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REINTERPRETING MALEVICH: BIOGRAPHY, AUTOBIOGRAPHY, ART

Malevich's life and achievement have frequently been framed as a narrative that describes a revolutionary, a dismantler of Russian and European artistic conventions, and a harbinger of a new art of the city. The "aesthetic of rupture" has been invoked in order to interpret his work as the expression of an overwhelming impulse to break radically and completely with the old society, with archaic and outdated artistic forms, and with nineteenth-century populist traditions. Retrospective exhibitions that have been mounted since 1988-91 alongside the publication of additional selections from his voluminous writings have stimulated some modifications to this interpretive matrix. He is now emerging as a figure formed not simply by the atmosphere of Moscow and St. Petersburg/Petrograd/Leningrad in the immediate pre- and post-revolutionary years,¹ but by a much wider set of experiences. Attempts to describe Malevich's evolution have, naturally, had to integrate new perspectives.² In particular, the early life in villages and small towns and the later association with Kyivan artists have attracted the attention of several critics and scholars. It is the thesis of this essay that Malevich's biography, his autobiographical statements, and his works from the late peasant period of 1928-30 suggest stronger links to Ukraine and to primitivism than has sometimes been admitted.

The story of Malevich as the revolutionary/dismantler/urbanist, the first commissar of the Bolshevik Revolution, and theorist of the visionary new is simultaneously the story of an artist inspired by peasant primitivism, notably that of the Ukrainian folk arts, and the icon. The evidence of his autobiographical essay of 1933, which insistently draws attention to the early period of his life, deserves particular attention in modulating the overarching narrative and in suggesting an expansion of the sources and influence on his work and ideas.

1. For an example of this kind of interpretation, see John E. Bowl, "Kazimir Malevich and the Energy of Language," in Jeanne D'Andrea, ed., *Kazimir Malevich 1878-1935* (Los Angeles: The Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center, 1990), pp. 179-86.

2. Malevich was frequently described in the early nineties as an elusive and confusing figure, no doubt partly in response to the new materials made available at the time. John Golding wrote: "Despite the many recent new insights into Malevich he remains an enigmatic figure." "Supreme Suprematist," *The New York Review*, Jan. 17, 1991, p. 16. Rainer Crone and David Moos wrote: "Although the impact of his work upon the viewer may have changed, we believe that the meanings carried within his paintings are only now beginning to be adequately understood." *Kazimir Malevich: The Climax of Disclosure* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 8.

Biography

Typically, narratives of Malevich's life have begun with his move to Moscow and have focused (sometimes almost exclusively) on his exhibitions and life in that city and in St. Petersburg/Leningrad. Gestures, if made, toward the periods that preceded or followed, have been guardedly coy or dismissive. Critics have, understandably, selected for emphasis those aspects of his life that have linked him to events in the Russian capital cities. The account of Rainer Crone and David Moos reads: "Departing from his inadequate, intellectually bland provincial surroundings, Malevich journeyed to Moscow in search of artistic enlightenment. . . . He moved to Moscow in 1904, and from this time on his artistic project became significant. . . . Moscow and St. Petersburg . . . were places that spoke of reform and revolution. Centers of thought and centers of intrigue. . . ."³ The fact that radicalism could have been engendered outside the "centers," or that the latter could have been considered bastions of conservative, imperialist or authoritarian thought are inadmissible in a narrative which imputes superiority to the goods of the metropolis. It often goes unrecorded in such narratives that the journey to the capitals was often made by ambitious youth in order to overthrow dominant intellectual and artistic trends, and to introduce a radical perspective learned elsewhere.

Like many contextualizations of literary, artistic and intellectual life, these narratives have rarely considered the Ukrainian background of Malevich, Tatlin, or many other avant-gardists as worthy of note. "The South Russian flavor of much art and writing that was in due course to be influential in Moscow and in St. Petersburg," John Milner has written, "has scarcely been recognized."⁴ Nonetheless, among late nineteenth-century Western artists the increasing awareness of indigenous traditions and values had brought about a cultural shift of vital importance — especially for artists from the Empire's southern regions. It both "encouraged an assertion of independence from the Westernized cities of Russia and from the West as a whole."⁵ It is worth mentioning that such a cultural shift had occurred before and had been taken advantage of by Ukrainian newcomers to the capital. In the Romantic and post-Romantic age (from the 1820s to the 1840s) Ukrainian writers and artists had exploited the fascination with Southern exoticism and folk cultures to win greater acceptance for their marginalized history and culture. Ukrainian artists and writers of the early twentieth century made a similar attempt to exploit neo-Romanticism, primitivism and Southern exoticism. Upon the outbreak of war in 1914 many artists who had spent time abroad were forced to return to the Russian Empire. The new concentration of artists and their cultural isolation from Western Europe during the war years appears to have augmented the interest in indigenous tendencies. Malevich, who, unlike many of his colleagues did not venture abroad until his visit to Berlin and Warsaw in 1927, was nevertheless able in the war-time years to draw upon his knowledge of both Western and indigenous art in order to make his greatest contributions to the avant-garde.

3. Crone and Moos, *Malevich*, pp. 51-52.

4. John Milner, *Vladimir Tatlin and the Russian Avant-Garde* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1984), p. 7.

