

Article

Kazimir Malevich's Negative Theology and Mystical Suprematism

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Abstract: This article examines Kazimir Malevich's Suprematist art in the context of negative (apophatic) theology, as a crucial tool in analyzing both the artist's theoretical conclusions and his new visual optics. Our analysis rests on the point that the artist intuitively moved towards recognizing the ineffability of the multidimensional universe and perceiving God as the Spiritual Absolute. In his attempt to see the invisible in the formulas of Emptiness and Nothingness, Malevich turned to the primary forms of geometric abstraction—the square, circle and cross—which he endows with symbolic concepts and meanings. Malevich treats his Suprematism as a method of perceiving the ineffability of the Absolute. With the *Black Square* seen as a face of God, the patterns of negative theology rise to become the philosophical formula of primary importance. Malevich's *Mystical Suprematism* series (1920–1922) confirms the presence of complex metaphysical reflection and apophatic thought in his art. Not only does the series contain icon paraphrases and the Christian symbolism of the cross and mandorla, but it also advances the formulas of the apophatic faith of the modern times, since Suprematism presents primary forms as the universals of “the face of the future” and the energy of the non-objective art.



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1. Introduction

Knowledge and the religious experience of God as the basic matrices of Christian self-cognition are the philosophical and theological codes which have always shaped the nature of religion and the foundations of centuries-old liturgical traditions. The feeling of divine presence and the belief in God's utter transcendentality are crucial for comprehending the world via divine revelation:

God as the Transcendent power is infinite, absolutely remote and aloof from the world; no regular and methodical pathways lead us to Him, which is precisely why He can become so endlessly close to us in His mercy; He is the closest to us, the most intimate, the most internal and the most immanent, He is closer to us than we are to ourselves. The God outside of us and the God within us, the absolutely transcendent becoming the absolutely immanent. By saying this, the only thing we deny is that seeing God is a mandatory and natural thing for those seeking Him. But the search, together with preparing oneself and finding the divine within, are attained by a human effort—the effort that God expects from us (Bulgakov 1994, pp. 24–25).

This passage by the Russian philosopher and theologian Fr. Sergii Bulgakov refers us to the tradition of negative theology, first¹ developed in the books ascribed to Dionysius the Areopagite, a Christian saint and the first bishop of Athens who lived in the 1st century CE.² Dionysius held that God cannot be imagined through concrete knowledge and specific ideas, since divine likeness is impossible to depict and the “primordially perfect wisdom”

(Dionysius 1987, p. 156) greatly exceeds the images created in words and intellect. The divine nature is above comprehension, and thus, God is unknowable and incomprehensible:

How can we speak of the divine names if the Transcendent surpasses all discourse and all knowledge, if it abides beyond the reach of mind and of being, if it encompasses and circumscribes, embraces and anticipates all things while itself eluding their grasp and escaping from any perception, imagination, opinion, name, discourse, apprehension, or understanding? The Godhead is superior to being and is unspeakable and unnameable. (Dionysius 1987, p. 53).

This sharply metaphoric text indicates that God is immeasurable and transcendentally unknowable. The author sees the hidden divinity in its boundlessness and in lying beyond comprehension, as divinity is beyond both everything substantive and insubstantive. By denying the particularly nominative (since God cannot be comprehended and signified in a specific way), negative theology attempts to move beyond the bounds of the understandable and the customary and reject the existing knowledge of the divine. God's trans-substantivity cannot be an object of reason, nor can it be comprehended by means of signs and symbols of this world. As Apostle Paul puts it, "Who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see: to whom be honour and power everlasting. Amen" (Holy 2010, 1 Tim. 6, 16). What negative theology offers is a different path of theosis. Unachievable through individual effort, this grace is "from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning" (Holy 2010, James 1, 17). In his treatises, St. Gregory Palamas further expands many ideas of the Areopagite's negative theology:

The divine nature is incomprehensible, as He is above all existence and any particular image, and inexpressible in words. In his substantive nature, God is far removed from everything, absolutely above any word or reason, any unity and any belonging, irrespective of anything, incomprehensible, impartial, invisible, incognoscible, nameless and absolutely inexpressible. (St. Gregory Palamas 2009, p. 27).

