

Na  
sombra  
do  
quadro  
Negro

# Na Sombra do Quadrado Negro

**COLÉGIO DAS ARTES  
UNIVERSIDADE DE COIMBRA**

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WORLDVIEW  
AS A CONSTRUCTIVIST  
ACT

BRUNO GIL

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# WORLDVIEW AS A CONSTRUCTIVIST ACT

BRUNO GIL

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*The aggregated reflections of feelings in the individual's consciousness – feelings of the most varied kinds – determine his “view of life”[worldview]. (...) The human being can be likened, in a way, to a radio receiver, which picks up and converts a whole series of different waves of feeling, the sum-total of which determines the above-mentioned view of life. (Malevich, 1927) ©*

## WORLDVIEW AND ITS DIALECTICAL LOGIC

The Russian geo-cultural identity is frequently observed by an *interval* between west and east. That was the main argument brought by Viollet-le Duc's *L'Art Russe* published in 1877, when he searched for a definition of an original Russian art, as a unique composition of Syrian, Indian and Persian elements. His life-long medieval project, arguing for a symbiotic relation between form and structure, pushed him to criticise in the Russian architecture a conspicuous addition of the classical canon as a difficult collage with Oriental references.

More than underlining these abstract notions towards an original Russian cultural identity, as naïve as these can be, by questioning the emphasised *interval* we may bring some light to unravel a *worldview* under construction within a perpetual negotiation of that vast in-between space, which has its highpoint in the dialectical condition of the constructivist project.

In the act of construction of the Russian territory, where distances are difficult to apprehend, and scale distends, a landscape of objects helps to capture a punctual artificiality of nature. Infrastructures are surpassed by superstructures, wishing to become objects, always in self-movement, consciously unaccomplished. We can say that scale becomes valueless, when the micro and macro are conceived with the same “creative energy”, as Iakov Chernikov might argue.

But whereas these objects are politically conceived and artistically expressed, they are realistically constrained by the prevailing logics of social and technical realms, also essential to frame – while criticising – its established *limits* and its possible *phantasies*.

The painted square by Kazimir Malevich can be read as the ultimate sophistication of both *limits* and *phantasies*, charging a quintessential spirit: an oppressive white daylight coming from above is challenged by a nocturn communal dream where black cosmos gives way to a renewed dawn. A reset of the established principles is fulfilled and the pre-existent *worldview* taken to oblivion. A collective memory gives way to a collective movement. The constructivist act is, thus, the inertial *force* resulting from the after-zero.

With this *force*, the low-tech scenography designed by Malevich for the opera “Victory over the Sun” (1913), can reach its high performance. Objects made of wood and paper surpass their material fragility. © A trans-rationality (*zaoum*) is achieved with the arrival of the black square as an icon – “a high-cultural form” – that can be traced back to Malevich’s memoirs of his childhood. The black square shared the spirit he had sensed in peasant art, familiar to the one emanated by Medieval icons painted by the Florentine painter Cimabue, to whom Malevich frequently referred to.

More than a subjective epiphany that kept Malevich awake for several days, the square emerges as a way of going back to basics: a *popular instinct* mirroring reality that we can already trace in the words of Viollet-le-Duc when discussing the Russian art in 1877:

“Ce n’est jamais d’en haut que surgissent les principes vivifiants sans lesquels l’art se traîne dans les pastiches: c’est d’en bas, c’est par le sentiment ou l’*instinct populaire*. Tout renouvellement se fait par suite d’une élaboration dans l’esprit du peuple, des masses: il n’est jamais le produit d’une élite.” ©

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① Kasimir Malevich, “Suprematism”, in Robert L. Herbert, *Modern artists on art: ten unabridged essays*. New York, N.Y.: Prentice Hall Press, 1964, p.99. Published originally in K. Malevich, *Die Gegenstandslose Welt: [von] Kasimir Malewitsch, A. von Riesen* (trans.), Bauhausbücher, 11. München: A. Langen, 1927.

