

The Literature of Art: Reading the Abstract Art of Suprematism

Aayushee Garg
Christ University
Hosur Road
Bengaluru, Karnataka

The Literature of Art: Reading the Abstract Art of Suprematism

Avant-garde modern art thrived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century of Russian Empire and Soviet Union. Modern art was characterised by a tendency of deviating from the conventional and traditional forms of art that the world had seen so far. It was an attempt to move away from the narrative form of art. Avant-garde art particularly refers to radical experimentation with respect to existing art. Suprematism was a Russian avant-garde art movement conceptualised by painter Kazimir Malevich. It was heavily influenced by Cubism, Futurism as well as Formalism. Malevich is credited with creating a Suprematist grammar characterised by basic geometrical shapes like square and circle. The celebrated abstract art form allowed the use of only minimal fundamental shapes and colours. The fourth dimension of art is what concerned Malevich's abstract paintings the most. This research attempts to critically read the modern abstract art form of Suprematism with special emphasis on Malevich's works of art. The influence of this art form on other art forms can nevertheless be undermined. Therefore, its interaction with other art forms prevalent in the same time has also been explored.

Keywords: Suprematism, Avant-garde, Russian art, Modern Art, Kazimir Malevich

"I transformed myself in the zero of form, I destroyed the ring of the horizon and escaped from the circle of things, from the horizon-ring that confines the artist and forms nature."

-Kazimir Malevich

The Russian avant-garde was not only an artistic, but also a social movement of the twentieth century. It was preceded by the Bolshevik Revolution, and succeeded by Social Realism. Russian avant-garde basically emerged to re-examine the questions raised in the nineteenth century, which were: What art is, and what should it do. According to Gabo, Russian post-revolutionary art was idealistic in content, utilitarian in its social function, and abstract in terms of formal expression. Malevich, Tatlin, Lissitzky, and Rodchenko lovingly called the

neoplatonists were the forerunners of this revolution. One of the most striking art forms belonging to that era was Suprematism.

This research is an attempt to critically read the abstract art movement of Suprematism as a unique

Suprematism was an abstract painting style involving minimally employment of fundamental geometric shapes and bright colours. This Russian avant-garde art movement was inaugurated by Kazimir S. Malevich around 1913. Malevich's acquaintance with graphic artist Aleksei Kruchenykh and violinist and painter Mikhail Matiushin, gave birth to Suprematism. They wanted to bring about the notion of A-logism, which was a conscious attempt to escape from rationality.

More than thirty Suprematist paintings were unveiled at the exhibition 'Zero-Ten' for the first time, which were secretly being painted by Malevich. The art form was called 'Suprematism' because of the fact that Malevich believed that this new style of art held supremacy over the forms of nature, and also because he favoured "the supremacy of pure sensation in creative art."

Though Suprematism emanated from "both personal and cultural matrices" (Douglas 266), there was a historical and philosophical motivation behind this peculiar art form. It was influenced by the Proletkult, which comprised local cultural societies and avant-garde artists. Vladimir Mayakovsky's campaign against the bourgeoisie also influenced this movement. He attacked it saying, "Down with your love. Down with your art. Down with your government. Down with your religion."

Malevich was essentially a formalist. He also defined a specific grammar for Suprematist works which consisted of geometrical shapes. His paintings gradually moved from loose, curved lines to geometric shapes. The paintings created by Malevich depicted rhythm, and were highly expressive. They used vivid colours and had broad, strong outlines. Projective imagery was Malevich's forte. There were however, three phases of this movement: black (zero-degree Suprematism), coloured (Dynamic Suprematism), and white. Interestingly, Malevich considered the square to be the most basic shape as well as formal element. One of his most famous paintings revealed in the 1915 exhibition Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings 0.10, in St. Petersburg, was *Black Square*. It has stirred profound subjective narratives. Though, on surface it appears that there is a black square surrounded by a white frame, recent research says that there are two images in this painting, one lying beneath the black square. Researchers Irina Rustamova and Irina Vakar claim that it is an inscription that holds secrets about fights of Negroes in caves. Malevich called the black square 'zero of form'. According to him, it was the first instance of the expression of non-objectivity.

In 1918, Malevich presented his exuberant work *White on White*, which was an abstract oil-on-canvas work. It was painted a year after the Bolshevik Revolution. There are two white squares, the ground being of a warmer tone than the figure. It is a perfect example of representational art, as promoted by Malevich. He made it as he gradually became detached and free from the bondage of colour as well. Both the squares being white, it destabilises the pre-existing and conventional notions of art in which contrast of colours has dominion. Different readings are allowed to radiate. One square might just be a shadow, or it might be to enhance the distance and depth.

Depersonalisation and defamiliarisation were the ideas that seriously concerned Malevich. He believed that the artist ought to put plane images in the painting which were

self-referential and are not-related to the personality of the artist per se. Art should be impersonal, as far as possible. They should be devoid of the feelings, aspirations, and memory of the artist. In *From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism*, Malevich described how colour and texture are ‘ends’ instead of ‘means’ in painterly creativity. Medium was the art.