5. *Ibid.*

Born in 1878 in Kyiv, until the age of seventeen Kazimir lived in small Ukrainian towns and settlements where his father worked for sugar refineries. The refineries brought together the worlds of agriculture and industry, mixing peasants and factory workers, and throwing into contrast traditional cultural forms and technological developments. It was a liminal, boundary existence in other ways also. The future artist's father attended both Orthodox and Catholic Church services and occasionally amused himself by simultaneously inviting the priests from both Churches to his house. Malevich lived in the town of Iampil (Iampol in Russian) in Podillia, until he was twelve – then in the towns of Parkhomivka (Parkhomovka in Russian), which is in the Kharkiv region, and in the settlement of Vovchok and the town of Bilopillia (Belopolia in Russian), which are between Kyiv and Kharkiv. The following years were spent primarily in Konotop, a town between Chernihiv and Sumy, until he was about seventeen. Here he met Nikolai Roslavets, who would become a futurist composer. From Konotop he traveled to Kyiv to contact the well-known painter Mykola Pymonenko (Nikolai Pimonenko in Russian), who taught art in Kyiv and made it possible for Malevich to attend classes at the Kyiv School of Drawing. It was then that he made the decision to become a painter and produced his first professional works. Charlotte Douglas has written that Pymonenko's subjects, "drawn from rural life – villagers at work, haying scenes, and full-length portraits of peasants – later became Malevich's own."⁶ One of his late paintings from 1930, *The Flower Girl*, also recalls an eponymous work by Pymonenko.

The language of communication in Malevich's family was Polish, but he grew up speaking Ukrainian well, as his sister has attested.⁷ This is hardly surprising given his surroundings. In the autobiographical sketch of 1933 he records as a child surreptitiously observing visiting painters at work and notes the fact that they spoke Russian, a significant and sufficiently exotic detail to remain fixed forever in his memory. The ensuing move to Kursk, where he stayed from 1896 until 1904, was a move into an adjoining Russian oblast with a mixed Russian-Ukrainian population. In 1926 over half a million people or 19.1 percent of the oblast's population identified themselves as Ukrainian.⁸ Not surprisingly, some of the painter's closest friends in Kursk were also Ukrainians. An accountant, Valentyin Loboda, who had studied art with the great Ukrainian modernist Oleksandr Murashko, and Lev Kvachevsky. Their Ukrainian background, it should be said, is deliberately underlined by Malevich in his autobiography: "Lev Kvachevsky was

6. Charlotte Douglas, *Kazimir Malevich* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), p. 8.

7. Dmitry Gorbachev, "We reminisced about the Ukraine. We were both Ukrainians," in Marijan Susovski, ed., *Ukrajinska avangarda 1910-1930* (Zagreb: Muzej suvremene umjetnosti, 1990), p. 196.

8. Some territories on the Russian side of the contemporary Russian-Ukrainian border were ethnographically predominantly Ukrainian and were considered "Ukrainian" by contemporaries. The region of Ostrogozhsk to the East of Kursk had been settled by Ukrainian cossacks, many of whom were enlisted by Catherine the Great only after 1783. Even as late as the 1897 census, figures reveal that this area was over 90 percent Ukrainian. After the revolution of 1917 the Central Rada expected it to be included in the Ukrainian Republic and considered a project to create from it a Ukrainian province which would be named Podon. See A. Zhyvotko, *Podon (Ukrainska voronizhchyna) v kulturnomu zhytti Ukrainy* (Prague: Vyd-vo Iu. Tyshchenka, 1943), p. 10.

my very closest friend. We couldn't live without each another. . . . We'd walk thirty versts every day in summer, spring, and winter for our sketch sessions, arguing all the way. . . . We'd discuss other matters when we ate, or reminisce about the Ukraine. He and I both were Ukrainians."⁹ When Malevich moved to Moscow he was already twenty-six. Even then, the complete move to Moscow did not occur until 1907, because he spent his summers in Kursk.

In later years, the painter expressed a desire to return to his birthplace, Kyiv. In 1926 he lost his job following the government's closing of the Leningrad GINKHUK (State Institute of Artistic Culture) and the merging of its staff and departments with GII (State Institute for Art History). Malevich was given laboratories at the Institute but he continually had to resist pressures to close them. He traveled abroad to exhibit his work in Berlin and Warsaw in 1927. The following year, while trying to find a job in Poland during his trip abroad, he described himself as Polish. After his trip, he visited relatives in Kyiv. Tatlin had already left Leningrad to teach at the Kyiv Art Institute (KKhI) in 1925. Malevich's friends Andrii Taran and Lev Kramarenko were already lecturing there, along with two other important avant-gardists, Oleksandr Bohomazov and Viktor Palmov, whose theory and practice of colorism Malevich found congenial.¹⁰ Although he continued his research at the Institute in Leningrad, from 1928 he began to lecture in Kyiv. He was given the opportunity to work two and a half weeks a month at the Kyiv Institute of Art (KKhI).

Ukraine was a haven for many avant-gardists at this time of growing repression. Malevich could count upon the support of Ivan Vrona, the director of the Kyiv Institute, and of Mykola Skrypnyk, the powerful Minister of Education. In 1929 the artist held a personal exhibition in Kyiv. That was also the year in which Alexander Archipenko, who was then working in the United States, planned to lecture at the Institute. He was to join a teaching staff that already included Vladimir Tatlin, Mykhailo Boichuk, Viktor Palmov, Fedir Krychevsky, Lev Kramarenko and Oleksandr Bohomazov. In size and number of enrolments the institution was the third largest after Moscow's VKHUTEIN (Higher Artistic and Technical Institute) and the Leningrad Academy of Art.¹¹ The move, however, did not occur, because the show trials, arrests and full scale attacks on the Ukrainian intelligentsia began to gather momentum that same year. Even so, between 1928-30 Malevich was able to publish fourteen articles in Ukrainian in the Kharkiv monthly, *Nova generatsiia* (New Generation), and its sister-publication in Kyiv, *Avanhard-Almanakh* (Avant-garde Almanac, 1930). The articles in *Nova generatsiia*, which chart the development of art since Césanne, were to form the nucleus of a book on the history and theory of the new art. The author had tried to publish it under the title "Izologia" (Artology) and had seen it rejected by Russian publishers. Malevich's long-time associate, Mikhail Matiushin, also published a long essay in *Nova generatsiia* at

9. Kazimir Malevich, "Glavy iz avtobiografii khudozhnika," in *K istorii russkogo avangarda* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell Intern, 1976), p. 115. This translation is by Alan Upchurch: Kazimir Malevich, "Chapters from an Artist's Autobiography," *October*, No. 34 (Fall 1985), p. 36.

