

Present Perfect or Present Progressive? Temporality in Early Soviet Avant-Garde Visual Arts

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I want the future today.
Mayakovsky

In life, mankind is an experiment for the future.
Rodchenko

The words of everyday language that make their way into academic discourse are usually the ones that provoke the most heated debates. The problem seems to depend not on the layers of supplementary meanings, covering some 'hidden core,' but on the inapplicability of the univalent term in the situation where both the context and the purpose of the analysis make the author tailor the existing vocabulary to particular purposes. To avoid possible terminological misunderstandings, I shall begin by defining the notion of the avant-garde as employed throughout this text, which slightly restricts the immediate scale of associations generally invoked by the term (Poggioli 12-15).

The term 'avant-garde' could be equally applied to the interpretation of form, as well as to the content of some artistic creation. In the former case the attention is mostly concentrated on the manifested stylistic innovations (in the case of visual arts, this would be an elaboration of a new pictorial language), while the latter emphasizes a certain radical ideology behind the project and is necessarily more self-reflexive (Bürger 22).¹ In other words, in my interpretation avant-garde is itself an ideology that implies particular temporal relations with the world. Briefly speaking, it postulates a linear development of the world that is encoded in the avant-gardists' positive self-evaluation: in the teleologically unfolding historical process they see their role not only as the prophets of a dawning future, but as active demiurges who, with the help of works of art, making this future happen. Making art a part of the public sphere necessitates the development of an artistic language that can influence, cause, and direct certain societal changes, ensuring that art and life progress in the same direction.

Russian avant-garde artists appear to claim their rights to the future approximately at the same time as their Western counterparts (Krusanov 20-25). It would be incorrect to think that the 1917 revolution was a radical break in the avant-garde worldview. Rather, being often more radical than politicians, avant-garde artists saw a unique opportunity to implement their ideas in practice – one of the major reasons that Soviet Russia is a perfect

case study for analyzing artistic utopias. Active participation in agitation and propaganda during the Civil War shaped revolutionary ideology, but certainly did not create it anew (Lodder 47). Nevertheless, the Marxist canon was important as a strong teleological referential framework for avant-garde artists.² As I try to show, however, there was no uniform interpretation of the ideal future.

These preliminary remarks already make clear the primacy of the questions of temporality in the avant-garde movement. Practically, the old/new dimension acquires an ontological status with a clear value judgment:

After long centuries marking the destruction of the bearers of youth the day has come for the clash between youth and age. Today a desperate struggle is being carried on with the old man who is trying to stifle youth. <...> We wish to form ourselves according to a new pattern, plan and system; we wish to build in such a way that all the elements of nature will unite with man and create a single, all-powerful image. (Malevich, 1920, 167)

If we accept the distinction of "activism vs. expectation" as two opposite attitudes towards the future in the age of modernity (Kern 89-90),³ the avant-garde would definitely qualify as the epitome of an active mode of life and thought. Considering the evolution of the inherent potentials of avant-garde ideology, I aim to show how it ultimately withdrew from its original activist stance and turned into the mode of expectation. Such an evolution was stimulated by changes in the environment (cultural, social, political), but was not merely imposed on the artists.

Starting from shared premises, the most uncompromising artists of the 1920s gradually diverged in creating opposing visions of the future (to which I refer as ideal types): provisionally, these two could be called "Constructivist" and "Organicist" canons. The visual and ideological languages of both were conceived before the revolution, but their development was finalized, and their ways finally parted, during the 1920s. Before turning to a detailed analysis of the development of these canons in painting, architecture, and cinema, I would like to give a brief explanation of the introduced concepts.

