the State Tretiakov Gallery, the retrospective exhibition of the works of Malevich attempts to collect works from various periods in order to show the creative work of K. S. Malevich as a whole and to demonstrate the evolution of this creative work. Although the art of Malevich appears to a considerable extent to be ideologically foreign to us, nevertheless, the formal qualities and the proficiency of his works are so considerable for the growth of our artistic culture, that acquaintance with his work is highly useful both for artistic youth and for new viewers.

Kazimir Severinovich Malevich was born in 1873 in Kiev; his artistic education began at the Kiev Artistic School (1895-96), and then, moving to Moscow, he joined the

School of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture (1904-05). Trained in the style of naturalism, Malevich quickly arrives at the study of color and light and he seeks to convey the vibration and oscillation of the atmosphere. This early Impressionist period of Malevich's creativity is represented in the exhibition by several works: 'Spring', 'Red fence' and others (1902-08). He then abandoned Impressionism, which ignored the volumetric form of objects, and he pursued the palpability and heaviness of objects—such was the enterprise of the following period of Malevich's creativity ('Harvest', 'Reapers', 'Haymaking'). In this transitional period the artist proceeded to bright, compacted colors and attempted, by means of clean pictorial methods, to stress the three-dimensionality of forms. A turning point takes place in 1910. The artist arrives at a two-dimensional planar treatment of the object and a fixed composition. Space and volume are brought forth by the juxtaposition of color proportions ("Peasants," "Head of a Peasant," and others). The object already here appears only as a pretext, a figurative justification for formal solutions. But soon the artist wholly renounces the object, separating it into its component parts, juxtaposing them in various combinations, taken from various points of view in arbitrary compositions (Cubism of 1911 to 1912). He breaks down the object into principal geometric forms (circle, square, two intersecting planes) and makes them the basis of his abstract cubist constructions. The logical conclusion from here was non-objective art (1913-1918), the abstract transmission and real convention of "pure" movement and of space, free combinations of simple geometric forms (Suprematism). Parallel to the cultivation of non-objective Suprematist problems, the artist worked on the construction of forms by

means of color, by means of contrasting juxtapositions (1915-1916). The contrast of two paired visual impressions in movement away from one form imparts a roundness to the figures and a movement, without which the laws of two-dimensional fixity of the composition would be violated (Figure of a Woman).

Since 1922 the artist has attended to the problem of the new architectural forms at the foundation of his Suprematist theory (so-called “Planits” and “Architectons”).

The artistic evolution of K. S. Malevich reflects in a small way, but with extraordinary clarity and logical continuity, the evolution of pan-European, including Russian, art of the era of industrialism and mature capitalism. During this era (the first quarter of the twentieth century), on the one hand, in all systems of bourgeois culture, the detachment of art from life reached its age of maturity, and, on the other hand, there emerged embryos of these new forms of art which develop now before our eyes.

Already commercial capitalism and the division of labor had torn artistic production away from material reality. With the introduction of machines this gulf between mechanical production and handicraft art became even wider. With the production of artistic “commodity” on an obscure market and the individualism that was generated from it having destroyed monumental architecture and artistic industry, one all the same returned to painting. The wealth-accumulating bourgeois and parasitic nobility restricted art to the maintenance of a narrow circle of the ruling class. Gradually, after its detachment not only from production, but also from other forms of ideology (sciences, politics and others), art also tore away from socio-political life. Its

slavish maintenance of bourgeois recreation and luxurious desires was covered up by the ideological “sanctity” of art, the theory of “art for art’s sake.” And so, along with landscapes, followed by still-lifes, art arrives, before the world war, at last, at the full rejection not only of the subject, but also of all representation of the exterior world. Painting was locked in the narrow circle of simple formal inquiry.

But every development encounters its contradiction. The same industrialism which led art to the loss of figuration contributed to a significant development of the material-formal culture of painting. The progress of science and technology was reflected in art by means of a yearning for scientific objectivity and experimentation. Artists have transformed their workshops into laboratories, attempting to deduce the coloristic and formal-dimensional formulae of human vision. Their art thus became, in outward appearance, unlike real things of the world, but ideally strove towards such an exact precision of their fixation, such that they did not resemble any visible phenomena, but that at the same time, for example, expressed mathematical or chemical formulas.

Emerging industry very soon set about to develop new structural forms (reinforced concrete) and posed in an integrated manner the problem of the standardized mass production of everyday items. This was where those experiments and data, that were developed in the laboratory of "non-objective" art, were put to use. Without them, the new architecture, furniture, decorative fabrics, banners and layouts of books and newspapers, and, last, the modern success of the new "industrial" art of the cinema, would have all been impossible. Meanwhile, it is only on the foundation of

this industrial art as well, as on the foundation of all capitalist industry in general, that we can construct the culture and art of the socialist society. It happened this way in the west and also in the USSR, where independent, so-called "leftist" artists played diverse parts in this process.

Some of them diverged definitively towards such so-called "production" art, finding in that field a way out of the impasse of objectlessness. Others remained with it, went "inward," filling the lack of real content with inner feelings. Although subjectively distant from the fundamental positive trends of the new industrial art, they objectively contributed, by means of their work, to its birth. To this latter type, K. S. Malevich belongs as well. He only worked on a few new forms of dishes, etc. His architectural works - more abstract thoughts on architectural themes, rather than actual projects. He is a subjectivist and a dreamer-philosopher. But this does not prevent the fact that his work possesses its own, self-sufficient objective value. His Suprematist painting already did its work in textiles and in a whole series of other branches of decorative art. Western architects are eyeing with interest his "planits" and "architectons," whose wealth of fantasy and expression through deeply-worked forms provide a wealth of material for the practice of architecture.

Last, a visitor to the Tretiakov Gallery can clearly make certain for himself that the formal artistic culture of Malevich can produce rich, fruitful results, not just in the domain of "production art," but also in the field of narrative painting. To do this it is necessary only to peruse carefully the exhibition, "Young Art Workers of the City of

Leningrad."[365] The working-class youth, by employing all the formal experiments and all of the heights of bourgeois artistic culture, to cultivate their new club-based art, comes out of the stage of artistic development, attained by Russian, so-called "left" art of the early years of the revolution, within which can be included the art of K. S. Malevich.

This being said, I conclude upon the objective value of the art of K.S. Malevich, and the significance of this art is demonstrated in the special exhibition upon the Gallery walls.

[365] On exhibition at the Tretiakov concurrently with this exhibition.

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