10. On Bohomazov, see Myroslava M. Mudrak, *The New Generation and Artistic Modernism in Ukraine* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1986), pp. 106-14.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 49. Mudrak also reports that in 1929, 846 students were enrolled (p. 251).

this time. His reasons for doing so are not entirely clear. Critics have speculated that he might have wished to publish a summary of his findings alongside those of his colleague, or he, too, might have been under the pressure of government attacks on his formalist interests and therefore considered that he had no other outlet. In any case, the article was written exclusively for this journal.¹²

By the beginning of the 1930-31 academic year Malevich was making plans to take up a permanent teaching post at the Kyiv Institute and to transfer all his works to the city.¹³ Suddenly, however, an order was issued dismissing all professors who were not members of the party. Malevich, along with Boichuk, Sahaidachny, Kramarenko and others, were sacked. Insulted, the painter fumed: "I no longer want to be a Ukrainian."¹⁴

It should be kept in mind that *Nova generatsiia* thought of art's evolution as a single international process and the editors vehemently opposed to any focus on national particularism. They deliberately gave their journal an international appearance by publishing versions of their articles in English, French, German or Esperanto, and by providing abstracts in foreign languages. The editorial board included Herwarth Walden, László Moholy-Nagy, Enrico Prampolini, Johannes Becher and Rudolph Leonhard. It is also significant that in 1927 the journal had invited Russians to participate and began displaying the names of prominent Russian avant-gardists on its covers. Russian representatives included Osip Brik, Aleksei Gan, Sergei Eisenstein, Vladimir Maiakovskii, Alexander Rodchenko, Vladimir Tatlin, N. Chuzhak, Viktor Shklovskii and Dziga Vertov. Malevich's inclusion in the associates' rubric and participation in the journal was, therefore, in line with attempts to bring in Russian and international participants.¹⁵ The Kyiv Art Institute, it should also be noted, was at the time strengthening its staff by hiring teachers from abroad. They included Ukrainians who had studied abroad (like Vasyl Kasiian), but also a considerable number of artists who were either Russians or who had spent considerable time in Russia (among them Viktor Palmov, Pavlo Holubiatnykiv, Volodymyr [Vladimir] Tatlin). The Institute, like *Nova generatsiia*, emphasized formalist and constructivist concerns, and an international perspective.¹⁶ Although its staff had a relatively cosmopolitan outlook, it was, naturally, inspired by the visual arts of the local traditions. Malevich joined the colorists, or "Spectralists" as they were known (his friends Bohomazov and Palmov), who were members of the Organization of Contemporary Artists of Ukraine (OSMU).¹⁷ He obviously found a supportive environment. At this time he made a point of identifying himself as a Ukrainian. The artist's sister has recounted that he

12. See *ibid.*, p. 109. It appeared as "Sproba novoho vidchuttia prostoru," *Nova generatsiia*, No. 11 (1928), pp. 311-22. An English translation is provided in Mudrak, *The New Generation and Artistic Modernism in Ukraine*, pp. 227-43.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 199.

14. From a letter to Kramarenko dated July 24, 1932. Archive of the National Museum of Ukraine, Kyiv. Quoted *ibid.*

15. Oleh S. Ilnytzkyj, *Ukrainian Futurism 1914-1930* (Cambridge, MA: Distributed by Harvard Univ. Press for the Ukrainian Research Institute, Harvard Univ., 1997), pp. 117-18.

16. See Mudrak, *The New Generation and Artistic Modernism in Ukraine*, pp. 48-50.

17. Dmitry Gorbachev, "We reminisced," p. 198.

recorded his nationality on official documents as Ukrainian, and, much to the consternation of some family members, insisted that they should do the same.¹⁸ Even after taking into account the ambiguities inherent in such a self-identification, it still suggests a strong link with the country and a need to examine his comments on his early life and on the origins of his art with greater care.

Autobiography

Two autobiographical sketches have been published: the shorter one dates from 1923-25, the second and much fuller account was written in 1933.¹⁹ This later account relates vivid childhood memories, early attempts at painting, work as a railway clerk in Kursk and the move to Moscow in 1904. Malevich attempts to explain the evolution that was to bring him to the "0-10" exhibition, which opened in Petrograd in 1915 and which for the first time included a large number of Suprematist paintings.

Particularly striking in the 1933 autobiography is the conscious juxtaposition of village and city life. In every case the author depicts the former as incomparably superior. Village children are freer; make their own colorful, clothing; practice art; live and work in a culture of song, dance and creative expression. The young Malevich dreams of developing apiaries on the sugar beet fields, so as to make unnecessary the use and production of sugar in the dismal, regimented factories. He perceives machines as predatory creatures, some of which have to be caged because of the potential to maim a person. He dislikes the children of factory workers and organizes pitched battles in which, like a young Nestor Makhno, he leads the village children against those of the factory in heroic and victorious combat. The peasants always struck him as "clean and well dressed" (*kazalis chistymi i nariadnymi*).²⁰ "Clean" is also an adjective that recurs throughout his writings as a positive description of the new art.

The young Malevich imitates the peasants' way of painting horses in the spirit of primitivism: "I watched with great excitement how the peasants made wall paintings, and would help them smear the floors of their huts with clay and make designs on the stove. The peasant women were excellent at drawing roosters, horses, and flowers. The paints were all prepared on the spot from various clays and dyes. I tried to transport this culture onto the stoves in my own house, but it didn't work."²¹ The boy undergoes a psychological transformation that is much more than a "passing" as another. Malevich describes a transformative process that

18. *Ibid.*; see also Horbachov, "Malevich muzhytskyi," p. 221.