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② After the October Revolution, the traditional construction materials in Russia, where stone was scarce, were wood and brick that continued to structure buildings and also to assemble small ephemeral objects – the propaganda kiosks, and stage sets. The avant-garde collision between the two cylinders that compose Konstantin Melnikov’s house, was conversely materialised with brick walls.

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③ Eugène-M. Viollet-le-Duc. *L’art russe: ses origines, ses éléments constitutifs, son apogée, son avenir*. Paris: Vve A. Morel, p.257, 1877.

In this sense, if we observe the Bronze statue of Peter the Great in Saint Petersburg (1782) designed by the French sculptor Étienne Maurice Falconet, we can say that the stone pedestal is the true icon, more than the statue itself. When carved and made abstract, its effective heaviness is visually emptied, while revealing its own formal self-content: the diagonal, the upwards force, the eruption of a constructivist act. This pedestal is a “proun” *avant la lettre*. Controversially, or not, if formally assessed, it has in its conformation the potential leaning revealed in the Lenin’s tribune designed by El Lissitzky.

Moreover, this might be considered within Lenin’s reading of Hegel’s “dialectical logic”, critical of eclectic short views, arguing that an object should be taken in development and in self-movement, and “if we are to have a true knowledge of an object we must look at and examine all its facets, its connections and “mediacies””. ©

We can perceive this “dialectical logic” as the constructivist *worldview* in the Soviet realm and, as such, the uncompletedness, the instability, appear precisely as the aura of the unfinished project of constructivism.

## HOUSE UNDER CONSTRUCTION

The constructivist act is, hence, fuelled with a self-movement of becoming-other, where (dis)location is paramount in the processes of (trans)formation. When these processes are fully expressed through objects, they represent nothing but their intrinsic formal construction, while mirroring and enacting a hermeneutic framework. The *worldview* becomes other, as Malevich contends in “Suprematism” (1927), the second essay of his major treatise “Non-Objective World” (*Die Gegenstandslose Welt*):

“Now that art, thanks to Suprematism, has come into its own – that is, attained its pure, unapplied form – and has recognized the infallibility of non-objective feeling, it is attempting to set up a genuine world order, a new philosophy of life. It recognizes the non-objectivity of the world and is no longer concerned with providing illustrations of the history of manners.” ©

Nevertheless, while opening a world of novelty, this non-objective *worldview* also brought doubts and misinterpretations, namely in regard to the

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④ Vladimir I. Lenin. *Lenin’s Collected Works. 32*. (trans. Yuri Sdobnikov). Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965 [1920–21], p.94. This sentence will be the epigraph of Nikolai Krasilnikov’s diploma thesis, *Problems of Modern Architecture* (*Problemy sovremennoi arkhitektury*) supervised by Moisei Ginsburg’s studio in Vkhutemas. See Nikolai Krasil’nikov. “Problemy sovremennoi arkhitektury”, *SA-Sovremennaya Arkhitektura*, 3(6), p.170–176, 1928.

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⑤ Kasimir Malevich, “Suprematism”, p.101–102.

beacon of Suprematism – the Black Square. As Aleksei Gan claimed in 1927, art critics will not decide what a black square on a white background represents: the disintegration of the bourgeoisie or, conversely, the rise of the young proletariat. Hence, “about Malevich we do not write.” ©

Actually, Gan was trying to make his own decision, attempting a re-enactment of Malevich’s theories, in front of the shortcomings brought by the rationalist movement, headed by Nikolai Ladovski. His rationalist movement, even if rejecting yesterday’s styles, was still atavistic and disconnected from everyday life. On the other hand, Malevich’s metaphysical formulation opened up a world of possibilities between painting and the third dimension. A “suprematist architecture” should maintain weight, speed and movement as its main features, similarly to a “suprematist painting”.

