

Florensky and Malevich: the image and materiality

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Daniel Miller claims that artefacts essentially not only have material existence – size, shape, texture, weight, colour, the substance from which they are made – but also the human value placed upon them, the context in which they are given agency, when they become engaged in the vital play of contemporary life: the material only acquires meaning, significance through cultural usage, a disaggregated hybridity that contributes to our sense of a cultural reality. In his book *Iconostasis* (1922) the Russian priest and writer Pavel Florensky insists on the significance of the material specificity of icons within the religious ontology of Russian orthodoxy. Similarly Kazimir Malevich's evolving concept of Suprematism can only be grasped through the "new realism" of his non-objective images, icons for a post-revolutionary future. Material objects – icons and Suprematist images – can exercise within social situations an agency that aims to bring about cultural effects. Both thinkers lived through the early years of the post-1917 Russian revolutions where their humane concepts of dialectical materialism came in conflict with more mundane materialism of Bolshevism.

Keywords: Materiality, Agency, Icon, Suprematism

Florensky en Malevich. Het beeld en materialiteit.

Daniel Miller beweert dat artefacten in wezen niet alleen een materieel bestaan hebben - grootte, vorm, textuur, gewicht, kleur, de stof waaruit ze zijn vervaardigd - maar dat daar bovenop ook een menselijke waarde geldt, de context waarin ze bestaansrecht worden gegeven, als ze in het vitale spel van het hedendaagse leven betrokken zijn: het materiaal krijgt pas betekenis, waarde door cultureel gebruik, een uiteengesplitste hybriditeit dat bijdraagt aan ons gevoel van een culturele realiteit. In zijn boek *Iconostase* (1922) dringt de Russische priester en schrijver Pavel Florensky aan op het belang van de materiële specificiteit van de iconen binnen de religieuze ontologie van de Russische orthodoxie. Ook het evoluerend concept 'Suprematism' van Kazimir Malevich kan alleen worden begrepen door middel van het 'nieuwe realisme' van zijn niet-objectieve beelden, iconen voor een post-revolutionaire toekomst. Materiële objecten - iconen en suprematistische beelden – kunnen binnen sociale situaties een invloed uitoefenen dat zich richt op culturele effecten. Beide denkers hebben de eerste jaren van de post-1917 Russische revoluties meegemaakt waarin hun humane concepten van het dialectisch materialisme in conflict kwam met meer alledaagse materialisme van het bolsjewisme.

Keywords: Materiality, Agency, Icon Suprematism

"We cannot know who we are, or become what we are, except by looking in a material mirror, which is the historical world created by those who lived before us. This world confronts us as material culture and continues to evolve through us." Daniel Miller, 'Introduction' to Daniel Miller (ed.), *Materiality* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 8

As a result of praxis – manual skill informed by knowledge and custom – human beings make things for use.¹ Most of these things are mundane - tools, implements, clothing, shelter, food and drink, protection of the body against the elements, defence against foes and predators. Over time the mind has developed thought processes that not only look for ways to extend praxis, to enhance capacities, but also to contemplate and evaluate that praxis and its social contexts, as well as the contemplators' selfhood, their concepts of natural and supernatural worlds. Knowledge of praxis is passed from one generation to another through language, but also through the use of imagery. Aspects of contemplation, concepts, are given a form of mental and social materiality through the use of images – the cave drawings and bas-reliefs of prehistoric societies, for example. Images were the only way ideas, beliefs, stories, could be rendered in material form before writing.

As Daniel Miller points out, “in his phenomenology of the Spirit, Hegel suggests that there can be no fundamental separation between humanity and materiality. That everything that we are and do arises out of a reflection upon ourselves given by the mirror image of the process by which we create form and are created by the same process.”² “The very act of creating form creates consciousness or capacity such as skill and thereby transforms both form and the self-consciousness of that which has consciousness, or the capacity of that which now has skill.”³

It is in the nature of human relations to the image that the materiality of the sign-bearing medium becomes invisible, overlooked, so that we see the spirit of an ancestor, a pathway to contemplating a god, a landscape, a portrait, and not the moulded clay, the paint on wood or canvas. Yet the material form and medium of the image is essential to both its social invisibility and its “affecting presence”⁴: change the materiality and you rupture the praxis. The material object and its sign-bearing significance are fused in social practice, we do not disaggregate the natural hybridity of form and function in our cognition of the image.