19. A translation of "IZ 1/42: Avtobiograficheskie zametki, 1923-1925," made by Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin, appeared in Troels Andersen, *K. S. Malevich, Essays on art: 1915-1933* (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1968), 2: 147-54. The second was published by N. Khardzhiev as "Detstvo i iunost Kazimira Malevicha; glavy iz avobiografii khudozhnika" in his *K istorii russkogo avangarda*, pp. 85-127. For the English translation, see Kazimir Malevich, "Chapters from an Artists' Autobiography," trans. Alan Upchurch, *October*, No. 34 (Fall 1985), pp. 25-44. Abridged and revised translations of both were published in D'Andrea, ed., *Kazimir Malevich 1878-1935*, pp. 169-72 and 173-75.

20. Malevich, "Chapters," p. 29.

21. *Ibid.*

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leads to a total identification with the peasantry. Their language, dress, eating habits and culture, and the young man's attempts to assimilate all these ways occupy half the autobiography. The point of the narrative is to show the depth of this imprinting. Later, in Kursk, the young Malevich takes up the realist manner of Shishkin and Repin, and then becomes an impressionist. Suddenly, however, he rediscovers the painting of icons: "I felt some kinship and something splendid in them."²² He recalls his childhood, "the horses, flowers and roosters of the primitive murals and wood carvings."²³ He writes that at this moment he sensed the bond between peasant art and the icon: "icon art is a high-cultural form of peasant art."²⁴ And continues, "I came to understand the peasants through icons, saw their faces not as saints, but as ordinary people. And also the coloring, and attitude of the painter."²⁵ Through the art of the icon, therefore, Malevich tells us that he grasped the emotional art of the peasantry, which he had loved earlier but had been incapable of explaining to himself. The artistic connection between the little horses and roosters on peasant walls, the costumes and domestic tools becomes clear to him. He decides not to follow the classical art of antiquity, nor its revival in the Renaissance, nor the realist art of the "Wanderers" (*Peredvizhniki*). Instead, he writes, "I remained on the side of peasant art and began painting pictures in the primitive spirit."²⁶ At the end of his autobiography Malevich once again returns to the icon, informing the reader that this art form taught him that the essential thing was not to be found in anatomy and perspective, naturalism or illusionism, but in "the sensing of art and artistic reality through emotions."²⁷

The emphasis on the importance of Nature and of Ukrainian peasant art in his evolution have, of course, to be set against those moments when he speaks of the pull and attraction of Moscow. As he puts it in his 1923-25 sketch, "Nature was everywhere, but the means of portraying it were in Moscow, where famous artists lived."²⁸ In the galleries of Moscow he made the crucial connection between the icon and the "emotional art of the peasants."²⁹ He also speaks of seeing in the icon "the entire Russian people with all their emotional creativeness."³⁰ Even, however, if we assume that Malevich was embracing Russian and Ukrainian influences with equal fervor, and that these autobiographical sketches were probably envisaged as parts of a longer, never written account that would devote more space to his later life, they are still remarkable in the weight they place upon the early life and peasant traditions as well-springs of inspiration. In truncated publications of the 1933 autobiography, all the text dealing with his early life and his Ukrainian connections in Kursk (twelve out of a total of eighteen pages in Upchurch's translation)

22. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

28. Kazimir Malevich, "From 1/42: Autobiographical Notes, 1923-1925," in D'Andrea, *Kazimir Malevich*, p. 172.

29. Malevich, "Chapters," p. 38.

30. *Ibid.*

have sometimes been omitted.³¹ This is, perhaps, understandable. Malevich's narrative wrenches attention away from the emphasis normally placed by critics on the Moscow years. It situates the artist's work in an entirely different interpretive matrix, conveying a powerful anti-urban, peasant-glorifying animus. The import of his early life and experiences, Malevich appears to be saying, was crucial and determining, an indelible and formative time, that later continued to inspire and guide his work, and to stimulate insights into the power and nature of art.

The interest in the link with peasantry is, of course, in keeping with the use of Suprematist designs in folk peasant art.³² Malevich himself painted stoves in the traditional Ukrainian manner. His mother knitted sweaters with Suprematist patterns for relatives and friends.³³ He was not alone, it should be remembered, in maintaining this link between the avant-garde and folk crafts. Oleksandra Ekster was especially important in introducing traditional folk elements and folk artists like the peasant-futurist, Hanna Sobachko-Shostak into the avant-garde.³⁴ With two other women, Ievheniia Prybylska and N. Davydova, she facilitated joint projects between avant-garde artists like Malevich and the so-called "peasant-futurists" (folk artists) from the cooperatives of Skobtsi, near Poltava, and Verbyvka, in the Kyiv region. In 1915 and 1916 embroideries on scarves, pillows and patterns on kilims based on Suprematist designs were produced in the workshops of these village cooperatives and sold in Kyiv, Poltava, Moscow and Berlin as examples of folk production.³⁵

The clash with ideas expressed in his *Non-Objective World*, which he began working on in 1922 and published in German translation in 1927, is, however, startling. In it he writes:

The pictorial culture of the provinces is incensed at the art of the big city (Futurism, and so on) and seeks to combat it, because it is not objective-representational and consequently seems unsound. If the viewpoint that Cubism, Futurism, and Suprematism are abnormal were correct, one would necessarily have to conclude that the city itself, the dynamic center is an unwholesome phenomenon because it is largely responsible for the "morbid alteration" in art and the creators of art.

31. This is the case, for example, in the version published in D'Andrea, *Kazimir Malevich*, pp. 173-75.

32. For an illustration, see Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker, "The Avant-Garde and the Ukraine," in Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker, Igor Jassenjowsky and Joseph Kiblicky, eds., *Avantgarde and Ukraine* (Munich: Klinkhardt and Biermann, 1993), p. 27.

33. Larissa A. Zhdanova, *Malevich: Suprematism and Revolution in Russian Art 1910-1930* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982), p. 34.