Examining the Corpus Areopagiticum, Palamas meditates on God's nature and energy and comes up with a concept of "uncreated divine light" as one these "energies" (see Kern 1996, p. 36). On the one hand, the incomprehensible divine indicates that the understanding God's presence in the world lies utterly beyond human comprehension. On the other, the incomprehensible nature of God through divine energy is revealed to the created world, and these revelations make the world copresent with the immanent and the eternal. Beyond this ambivalence lies the question of how to grasp the ungraspable. St. John of Damascus' response to it was as follows:

The Divinity, then, is limitless and incomprehensible, and this His limitlessness and incomprehensibility is all that can be understood about Him. All that we state affirmatively about God does not show His nature, but only what relates to His nature. And, if you should ever speak of good, or justice, or wisdom, or something else of the sort, you will not be describing the nature of God, but only things relating to His nature. There are, moreover, things that are stated affirmatively of God, but which have the force of extreme negation. For example, when we speak of *darkness* in God we do not really mean darkness. What we mean is that He is not light, because He transcends light. In the same way, when we speak of *light* we mean that it is not darkness. (St. John of Damascus 2010, p. 172)

The symbolic insights and mystical intuition, comprehending the Light in the Darkness—such is the way of negative and mystical theology. V.N. Lossky in his magisterial *The Vision of God* observed that every theology is "mystical" (Lossky 2006, p. 11), since it presents the divine mystery through revelations. In this respect, the apophatic or negative theology is the perfect path since the "complete ignorance" allows "the unknowable nature of God" to be reached (Lossky 2006, p. 126). Since God is transcendental, He cannot be grasped by reason or be an object of cognition: "it is by ignorance that we know the One who is above all that can be an object of knowledge" (Lossky 2006, p. 126). Negative theology as the "way of accessing the first cause of all things" and the method of "negating the negation and retrenchment of the subtraction" (Hadot 2005, p. 216), according to

Pierre Hadot, is linked to intellectual intuition and mystical vision. The “unutterable” and “inexpressible” mark the mystical order and the experience of the transcendental (Hadot 2005, p. 233). Nicholas of Cusa saw God as the infinite Absolute, who is “the form of forms, the being of being, the foundation and essence of all things; in this mode of being all things in God are the absolute necessity” (Nicholas of Cusa 1979, p. 117). God is the absolute maximum which surpasses all understanding, and His being can be contemplated only at the height of the *docta ignorantia*. Thus, the notion of God is moving closer to Nothingness. A question rightfully asked at the moment is how negative theology is related to the Russian avant-garde art, with its radical aesthetics and total formal experimentation. Was Russian avant-garde an act of theomachy³, or was it trying to construct a new religion “out of nothing”⁴? Is it possible to see a metaphysics of its own, or an act of sacralization of the everyday, in the works of avant-garde reformers of art? All of these questions can hardly be addressed within the space of one article, but we may try to focus on the most significant challenges by reflecting upon the numerous theoretical works by Kazimir Malevich. The impact religious conscience and Old Russian icon painting had upon many artists of the Russian avant-garde is a commonly known fact, expanded upon by many Russian and Western scholars.⁵ The discourse of such an impact is still attractive to many researchers, since it allows us to rethink the influence Christianity had on the rise of new visual symbolism and crucial philosophical and religious dichotomies, such as God/revolution, Christianity/Communism, Icon/Nothing. Nikolai Berdyaev considered Communism a type of religious faith (Berdyaev 1955, p. 129), and it seems to us far more than a paradox. Both the fervent energy of a new-born faith and a creative ecstasy are discovered within the Russian avant-garde, not only on the level of social and aesthetic utopia, but also within the body of sacred symbols which open the door into the transcendental and the mystical. Avant-garde art displays new forms of the religious feeling, and this concentrated energy and the experience of the perfect and the unreal leads to “setting oneself free from the whole created world, and beyond it, to creating out of Nothing” (Berdyaev 1990, p. 9). Malevich sees Suprematism as a new religion and the new artistic matrix of the world, both of which call for social change and the “Revolution of the Spirit”.

El Lissitzky was perfectly right when he compared Suprematism and Christianity in his article titled *Suprematizm Mirostroitel'stva* (Suprematism of the World-building):

And if the Communism of today, which recognizes Work as its master, and Suprematism which puts forward the square of creative work, go hand in hand, then subsequently, Communism will fall behind in its movement. Suprematism, having covered all of life, will lead people out of the authority of work, of the authority of heartbeat, will liberate all of their creativity and will take the world further to the perfection of pure action. This is what we are expecting from Kazimir Malevich (Lissitzky 2003).

2. “The World as an Unencompassable Whole”: The Apophatism of Kazimir Malevich

I am looking for God for myself in myself
 God all-seeing all-knowing all-powerful
 the future perfection of the intuition of the universal
 global supermind (Malevich 2004a, p. 440)