Florensky

The Russian Orthodox priest Pavel Florensky (1882-1937) wrote extensively about both the materiality and spiritual significance of the icon, particularly in his book *Iconostasis* written between 1918 and 1920.⁵ It was a period of profound change in the life of the Russian Orthodox Church and for Florensky himself. The Moscow Theological Seminary in Sergiev Posad near Moscow, in which he taught, was closed in March 1919. In November monks were forbidden their dormitory in the monastery of the Lavra of the Trinity and St Sergius near where Florensky lived with his family. On 31 May 1920 the Cathedral of the Trinity in the Lavra was sealed off and in 1922 the Bolshevik government issued a decree on the confiscation of church valuables. *Iconostasis* is a defence of Florensky’s deeply held values that were being eroded all around him, as the spirit of Russian Orthodoxy was gradually starved of material oxygen.

In *Iconostasis* Florensky claimed that there is nothing accidental about the materiality of the iconic forms, nor about the material lives of the icon painters. Artistic praxis and media “flow from the sacred purpose.” “Neither the techniques nor the materials... are accidental; none of them may be understood as having simply arrived – in the accidents of history – inside the Church, as if any of them could be painlessly and easily replaced by other techniques and other materials.”⁶ The icon cannot be compared with any other art form, nor can it be replaced by other types of images, “as if materials and techniques were somehow arbitrarily connected with artistic ideas and concepts, somehow extrinsic to aesthetic essences.”⁷

In claiming that “it is impossible, then, to conceive even as a purely aesthetic experiment an icon composed in an alien technique with alien materials: it could not possibly be an icon,”⁸ Florensky emphasises an essential materiality that was unaffected by regional variations in colouration and composition, by changes in style over time, by the influence of Western art from the 16th century, by the massive intrusion of Russian popular culture into the range of subject matter, or by artistic dexterity.

This impossibility becomes vividly clear when we consider the spiritual essence of the icon. The artistic strategies and tactics of icon painting, i.e. the materials used and the ways of technically using them, are the metaphysical modalities by which the icon possesses incarnate life. The materials and techniques of an art – any art – are symbolic: for each single one of them possesses its own concretely determined metaphysical aliveness through which it corresponds to a unique spiritual fact.⁹

Florensky makes claims for the appropriateness of specific materials to their metaphysical function.

If we think about the surfaces of icon painting – about the exact biology and physics of the artistic surfaces (i.e. their chemical and physical natures) about what precisely coheres the colour-pigments as well as their chemical constituents; if we think about what various dissolvents and varnishes exactly do in the icon; if, in short, we think about the myriad *material causes* [Florensky's emphasis] operating in any art, then we are already directly engaged in reflecting upon that profoundly metaphysical disposition which the creative will expresses in and as its wholeness.¹⁰

Material and creative function forge a natural hybridity that is the result of both manual praxis and the history of concepts and social interactions. “In creativity [there is] something far beyond the merely mental arbitrariness of rational choice...the powers of creativity continue the primary activity of organic organisation, that activity through and of which the physical body is itself woven.”¹¹

The Russian wall of icons, the iconostasis, “the window on Heaven”, which separates the congregation from the sacred space of the altar (the sanctuary), which replaced the Byzantine *templon* (openwork altar rail) around 1400, whilst marking a shift in the material display of icons,¹² did not affect the integrity of the materiality of icons themselves within this frame. “Otherworldliness” is conveyed through the material even when that materiality becomes, as it were, invisible through the assumption of the ubiquitous hybridity of the image. “An icon can be of high or not-so-high quality, but a genuine apprehension of otherworldliness, a genuine spiritual experience invariably constitutes its foundation.”¹³

The materiality of icons cannot be considered separately to the materiality of their context, their place in the space of a Russian Orthodox church, their surfaces lit by oil lamps and candles, the dim Northern light filtered down through slits in the drum of the dome, the air rendered sacred through a mist of incense, an air vibrant with the voices of unaccompanied choristers.¹⁴ There is also, Florensky argues, a particular colouration to the Orthodox Church interior in which the icon and frescoes play a significant role. These qualities of the materiality of the Orthodox interior in themselves create a sense of the power of that “crystalline transparency of Orthodox liturgical life,”¹⁵ become the locus of engagement of subject and object, such that it is possible, in such material circumstances of the body, of the full play of the senses,¹⁶ for the believer at prayer to experience the saints descending from the icon to give their blessing. It is a situated experience of material life that shapes both human sentient experience and thought processes: the image plays an essential part in the living materiality of the liturgical space for the engaged believer. Icons become “agentic objects” within that space of liturgical action, within the vital play of Orthodox worship, acting as “interlocutors between persons, things, and worlds”.¹⁷ The material and immaterial become enmeshed, collapsing the boundaries of subject and object. In these circumstances icons “represent a presence of power in realising the world, crafting things from nothing, subject from nonsubjects.”¹⁸

The deitic imaginary, religious ideas and sentiments, a sense of collective identity and belonging, of history, an ontology, takes form through the concrete locus of engagement with the icon in the living context of Orthodox worship. It is as if the objectification of specific religious events through the imagery of the icon imbues the greater realm of Orthodox belief with agency, with spiritual efficaciousness.