34. See Danzker *et al.*, *Avantgarde and Ukraine*, pp. 15, 104-05. A translation of Oleksandra Ekster's essay "On the Works of Evgenia Pribilska and Ganna Sobachko" appears in Susovski, *Ukrainian Avangarda*, pp. 209-10. It was originally published in *Teatralnaia zhizn* (Kyiv) No. 9 (1919), p. 18.

35. *Ibid.*; see also Horbachov, "Malevych muzhytskyi," p. 221.

The new art movements can exist only in a society that has absorbed the tempo of the big city, the metallic quality of industry. No Futurism can exist where society still maintains an idyllic, rural way of life.³⁶

Malevich's fulmination's against the dominance of "provincial" art in the cities, and against "reactionary" attempts to revive the Byzantine icon and Renaissance fresco in this essay do not sit altogether comfortably with his peasant paintings of 1928-30 or his statements in the 1933 autobiography. Possible explanations can be suggested. First, by "provincial" Malevich did not mean folk primitivism, but realist and representational art. Second, he was opposed to the idea of "reviving" the icon or the fresco in the sense of providing a stylization, of uncritically copying. Creative work was *using* past examples by reworking and changing them. Third, Malevich's outlook probably changed after 1927, and his views on urbanism, industrialism and the "metallization" of culture shifted. As we shall see, his works of 1928-30 can be interpreted as an implicit renunciation of some of his earlier opinions, such as the following passage from his *Non-Objective World*:

The provinces fight for their tranquillity. They sense in metallization the expression of a new way of life in which small, primitive establishments and the comforts of country living will come to an end. The provinces therefore protest against everything that comes from the city, everything which seems new and unfamiliar, even when this happens to be new farm machinery.³⁷

The importance of folk-art primitivism and of icon-painting to Suprematism is still being explored. Love of the peasant primitive has, of course, been a potent force in modern art and in avant-garde experimentation throughout the twentieth century. In Malevich's case, however, the avant-garde/primitivism connection confounds because it seems to contradict the image of the revolutionary/dismantler/urbanist, and because it aligns Malevich with what many Marxists of his day readily assumed to be rural "backwardness" and local "nationalism" against urban "progress" and metropolitan civilization. The autobiography suggests that the artist was intuitively drawing on the primitive power of some of the most ancient, peasant forms of art. Ekster and the Futurists were, of course, doing something similar. So was Maria Syniakov in Kharkiv, and so was Malevich's colleague at the Kyiv Art Institute, Mykhailo Boichuk. These experiments were soon to be branded as formalist and nationalist.

Something similar had also happened in the past. The rediscovery and validation of native art had been a self-affirmatory and anti-colonial reflex practiced by Ukrainians – even by "émigrés" in the imperial capital, since the 1840s. Both Nikolai Gogol' and Taras Shevchenko (the first in Russian, the second, who began as

36. Originally published in a German translation from the original Russian in Kasimir Malevich, *Die Gegenstandslose Welt, Bauhaus Book II* (Munich: Langen, 1927). An English translation by Howard Dearstyne appeared as *The Non-Objective World* (Chicago: Theobald, 1959). Here quoted from Heershell B. Chipp, ed., *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book By Artists and Critics* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1971), p. 339.

37. *Ibid.*

a painter, in Ukrainian), burst upon the literary scene as voices of a vigorous, unspoiled, new and exotic "Little Russian" culture. They elevated the peasant ethos and exotic Southern civilization as part of a Romantic nationalist rediscovery of native traditions. Initially welcomed as part of a Russian movement of cultural self-discovery, they were both soon reinterpreted by metropolitan intellectuals as constructors of a highly problematic identity. Many Ukrainian intellectuals have maintained that the works of both men are expressions of a separate national awareness and part of an anti-colonial "writing back" against the civilization of the empire.

One might consider Malevich's longer autobiography, which was composed in 1933, along similar lines, as a veiled form of protest against the forced collectivization, grain requisitioning and the famine that occurred in that year. These events constituted a war on the peasantry and the Ukrainian nation, one in which, scholars now estimate, at least five million peasants died. It sometimes goes unrecognized that artists and writers of this period found various ways of encoding their opposition to the régime while producing works acceptable to the authorities. Perhaps the best-known example is Oleksandr Dovzhenko's film *Earth (Zemlia)*, (1930), which ostensibly lauds the benefits of collectivization, but in fact derives its power from a depiction of the vitality and beauty of peasant life.

Art

In turning to a consideration of Malevich's art, these biographical and autobiographical facts enable us to question what Charlotte Douglas has termed "the generally assumed direct descent of Suprematism from Cubism."³⁸ She has complicated the notion of a simple borrowing from Western sources, without, however, accepting the countervailing extreme position, which argues that modern forms in Russia and Ukraine arose independently of modern art's development in Europe. In Malevich's case, she points to a mixture of aesthetic and intellectual influences contributing to the genesis of the first Suprematist paintings of 1915, among them Henri Bergson and Umberto Boccioni, experiments with *zaum* (the "beyond the mind" or "transrational" principle in poetry and painting), as well as traditionally Russian philosophical concerns and the artist's own personal genius.³⁹

The important Cubo-Futurist goal of "seeing through the world," of penetrating into the unified cosmos beyond the world of appearances owed much to the inspiration of the Symbolists. Malevich studied the literature on the then fashionable speculation concerning the "fourth dimension." He saw the idea of motion as a key to understanding it. Douglas writes: "If objects move past us rapidly enough or if we ourselves rush by them, they may seem to lose their separate identities and individual characteristics and to become a more integral part of their environment. Further, in rapid motion objects are less apt to block the view, so that it may be

38. Charlotte Douglas, *Swans of Other Worlds: Kazimir Malevich and the Origins of Abstraction in Russia* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1980), p. 1.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 3. The works of Bergson and Boccioni were available at the time in Russian translation. The atmosphere of Symbolism, and P. D. Uspenskii's books on the evolution of human perception and consciousness are also discussed as influences.