Kazimir Malevich is a universally recognized genius. A prophet, a thinker, an artist—the creator of Suprematism saw in himself a man of “the world of new transformations” (Malevich 1995b, p. 109). He interpreted Suprematism as a “source for creation of the world”, with its Utopian model as a laboratory for the new religion of pure sentiments where “every form is a world” (Malevich 1995c, p. 53). The “concept of self-negation” (Epshtein 2013, p. 208), which is characteristic of the Russian culture in general, metamorphosed into an apophatic search for the Absolute in the Russian avant-garde when the conventional vision of the world was no longer possible at the turn of the 20th century. Not only do the visual codes change, but a whole new experimental artistic practice rises, aimed at the revolution of the Spirit and apophatic optics. This new eschatology demanded

new, radically different symbols, which marked both the customary objects and notions, and the transformations, which reveal the true meaning of the apophatic—"naming the unnamable, pointing towards the invisible, knowing the unknowable" (Mikhailova 2000, p. 167). The Russian avant-garde features the apophatic discourse in both its philosophical/theological sense and in its poetics of the sacred, when denying the classical canons and reaching beyond Time and Space marked the attempt to "see the invisible" in the formulas of Emptiness and Nothingness, of sacred geometry and symbolism of mystical theology⁶. Transcendental, otherworldly space as a new form of immersion and silent communication with God was the new reflexive method of rhetoric, which, in Russian avant-garde, was introduced by the notion of silence. In his 1923 article *Suprematicheskoe zerkalo* (A Suprematist mirror), Malevich declared, "There is no being in me, nor outside me, nothing can be changed by anything else, since there is nothing that could change, or be changeable. The essence of difference. The world as objectlessness" (Malevich 1995d, p. 273).

Malevich presents the Universe as the world of human difference, borderless, the one where God, the soul, religion, science and art equal nothing. This level zero of the crucial meanings of life aimed to illustrate another of Malevich's iconic assumptions—"there is nothing knowable, and the eternal Nothingness does exist" (Malevich 1995e, p. 242):

To study reality is to study what does not exist, what is unintelligible; and whatever is unintelligible for a human, is non-existent; consequently, it is the non-existent that must be studied. Studies will prove that things do not exist, and yet the infinity of them does, a "nothing" at the same time is a "thing" (Malevich 1995e, pp. 241–42).

The mystery of the Universe and "God as an Absolute of nature's perfection" (Malevich 1995e, p. 243) are both things incognoscible. The man who strives towards God as an ideal is on a conscious quest for harmony and cosmic calm. He is struggling to understand the meanings which are impossible to find, as they lie beyond human conscience. In fact, Malevich as an original thinker advances his own interpretation of divine ontology—not of a Christian God, but of a transcendental personality, perfection incarnate and incognoscible:

God cannot have a human meaning; since reaching him as the final meaning does not allow to reach God, since God is the final limit, or, more correctly, the limit of all meanings lies before God, and in God there is no meaning already. Thus, in the end, all human meanings pointing towards God the meaning, will be crowned with thoughtlessness, hence God is the non-meaning rather than meaning. It is his thoughtlessness that must be seen as objectlessness in the Absolute, in the final limit. Reaching finality is achieving objectlessness. It is indeed unnecessary to strive for God somewhere in the spaces of the celestial, since He is present in every human meaning, as every meaning of ours is, at the same time, a non-meaning (Malevich 1995e, p. 243).

Malevich is thinking out of the box, not as an orthodox Roman Catholic who has a good command of the Gospel and the canonical liturgical tradition. The Eucharist as a form of communion with God and realizing His presence transformed into the new covenant of the Great liturgy as "God's dance" (Malevich 1995f, p. 147), wherein the Master (a poet or an artist) partakes in the perfect nature. His notion of God forms a new metaphysics and an apophatic methodology based on the practice of negation. However, the Master does not reject God as the incognoscible perfection, but rather, the Church and the iconography of Christ. He aims to purge the particular from the religious thought and clear the Church of the unnecessary accessories: "The icon as it is appears as a low-cultured barbarity, and thoughtless worship of them belittles and obscures the spiritual in the Master who through the painted face has made himself part of the future highest being of his own spirit" (Malevich 2004b, p. 92).

We must note here that Malevich's own religious views underwent an evolution, as the status of the apophatic was changing within his philosophic doctrine.⁷ He always interpreted the Church canons as a visionary, as a prophet of a new reality and of the transcendental future of the new order. Religion, in Malevich's idea, strives to turn a

human into a “non-being” and reveal the true way to the immortality of the soul as a part of death-defying God. However, nothing can be proved or comprehended. Apparitions can be destroyed, but God is indestructible, and it is thus impossible to topple Him. In another crucial text of his, *Suprematism. Mir kak bespredmetnost', ili vechny pokoi* (Suprematism. The World as Objectlessness, or the Eternal Rest (1922)), Malevich further expands on the link between God, non-objective art and Suprematism: “No icon depicts the zero. The nature of God is zero good, and that is good in itself. Zero [is] a circle of transformation of everything objective into non-objective” (Malevich 2000, p. 84). This is how he comes to formulate an important thesis on Suprematism as a “zero limit” and Nothingness liberated. The artistic world, according to Malevich, has become “new, objectless, pure” (Malevich 1995c, p. 53) in the same way as a Deity obtains a new form of existence. Rest and meditative contemplation, the infinity of space and the esoteric emptiness—the essence of total perfection—all of these are similar to the eternal “Nothingness”: “God is rest, rest is perfection: everything has been achieved, the worlds have been built, motion has been set in eternity” (Malevich 1995e, p. 257). The dichotomy of the objective and the objectless appears here as part of the dialectic of the spiritual and material: “The action of the object-focused consciousness is an empty action. There is no reason for viewing this action as a kind of a highest cause and thus privilege it—no more, at least, than granting this right to spiritual and even religious worldview. In general, both of these worldviews face the same objectlessness” (Malevich 1995e, p. 255).