The origins of both constructivist and organicist visual languages are traceable to Cubism and Futurism, with their special emphasis on the plurality of perspectives, an analytical approach to form, an interplay between materials and attempts to reproduce speed and movement on the two-dimensional canvas, as well as in the architectural models. The lessons learned by artists in Russia from these experiments were diverse: "ideal-typical

Constructivism" emphasized the utilitarian functions of the construction, created by and for a 'standard' individual who is the result, as well as the creator, of this process. Being mobile, rational, and pragmatic, this individual takes the best from the present for building the ideal future. Organicity, on the other hand, aimed at a unity that was close to the conservative Slavophile utopia or a monistic collectivism of God-builders (Williams 38-40): a group not reducible to the mere sum of its individual representatives, united by a common spirit and higher, almost metaphysical interests, communally working to create the apocalyptic future. My examination of the evolution of constructivism and organicism in the 1920s and their impact on the modalities of time perception argues — through analyzing both the works and the manifestoes of the artists — that the activist attitude towards the future gradually ceded to a modality of mere expectation and, ultimately, an abrogation of the active stance in relation to the future in both canons.

I. Kazimir Malevich: the Lonely Cosmic Rider

Long before the revolution, painting was probably the primary sphere of art for experimenting with a new visual language. Borrowing ideas from Western trends, particularly French Cubism and post-Impressionism, and, at the same time, influenced by a European fascination with primitive arts, such Russian artists as Larionov, Goncharova, Lentulov, Filonov, and Malevich discovered the world of peasantry, Russian orthodoxy, and traditions of *lubok* (Khardzhiev 59-60). The world created in their works attempted to recover a lost paradise. Receptive to these ideas, yet modifying them in order to align them with his Futuristic world view,

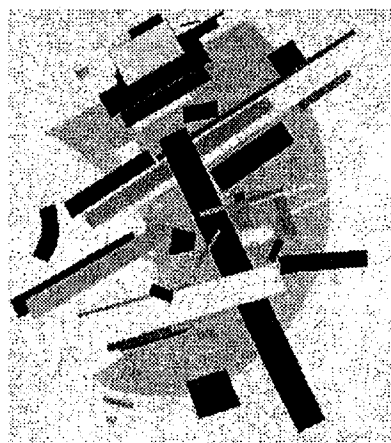


Figure 1.

Malevich elaborated new ways of expressing the unity of the world and showing the route to the collective paradise that he refused to acknowledge as lost forever (Khardzhiev 117-18).⁴ Behind the language of Suprematism is the impetus to a radical break with the past, a "complete zero" necessary for creating a new reality rather than evoking associations with one already existing (Sharp 39).⁵ In other words, this new reality was envisioned as a synthesis of the organic communal utopia with the characteristic features of modernity (Douglas, 8).⁶ The new

language was developed as a symbolism of forms and colors: the main shapes — square, circle and triangle — stood for such complex entities as the world, the earth's movement, and a "higher force," as well as their interaction, while the main colors — black, white and red — represented universal evil, good, and revolutionary forces (Khan-Magomedov 101). It is important to emphasize the "direction" of Malevich's nonfigurative language: unlike abstract painters, such as Kandinsky, he created his world "top-to-bottom," moving from general to particular (Kovtun 321). Aiming at no less than the creation of the perfect New World, Malevich did not refine existing models, but searched for new principles (Figure 1). Since he saw no necessary unity in the elements of the present, Malevich projected his ideals up in space and ahead in time, occupying the whole cosmos with his utopian visions:

[T]he keys of Suprematism led me to discover what had not yet been realized. My new painting does not belong to the Earth exclusively. The Earth has been abandoned like a house infested with termites. And in fact in man, in his consciousness, there is a striving towards space, an urge to take off from Earth. (Douglas 26)⁷

The October revolution seemed a chance for the realization of the most daring projects. In 1919 Malevich moved to Vitebsk with a group of followers and started interesting experiments by creating an artistic commune, UNOVIS (*Utverditeli Novogo Iskusstva*), based on the utilization of collective creativity to translate his ideals into practice (Statskih 53):

Today the man has awoken who shouts for all the world to hear and calls all humanity to unity. Our unity is essential for his being: not to obtain rights and liberty or to build an economic, utilitarian life, but in order that, by safeguarding of our bodily needs, our being may advance to the single unity and wholeness on the path of universal movement, as our main, and, indeed, only goal. ... We wish to form ourselves according to a new pattern, plan and system; we wish to build in such a way that all the elements of nature will unite with man and create a single, all-powerful image. (Malevich, 1920, 167)

