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## *Communism in Art and Religion in Squares: Kazimir Malevich's Suprematism in Russia since 1915*

**ABSTRACT:** *This essay revisits the early critiques of Kazimir Malevich's creation of Suprematism in the second decade of the twentieth century and traces the trajectory of academic scholarship on its meaning and purpose since then. The author argues that, prior to 1975, scholars viewed Suprematism as an art form directly linked to Malevich himself; after 1975, however, academics detached Suprematism from Malevich and, instead, increasingly associated it with other individuals, as well as with artistic, political, social, and religious movements.*

**KEYWORDS:** *modern history; Soviet Russia; Russian Avant-Garde; Suprematism; Kazimir Malevich; Black Square; communism; utilitarianism; objectlessness; religion*

### *Introduction*

In December 1915 and January 1916, fourteen Avant-Garde artists presented their works at the *Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings 0,10* in Saint Petersburg, Russia – among them Kazimir Malevich (1879–1935), whose *Black Square* painting (Figure 1) elicited a wide range of critical responses and has been considered synonymous with the art style and movement known as Suprematism ever since.<sup>1</sup> The number “0,10” in the exhibition’s title suggested that the subjects of the paintings on display had been leveled to “zero” – made “objectless” – and that the art of these paintings was going “beyond zero.” Suprematism is characterized by the reduction of art to geometric forms and color; it got its name from the idea that pure artistic sentiment would reign supreme over all art forms and styles, as well as any meanings or purposes that artists might ascribe to their art.

This essay revisits the early critiques of Kazimir Malevich’s creation of Suprematism and traces the trajectory of academic scholarship on its meaning and purpose since then. Initially regarded simply as a new art style, Suprematism later came to be viewed as a political movement, then as an inspiration for other artists, and ultimately as influenced by outside forces. Until the late 1920s, responses to Suprematism were embedded in the discourse on contemporary abstract art. During the Stalinist era (1927–1953), discussions on Suprematism were eclipsed by the period’s resurgence of realism. In the 1960s, scholars studied Suprematism as an art form and as an art movement. In the 1970s, the focus shifted to consider Suprematism’s relationship with the political environment of Soviet Russia, and political Suprematism as a form of protest was increasingly linked to Malevich’s own ideas about government, politics, society, and culture. From the later 1970s to the earlier 2000s, scholars studied Suprematism as an inspiring artistic movement as well as a political movement, both operating congruently and influencing each other. Suprematism was now considered to have come from somewhere other

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<sup>1</sup> Kazimir Malevich, *Black Square*, 1915, oil on linen, 79.5 x 79.5 cm, The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, Russia, [online](#). In this essay’s transcription of Russian words and phrases, diacritics have been omitted.

than Malevich, as something that had always been there but never known, and as something that had been discovered rather than created. For many academics, Suprematism became purely an idea, a transcendental art movement, an intuitive inspiration, and something that could be transferred to other people and societal factions, taking Malevich completely out of the picture. More recently, scholars have studied religion's influence on Suprematism.