Several questions can be brought up at this point, such as how this objectlessness is linked to the divine creation of the imperfect world and to God himself. Why does Malevich grant a special ontological status to it? Is mysticism of the artist at all compatible with Christianity? Some answers to these questions can be found both in Malevich’s theoretical reflections and his Suprematist practice. He sees objectlessness as a feature of divine rest and of the existential Universe:

Nothingness, i.e., the resting God, and it happened to be so that Nothingness was God, and passing through perfection, it returned to the nothing it had been, because that is what it still was. “Nothing” cannot be researched or studied, since it is “Nothing”, but in that “Nothing”, man, “the thing” revealed itself. Since “the thing” cannot comprehend anything, it becomes “nothing”; now what follows from this—that man exists or that God exists as “nothing”, as the objectless?” (Malevich 1995e, p. 264)

This passage clearly demonstrates that the apophatic intention of God’s unknowability is transformed into a separate category of “nothingness”, understood as “non-being”. Correspondingly, the Creator is not an object of our perception, but the unknowable primary origin of the world. “Nothingness” is not only the infinity of the Absolute and a symbol of the complete unknowing, but also the perfect transcendentality. Malevich sees Suprematism as a method of comprehending the ineffability of the Absolute. In this context, many researchers see a link between his philosophy and Buddhist–Hindu mysticism. Cornelia Ichin argues that Malevich’s notion of emptiness hails back to the Taoist ideas of inaction, setting the self free of passions and returning to the original substance. By removing the focus on objects in art, Malevich in his *Black Square* comprehends the mystery of emptiness and nothingness (Ichin 2011, pp. 48–56). By trying to see through space and discern the invisible, the artist-thinker transcends the bounds of the conventional and focuses on the sign of the absolute in total emptiness. God appears in the shape of the black square. As the artist recollected later, by staring at the mystery of the black space, he “knifed down art, put its body in the coffin and sealed it with the black square” (Malevich on himself (Malevich o sebe) 2004, p. 77).

3. Sacred Mysteries of Suprematist Primary Forms: The Square, Circle and Cross

For more than a hundred years, the mysteries of Malevich’s *Black Square* have been attracting the interest of both viewers and scholars of art. Hundreds of studies have been published in many languages. Scholars have long been trying to decipher this work of art as a provider of a number of meanings, as well as to suggest which tools of theoretical

analysis will be most useful in this act of deciphering. Heated debates started in the wake of the X-ray fluorescence and infrared tests carried out in November 2015 at the State Tretyakov Gallery. The tests proved that underneath the *Black Square* are two layers of paint: a Cubofuturist image and a Proto-Suprematist one. An inscription was found, which said, “Africans fighting at night”. According to art historians, this is a reference to the painting by Alphonse Allais (1880s), which showed a black rectangle titled “The battle between Africans in a cave in the dead of night”.⁸ Was this the poet’s joke or an appropriation of the experience of liberating art from its figurative and object-focused manacles? It is hard to guess why Malevich overpainted these palimpsest levels: Was it that he had no other canvas to use? Or was he trying to redo the two previous versions? Or maybe it was a gesture which symbolized the victory of Suprematism as the most perfect form of art?

It is well known that the *Black Square* was first exhibited at the “Last Futurist Exhibition: Oh—Ten (0,10)” in St. Petersburg. It was displayed in what is known as “the red corner” of the room, where traditionally, an icon would be placed⁹ (see [Vakar 2015](#); [Shatskikh 2000](#); [Levkova-Lamm 2004](#)). The provocative character of the new plastic form brought about fierce debate, involving many members of the artistic intelligentsia. In a January issue of the *Rech* newspaper, the doyen of the Mir Iskusstva (World of Art) group, painter and art historian Alexander Benois gave his impression of the painting as follows:

Without a catalogue number, high under the ceiling, upon the place of an icon, hangs Mr. Malevich’s “work”—a black square framed in white. It is, without doubt, the very “icon” that Messrs. Futurists plan to replace the Madonnas and shameless Venuses with. This is the “power over the forms of nature” that is the logical consequence of more than just Futurist art alone. A black square in a white frame is not only a mere joke, a simple challenge, a small accidental event in the house on Field of Mars. It is an act of self-assertion by a power named “abomination of desolation”, a power that takes pride in the fact that its haughtiness, its hubris and its trampling down on everything tender and loving will make us all perish” ([Krusanov 1996](#), p. 262).