Assimilation played an important role in emergence of this form. Before conjuring Suprematism, Malevich had been making Cubo-Futurist art. For instance, *The Knife Grinder (The Glittering Edge)* employs Cubism as well as Futurism. Even, in his Suprematist works, Malevich deliberately introduced Italian Futurism. Futurism advocated declassification. Perspectives played an important role here, as well as in Suprematism. His paintings also freely borrowed from Cubism, which was also a Modernist European art movement. Cubism involves a dismantling and reassembling of the objects. This fact points to the subtle, yet grave concern that Suprematism was indeed largely influenced by colonisation from the West. In spite of this, Suprematism was nevertheless more radical than Cubism and Futurism. Malevich called it the “new painterly Realism,” the basic tools for which were colour, line, and brushwork. It is interesting to note, as in *Suprematist Composition*, and other such works using minimalistic shapes, that the shapes were not always circle, square, and triangle, but also varying sizes of rectangles, trapeziums, and sometimes, even cubes, which were drawn out of rhombuses though.

However, Suprematism was entirely different from Constructivism, Humanism and Materialism. Alexander Rodchenko, another pioneer of Russian avant-garde movement, had introduced Constructivism, which focussed on utilitarian art. Suprematism was completely based on an anti-materialist, anti-utilitarian philosophy. It did not have a functional utility. It vouched for Art for Art’s sake. It seemed to align with Oscar Wilde’s thought, “Life imitates art far more than art imitates life.”

It is important to note that this was a time when various philosophers, scientists, and thinkers, like Nietzsche, Steiner, Einstein, and Schopenhauer were grappling with epistemological duality. Malevich encouraged people to change their thought pattern. He wanted them to move beyond the “denotative significance of colour” (Stupples 11). He recommended a revolution of consciousness. He went on to write a book titled *The Non-Objective World*, the second part of which dealt with Suprematism. He asserted that only through non-objectivity, alogism, and liberation from the object could art be free, and the artist would be able to create something new and original. He advocated dependence on intuition for originality and freeing oneself from objectivity. According to him *Black Square* represented intuitive reason. (Neimark 63)

Many believed that there was an emotional as well as a mystical factor also involved in the works of Suprematism. It was said to be idealistic and other-worldly. Malevich contested that the ‘beyond-reason’ Zaum style of painting and literature, which was essentially transrationalism, had a structure and was not “all emotional and anti-intellectual.” (Douglas 270)

Evolution also played a significant role in Suprematist art. Malevich believed that along with biological evolution, an evolution in human psyche takes place. Being discontented with the stagnation brought about in art in the mid-nineteenth century, he encouraged Symbolism, Cubism, Futurism, and non-objective art, as an antidote to it. He himself evolved his painting style from early imagery to Eastern mysticism to Russian primitivism in his later works. In *Mower*, colours do not remain solid, and try to blend with

their lighter shades. Malevich kept improving his work, and hence, thankfully Suprematism did not stop to evolve. The 1960s saw him laying emphasis on the idea that the pattern must reflect the shape of the painting. Thus, he began to use notched and shaped canvases. Further, in the 1970s, he modified his art by in

Malevich was influenced by the avant-garde poets and literary critics of the time He was influenced by the Saussurean idea that words and their meanings are separate from each other. He was totally fascinated by the idea of abstract art. He also gave a theory of poetic discourse where he described the relation between realism in poetry and Suprematism in art. He was also influenced by Russian Orthodox Church, as well as Russian folk art. From 1903 to 1913, Malevich experimented with various art forms from Impressionism to Primitivism to Cubism to Futurism to Suprematism. Suprematism is believed to be the greatest among all of these, owing to its figurative style. It was the epitome of avant-garde art. The art form depicted the power of abstraction. This extremely radical and experimental zaum-painting movement employing depersonalisation, abstraction, Eastern mysticism, intuitive reason, while carefully eradicating objectivity, eventually grew to be known as one of the most prominent art movements in World Literatures. It was often considered nihilistic and esoteric, and unfortunately the iconoclastic originality of the Russian avant-garde art was curbed by Communist authorities, when Socialist Realism attained the position of official policy. Still, the contemporary abstract art can be seen to borrow heavily from Suprematism.

Select Bibliography

- Birnholz, Alan C. "The Russian Avant-Garde and the Russian Tradition." *Art Journal*, vol. 32, no. 2, 1972, pp. 146–149. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/775725.
- Douglas, Charlotte. "Suprematism: The Sensible Dimension." *The Russian Review*, vol. 34, no. 3, 1975, pp. 266–281. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/127974.
- Kovtun, E. F., and Charlotte Douglas. "Kazimir Malevich." *Art Journal*, vol. 41, no. 3, 1981, pp. 234–241. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/776564.
- Neimark, Anna. "On White on White." *Log*, no. 31, 2014, pp. 62–66. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/43630889.
- Stupples, Peter. "Malevich and the Liberation of Art." *New Zealand Slavonic Journal*, 2001, pp. 11–86. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/40922063.