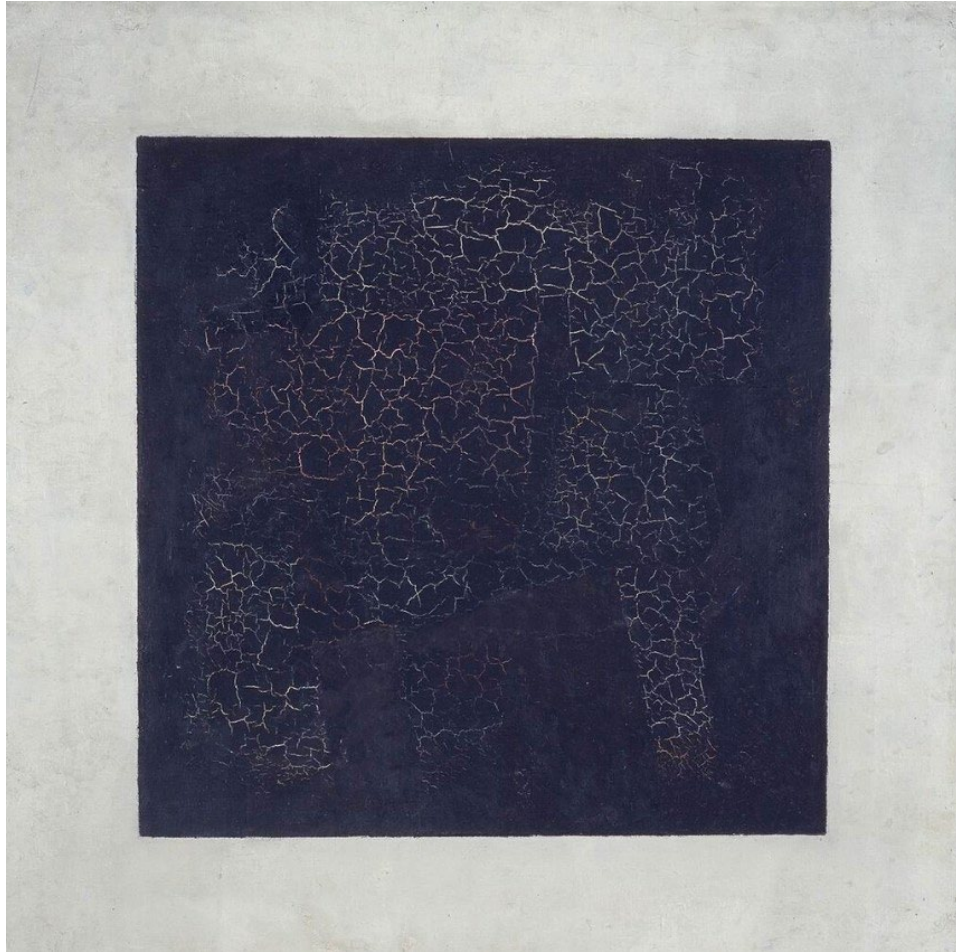


Figure 1: "Black Square" (1915), painting by Kazimir Malevich, [online](#).

I argue that, prior to 1975, scholars viewed Suprematism as an art form directly linked to Malevich himself; after 1975, however, academics detached Suprematism from Malevich and, instead, increasingly associated it with other individuals, as well as with artistic, political, social, and religious movements. My essay's two parts—"United: Before 1975" and "Separated: After 1975"—reflect this argument.

### *I. United: Before 1975*

In 1902, assessing the future of Russian art in the context of the rising Avant-Garde movement, the artist, historian, and critic Alexandre Benois (1870–1960, also known as Aleksandr Benua) commented that "the whole art of our time is

deprived of direction...it is uncoordinated, broken up into separate individuals."<sup>2</sup> New art was considered unorganized—even invalid—because it did not follow the movements and traditions of the past. And yet, Benois argued, even when “divisions occur among artists here for the most absurd reasons...the character of the work from one group to the next is indistinguishable.”<sup>3</sup> Even before Malevich entered the scene, the Russian art world had been quite hostile to new forms and styles. Predictably, when Malevich’s *Black Square* was shown at the 1915–1916 *Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings 0,10*, artists and critics were divided. Some artists, even if they were practicing a different style, such as Futurism or Cubism, were supportive. In fact, many of Malevich’s contemporaries, among them the celebrated art critic Alexander Rostislavov (1860–1920), loved that his works’ “geometricization ha[d] something to say...this planar painting of such secretive and appealing complexity and mystery.”<sup>4</sup> However, others—just like today—did not quite know what to make of Malevich’s new art form and believed that they were “not in a position to judge vanguard art that [was] ‘absolutely foreign’” to them.<sup>5</sup> Yet, in the words of painter and composer Mikhail Matyushin (1861–1934), Suprematism was giving “the strong impression that it [was] the oncoming shift [*sdvig*] in art,” whether they liked it or not.<sup>6</sup>

Later on, Malevich’s students refused to have Suprematism reduced and “trodden by the theory of Constructivism,” an art form that was using geometric shapes to reflect the industrial nature of modern society. Claiming that “Constructivism, in proclaiming death to art, conceive[d] Man as an automaton,” Malevich’s students sought to create “real works of art.”<sup>7</sup> The importance of Malevich’s Suprematism as a cultural and historical shift was eventually recognized by the Russian art historian Aleksei Fedorov-Davydov (1900–1969), who, in 1929, proclaimed: “Although the art of Malevich is to a great extent ideologically alien to us, nevertheless the formal qualities and mastery of his works are so vital for the development of our artistic culture that familiarization

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<sup>2</sup> Alexandre Benois, *History of Russian Painting in the XIX Century [Istoriia russkoi zhivopisi v XIX veke]* (Saint Petersburg: Evdokimov, 1902), 274, quoted in John E. Bowlit, “Russian Art in the Nineteen Twenties,” *Soviet Studies* 22, no. 4 (1971): 593.