What Benois saw in this “farce of contemporary culture” ([Krusanov 1996](#), p. 262) was nothing more than an abomination and the decay of culture. He saw the Black Square as an anti-Christian act in defiance of Orthodoxy. Malevich’s response was concise: “I have nothing else but a naked, frameless—like a pocket—icon of my time, and struggling is hard. But the happiness of being different from you gives me energy to move on and on, deeper into the emptiness of deserts. For there is transfiguration waiting for me there” ([Malevich on himself \(Malevich o sebe\) 2004](#), p. 85). This minimalist form of abstract geometrical shape has since become an emblem of new art, where “the mystical optics of black shape” ([Levkova-Lamm 2004](#), p. 17) was represented as both part of a personal story and a non-objective apophatic symbol. The Black Square is a symbol of a hidden perfection. Natalia Rostova sees its religious mystery in the fact that “Malevich appears here as a negative theologian, but not within a Christian tradition dominated by the idea of the transcendent God. He comes as a new kind of negative theologian, who himself acts the impossible way” ([Rostova 2021](#), p. 27).

Even at the very foundations of theoretical reflections on the figure of black square, the problem of negation makes itself quite conspicuous. The logic of witnessing how artistic matter turns into non-objective art is such that the simplest of geometrical forms attains the status of the philosophical Universe. The artist’s formula, “The living square, the royal infant” ([Malevich 1995c](#), p. 53), contains two important assumptions. “The living square” symbolizes the flexible and changeable form, the process of dispersing and destroying the wholeness of an object: “Here Deity commands the crystals to transfer into a new form of existence” ([Malevich 1995c](#), p. 47). The metaphor of the “royal infant” has many associations of its own, including references to Russian icon painting traditions. Malevich offers his own interpretation of classical icon painting by appealing to his semiotic practice. It is not accidental that he mentioned “new signmaking” in Suprematism so often ([Malevich 1995g](#), p. 162).

On the one hand, the *Black Square* can be interpreted as a paraphrase of an icon and the “new icon of the transcendental” (Tarasov 2017, p. 125). Inessa Levkova-Lamm sees a similarity between the Square and the Orthodox icon of the Holy Mandylin (c. 1657), now in the collections of the Yaroslavl Museum-Reserve. On the icon, the face of Jesus the Saviour appears in the center of a black and light ochreish squares (Levkova-Lamm 2004, p. 114). Many other references to Christian liturgy and Orthodox practice have been found; they are especially frequent in Malevich’s early frescoes and pre-Suprematist paintings (Lozovaia 2011; Mudrak 2016; Marcadet 2000; Bowlt 1991; Kurbanovsky 2007; Spira 2008; Tarasov 2002, 2011). The artist was quite vocal when talking about the influence of the Novgorod icon style and icon painting in general. He reflected upon the emotional impact of peasant art and of the new meanings rising in his painting in the wake of his interest in Russian icons. “I saw in it the whole spirituality of the peasant times”, he wrote, “I understood peasants through the icon, I saw their faces as those of common people, rather than saints. [I understood] the colour and the attitude of an icon painter” (Malevich on himself (Malevich o sebe) 2004, pp. 28–29). “Icon archetypes” (Sarabyanov 1993, p. 168) have also been found in the *Black Square*—not only in its visual imagery and iconographic narrativity, but also in the absence of the proto-image and the apophatic interpretation of the painting. The presence of the divine is discovered in the very rhetoric of the black square, and the face of God is recognized through empty space. An entry into the world of the collapsed things and signs through the annulment of the object introduces a new dimension of the Suprematist objectlessness, which, in turn, takes the viewer a step closer to comprehending the transcendental spiritual Absolute. Having seen the face of God in the square, the artist relies on patterns of negative theology in constructing his primary philosophical formula: “What we call reality is in fact infinity which has neither weight nor measure, neither space nor time, nothing absolute and nothing relative, nor anything shaped into a form. It can be neither imagined nor known. Nothing is comprehensible, and yet the eternal “nothingness” exists” (Malevich 1995e, p. 242).