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possible to see more easily past one row of objects to those beyond."⁴⁰ The notion of another "more real" world, which could only be penetrated by the artist, was, continues Douglas, as important for Russian modernists as it was for Gleizes and Metzinger, authors of the 1912 essay "Du Cubisme" with which Malevich was familiar.⁴¹ Interestingly, it was Matiushin's essay on the fourth dimension, motion and expanded vision that *Nova generatsiia* published alongside Malevich's writings in 1928. The idea of seeing through to the "more real" was, however, just as important for peasants educated in Byzantine Orthodox spirituality, who were encouraged to contemplate, or "read" icons as guides to the world beyond that of appearances. The colors, forms and symbols of icons were codes to understanding a painter's intentions and to entering the spiritual realm.

There is, one should recall, also a pre-Byzantine, pre-Christian symbolism underpinning icon and peasant art. The pagan symbolism of Easter egg designs, embroideries and mural art reaches into ancient times. The symbolism of colors and forms plays a prominent role in these, as it does in other folk arts. According to the oldest Slavic legends, for example, the world was created and ruled by Biloboh (Belobog in Russian), god of light, day, and life, and by Chornoboh (Chernobog in Russian), god of darkness, night and death. This dichotomy, which dominated the earliest Slavic mythologies and semiotic systems, survived into the early twentieth century. Symbolist and Neoromantic writers exploited it at the turn of the century, as Mykhailo Kotsiubynsky's great novella *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* (*Tini zabutykh predkiv*, 1913) demonstrates.⁴² These beliefs left their traces in the names of places, flora and fauna. The things that Malevich mentions as having such a powerful effect upon him – the homes of peasants, their clothing and rituals – conveyed elements of this all-pervasive mythology in a mysterious yet systematic, "encoded" manner, a fact that has led the critic Dmytro Horbachov (Dmitry Gorbachev) to contend that the folk arts of Podillia are an unexplored influence on Suprematism: "The closest analogy to his [Malevich's] Suprematism are the geometrical forms of wall paintings in the homes of Podillia, the *pysanky* [painted Easter eggs] with their astral signs, the patterns of the *plakhta* [woven woman's skirt] with their magical code of universal elements (fire, earth, water). The paintings of Malevich, in which sharply delineated patters are scattered on a white background, capture the spirit of folk art and folk cosmology. The only difference is that the established order of the peasant ornamental 'tree of life' is disturbed, dramatized and made dynamic in the spirit of the breakneck twentieth century."⁴³ The black square, circle and cross are symbols that have a long evolution in folk creativity and are common in mural art and embroidery. The cross, for example, has decorative, ritualistic and symbolic functions. The Iampil region of Podillia is known for its short, stone crosses and tall, light wooden ones that are often painted and which recur in Malevich's works from 1928-30. The region also abounds in

40. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 78.

42. For a translation, see Mykhailo Kotsiubynsky, *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*, trans. M. Carynnyk (Littleton, CO: Ukrainian Academic Press for The Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, 1981). This volume contains an extensive essay by Bohdan Rubchak analysing the mythology.

43. Horbachov, "Malevych muzhytskyi," pp. 221-22.

roadside crosses, and crosses as details of *pysanky*, *kilims* and embroideries. The cross symbolizes salvation and protection. In combination with the vase and the bird, it represents the tree of life.⁴⁴

Among the strong Ukrainian contingent in the avant-garde there were many who were interested in primitivism.⁴⁵ They were well represented in the early avant-garde exhibitions in the Russian Empire and could be found working alongside other avant-gardists in Paris, St. Petersburg and Moscow. Ekster was emblematic of the cross-national interaction that was common at the time. She participated in the first avant-garde exhibition in the Russian Empire, Zveno (Link), held in Kyiv in 1908. She visited Paris, where she met Picasso, Braque, Leger and Apollinaire, while at the same time she maintained close contact with other artists from Ukraine working in Paris, who included Natan Altman, Oleksandr Archipenko, Volodymyr Baranoff-Rossinée and David Shterenberg. In ensuing years she divided her time between Paris, Moscow and Kyiv. Between 1917 and 1921 leading figures of the Ukrainian avant-garde like Oleksandr Khvostenko-Khvostov, Vadym Meller, Solomon Nikritin, Anatol Petrytsky, Klyment Redko and Oleksandr Tyshler either took classes from her or frequented her studio in Kyiv. Such interaction across both East-West and North-South axes was common and led to a blending of influences and an exchange of experiences.

Although a definitive study of the Ukrainian avant-garde movement has not yet been written, some dominant features are clear. One was a belief (which Ukrainians shared with Russian and other avant-gardists) in a Slavic cultural revival throughout all of Eastern Europe.⁴⁶ The notion that there were features to Russian and Ukrainian civilizations that were unique and fundamentally different from the Western excited and motivated artists. A mythologized cultural past "functioned as did the notion of exotic tribal and Eastern cultures in West European art."⁴⁷ Stimulated by Picasso's primitivism or Gauguin's exotocism, Russian and Ukrainian painters searched for inspiration by ransacking their own native traditions. Everything from carved stone idols in the Ukrainian steppe, through the decorative arts of the Baroque age to contemporary village crafts was made available as sources of visual imagery.

The vivid use of color and the blending of cubist, futurist and primitivist elements were distinguishing features of the Ukrainian avant-garde. They were shared by Oleksandra Ekster, Oleksandr Khvostenko-Khvostov, Viktor Palmov, Oleksandr Bohomazov and David Burliuk. Maria Syniakova emphasized "primitive," almost childlike drawing in her paintings and ceramics, and sought inspiration in the folk tradition of tile painting which dates back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Although Syniakova enjoyed presenting herself as unschooled, a student of Nature, her circle was, in fact, a sophisticated one. The poets Pasternak

44. *Ibid.*, p. 216.