<sup>3</sup> Alexandre Benois, “Khudozhestvennye pis'ma: Obilie Vystavok,” *Rech'* (February 13, 1909): 2, quoted in Jane A. Sharp, “The Critical Reception of the 0.10 Exhibition: Malevich and Benua,” in *The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915–1932* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1992), 45–46 (see 52), [online](#).

<sup>4</sup> Aleksandr Rostislavov, “O vystavke futuristov,” *Rech'* (December 25, 1915), 3, quoted in Sharp, “Critical Reception,” 49 (see 52), [online](#).

<sup>5</sup> Sharp, “Critical Reception,” 42, [online](#).

<sup>6</sup> Mikhail Matyushin, “O vystavke ‘poslednikh futuristov,’” *Ocharovannyi strannik: Al'manakh vesennii* (1916), 17, quoted in Sharp, “Critical Reception,” 49, [online](#).

<sup>7</sup> Preface to the catalog of the first exhibition of the New Society of Painters (NOZh), Moscow, November 1922, quoted in Bowlit, “Russian Art,” 586.

with his work is very useful both for the young artist and for the new spectator.”<sup>8</sup> Malevich and his new suprematist art style had certainly altered the way art was viewed and created. However, while likeminded artists greatly appreciated the radical change in painting, many critics considered Suprematism a catalyst of destructive change.

Kazimir Malevich’s own voice in the debate on Suprematism fell silent when he died on May 15, 1935. In fact, the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s were a dark period in Malevich scholarship, likely because Joseph Stalin, the leader of the Soviet Union, tightly controlled the use of art as propaganda for the political state. Consequently, Malevich’s suprematist style and the concept of Suprematism itself had to give way to a resurgence of realism and the need to portray and propagate the proletarian movements, particularly the rise of the industrial working class during the 1910s and 1920s. While Stalin held power (1922–1953), first as General Secretary of the Communist Party and then as Chairman of the Council of Ministers, art was strictly censored.

After Stalin’s death and the implementation of “de-Stalinization” policies, there developed a “notion that the Avant-Garde was a plastic experiment valid for all time.”<sup>9</sup> This was the prevalent understanding in the 1960s. Suprematism was expected to last for generations and influence many artists afterwards. Art was freed from the limitations forced upon it by gravity, culture, ideas, shapes, and techniques. Thanks to Malevich’s work, art had been reduced to “zero,” and it could now be created without any need to serve ulterior purposes. In a 1960 article, “Kasimir Malevich and the Non-Objective World,” the German *Bauhaus* architect and urban planner Ludwig Hilberseimer (1885–1967) remained true to Malevich’s theories when characterizing Suprematism as separate from outside ideas of politics and culture. According to Hilberseimer, Suprematism retained its original intention of non-objectivity—avoiding any exact image of a place, person, or thing—which “contrast[ed] it to the utilitarian aims of Constructivism.”<sup>10</sup> In the 1960s, there was no external influence on how Suprematism should be studied, just as there was no such influence on how it should be created. Malevich had never intended for politics, labor movements, technology, or culture to become aspects of his work, and the academic assessments of the 1960s reflected this perfectly.

The scholarship on the relationship between politics and art usually focuses on art as a whole during a specific time period. Russian art between 1917 and 1932 had been led by artists who founded individual art movements, such as Futurism

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<sup>8</sup> Catalog to a personal exhibition of Malevich, Moscow, 1929, 5, quoted in Bowlit, “Russian Art,” 591.

<sup>9</sup> Irina Karasik, “Malevich as His Contemporaries Saw Him,” in *Malevich: Artist and Theoretician*, ed. Galina Demosfenova (Paris: Flammarion, 1991), 192.