On the other hand, Malevich assumes that the existence of non-existence is ambivalent. The non-objective nature of Suprematist primary forms is interpreted as the being of non-being. Malevich saw Suprematism as the religion of pure action. In 1920, he wrote to Mikhail Gershenzon, “I am not sure what you will think of my opinions, but I interpret the three squares and the cross as the foundations of art, and moreover, of everything, and also as a new thing—religion. I also see [in it] the New Temple (Malevich on himself (Malevich o sebe) 2004, pp. 127–28). The square sets the pace for the new time as it is the “embryo of all opportunities” (Kovtun 1990, p. 105). It is the square that helps Malevich preach the new Suprematist religion and proclaim the power of the symbol of emptiness, bowing before the authority of the Zero. *The Black Square* is the limit beyond which there is no rationality or logic of verisimilitude, and the world appears as Infinity.¹⁰ While setting the transcendental supraterrrestrial space and the evasive motion, Malevich stares into the abyss of metaphysical emptiness and discovers that the zero point is polymorphous and inexhaustible: “I have been transformed in the zero form and move beyond the zero point to art, i.e., to Suprematism, to the new artistic realism of non-objective art” (Malevich 1995c, p. 53). *The Black Square* is the zero matrix reflecting the foundations of the Universe, and the spiritual Absolute as the liberated Nothingness symbolizes the apophatic non-being of God: “If religion has comprehended God, it has also understood the zero” (Malevich 1995d, p. 273). We see the metaphysics of zero as the formula of apophatism and of the mystical phenomenon which describes the process of negation, understood as the endless production of secret meanings. As Malevich wrote to Gershenzon, “The square is now a living one, creating a new world of perfection, and I see it in a different light now, as something other than art. I’ve had an idea that if mankind has always been portraying God in their own image, then the Black square is the image of God as the essence of his perfection on the new path of today’s beginnings” (Malevich on himself (Malevich o sebe) 2004, p. 125). In his attempt to decipher the secret of the black square,¹¹ the artist often mentioned revelations and a mystical experience

while creating the eponymous painting: “I have invented nothing. I felt the night within me and saw the new thing I called Suprematism. It came as a black plane, shaped as a square” (Malevich 1998a, p. 30). The formula of plastic minimalism and the conciseness of the Suprematist figure lead us to a conclusion that Malevich manifested the black square as an apophatic symbol of otherworldliness, as a form of the ineffable and inexpressible which cannot be reduced to a clear definition. At the same time, the transcendently signified (God) appears as a negation of all previous forms of the objective world. Having accumulated all of his theoretical breakthroughs in the Suprematist model, Malevich has turned to primary forms, which would be relevant to his new system of art.

The Black Square is open to many interpretations, which can be converted into a discourse of morphological functions of Suprematist geometry. Metaphorical constructs telling of the world’s first elements (interpreted as the quintessential signs of human existence) contain figures made of squares, which the artist explains in an interesting way in his book *Suprematizm: 34 risunka* (Suprematism in 34 drawings):

In its historical development, Suprematism passed through three stages of black, colored and white. The three Suprematist squares are establishing certain worldviews and world sentiments. The white square, besides the purely economic movement of the shape of the whole new white worldbuilding is also an impetus towards justifying worldbuilding as a “pure action”, as self-knowledge in the purely utilitarian perfection of the “all-man”. In communal life it has more meanings: black as the sign of economy, red as the signal of revolution and white as pure action. The white square I painted gave me an opportunity to study it, which resulted in a brochure on “pure action”. The black square defined the economy which I introduced as art’s fifth dimension. Isn’t it strange that the three squares show the way, while the white square brings the white world (worldbuilding), thus establishing the sign of purity of artistic life (Malevich 1995h, pp. 187–88).

The empiric outcomes of this classification allow us to go beyond seeing it only as “the methodological foundation of the concept of developing the Suprematist plane” (Goryacheva 2020, p. 13). We can also see it as a description of mechanisms to record the potential infinity of the metaphysical. Discovering all of the capabilities the squares have and tracing the multitude of their links constitute the new meanings of the sacred symbols. A reminiscence of the black square can be found in “pure colour art” (Malevich 1995h, p. 150)—in an abundance of modifications of the white and red squares. Within the space of a Suprematist model, the multidimensional and multivalent character of primary geometric forms appears on various levels of stratification and complexity. The minimal structure is the white square—*Beloye na Belom* (White on White) or *Belyi Kvadrat na Belom Fone* (A White Circle with White Background)—painted in 1918 and first displayed at Malevich’s personal 10th State Exhibition “Non-objective art and Suprematism” in Moscow. The new optics of pure sensations in the liberated space was an illustration of Buddhist emptiness, transcendental abyss and apophatic non-existence. Malevich was far from the purely religious interpretation of the white color as a symbol of divine light and formal symbolization. The Via Negativa as a method of negation of the knowability of God (first appearing as early as in Neo-Platonism), and negation of clear definition of God in the language of human notions—both of these produced the new optics of pure sensations and were the paradigm of actualizing various levels of transcendentality. Researchers have long been emphasizing a typological similarity between Malevich’s Suprematism and the works of the great mystics of the East the Russian artist cannot have read, such as Lao Tze, Zhuang Zhou or Huineng, and also the negative path of knowing God and the mystical teachings of Meister Eckhardt, etc.¹²

For us, of high importance is the very fact that the artist was capable of complex methodological reflection and apophatic thinking. In our view, the white circle was a message, which the artist himself saw as a productive one. The mythology of whiteness as a symbol of multidimensional space and of the presence of God articulates the balance between the sacred and profane, the real and the mystical. The white square is drastically different from the black one, since the white abyss is a leap to infinity, to objectless nature

and a new form of conscience: “I tore through the blue lampshade of colored limitations and stepped into the white. Float on! The free white abyss, the infinity lie in front of you”. (Malevich 1995a, p. 151).