45. For recent exhibitions and accounts, see Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker, Igor Jassenjowsky and Joseph Kiblicky, *Avantgarde and Ukraine* (Munich: Klinkhardt and Biermann, 1993) which accompanied the Munich exhibition of the same name, and *Ukrajinska avangarda, 1910-1930*, which accompanied the 1990-1991 exhibition in Zagreb.

46. Douglas, *Kazimir Malevich*, p. 12.

47. *Ibid.*

and Khlebnikov stayed at her family estate, as did Mikhail Matiushin. This pose, incidentally, was part of a typically Ukrainian auto-ethnographic performance that can already be detected among the Romantics of the early nineteenth century and persisted into the twentieth.

The search for forgotten rules of past art, for the "laws" and "codes" of perception was also a Ukrainian obsession that owed much to icon-painting. It was a dominant feature of Mykhailo Boichuk's art. There is a curious and revealing parallelism between Malevich and Boichuk. The latter formed a school in Paris in 1905-07, which included Poles and Ukrainians, who together explored Byzantine iconography, fresco art and folk primitivism, searching for the "lost secrets" of great art. They, too, viewed themselves as heralds of the Slavic renaissance in art. Later Boichuk became one of the founders of the Ukrainian Academy of Arts in 1917, created one of the most influential schools of art in the twenties, and in the last years of the decade interacted with Malevich when the latter taught at the Kyiv Art Institute (the renamed Academy of Arts). They met frequently, sometimes at Boichuk's home, for discussions. Boichuk came from a peasant background from the same region of Podillia that Malevich had lived in as a child. Both had studied and been influenced by Symbolism and the Nabis artists. Boichuk actually studied in a studio of the Nabis in Paris. Malevich also had studied the Nabis and been strongly influenced by them at approximately the same time. Douglas has written: "An early indication that Malevich studied works by Gauguin and the Nabis artists are his self-portraits from about 1909 . . . that take Nabis portraits as models. In these works Malevich's lifelong devotion to Symbolist ideas, to multiple layers of meaning, and to the compositional traditions of Russian icons are first set out. Their Western roots are clear: the brilliant colors, the Fauvist complementary reds and greens, the mysterious signs and hints at occult powers, all are indebted to the work of Gauguin and the Nabis."⁴⁸ Both Malevich and Boichuk made Russian or Ukrainian peasants the subjects of their works. Both, too, had a sense of the mysterious power of the monumental forms and symbols of iconic and primitive art. Boichuk, however, recreated the methods and procedures of the medieval artists, focusing on their use of line and composition, and aiming at a serene, harmonious effect. Malevich was more interested in the use of color and simplified forms. Yet, there are analogous works. Malevich's monumental *Peasant Women at Church* (1911) and *At the Cemetery* (1910-11) resemble some of Boichuk's drawings from the same period. Douglas has written, that in these drawings by Malevich "the subjective distance inherent in Western Primitivism, in Gauguin's visions of an island paradise and Picasso's savage masks, has been expunged in favor of a sympathetic identity of the artist with his subject. The exotic "otherness" has been converted into a vision of the peasantry that is wholly and inimitably Russian-Ukrainian."⁴⁹

The last point is an important one. The domestication of the avant-garde was more easily achieved in an environment where the folk culture was a vital part of quotidian existence. Such a domestication was attempted immediately by Malevich, Boichuk, Ekster, the Burliuk brothers and others. These artists were not so

48. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

much depicting an encounter of the Western with a foreign other, but were painting from within the "other." They were not mummifying or "musemifying" objects of primitivism, but connecting with an art that was to be found all around them. The case might also be made that the leap to a conceptual art was so quickly achieved by many artists in the immediate pre- and post-revolutionary years because color symbolism and simplified, abstract forms were already familiar to them from both icon and folk art.

When Malevich reestablished his connections with Kyiv (and the Kharkiv journal *Nova generatsiia*) in the late twenties, he again took up his earlier peasant subjects, producing a series of post-Suprematist paintings and drawings. These works from 1928 to 1930 were backdated by the painter; their peasant subject matter was unacceptable at the time of the First Year Plan when attacks on the "peasant dominant," "formalism" and "bourgeois nationalism" in Ukraine were becoming more and more insistent and threatening. The works constituted a putatively "retrospective" exhibition that opened in Moscow at the Tretyakov Gallery at the end of 1929. Early in 1930 some forty-five of the works were shown in Kyiv. They differ from his earlier peasant works. Dmitry Sarabianov has described these earlier works as evoking "a stable community of people and nature in constant interaction. Man lives his life in nature. Existence is elevated to labor. Peasant women, carrying buckets of water on yokes or heading off for the field, take their children by the hand, for the young ones have been introduced to the rhythm of working life, and their faltering steps over the land seem to make it theirs. The 'peasant universe' is presented to us as an organism with a purpose, where life-processes are determined by the simplest and most obvious actions, where nothing is superfluous, where everything is objective-ontological."⁵⁰ The later works, on the other hand, reveal a different sensibility. The blank faces and armless, mannequin-like figures float in space like the figures of Giorgio de Chirico and other Surrealist artists, in whom Malevich was interested. He was considering devoting last chapter of his projected book "Izologia" to Surrealism as the successor to Suprematism.

There were, however, local sources of inspiration for these works of 1928-30 that have recently come to light. They may also owe much to the discussions Malevich held with Boichuk and other artists in the Kyiv Institute. Although he criticized Boichuk for reproducing the faded colors of monastery frescoes and for copying the past in the press and in his correspondence,⁵¹ the artist probably owed at least a partial debt to Boichuk for his return to peasant subject matter and to icon-inspired art. Many of the paintings and drawings from 1928-30 copy the compositions and the poses of icon art. The grouping of figures who face the viewer (as in *Peasants* 1928-30), or the *Head of a Peasant* (1927-29) which echoes the portrayal of the Head of Christ against a cross in icons.⁵² These works exploit the icon's use of detached, seemingly floating figures, favor the golds, blues

50. Dmitry Sarabianov, "Malevich at the Time of the 'Great Break'," in Galina Demosfenova, ed., *Malevich: Artist and Theoretician* (Paris: Flammarion, 1991), p. 143.