<sup>10</sup> Ludwig Hilberseimer, “Kasimir Malevich and the Non-Objective World,” *Art Journal* 20, no. 2 (1960): 82–83.

and Suprematism, all considered to be under the umbrella of the Russian Avant-Garde. As the English art historian John E. Bowlt (b. 1943) pointed out in his 1971 essay on “Russian Art in the Nineteen Twenties,” Malevich himself had been one of the founders of early modern abstract art, and his ideas had guided it “toward functional applied art during the years immediately after the Revolution.”<sup>11</sup> Malevich and his suprematist art style had added a rebellious element to Russian abstract art by rejecting Western influences, thus contributing to political rebellion and, perhaps, serving as the face of it. Bowlt linked Malevich as an individual directly to the politics of art; while artists and society were separate entities, artists’ contributions to the Revolution united them again.<sup>12</sup> In this discourse of the early 1970s, Malevich and Suprematism were still viewed as a single entity, while Malevich’s Suprematism was being associated with a political statement.

In his 1972 article on “The Russian Avant-Garde and the Russian Tradition,” the American art historian Alan C. Birnholz argued that the new Russian art movement that emerged out of the 1920s was a response to “preceding developments in Western Europe,” with the Russian Avant-Garde now “emphasiz[ing] the rupture in Russian Art history brought about by the 1917 Revolution.”<sup>13</sup> Politics and art, Birnholz believed, went hand in hand. Suprematism was in line with the Bolshevik Revolution, particularly through its manifestation in architecture. The Bolshevik Revolution introduced the idea of a collective society and utilitarianism, a departure from the tenets of Western-style monarchies and societies, as well as from the democratic ideals of the United States. Malevich’s Suprematism was meant as an architectural form, which, according to Birnholz, corresponded to the political movements of his time. Suprematism was founded “on utilitarian grounds” because it “gave man a glimpse of the coming utopia and hastened thereby the formation of a more perfect world.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, in the early 1970s, Suprematism was studied and understood as having political origins; as a response and as a rebellion against traditional bourgeois forms and styles; and as a parallel to the Bolshevik Revolution.

The scholarship on the political nature of art during the early 1970s also extended to other artists, including Wassily Wassilyevich Kandinsky (1866–1944), Lazar Markovich Lissitzky (1890–1941), and Lazar Khidekel (1904–1986). This is relevant because the respective discourse applied and addressed the artists’ parallel thinking. For example, the American art critic Donald B. Kuspit (b. 1935) claimed in a 1970 article that Kandinsky had emphasized the human experience as opposed to the materialism propagated by the West. Kandinsky, Kuspit argued, was “not so much...protesting science, but science’s pretension to

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<sup>11</sup> Bowlt, “Russian Art,” 576.

<sup>12</sup> Bowlt, “Russian Art,” 575.

<sup>13</sup> Alan C. Birnholz, “The Russian Avant-Garde and the Russian Tradition,” *Art Journal* 32, no. 2 (1972): 146.

<sup>14</sup> Birnholz, “Russian Avant-Garde,” 148.

conclusiveness.”<sup>15</sup> Kandinsky’s art was inspired by student revolutions against traditional societal and political institutions in Russia and the West alike. He found inspiration and solutions in Russian peasant law, which he saw as protesting against “all social forms which hold man back from his abstract relation with his fundamental nature.”<sup>16</sup> By comparison, Malevich was simply more explicit about his protest against traditions in politics, art, and society. Thus, academic scholarship in the early 1970s held that the artists’ own ideas about society and politics were portrayed in their artwork. As Malevich’s political ideas were inherently tied to Suprematism, there was no way to separate Malevich from Suprematism and vice versa. In short, Malevich protested by means of Suprematism; Suprematism was his political agenda. However, this line of thought clearly ignored Malevich’s original intention for Suprematism to be liberated from all societal functions and to stay away from political propaganda. Because they failed to separate the artist from the artwork, scholars failed to portray Suprematism as it had been conceived, namely, as an art style.

## II. Separated: After 1975

After 1975, scholarly literature on Malevich and the birth of Suprematism took a radical turn by now discussing artists and art as separate entities. Instead of focusing on Malevich, academics shifted to an examination of Suprematism as a style created by and for other artists. In doing so, they began to see Suprematism as a combination of ideas, concepts, and art forms not necessarily linked to Malevich. As the Russian Avant-Garde had originally been a literary movement of Futurist poets, whose ideas ran parallel to Malevich’s, and as poets routinely removed their subjects from their writings, similar to the concept of “objectlessness” in Suprematism, Suprematism was no longer viewed as Malevich’s own but simply as a representation of the ideas and artists of the day.<sup>17</sup>