A rotating square formed a circle,¹³ and the transformed white and black squares, a cross. Suprematist figures of the square, cross and circle are secret mystical signs, which lead us to more questions than answers. At this point, we would venture to suggest a number of hypotheses. The circle can be seen as a black hole, a symbol of cosmic transition to another transcendental space and time continuum. Or as a black sun, which, as a symbol, contains the autoreflexive message on the transfer from the real to the unreal. The circle both displays the new plastic ideas of Suprematism and presents, in accordance with Slavic mythology, a face of Chernobog (the Black god), the twin of Belobog (the White god of light and creation). Both gods were made by the Creator God to perform their own functions, but both strove to bring the world to a state of balance. A number of sacred contexts can be discerned here as well. The black circle symbolized non-existence, the beginning and the end of the macrocosm, an ontological infinity. What we see here is an apophatic formula which implements the notion of the black circle as a point of rest, and the idea of non-manifested divine existence. Darkness is born together with the Light, since Light rises out of Darkness, out of mystery, out of the innermost, of absolute calm. Malevich made a most eloquent point of it in his letter to Mikhail Gershenzon on 13 October 1924:

Light and darkness from the point of view of objectlessness is the same substance, different on no more than two counts. The sun compared to reason is a dark spot, but there is something which will make reason itself be the same. Darkness is neither good nor evil; it rather is rest, and woe to him who comes to vex darkness with light, for it is the light that creates representations that men assault with their bayonets and save themselves. The world lies in darkness; I understand darkness which has neither will nor representation—and it was Schopenhauer who wrote a book titled *The World as Will and Representation*. Of course, I haven’t read it—but I read the title in the window of a bookshop. I haven’t given it a proper thought, but I trust the world can exist only where there is neither will nor representation. And where the latter two stand, there can be no world, only a struggle between representations. (Malevich 2000, p. 354)

Malevich’s negative theology is closely linked to the notion of “religion of pure action” he often talked about. Contrary to the Taoist notion of “pure experiences”, the artist sees the Suprematist primary forms as new visual codes of objectlessness. The religious world, according to Malevich, is the world of the unknowable Absolute where union with God is only possible by means of negating matter and objectness. Fully realizing that knowing God and theosis are both impossible, Malevich codifies this impossibility into a set of statements where the religion and artistic text are both converted into the zero point of meaning—“the infinite nonsense”. In a letter to Mikhail Gershenzon on 11 April 1920, he wrote:

For many years I have been focused on my own progress in painting, leaving the religion of the Spirit aside, and now I am entering or returning to the world of religion, and I do not why it is happening now. I go to churches, look at [the images of] saints and the whole living spiritual world—and I see within myself—or maybe in the whole world—that the moment of change has come for religions. I saw it this way: just as art was progressing to the purest form of performance, the world of religion was approaching the religion of the same; all the saints and prophets were motivated by the same but could not bring it to life. Reason prevented them by focusing on the ends and point of everything—and the whole work of the world of religion crashed against these two parts of the wall of reason. The work became finite and could no longer reach infinity. The entrance of religion into pure action is for me a mandatory requirement; the endlessness of the work of the spirit of religion is a universal substance. Then its power will be no longer contained within itself, for prayer will not be limited with its ends and meaning—and will turn into the action of endless nonsense (Malevich 2000, p. 340).

Malevich's semiotics of the cross is linked to the many meanings a symbol has within the author's epistemology. These semantic articulations found their best expression in Malevich's series "Mystical Suprematism" (1920–1922) [Figures 1 and 2].



Figure 1. *Mystic Suprematism (Black Cross on Red Oval)*, 1920–1922. The collection of the Stedelijk Museum of Amsterdam. © Stedelijk Museum.



Figure 2. *Mystic Suprematism (Red Cross on Black Circle)*, 1920–1922. The collection of the Stedelijk Museum of Amsterdam. © Stedelijk Museum.