Florensky, in his condemnation of Western reason, contends that the very form of the canvas on a stretcher in Renaissance art is related to the individuality, “the sensuous liquidity” of the Renaissance painter. “The icon board: immovable, hard, unbending, ...is far too strict,

obligatory, and ontological for the hand of the Renaissance artist.”¹⁹ The purpose of the icon is not to depict the apparent, the world as seen through reason and the eye, the Renaissance’s Optical Model, but as a means to apprehend the invisible world, what is “sensuously unavailable”, but essentially “real”.²⁰ This is the reason for the use of gold in Orthodox icons to depict the spiritual firmament:²¹ blue merely renders the apparent sky, the sensuous experience of looking into space, not the religious aspiration of apprehending the heavens.

For Florensky, then, the icon is an essential object within the orthodox frame of being, constituting its context of lived action. Icons play a part in the social process of influencing a perception of the world, of cosmology, of ontology, of who and what we are, of the moral structure of the world in which we act. Their materiality, constituted of the hybridity of praxis, object and concept, both represent and interpret Orthodox reality. Icons act as emphasis frames, simplifying that mystical reality by focusing on subsets of belief – the life and work of Christ, the Apostles and Fathers of the Church, that are mere external, material, visualised cyphers for a reality that lies beyond, beyond the apparent, the optical, the sensuously experienced, beyond reason. It is this frame and the material qualities of the icon, as against any other form of visual art, that give the icon power and authority within the Orthodox world, that constitute normative behaviour, Orthodox second nature, the Orthodox orientation to the world, or habitus. The intangible is grounded in the tangible.

In an article written in October 1918 Florensky likened the liturgical rite of the Orthodox church to a synthetic aesthetic experience, a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, experienced by the congregation through their senses of sight, hearing, smell and touch, materially through their body. When cultural experiences such as this cease to exist and the objects that are used in such rites (*deistva*) are removed to a museum, the object changes its character, loses its power: an icon in a museum becomes “a work of art” at best, an ethnographic specimen at worst – it becomes merely material and ceases to enjoy the conceptual richness of its former hybrid character. “A museum that functions autonomously is false”,²² he writes, and the essential adjuncts to ritual “die, or at least enter a state of [suspended animation].”²³ Though materially the object remains the same, it is now, conceptually, a freak. “Verily, *lucus a non lucendo*.”²⁴

When icons took on characteristics of artworks, became precious and collectable, Florensky felt their integrity challenged. “Icons in an excessively delicate style, for example the Stroganov manner, are of course characteristic of an age that turned its sacred objects into items of luxury, vanity and collectability.”²⁵ Furthermore, putting an object into a museum “transgresses against life, slid[es] on to the oversimplified, easiest path of stifling and soul-destroying collecting. For isn’t that what happens when an aesthete or archaeologist regards the signs of life in some organism, a functionally unified whole, as self-sufficient *objects*, severed from the living spirit, outside of their true functional relationship to the whole.”²⁶ Thus for Florensky “materiality” encompasses not simply the object, but the object in its “vital play”,²⁷ the environment for which it was conceived, and the phenomenological conditions for its enactment, for it to realise its power, for it to act. “The work of art is the centre of an entire cluster of conditions, which alone make possible its existence as something artistic; outside of its constitutive conditions it *simply does not exist* as art.”²⁸ “In a museum we see not icons but merely caricatures of them”²⁹ (Florensky’s emphasis).

It is in this spirit that Florensky included in his notes in preparation for this essay his positive response to the notion of the late Metropolitan Vladimir that rather than gathering all Russian religious art treasures into a museum he would prefer to see them burnt.³⁰

It is significant that Florensky wrote *Iconostasis* in the aftermath of the October Revolution in Russia that led to the formation of the atheist Bolshevik government. From 1918 to 1920 he served on the Commission for the Preservation of Monuments and Antiquities of the Lavra of the Trinity and St Sergius in Sergiev Posad, the architectural complex at the heart of Russian Orthodoxy then being reorganised as a museum. He was also invited to teach a course on Byzantine art at the Moscow Institute of Historical and Artistic Researches and Museology. The book was meant to serve as an explication of Orthodox belief and practice, emphasising the role of icons, and hence, despite the feelings expressed in his notes, the need to preserve rather than destroy them, because of their role in Russians' orientation to the world, an orientation that was fast being redirected and replaced by the new orthodoxy of Marxism-Leninism. There is a painful self-contradiction in Florensky's position here, as he sought to come to terms with the destruction of the material and phenomenological conditions for the enactment of his spiritual beliefs.