Suprematism's goal of transforming the world was based on a distinction between "reality" and "actuality" that viewed reality as concealed by the "objectified" surface of the world, and recoverable only by loss of the chains of the figurative present (Khardzhiev 123). Thus, reality was perceived as the future and no longer understood in spatial terms. Such ideas were close

to the vision of *bogostroitel'stvo* (God building), based on the mystical, religious unity of the proletariat, elevated by the revolution to the full realization of its potential and thus truly become "like God" (Williams 57). Yet, the further development of the outlined ideas soon led to a parting of the ways of the originally coherent UNOVIS group.

Bringing the future into the present meant a search for practical solutions to the numerous problems forcing artists to confront the present. Already in 1921 Malevich mentions a need to adopt "a more Constructive approach to the present requirements of reorganizing the world" (Lodder 160). As artists plunged into work, along with paintings and non-figurative constructions, they created decorations for the revolutionary holidays in the city (flags, placards, decorations for buildings), worked out the design for public places (stages, tribunes), as well as for objects of everyday use (porcelain, other household facilities), and sketched out a number of Suprematist architectural complexes (Khan-Magomedov 63).⁸ However, while tailoring their artistic language to the needs of everyday reality, artists quickly realized that Suprematism was impossible to apply without taking functional needs into account:

Despite its good intentions, in reality it amounted to little more than what the Constructivists attacked as applied art. Keeping to the pictorial language of Suprematism, the artists kept the sphere and the cube as the major forms without regard to their functional requirement. (Lodder 163)

The dilemma appeared as follows: either to keep and further develop the language of Suprematism, while sacrificing immediate utilitarian feedback, or to compromise that language by allowing the logic of the particular problem to define the means employed. In the second half of the 1920s, after UNOVIS was already dissolved,⁹ Malevich authored a number of theoretical works defending his visual language and ideology from multiplying attacks. In answering accusations against the uselessness of his art, Malevich was unable to subordinate his views to reality, and in his works *God is not Cast Down* (1922) and *The Suprematist Mirror* (1923) he chose to deny the existence of reality itself by dissolving it into holistic nothingness:

1. Science and art have no boundaries because what is comprehended infinitely is innumerable, and infinity and innumerability are equal to nothing.
2. If the world's creations are God's paths and if "His ways are inscrutable," then both He and His path are equal to nothing.

3. If the world is the creation of science, knowledge and labor, and if their creation is infinite, then it is equal to nothing.
4. If religion has comprehended God, it has comprehended nothing.
5. If science has comprehended nature, it has comprehended nothing.
6. If art has comprehended harmony, rhythm and beauty, it has comprehended nothing.
7. If anyone has comprehended the absolute, he has comprehended nothing.
8. There is no existence either within or outside me; nothing can change anything, since nothing exists that could change itself or be changed. <...> (Malevich 1923, 224-25)

In folding the present into the futuristic utopia, he targeted the future and thus lost touch with reality. This dissociation, in its turn, made him finally abandon Suprematism, but only after he had fully developed its potential.¹⁰

Opting for the alternate strategy — to serve the “visible today” instead of the “remote tomorrow” — led Malevich’s most talented colleagues, such as Lissitzky, Klutis, and Tatlin, to adopt the ideas of Constructivism and associate themselves with adherents of a utilitarian and productive approach to art. Yet the attempt to project the present into the future was not free from contradictions, either, and eventually led to another blind alley.