51. K. Malevych, "Arkhitectura, stankove maliarstvo ta skulptura," *Avanhard-Almanakh* (Kyiv), No. 6 (1930), p. 91.

52. Malevich's *Face of a Peasant* is reproduced in D'Andrea, ed., *Kazimir Malevich 1878-1935*, p. 128.

and reds of icons, and the integration of symbolic background details.⁵³ The color theories of the Spectralists might also have been an influence.⁵⁴ Most convincing, however, is the link to the armless and faceless forms were also typical of dolls made by peasants from Podillia. They were often made with a simple black cross on the face.

The paintings of this period differ from Malevich's own peasant paintings of 1911-13 and from Boichuk's work. In contrast to the rather serene earlier style, the later peasant portraits obviously depict a disturbed world in which there is no harmony. They can be read as a protest against the treatment of the village. The armless peasant conveys the helplessness of this class, indeed of the common people as a whole. The absence of details emphasizes the isolation of these figures, who are dislocated from their background, with faces distorted by grimaces (as in *Peasant in the Field*) or gesturing ominously. In his *Untitled (Man Running)* (1928-30) a figure is portrayed as running from a sword toward a cross. On the back of *A Complex Presentiment (Half-Length Figure in a Yellow Shirt)* (1928-32), Malevich wrote: "The composition is made up of the elements of the sensation of emptiness, loneliness and the hopelessness of life. 1913, Kuntsevo." Although backdated, like the other paintings, because such sentiments were punishable with imprisonment at the time of the Five Year Plan, this description probably accurately conveys the artist's mood in the late twenties and early thirties. The figure itself is described by Sarabianov as "cramped by the expanse, the neck is stretched, the arms extended. Edged to the right, the figure has lost its dominant position on the surface of the canvas and is torn from the center. These devices symbolize the uprooting of mankind, its proximity and muteness, its captivity and doom."⁵⁵ Almost irresistibly one is led to conclude that this series of paintings records the presentiment of the catastrophe that was engulfing the peasantry.

Other drawings from the period show a coffin, a hammer and sickle, and Orthodox crosses on the faces of peasants. Horbachov has argued that Malevich may have been aware of the mass movements that were at the time springing up in the rural areas in reaction to the terrible events, and which bore a mystical, eschatological character. Horbachev cites one of the largest as that of the "Kalynivka Miracle," which prophesied the end of the world and the coming of the anti-Christ. In folk-songs, which have survived from this and similar movements, symbols of death, salvation and the Anti-Christ are common. They can be linked to images of the coffin, the cross, and the hammer and sickle in Malevich's paintings from the period.⁵⁶ It is hardly likely that Malevich would have been unaware of such an upsurge of activity among the peasantry, and it is quite conceivable that he would have been influenced by it. He would have chosen to use symbols that were famil-

53. Some of these paintings are reproduced and annotated in Douglas, *Kazimir Malevich*, pp. 108-09 (*Head of Peasant*), pp. 110-11 (*Head of Peasants*), pp. 112-13 (*Untitled. Man and Horse*), pp. 114-15 (*Untitled. Man Running*).

54. Malevich's arguments with Viktor Palmov concerning color were recorded by a student, M. Krapyvynsky. They are in D. Gorbachev's private archive. See D. Gorbachev, "We reminisced," p. 198.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 146

56. Horbachov, "Malevych Muzhytskyi," p. 220.

iar to the popular psyche in order to convey in these paintings an intuitive sense of imminent disaster.

Malevich's disagreements with his Kyiv colleagues were candidly expressed in his articles and letters to Lev Kramarenko and Iryna Zhdanko.⁵⁷ It has been suggested by Horbachov, however, that his sharp criticism of Boichuk stems from an awareness of their "common roots" in the art of the icon.⁵⁸ From this starting point "Ukrainian art branched out in numerous directions, both into the energetic Spectralism of Malevich, Bohomazov and Palmov, and into the quiet 'metaphysical' sadness of the Boichukists."⁵⁹ There was an argument, in other words, between individuals who have evolved out of the same sources. It might also be noted, that the works Malevich produced in his final years, after his "Kyiv period," might also owe a debt to Boichuk, whose intense interest in Renaissance portraiture might have influenced Malevich's turn to a reworking of this genre.

The years of Malevich's contacts with the Kyiv Institute were a time of intense discussions. Boichuk and his school were under heavy attack and defended themselves in books and pamphlets. The Institute's director Ivan Vrona, and many of the staff, including Malevich, participated in the debate. It is entirely possible that in such an atmosphere, with his own arrest looming, Malevich sensed the need to rethink the rural/urban dichotomy. Further research concerning the influences on Malevich of the icon, folk primitivism and the Kyiv Institute of Art still needs to be conducted, but there now exists a body of evidence in the artist's biography, his own statements, and his art that speaks to the formative nature of these influences.

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57. These are in the State Museum of Ukrainian Art (Derzhavnyi musei ukrainskoho obrazotvorchoho mystetstva) in Kyiv, fond. L. Kramarenka. A selection has been published in "Lysty K. Malevycha do khudozhnykiv L. Iu. Kramarenka ta I. O. Zhdanko," *Khronika* 2000, No. 3-4 (1992), pp. 232-40.

58. For his article criticising Boichuk, see Kazymyr Malevych, "Arkhytektura, stankove maliarstvo ta skulptura," *Avanhard-Almanakh*, No. 6 (1930), pp. 91-93.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 229.