Florensky was also a research scientist and entertained the possibility of legitimate parallel thinking, upholding a scientific basis for material culture and orthodox belief for spiritual aspirations. He certainly attempted to live that duality, as well as act as a salvage museologist for the preservation of the most valuable (from his perspective) material objects from the Orthodox past. However there was a fundamental split between the closed mysteries of Orthodoxy and the open enquiry of the scientist that made parallel thinking untenable to the Marxist mind, which, at its most positive, was intent on enhancing social capacities, at least at this stage of the Russian Revolution. If Florensky entertained the idea of the parallel progression of science and spirit such a duality became increasingly untenable within Bolshevik orthodoxy. The ideological frameworks of the two orthodoxies were incommensurable, conceptually incompatible, as he was to understand tragically in the not too distant future.

Malevich

In December 1915 Kazimir Malevich showed Suprematist images, the New Realism, for the first time at the "Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings: 0.10" at Nadezhda Dobychina's Art Bureau on the Field of Mars in Petrograd, as St Petersburg was then called. The exhibition showed over thirty Suprematist works arranged from floor to ceiling, like some abstract fresco, and with the key image, the *Black Quadrilateral* (usually now called *The Black Square*) in the icon corner, right up against the ceiling plaster cornice. Malevich explained the reference to "0.10" in an essay he distributed at the exhibition, *From Cubism to Suprematism. The New Painterly Realism*.³¹ This New Realism, he argued, would draw a line under all previous art, it would "reduce all figurative forms to nothing" and then "step beyond zero – to the non-objective."³² In this way he made overt the process by which imagery crafts something from nothing, subjects from nonsubjects, the use of the materiality of language and image in combination to give form to the immaterial.

The prose of his essay was no less shocking than his images, mocking the art of the past, disparaging Western "art" displayed in galleries and museums as without relevance in the new age, devoid of the former "vital play" of images. Instead Malevich presented new icons for a new era, the era of scientific enquiry, of revolutionary social change. For Malevich the art of the past was of no "use" to us, we needed a new hybrid materiality linking Suprematist objects with Suprematist concepts, as, from their first appearance, Suprematist painterly images were associated with verbal explications, explorations – the visual and the word inextricably woven together as a conceptual magic carpet whisking the mind into a new conceptual space. Like

the experience of the icon in the vital space of the orthodox liturgy Malevich hoped that the contemplation of Suprematist images in the context of his writing would lead to a reshaping of both sentient experience and imminent thought processes. Suprematist images, in these circumstances, would become agentic objects.

The material words, Malevich believed, were needed to speed and sharpen comprehension of Suprematism's mission, giving the incredulous public a way in, a guide, to the radical imagery they were to see and experience, as Malevich was sure that, without a cultural context, visitors would immediately feel bodily shock, apprehension, even revulsion. What Suprematism lacked, however, was "situation", an embeddedness within a social context, a legitimising culture wider than the fissiparous cliques of the Russian avant-garde. Form, materials and the manufacture of images have to be grounded in social relations to become reified agents of vital play, to accrue to themselves the inflection of powerful things.

But Malevich wanted to cut away the ground of history, to shatter the material mirror, to sever all links with the history of art, with both sacral and secular traditions of cognition, any previously constructed 'situatedness'. He was a radical iconoclast. But how could he persuade a sceptical public and artworld that his ideas had value, had relevance within their own, and fast changing, social context? Malevich understood that the material images in themselves were not enough. Urgent words were essential to the task of creating a foundational "situation" for his "new" material objects, to make nothing into something imbued with agency, the materiality of energy, "a work of pure living art". From the first the key image of the *Black Square* was imbued not only with the crude materiality of a "real" black quadrilateral – black paint on a white ground – instead of the fallacious, "little corners of nature, madonnas and shameless *Venuses*," but, like Florensky's icon, with a conceptual material life that shapes both human sentient experience and thought processes.