II. From the Temple to the Factory: the Story of Constructivism

Suprematism did not remain supreme on the avant-garde cultural scene for long. In the best traditions of Futurism, already during its heyday it was pronounced by its “successors” a phenomenon of the past:

Suprematism bloomed all over Moscow. The shop windows, exhibitions, cafes — all suprematism. And this is very telling. One can surely say that the day of suprematism is coming. And it is exactly at this very moment that suprematism should lose its creative meaning. What was suprematism? Clearly a creative expression, but a purely artistic one. (Lodder 112)

New artists came to develop a new language, combining the revolutionary ideology, their vision of the Soviet future, and the expressive force of their material to achieve the necessary synthesis of form and function (Taylor 77-43). One of the first attempts to answer the demand of the state was implemented by Tatlin, a friend and colleague of Malevich who later searched for

a practical application of his creativity, drifting away from Suprematism, while accepting certain elements of its visual language. Enthusiastically reacting to Lenin's plan of monumental propaganda,¹¹ Tatlin nevertheless despised the figurative monuments created by other sculptors. He offered the alternative of a synthesis of modern art and life, pregnant with a symbolic meaning of the universal order, fused with futuristic dynamism:

As a principle it is necessary to stress that first of all the elements of the monument should be *modern technical apparatuses promoting agitation and propaganda*, and secondly that the monument should be a place of the most *intense movement*; least of all should one stand or sit down on it, you must be *mechanically* taken up, down, carried away *against your will*, in front of you must flash the powerful laconic phrase of the orator-agitator, and further on the latest news, decrees, decisions, the latest inventions, an explosion of simple and clear thoughts, *creativity, only creativity*. (Lodder 56)¹²

The monument to the III International (originally conceived as a monument to the Proletarian Revolution) was a talented implementation of these ideas: it combined the Suprematist emphasis on geometrical forms (cube, pyramid, and cylinder, located one on top of another) with the dynamism of a diagonal and two spirals that together made up a light modern structure simultaneously evoking the Eiffel tower, oil derricks, skeleton masts of ships, and various Futurist sculptural works (see Figure 2). The tower was to be made of steel and glass, perceived as the epitomes of modernity, as well as a symbol of the steel will of the proletariat, combined with its clear consciousness. The monument was to be invested with multiple functions, containing a number of conference halls, an information center, and a telegraph. Moreover, the emphasis on the dynamism of the structure was taken almost literally, for its various parts were supposed to rotate at different speeds (the cube — once



Figure 2.

a year, the pyramid — once a month, the cylinder — once a day, and the radio station on top — once an hour), thus representing a microcosm aligned with the harmony of the whole universe (Lodder 62; Khan-Magomedov 101-102)

This project attempt aimed to unite the past, present, and future by a particular logic and a certain direction of development. Tatlin, however, never bothered to provide relevant engineering calculations on the feasibility of the project,¹³ which came under strong criticism from other avant-garde artists, who saw the monument as uselessly complicated by symbolism at the expense of practicality. At a time of general concern with productiveness and the utility of art, one of the most serious accusations, leveled by the colleagues was the 'aestheticism' of the project, which caused others to abandon the tactics proposed by Tatlin and to search for other solutions to current needs. And the needs of the present were various. An urge to build, create, and construct united an otherwise diverse group of artists, who developed the ideology of Constructivism, which focused on the present, abandoned metaphysics and irrational spirituality, and spoke of a New Realism:

We do not look for justifications either in the past, or in the future.
<...>

We assert that the shouts about the future are for us the same as the tears about the past: a renovated day-dream of the romantics.<...>

Today is the deed.

We will account for it tomorrow.

The past we are leaving behind as carrion.

The future we leave to the fortune-tellers.

We take the present day. (Gabo, Pevsner 214)

The first Constructivists declared the primacy of form over texture, line over surface, structure over color, and three dimensions over two. They saw their major achievement in paying attention to the combination of elements in space, to the balance of lines in a construction, as opposed to the assemblage of elements into a composition. Their works did not imply any global vision of the future, but, rather, concentrated on the present, making its forms clear, precise, and laconic. The visual language of such artists as Sergei and Vladimir Sternberg, K. Medunetskii, and N. Gabo marked another step in the direction of utilitarianism, while the works themselves, despite the artists' declarations, remained purely abstract. Clearly, the strongest criticism of the current uselessness of such artistic experiments came from the defendants of the principle of functional construction.

The Institute of Artistic Culture in Moscow (INKhUK), established in