Bringing forward this third dimension, “arkhitektons” (1920s) constitute an archetype for suprematism. Where the horizontal model *Alfa* reveals the deep structured volume colliding with minor elements, paused in their territorial dislocation, the vertical model *Gota* evokes the vertigo of form, extruded in its aerial flight. We regard those models as an experimental *constructivist act* between two suprematist archetypes of a house: first, its fundamentals in the “House under construction” (“Stroyuschiysya dom”) (1915-16) ⑦ [FIG.1] and, secondly, its application in the “Houses of the Future Leningrad” (“Planity (doma) budushchego Leningrada”) (1924) ⑧. Whereas, in the latter, elements have collided and coalesced into one *planity*, the “House under construction” can be interpreted as the conception of Malevich’s own suprematist *worldview* of art: the art under construction with single coloured elements cosmically relating to each other in space.

Indeed, the act of “transition” between elements consists in a powerful means to unveil the inventive capacity of the designer and his constructivist spirit. The way the (trans)formation is conceived and made present in the design, is translated into the hermeneutic formulation of the constructed composition – the “conjugation” as later theorised by the “Soviet Piranesi” Iakov Chernikhov. ©

④  
Essay by Aleksei Gan on Malevich published in the OSA journal, SA - *Sovremennaiia Arkhitektura* (Contemporary Architecture). See Алексей Ган. “Справка о Казимире Малевиче”. СА-Современная архитектура. п.3, p.104-106, 1927.

⑦  
This work is in the collection of the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra. See <https://artsearch.nga.gov.au/Detail.cfm?IRN=36797>.

⑧  
This work is in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. See <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/35590>.

⑨  
“Conjugation” is one of the four classes of the constructivist solution, besides “amalgamation”, “combination”, “assemblage”. See Catherine Cooke. *Fantasy and Construction: Iakov Chernikhov’s Approach to Architectural Design*. London: Architectural Design, 1984. Chernikhov’s “The Construction of Architectural and Machine Forms” (1931) reveals a concrete outlook on how to translate a cosmological suprematism, free of gravity, into a tectonic investigation where forces between elements were crucial to a project’s eventual materialisation.

“Conjugation” depends on the “interval” between formal conditions – departing from one form and reaching another. Constructiveness, appears, thus, as a sublimation of forms – supremely achieved in visionary projects by Ivan Leonidov. The more its representations express force, tension, rhythm, dynamics, ⑩ the more its forms are pushing the limits of reality and reaching “zero”.

This is the Malevichian “Suprematist Mirror” (“Suprematicheskoe zerkalo”) (1923) ⑩ in action, where “the world as human distinctions” is equal to zero. Therefore, the “after-zero” is itself a revolution. Malevich’s avant-garde aura continued henceforth. Fifty years later, the constructivist movement caused astonishment in the 1960s and 1970s, taking a formal rebirth elsewhere, freed from the original ideology. After one hundred years, it keeps persisting in smaller revolutions, in architecture and art [FIG.2], as a broader *worldview* in perpetual construction determined by “aggregated reflections of feelings in the individual’s consciousness – feelings of the most varied kinds”. ⑩

⑩  
As argued in Moisei Ginsburg’s essay *Rhythm in Architecture* (Ritm v Arkhitekture), first published in 1923.

⑩  
See Kasimir Malevich, “Suprematicheskoe zerkalo.” [The Suprematist Mirror]. *Zhizn’ iskusstva*, n. 20 (895), p.15-16, 1923.

⑩  
Kasimir Malevich, “Suprematism”, p.99.

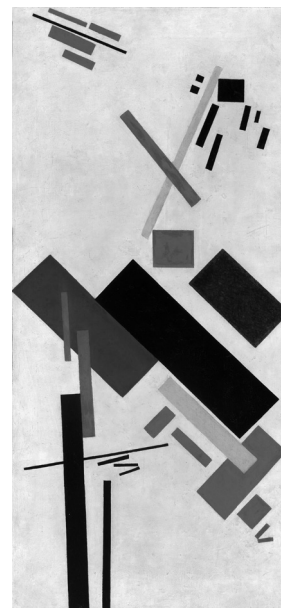


FIG. 1 ←  
“Stroyuschiysya dom” [House under construction], Kasimir Malevich, 1915-16. National Gallery of Australia.  
FIG. 2 →  
“The Unknown House”, Pedro Pousada, 2018. Photo: Pedro Pousada

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