In his essay Malevich insisted that "creativity", the development of new visual forms and concepts, could not happen when art was burdened with now irrelevant historical baggage, including the frame of the apparent, of nature. Cubism and Futurism had tried to reconfigure that frame, by developing multiple perspectives within a single image and by attempting to address the problem of expressing speed and time in a materially two-dimensional medium. Neither Cubism nor Futurism could bring themselves to abandon the frame of Western art histories in order to "create" material images free from the shackles of "the apparent", of nature, in order to enter the new realm of "absolute creativity".

The world of "nature", as Malevich puts it, is framed by "reason". It had for some time been a cornerstone of Russian Cubofuturism to get "beyond reason" (*zaum*), beyond the historical and cultural limitations placed on thinking within all human communities, to effect a change in cognition.³³ In March 1915 Malevich had issued his "Easter Message", alongside those of his Cubofuturist colleagues, to the effect that "Reason is the artist's prisoner's chain, and therefore I wish all artists freedom from reason."³⁴ In the opening statement of his 1915-16 pamphlet-manifesto Malevich placed Suprematism firmly outside the frame of "Reason": "Space is a receptacle without dimensions, in which reason displays its creative work (*tvorchestvo*). Let me also display my own [alternative] creative form."³⁵

Thus from the very first Malevich challenged any commonly established sense of materiality as he was seeking both forms and concepts that lay outside the common parameters of particulars and universals: he wanted "absolute creativity", an exploration of the unthought.

Yet the tools available to him were the very prisoner's chains he was so keen to throw off – the materials to make images – paint, canvas, and the materials to explore concepts – language.

In the years that followed (1915-1921) Malevich not only developed Suprematist images – the “static sensations” of the Black and Red Quadrilaterals, the “dynamic sensations” of complex coloured images, the magnetic Suprematism of interrelating, interacting “dynamic sensations”, the “sensations of total non-existence” in the white-on-white phase, the “technological organisms of the Suprematist future” – the constructions “satellite systems in space”, but also a series of essays each developing new aspects of Suprematism, emphasising the making of images and conceptual thought as “creative work” (*tvorchestvo*) without any constricting frame. For Malevich reality is not contained within frames. The only “reality” is energy, the energy that propels us, and our world, through the infinite cosmos, an energy subject only to the rules of its own nature, which Malevich, somewhat confusingly for some commentators, labelled “economy”.³⁶

Malevich was not unaware of the parallels between the role of Suprematist images and the icon, after all he had placed one of the *Black Quadrilaterals* in the icon corner of the Dobychina Gallery in December 1915. If the icon sought to evade the apparent by insisting on a gold ground, so too Malevich denied the blue of the sky by insisting on depicting the universe, within which we have our being, as a white ground, nothing-ness, zero, the void.

Malevich had grown up with icons in his parents' house – despite their Polish Catholic origin. He was familiar with the essential “mysticism” of Russian Orthodoxy. When he lived in Vitebsk in 1919-1921, the period when Florensky was preparing *Iconostasis*, Malevich visited both Orthodox and Catholic churches, as well as the synagogue.³⁷ The energy that Malevich places at the centre of his subject matter, both in terms of concepts and imagery (the *Black Square* symbolising stasis and the *Red* movement) he was, also confusingly, at times to label “God”. Malevich's concept of God, he makes clear, is grounded in the materiality of his images.

Malevich never conceived Suprematist ideas, and the images that gave them form, as simply a given, static, unresponsive to change. They existed in a concept of space owing much to Einstein's Theory of Relativity, and Malevich reflexively understood that his own mind had to grow from the materiality of the images and ideas he had forged through the spiralling hybridity of Suprematism. In 1920 he wrote to his friend Mikhail Gershenzon:

A great deal has also become clear about Suprematism, in particular when the *Black Square* grew into an architecture in such a manner that it was difficult to express the shape of that architecture, having taken forms that were difficult to see as architecture, it was an image in which it was impossible to see its form. This is the form of some new living structure; if suddenly you came upon such a city, it would be impossible to recognise that this *Square* had become vital, giving the new world some resolution; but I look at it quite differently than I did before. It is not a painting. It is something else. It occurred to me that if mankind had drawn the image of God in its own image, then, perhaps the *Black Square* is the image of God, like manifestations of his actuality in a new form of some contemporary genesis.³⁸

All Malevich's images and writing have multiple and evolving conceptual values, refocussing their significance according to context. For example, the *Red Square* of action became the badge of the Suprematist faction at Unovis (The Affirmers of the New Art) within the Vitebsk School of Art (1920-21), which students and staff wore on their clothing as a sign of solidarity. Malevich also invited his students in Vitebsk to “draw the Red Square in your studios as a sign of the world revolution of the arts.”³⁹ Others also saw in the Suprematist images other meanings of “revolution”, such as the end of the old world, with both negative and positive connotations.