It was also considered an inspiring ideology for up-and-coming artists and therefore studied through the lens of ideas and concepts rather than politics. According to a 1981 assessment by art historian Evgenii Fedorovich Kovtun (1928–1996), Malevich’s work in the late 1920s—despite its clear break away from pure Suprematism—“return[ed] to a figurative style, but one that ha[d] memories of Suprematism.”<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, Malevich’s earlier style of alogism (i.e., art with absurd and irrational elements) as exemplified by his 1913 painting *Cow and Violin*

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<sup>15</sup> Donald B. Kuspit, “Utopian Protest in Early Abstract Art,” *Art Journal* 29, no. 4 (1970): 430.

<sup>16</sup> Kuspit, “Utopian Protest,” 431.

<sup>17</sup> Susan P. Compton, “Malevich’s Suprematism: The Higher Intuition,” *Burlington Magazine* 118, no. 881 (August 1976): 578.

<sup>18</sup> Evgenii Fedorovich Kovtun, “Kazimir Malevich,” trans. Charlotte Douglas, *Art Journal* 41, no. 3 (1981): 234.

(Figure 2) was now considered a different phase of his career that he would pull from to create his final pieces in the 1930s.<sup>19</sup>



Figure 2: "Cow and Violin" (1913), painting by Kazimir Malevich, [online](#).

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<sup>19</sup> Kazimir Malevich, *Cow and Violin*, 1913, oil on wood, 48.8 x 25.8 cm, The State Russian Museum, Saint Petersburg, Russia, [online](#).

As Kovtun saw it, Suprematism was “a model and an analog of cosmic space,” which encompassed the “theme of overcoming gravity” often seen in Russian Avant-Garde art.<sup>20</sup> Kovtun’s scholarship on *UNOVIS* (*Utverditeli Novogo Iskusstva*, i.e., “Champions of the New Art”), an influential group of artists led by Malevich and dedicated to exploring and developing new theories and concepts in art in the late 1910s and early 1920s, underscored this shift in academic focus: it studied Suprematism for its influence on and inspiration of future art, including Malevich’s own later works,<sup>21</sup> such as his 1928–1932 painting of a *Peasant Woman (with a Black face)* (Figure 3), which incorporated his prior style of alogism but mostly drew from the objectlessness of Suprematism.<sup>22</sup>

