By James Strugnell

To what extent was the idea of the fourth dimension a crucial factor in Kazimir Malevich’s development of Suprematism?: A Comparison of Ouspensky’s Ideas and Malevich’s Suprematist Art.

We now think of the fourth dimension as time. Time running along side our three other dimensions, height (up and down), length (left and right) and breadth (forwards and backwards). These three dimensions together with time allow us to locate ourselves at any co-ordinate in our space. But, for Russia in the early nineteen hundreds the interest lay in finding a special, other worldly, fourth dimension. A fourth dimension which once found would turn our understanding of the world upside down. This fourth dimension would therefore be totally illogical to us.
In this paper I am going to focus on the writings of Ouspensky, and look at how his ideas on the fourth dimension can be compared to his contemporary, Malevich’s Suprematist art. But first, to set the scene I want to look at the 1884 book, *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions, By A Square*, by Edwin Abbott. This book is set in a two dimensional world occupied by flat, two dimensional shapes, which move around an equally flat plane. They perceive one another as lines (Abbott, 1884:7). We are shown by analogy, by the main character of the book, A. Square, that it is impossible for us to envision a world of a higher dimension than our own and that even though such worlds exist we can only perceive them in terms of our own dimension and therefore we do not notice them as they truly are (Abbott, 1884). A. Square shows this by recalling a dream of him visiting Lineland, a one dimensional world, which rather than existing on a plane exists along a line (ibid: 53-63). Due to this, here, they only see points and thus do not comprehend the square as anything but a point (ibid).

Now let us bring in the main character of this discussion: Ouspensky. He was one of the main writers on the fourth dimension in Russia at this time, bringing out many books including *The Fourth Dimension*, first published in 1909, and *Tertium Organum*, first published in 1911. These brought many ideas from both Russia and the West together, including ideas from Abbott, Hinton, Kant, and Hegel. Although we do not know if Malevich read these books personally, we do know that his close friend Matyushin did, and that there was much correspondence between the two men about Ouspensky’s ideas.

Ouspensky’s mentions the same ideas as were brought up in *Flatland* in *Tertium Organum*. He agreed with Abbott that points could not imagine lines or the “laws of line”, nor could lines imagine planes (or as he calls them surfaces) or the
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“law of surface”, and it followed that surfaces could not imagine solids (Ouspensky, 1934:34). From here he projected, that as solids we would therefore be unable to imagine a body that had any more than three dimensions (ibid). In spite of this Ouspensky still believed he could argue convincingly that they existed, and it is from this point that we begin to see his many ideas that are seemingly comparable to the Suprematist work of Malevich.

Ouspensky writes that a line can be seen as being made up of many point, therefore, the section of the line can be seen as a point (ibid: 36). A plane can be seen as being made up of many lines, therefore, the line is the section of the plane (ibid). The planes that we see in this world could thus be seen as being sections of three dimensional objects (ibid). Continuing this analogy, three dimensional objects could logically be sections of four dimensional shapes (ibid). This would in turn mean that our entire three dimensional world is merely a section of a four dimensional body (ibid). To quote Ouspensky:

*If every three dimensional body is the section of a four dimensional one, then every point of a three dimensional body is the section of a four dimensional line.* (Ouspensky, 1934:36)

This would therefore mean that one could represent the fourth dimension by using any of the elements within the third dimension, for example, points, lines, and plains. This is backed up by Ouspensky, who says that one could think of a “Four dimensional body as an infinite number of three dimensional bodies” (ibid).

It could then be said, studying *Suprematism: Self-Portrait in Two Dimensions*, painted by Malevich in 1915, that he is using the analogy as both Abbott and Ouspensky did, and is showing us an equivalence to the illogicality of the fourth
dimension in our world by showing how illogical a three dimensional human self-
portrait would be to comprehend in the two dimensional world.

In *Painterly Realism: Boy with Knapsack: Colour Masses in the Fourth Dimension*, also of 1915, the opposite might be true instead of analogy Malevich might be portraying the fourth dimension as we perceive it. To expand: If a plane sees the world in terms of line then it follows, and is true, that we see the world in terms of planes, and as the fourth dimension is made up of the third and we are just unable to comprehend it, then it follows that planes in an incomprehensible arrangement would make a good representation of the fourth dimension, which after all we are just a section of (ibid). This can also be seen to be connected to Ouspensky writing that “separate bodies (as we perceive them) may be the section of parts of a four dimensional body” (ibid: 37). Therefore we could be surrounded by the fourth dimension but merely be unable to comprehend it.
To explain this a bit further we could use Mr Leadbeater’s analogy (as does Ouspensky) (ibid). Leadbeater says, imagine that a man touches with his finger tips, a table top; he will leave five circular marks (ibid). In Flatland, i.e. the land of two dimensions, they would see only five lines; upon movement they would discover these to be circles (ibid). This, though, would be as far as they would get, it would be unimaginable to them to connect these circles to the hand of a man and the three dimensional world from whence it came, and which they are unknowingly part of (ibid).