Yet Russian artists and the intelligentsia took both his images and writing seriously.⁴⁰ Post-1917 Russia seemed to offer the ideal “situation”, the cultural embeddedness, the vital play, that Suprematism previously lacked.

In an interesting exchange the writer Andrei Belyi saw the *Black* and *Red Squares* accompanied by the Jewish intellectual Mikhail Gershenzon. For Belyi they were simply objects, without significance, but Gershenzon was incensed by them. He appeared to be mocking Malevich when he lowered his voice to speak seriously, as if he were giving a lecture: “The history of art and all those images of Vrubel’ are nothing by comparison to these squares”. “He stood in front of the squares, as if praying to them; he later explained to me: looking at these squares (black and red), that he had a sensation of the fall of the old world: ‘ Just you wait and see: everything will be destroyed.’”⁴¹ Malevich wrote to Gershenzon in December 1919:⁴²

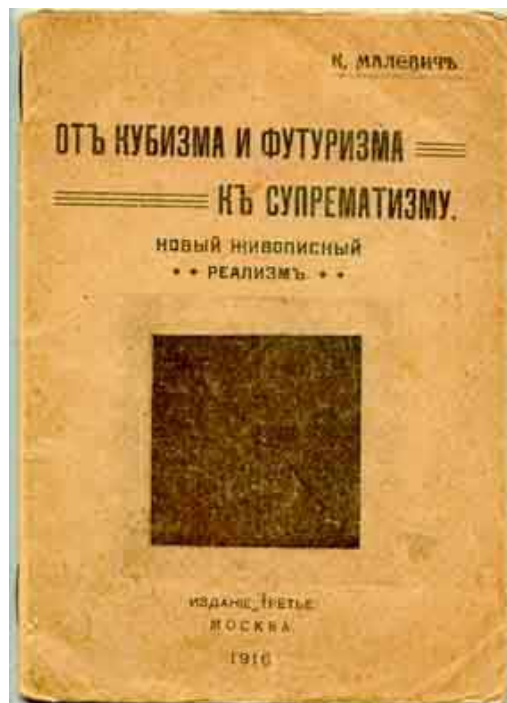
The moment is approaching when this world will come to an end. Its forms are decrepit, worm out. A new world is on the horizon, its structures are soul-less and reason-less, will-less, but are powerful and strong. They are indifferent to God and the church and to all religions. They have life and breath, but their breast does not rise and fall and their heart doesn’t beat, but the brain that has moved into their body moves them and us with a new strength: for now... I call this spirit dynamism (although this word, perhaps, conveys something else).⁴³

Whilst documenting the passing of the old world, Malevich did not seem to find any solace in the new. Indeed in 1920 he also developed ideas of parallel thinking: the new Bolshevik government might be instituting new “soul-less” structures, but Suprematism could breathe a new positive “creativity” into them. In Vitebsk in early 1920 he organised a Suprematist Party with branches among his followers in Moscow and a few provincial towns.⁴⁴ It had no political policies⁴⁵ but stood for freedom of creativity and freedom of thinking outside any frame or platform. Its forward thinking was conveyed materially by Suprematist images, now being produced by Malevich’s followers and students in Vitebsk, and conceptually by the stream of aphorisms and articles coming from his own pen. The Suprematist Party was not opposed to the Bolsheviks but saw itself as their creative partner, an intellectual counterweight to the brutal mechanics of revolution. However, by the end of 1920 Malevich recognised, like Florensky, the inexorable tragedy that the Bolshevik leadership would never permit such parallel processes. The ideological frameworks of Suprematism and Bolshevism were incommensurable, conceptually incompatible, as Malevich was also to understand tragically in the not too distant future.

For both Malevich and Florensky the image – whether icons or Suprematist paintings – were the material objects through which a knowledgeable viewer could find a path to new thinking, thinking that was outside any language-based conceptual framework tied to history. Both rejected the rationality that had given rise to one-point perspective. Whilst images purport to create a sense in two-dimensions of optical space both Russians found mere opticality a hindrance to comprehending the “reality” of, in the one case, our relationship to God and, in the second, man’s place in a dynamically constructed spatial universe. Perspective might be a useful mechanism to outline the apparent but not the “real” (though the “real” meant different things to both Florensky and Malevich). For Florensky the icon was a faith-hallowed device for contemplating mystical reality. It was necessary and sufficient for this purpose. For Malevich the *Black Square*, and its progeny, were temporary mechanisms for a similar exercise in conceptual thinking but were increasingly insufficient. To reach “zero”, the materiality of the void (the only reality in which the energy of the universe has its being) Malevich struggled towards the white-on-white series and even showed a blank canvas at two exhibitions. By 1920 he was writing about the “religious spirit of pure act”, in a sense announcing that the only material conduit towards thinking through the idea of a new reality as suggested by developments in science, philosophy and mathematics, was akin to the irrationality of religious experience.