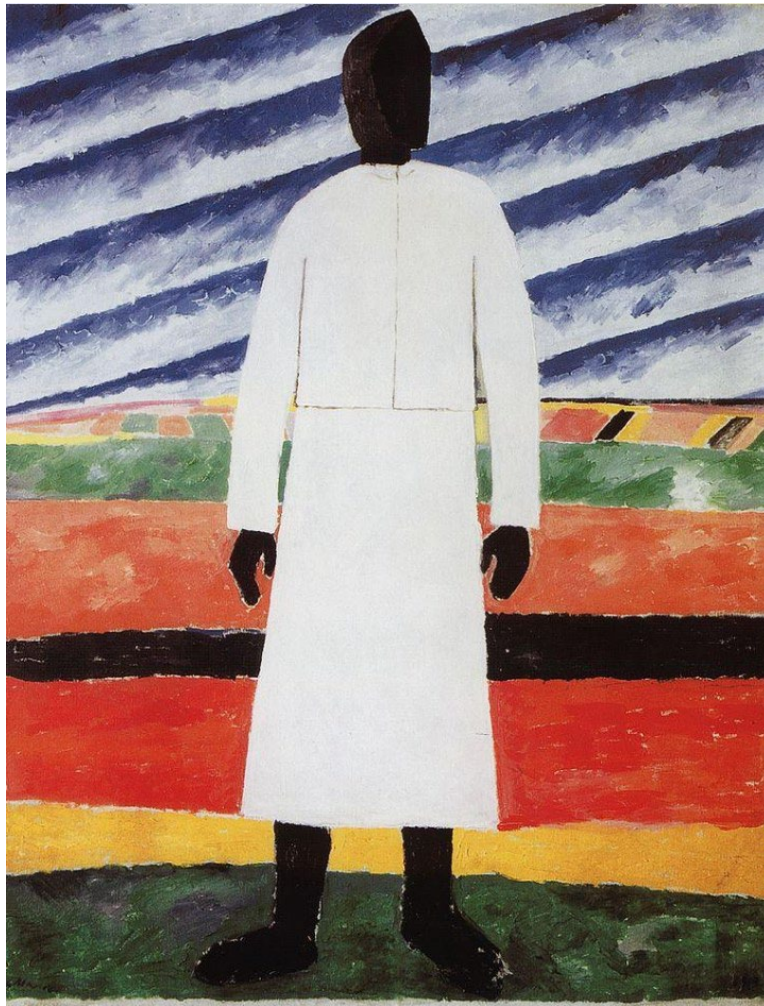


Figure 3: “*Peasant Woman (with a Black Face)*” (1928–1932), painting by Kazimir Malevich, [online](#).

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<sup>20</sup> Kovtun, “Kazimir Malevich,” 236.

<sup>21</sup> Kovtun, “Kazimir Malevich,” 236–240.

<sup>22</sup> Kazimir Malevich, *Peasant Woman*, 1928–1932, oil on canvas, 98.5 x 80 cm, The State Russian Museum, Saint Petersburg, Russia, [online](#).



In a 1993 article, art historian Alexandra Shatskikh (b. 1956) reflected on Malevich's influence over the art form of film. It was not that Malevich had wanted create suprematist films himself. Instead, he wished for other artists to integrate his style into their cinematic works. Shatskikh clearly viewed Suprematism as something separate from Malevich by virtue of the ability of others to use it.<sup>23</sup> Malevich himself believed that Suprematism should influence all other art forms, including film, and thus he advocated for future "non-object" cinematic projects.

By the early twenty-first century, scholars were applying various past perspectives on the origins and use of Suprematism to their own work. Malevich was acknowledged solely as the artist whose hands had created such political works, but whose personal ideas were not necessarily understood to be connected. In a 2018 book chapter, art historian Tatiana Goriacheva (b. 1954) drew attention to Malevich's unpublished essay, "In our time, when it became We," describing it as "one of the links in the chain of the artist's argument that collective creativity [had to] replace individual artistic thinking."<sup>24</sup> Thus, Suprematism was not just an artistic style or movement, but also an ideology that could be wielded by and transferred to other artists and their work, making suprematist art a collective effort that mirrored the political thoughts of the labor class of the day.

Inspiring others to partake in a collective effort to politicize art involved an understanding of the techniques and processes underlying the creation of suprematist art in the first place. As early as 1994, art historian and theorist Peter Stupples had argued that Malevich's work had contributed significantly to a stepping away from the Western and European dominance of art: through the use of color, line, and texture, Malevich was communicating the spiritual and the emotional, as well as the aesthetic beauty of the natural world, by producing works that stood in direct opposition to previous Western-influenced art styles. Malevich's work coincided with the Russian Revolution in that it "attempted to overcome [the] subjective aesthetic[s]" that Western artists had been focusing on, just as the political agency of the Bolsheviks was setting out to rid Russia's government of Western capitalist influences.<sup>25</sup> Thus, to scholars of the late twentieth and earlier twenty-first centuries, Malevich's Suprematism was representative of the political movement. The intention of its creation never

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<sup>23</sup> Alexandra Shatskikh, "Malevich and Film," *Burlington Magazine* 135, no. 1084 (July 1993): 471. Shatskikh relates Malevich's "desire to find a theoretically solid platform for artistic creativity" to Soviet film, for which he designed many suprematist style posters. In this way, Malevich attempted to "introduce Suprematism into 'utilitarian' life." Soviet film director Sergei Eisenstein was deemed a perfect candidate for Malevich's artistic endeavors.

<sup>24</sup> Tatiana Goriacheva, "...In our time, when it became We...": A Previously Unknown Essay by Kazimir Malevich," in *Celebrating Suprematism: New Approaches to the Art of Kazimir Malevich*, ed. Christina Lodder (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 190, ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>25</sup> Peter Stupples, "The Notation of Radical Change in the Graphic and Painterly Systems of Malevich and Lissitzky," *New Zealand Slavonic Journal* [Festschrift in honour of Patrick Waddington] (1994): 174.

mattered. In fact, suprematist ideology was deemed exactly parallel to that of the Bolshevik Revolution: it “was exploring the same metaphysical ground as the Bolshevik variant of Marxism.”<sup>26</sup> Malevich’s own ideas “concerning the role of art”<sup>27</sup> were being separated from Suprematism’s inherently political role. Suprematism became a means to evade censorship and to convey one’s true ideas via an artistic subtext.<sup>28</sup> As literary scholar Anna Wexler Katsnelson put it in 2006, Suprematism—as another political language—was “a painful compromise with the Soviet artistic nomenclature.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, the academic literature reflected what scholars believed Suprematism to be, as well as what they believed it stood for at the time: a culmination of art, artistic technique, and politics.