I have just written of the importance of motion or movement as a way of discerning shape. Ouspensky sees motion as major evidence that the fourth dimension can be found amongst us. In explaining this he uses four important concepts; time, “space-sense”, “time-sense”, and motion (ibid: Chapter X). By using these four elements he shows that the fourth dimension (or it is probably better to say the ultimate dimension or n\textsuperscript{th} dimension) will be “a Universe of the Eternal Now” (ibid: 119), i.e. it will be unchanging.

Time for Ouspensky is created (ibid: 112-113). As in order to understand a space, that we do not know, we must spend time walking around it, therefore, we need space and motion to create time (ibid: 113). From this we see that time comes from ourselves, and is thus a sense (ibid). He calls this our “time-sense” (ibid).

This “time-sense” is only needed due to us having an imperfect “space-sense” or sense of space (ibid). Ouspensky explains that “the sense of space is the power of representation by means of form” (ibid). An imperfect “space-sense” is due to us having a lack of knowledge. But, upon reaching the n\textsuperscript{th} dimension we will have infinite knowledge and therefore movement will not be necessary to understand space
as our “space-sense” will be perfect (ibid: 115). This will lead to the fourth dimensional world being static (ibid). Thus motion is just an illusion (ibid).

We can see both “representation by means of form” and the stillness of the fourth dimension in Malevich’s Suprematist work. If we take for example *Eight Red Rectangles*, of 1915, we can see that this painting is purely of form, there is nothing to take away from that all we see is eight rectangular forms, each is a uniform colour, constant and unchanging, there is no depth to take away from this, just pure forms. This lack of ambiguity and depth also adds to the still static nature of the picture, there is nowhere for the eye to escape to, one cannot move beyond the surface of the picture. There is nothing to be resolved, all is presented plainly to us, and follows what Ouspensky wrote; that as in a cinema we only see movement because we are unable to fully appreciate what is going on behind the scenes (ibid: 114). We see a picture of reality but not what created it, therefore we only see part of reality (ibid). In Malevich’s work though, we see the whole, there is nothing more to see.
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That we see reality but not what made it was to be examined further by Ouspensky. He writes about the “phenomenal world” and “noumenal world” (ibid: Chapter XIII). The “phenomenal world” is easy for use to define as the visible, finite world which we see and understand as reality (ibid). Ouspensky writes that we must “regard the visible phenomenal world as a section of some other infinitely more complex world, manifesting itself at a given moment in the first one” (ibid: 153). This infinite, incomprehensible world he calls the “noumenal world”. It can be seen as the fourth dimension, with the “phenomenal world” being like a three dimensional section of it (as has already been mentioned) (ibid).

We can see evidence of both worlds in Malevich’s work. For example in Aeroplane Flying, of 1915, he portrays the “noumenal world” as the infinite abyss of the white ground, and “phenomenal world” as the discernable coloured sections of this “noumenal world”, which appear in our own reality as differently coloured surfaces.

Continuing his discussion on the phenomenal and noumenal Ouspensky quotes Hegel: “Every idea extended into infinity becomes it own opposite” (Ouspensky, 1934:153). This could be seen in our understanding of the “phenomenal world”, which, as it increases will at some point disappear, and our understanding will be that of a “noumenal world”.

This could be compared to The Quadrilateral (better known as The Black Square), of 1915. In The Non-objective World (page 76), of 1927 (trans. Howard Dearstyne. Chicago: Paul Theobald & Co., 1959), Malevich writes that “the square = feeling, the white field = the void beyond this feeling” (Henderson, 1983:288). By placing the black square on the white ground, he shows us numerous opposites: that of feeling and no feeling; that of black and white; and the fact that white, which is
used to represent the void, actually reflects the whole colour spectrum back at us, where as black, which here is meant to represent something, i.e. feelings, actually acts as a void reflecting nothing back to us (this will be explored more, later on).

The “noumenal world” is seen by Ouspensky as linking the different phenomena of “our” world together (Ouspensky, 1934:153). He prophesises that as our knowledge increases we will be able to link more individual phenomenon together, and that this will lead to us one day creating an ultimate truth or higher level of being, from which everything will be (ibid).