There is no suggestion that Malevich and Florensky knew, except superficially, of each other or their work. Commentators have often put their ideas alongside each other and hoped that something would come from such a juxtaposition,⁴⁶ but to no avail. Florensky's focus on the icon precluded any serious consideration of the work of the contemporary Russian avant-garde. He was aware of abstract Modernism but tended to group all practitioners into a single category and dismissed their images as conjuring tricks and magic quite devoid of any intellectual coherence.⁴⁷

Any discussion of the work of Florensky on icons and Malevich on Suprematist images highlights the essential recursive dialectic between the material and the conceptual. Social praxis, concepts, the material form these take in development of cultures over time is never static – icons did change in important material, stylistic and social respects over time and place, however Florensky argues that their essential “vital play” for orthodox believers did not, and Malevich was always ready to grasp the recursive nature of Suprematism – between image and concept, from painting to design, to architecture, to film, with a shifting materiality, as the concepts themselves responded to new social and political circumstances, yet was essentially seeking new ways of seeing the world and man's place in the universe, Suprematism's “vital play.” Concepts develop according to the passage of dynamics of history through time, including the materials used to give them form, and through their contemporary situatedness, shaped itself to some extent by the material structuring and componentry of that history. Materiality and immateriality have a natural recursive relationship out of which concepts and history itself grows, driven by the energy that Malevich argues is the very life-force of the natural world, the universe in which we have our being.



Cover of a 2010 edition of Florensky's *Iconostasis* published by Azbuka-Klassika, Moscow



Cover of Malevich's pamphlet-manifesto *From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism* published in Moscow, 1916

Notes

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| 1 | A 'thing' is used here to indicate any object or event that is experienced optically or otherwise sensuously free of any social or symbolic connotations. | 10 | op.cit. |
| 2 | Daniel Miller (ed.), <i>Materiality</i> (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005): 8 | 11 | Sheehan and Andrejev: 1996: 100. |
| 3 | Miller: 2005: 9 | 12 | The first ceiling-high, five-levelled Russian iconostasis was designed for the Cathedral of the Annunciation in the Moscow Kremlin in 1405, which was repeated in the Cathedral of the Dormition in Vladimir in 1408. On the history and significance of the iconostasis in the Russian Orthodox Church see Aleksei Lidov (ed.), <i>Ikonostas: Proiskhozhdenie, razvitie, simbolika</i> (Moscow: Progress-Traditsiia, 2000). |
| 4 | On 'affecting presence' see R.P. Armstrong, <i>The Powers of Presence: Consciousness, Myth and Affecting Presence</i> (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981) | 13 | Pavel Florenskii, <i>Ikonostas</i> , edited by A. G. Dunaev (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1994): 71. |
| 5 | Iconostasis was not published in Russian until 1972: Archimandrite Innokentii (Prosvirin) and Pavel V. Florensky (eds), 'Sviashchennik Pavel Florensky, <i>Ikonostas</i> ' in <i>Bogoslovskie Trudy</i> , 9 (Moscow, 1972): 88-148. For an English translation see Donald Sheehan and Olga Andrejev, <i>Pavel Florensky. Iconostasis</i> (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996). | 14 | Pavel Florensky, 'The Church Ritual as a Synthesis of the Arts', in Nicoletta Misler, <i>Pavel Florensky: Beyond Vision: Essays on the Perception of Art</i> (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), p. 107-109. |
| 6 | Sheehan and Andrejev: 1996: 98. | 15 | Sheehan and Andrejev: 1996: 101. |
| 7 | Sheehan and Andrejev: 1996: 99. | 16 | Misler: 2002: 110. |
| 8 | op.cit. | 17 | Lynn Maskell, 'Objects in the Mirror Appear Closer Than They Are' in Daniel Miller (ed.), <i>Materiality</i> (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005): 51. |
| 9 | op.cit. | | |