More recent scholarship on Malevich and Suprematism has taken a step or two away from all of the above by postulating that Suprematism was influenced by religion more than anything else. In a 2021 article, historical theorist Irina Sakhno claimed that Suprematism was not just “a new religion” for Malevich, as represented by a complete devotion to the suprematist ideology and lifestyle, but that Suprematism itself was imbued with religious—including Christian—concepts.<sup>30</sup> According to a 2023 article by Russian Studies scholar Dennis Ioffe, Suprematism was not so much a culmination of political ideas or artistic endeavors as it was a culmination of various historical religious iconographies, starting out with the figurative iconography of the Pan-Turkic world, the “Kurgan Stelae.”<sup>31</sup> Suprematism, Sakhno argued, worked much in the same way as Christian negative theology.<sup>32</sup> Through shapes, Suprematism emphasized objectlessness and limitlessness, just like apophatic (i.e., negative) theology described God by saying what God was not. Thus, religion developed Suprematism, and Suprematism had always existed in religious thought and iconography. Malevich, however, had unearthed the style’s full form.

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<sup>26</sup> Stupples, “Notation of Radical Change,” 175.

<sup>27</sup> Goriacheva, “...In our time,” 191.

<sup>28</sup> Anna Wexler Katsnelson, “My Leader, Myself? Pictorial Estrangement and Aesopian Language in the Late Work of Kazimir Malevich,” *Poetics Today* 27, no. 1 (2006): 87, 68–69. Aesopian language is a literary technique, similar to what is now known as doublespeak, allowing authors to “evade censorship.” During the Stalinist era, the ideology and style of Suprematism could not be fully evoked in Malevich’s work due to the restrictive political and cultural climate. There needed to be a subtext. Estrangement, however, created by literary critic Viktor Shklovsky, “reinforces the abstraction inherent in the devaluing of content.”

<sup>29</sup> Katsnelson, “My Leader, Myself?” 92.

<sup>30</sup> Irina Sakhno, “Kazimir Malevich’s Negative Theology and Mystical Suprematism,” *Religions* 12, no. 7 (2021): 2–3.

<sup>31</sup> Dennis Ioffe, “Avant-Garde versus Tradition, a Case Study: Archaic Ritual Imagery in Malevich: The Icons, the Radical Abstraction, and Byzantine Hesychasm,” *Arts* 12, no. 1 (2023): 10.

<sup>32</sup> Sakhno, “Kazimir Malevich’s Negative Theology,” 2–3: negative theology is an “attempt to move beyond the bounds of the understandable” as God’s “limitlessness and incomprehensibility is all that can be understood about him.”

### *Conclusion*

The scholarship on Malevich and his profound new art style, Suprematism, highlights the changing perspectives and approaches academics have taken over the past century. When Suprematism was first born, Malevich and the art style were inseparably linked. Suprematism sparked a wide debate over the failure of modern art and the destruction of art and culture as a whole, and this reflected directly back on Malevich as an individual. The idea of uniting artists with their artwork carried through to the influence of Suprematism on the political and ideological realms. Malevich was seen as both politicizing art as well as rebelling against the state – or Western influences – through his art. Thus, according to pre-1975 academics, Suprematism was Malevich’s chosen ideology and applied to all spheres of life and art.

By 1975, however, scholars were changing their approach to Malevich and Suprematism. Art and artist were separated. Malevich had not created Suprematism, he had merely discovered it, and thus the style could stand on its own. Consequently, Suprematism came to be seen as an art movement that was influenced by politics, other artistic endeavors, and religion. It became the culmination of the past and the present. As long as Suprematism was viewed as something created by Malevich, the two were one; they were whole, united, and singular. Once Suprematism was thought of as discovered or influenced by previous and outside forces, Malevich and Suprematism could be separated. The academic literature before and after 1975 walks a very fine line, but the line is certainly drawn.

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