One may compare this to Supematist work. Take for example Malevich’s *Suprematism*, of 1915; here we see forms that can be defined, measured and quantified. They are. But, if we use Hegel and extend what “is” to infinity then it will become “not”, i.e. what exist will become non-existent. They will become nothing. Malevich represents nothing by the abyss, which he defines as white, not a form, as feeling, but a colour (Henderson, 1983:288). Therefore in this painting we see form...
extended to infinity, and form as we see it now and use it to define our reality. He shows us our truth and what will be the ultimate truth, if Hegel, as Ouspensky thinks, is to be believed. Malevich uses the idea of the abyss to indicate to us the higher reality of the fourth dimension, and again such ideas are mentioned in Ouspensky’s work. Ouspensky describes infinity as “the only reality and at the same time it is the abyss, the bottomless pit into which the mind falls, after having risen to heights to which it is not native” (Ouspensky, 1934:243). As we have seen Malevich uses the idea of the abyss, which in turn, according to Ouspensky contains everything and therefore nothing at the same time, in all his Suprematist work. He uses white to represent the abyss, a blank but at the same time a colour capable of reflecting back to us all the light of the world.

It is possible to see both definitions of infinity in The Quadrilateral, we see the black square as a bottomless pit, which we may at anytime fall into, it absorbs all notion of the light of the world in its blackness thus containing all that we can see in our reality. But around this “void” we see the white abyss reflecting the whole truth of the world back to us and thus containing nothing. In this work we are standing at the brink of the “only reality” (ibid). This idea could be furthered by Ouspensky’s writing on what happens when one approaches the higher order:

*He will sense a precipice, an abyss everywhere, no matter where he looks; and experience indeed an incredible horror, fear and sadness, until this fear and sadness shall transform themselves into joy of sensing of a new reality.*

*(Ouspensky, 1934:244)*

Malevich upon showing The Quadrilateral as a higher truth, placing it in the place of an icon image, managed also to produce the feeling of horror, which Ouspensky says
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will be felt by men when they approach the “higher order”. By 1918 it may be said that in his *White on White* paintings, Malevich is portraying the gradual transformation of fear and sadness into the joy of the new reality. This can be seen in the decreasing solidity of form, which for Malevich represented feeling, and the increasing dominance of the white ground of the abyss and higher truth. He was to eventually come to the “new reality” when he did away with painted form, and thus the notion of feeling all together, and displayed blank canvases.

These blank canvas works are comparable to everything that Ouspensky wrote about the fourth dimension. By combining both our initial comprehensions of how we perceive our dimension and therefore how we might perceive the next, with Hegel’s belief that “every idea extended into infinity becomes it own opposite” (ibid: 153). We can see how Malevich now depicts the infinitely-dimensional as non-dimensional. We also see the resolution of motion, our space-sense is complete, and we see the whole of reality at once with no need to move around it, we therefore stop creating time (ibid: 115). We therefore have a static unchanging world; existing in the “eternal now” (ibid: 119). We see everything, and therefore here we also see the point at
which ideas of the “phenomenal world” and the “noumenal world” become obsolete, as there is now only one reality and not one running behind the other (ibid: 114 and 153), here we see the ultimate truth.

But, apart from the above ideas on the fourth dimension, we might also see, by comparing both Ouspensky and Malevich, that some of the techniques used by Malevich, as well as the idea that artists could possibly portray a fourth dimension, are comparable with what Ouspensky wrote. For example:

In combinations of…colours, lines, [and] forms – men are creating a new world, and are attempting to transmit that which they feel, but which they are unable to express and transmit simply in words…The combination of feeling and thought of high tension leads to a higher form of psychic life. Thus in art we have already the first experiments in a language of the future. (Ouspensky, 1934:83)

If we compare this passage to nearly any Suprematist work we can once again, seemingly, see major overlaps between Ouspensky’s writing and Malevich’s art. We might see, in early Suprematist art, how Malevich is using “colours, lines, [and] forms” to create “a new world” and how by placing forms against a white background he is creating feelings and thoughts of “high tension”, especially in the case of The Quadrilateral. This could show once again the extent to which ideas of the fourth dimension were a crucial factor in Malevich’s development of Suprematist art.

Another quote, that would seemingly back this up, and also allow us to see, again, why Malevich might have genuinely believed that he could represent the fourth dimension in his art, occurs when Ouspensky writes:
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Colours are for the painter...a means for the understanding of the noumenal world and for the expression of that understanding...At the present stage of our development we possess nothing so powerful, as an instrument of knowledge of the world of causes, as art...

...Only the fine apparatus which is called the soul of an artist can understand and feel the reflection of the noumenal in the phenomenal. (Ouspensky, 1934:161)

This passage leaves me in no doubt to how essential and crucial, ideas of the fourth dimension were, not only, for the ideas involved in the development of Suprematist art, but also in the justification that an artist would be able to actually get close to depicting the fourth dimension.

References:


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