- 18 Maskell: 2005: 51.
- 19 Sheehan and Andrejev:1996: 105.
- 20 *ibid*: 125.
- 21 Mislser: 2002: 108.
- 22 *ibid*: 101.
- 23 *ibid*: 102.
- 24 *ibid*: 103.
- 25 Florensky, 1985: 288.
- 26 Mislser, 2002: 104
- 27 *ibid.*: 106.
- 28 *ibid.*:106.
- 29 *ibid.*:108.
- 30 *ibid.*: 99. Metropolitan Vladimir (Vasilii Bogoiavlensky) (1848-1918) was Metropolitan of St Moscow (1898-1912) and St Petersburg (1912-1915), when he was demoted because of his criticism of Rasputin. He was Metropolitan of Kiev and Galich when he was arrested in February 1918 and executed in front of his monks. It was possibly for this reason that Florensky did not included this passage from his notes in the final version of his essay.
- 31 Kazimir Malevich, *Ot kubizma k suprematizmu. Novyi zhivopisnyi realism* (From Cubism to Suprematism. The New Painterly Realism) Petrograd, 1916. A shorter, version of this pamphlet-manifesto was written and printed in the autumn of 1915, despite the fact that it bear the date “1916” on the cover. Both versions appear in identical editions.
- 32 Malevich: 1916: 14
- 33 For a general history of Russian Cubofuturism see Vladimir Markov, *Russian Futurism: A History* (London: McGibbon and Kee, 1969).
- 34 *Paskha u futuristov: Paskhalnye pozhelaniia* in Kazimir Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh 1*, (Moscow: Gileiia, 1995): 26
- 35 *Ot kubizma k suprematizmu* in Kazimir Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh 1*, (Moscow: Gileiia, 1995): 27
- 36 Malevich’s term ‘economy’ is tantalisingly unclear, but nevertheless central to his intuition about ontology, the nature of being in the universe. In his fascinating essay on Malevich in Vitebsk, Timothy Clark relates Malevich’s “economy” to the more mundane notion of either a political or fiscal economy, that were never present in Malevich’s own use of the word. More egregiously he insists on equating “energy + internal logic” with Flatness, expressing his repeated ‘will to flatness’ as a measure of Modernism. For Malevich Suprematist images were not expressions either of flatness or three dimensions, but of the spatial relationships established through the economy (the rules created) of energy. Clark, T.J., *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes in the History of Modernism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press). 1999: 234-236. Clark also fails to grasp Malevich’s ironical use of key concepts, such as ‘God’ or ‘the Factory’. Elsewhere in this essay, however, Clark’s untiring efforts to get to the heart of the Vitebsk experience are profoundly illuminating.
- 37 Kazimir Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh 3*, (Moscow: Gileiia, 2000): 334
- 38 *ibid.*: 339
- 39 Unovis (1), Vitebsk, 20 November 1920.
- 40 See, for example, Belyi, Andrei, *Mezhdru dvukh revoliutsii* [Between Two Revolutions], Edited by A. V. Lavrov. Seriiia literaturnykh pamiatnikov (memuarov) (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1990, reprint of 1934 original): 256; A. Lisov, The Works of Group UNOVIS from Vitebsk in the First Exhibition of Russian Art in Berlin in 1922, in Malevich: *Klassicheskii avangard Vitebsk, 5* (Vitebsk Regional Museum: Vitebsk, 2002): 49-56; and the ambivalent relationship to Malevich’s ideas in the 1920s and 1930 mentioned in the correspondence of Antonina Sofronova, in *A. Sofronova: Zapiski Nezavisimoi* (RA: Moscow, 2001).
- 41 Belyi: 1990 [1934]: 256
- 42 Kazimir Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh 3*, (Moscow: Gileiia, 2000): 327-354. This section contains the few letters still extant that Malevich wrote to Gershenzon 1918-1924.
- 43 *ibid.*: 337
- 44 Karasik, Irina, (ed.), *V krughe Malevicha* (Palace Editions: St Petersburg, 2000): 16 and 23.
- 45 Malevich was affiliated in the immediate post-1917 years with the Russian and Ukrainian anarchists. He wrote for their journal and was

- horrified when, as early as 1918, the Bolsheviks began to persecute their leadership.
- 46 John Milner is, for example, guilty of this ‘influence by juxtaposition’. See his *Kazimir Malevich and the Art of Geometry* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996): 115, 185.
- 47 Igumen Andronik (Aleksandr Trubachev), Mariia Trubacheva and Oleg Genisaretky (eds.), *Pavel Florenskii. Analiz prostranstvennosti i vremeni v khoduzhestvenno-izobrazitel’nykh proizvedeniakh* (Moscow: Progress 1993): 127-8.

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- Unovis No. 1*, Vitebsk, 20 November 1920.

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