In the focus of the paintings is the four-pointed Orthodox cross with a slanted cross-beam. This is a reference to the Orthodox visual version of the Crucifixion, where each of Christ's feet was nailed to the cross with a separate nail—unlike the crossed feet and the single nail for both feet on Catholic crucifixes. This is the first riddle of Malevich's

crosses—the artist was a Roman Catholic, and we could have expected he would use Catholic imagery. The second riddle is in Malevich's use of another important symbol of orthodox iconography. In his *Cherny krest na krasnom ovale* (Black Cross on Red Oval), Malevich places the cross within a red oval resembling the mandorla¹⁴—the light around the body of the Savior. In Christian iconography, it symbolized the divine glory and holiness, the victory of spirit and light coming from the Savior. Its color of red is reminiscent of the fiery nature of the divine: "For the Lord thy God is a consuming fire, even a jealous God" (Deut 4:24). This symbol of Christ transfigured and His divine majesty are also found in Andrei Rublev's *The Savior Enthroned in Glory* (1408, made for the Assumption Cathedral in Vladimir). The blue-green mandorla and the red field around the Savior in this icon clearly gravitate towards the simplest of geometric figures—the square and cross. The symbolism of the icon has given rise to ambivalent interpretations: Oleg Tarasov, for instance, talked of "the ambiguous nature of signs and symbols in the Christian worldview" and the complex structure of the text of the Orthodox icon. (Tarasov 2011, p. 120). In the Russian icon painting, we see a multitude of symbols of sacred space, which mark ambiguous discourses of theology. The important thing for us is the cultural meaning of the two geometric figures, since the cube or rectangle symbolized the earth, and the circle, the sky. Art historians currently interpret *The Savior Enthroned in Glory* in the context of early Christian iconography: Jesus is seated against the background of the Universe (the sky and angels), and the earth is represented by a large red square, with its four corners standing for North, South, East and West. It is in this combination of the earthly/profane and the heavenly/sacred that the mandorla captured this duality and symbolized the Transfiguration of Christ.

Malevich as a Catholic must have known the Christian iconography quite well. However, it would have been a mistake to only look for the religious context in his mystical paintings. The mandorla for the artist was more of a mystical space, and the cross, rather an ideologeme of Suprematism, which postulated the new sign system of the non-objective art. By liberating the Suprematist art from objectness, Malevich followed the notion of "dissimilar likeness" advanced by Pseudo-Dionysius, since God is unknowable and impossible to signify. The square, circle and cross were formulas of the apophatic faith of Modern times, since "Suprematism is also a prism, through which, however, no 'thing' could be seen" (Malevich 1998b, p. 41). Primary forms were the universals of the "new face" of the future, signs of the multidimensional Universe, which was, in turn, Malevich's shorthand for a special world structure of the transcendental. The descriptions of Suprematist narratives lay in the transformation of matter's previous state and its forms and in the justification of the new energy of objectlessness: "Having traced the Suprematist line, and energy as the major line of life, I saw they were identical in their dynamism, and not in their ideology. I then made a graph of the movement of color, and three points became clear in Suprematism: the rainbow, the black and the white. The white square is some kind of border of the rising motion" (Malevich 1998b, p. 50).

4. Conclusions

Malevich's negative theology still remains a moot point. A researcher who aims to comprehend the art of the non-objective and interpret the deeper layers of the texts in the context of theological exegesis and the apophatic thought will have to grapple with both the clear and evident surface meaning, and with deeper, palimpsest-like layers, which demand a more in-depth scholarly approach. We believe that Malevich has intuitively reached the ideas of negative theology by relying primarily on the outcomes of the artistic system he had discovered, and by rejecting the objectness of art. Having transcended the traditional boundaries of art, he felt the presence of the invisible world of the spiritual Absolute and tried to add the new sacred and symbolic aspect to the geometrical abstraction. Malevich imagined Suprematism as the artistic discovery of the mystical space and as a reflection of the invisible world, a "pure form" system which could transform reality. The artist saw his God through the prism of his own subjective experience and apophatic thought,

relying on the negation of “object-focused” consciousness and on the mystical experience of the Absolute. The latter’s utter ineffability found its reflection in the abyss of *The Black Square*. The impossibility to express the sacred or divine in the language of Suprematism pointed towards the transcendental nature of the spiritual, which could be made explicit on the level of metaphysical experience. The mystical theology formula of the *Unio mystica* as a direct union and communication with God, which mystics described in their works, is understood by Malevich as the “supranaturalist” effect (in his original words). In the supranaturalist space/time continuum, all forms are reduced to zero: “I was transformed into zero shape and went beyond the 0–1” (Malevich 1995c, p. 34).

To go beyond the limits of the visible world, open new horizons and be transferred to other cosmic dimensions—all of these refer to a mystical and religious experience of contacting something infinitely larger and unnamable. Then, the artist would have to symbolically express these feelings in zero-point texts. Having intuitively felt the boundaries and limits of the knowable, the worldly and divine, Malevich, in his abstract geometry of the black square, cross and circle, took these primary forms up to the level of apophatism, both in the artistic and symbolic aspects. Malevich repeatedly postulated that *The Black Square* is not a painting: “There can be no talk of painting in Suprematism—it has long become obsolete, and the artist himself is a living prejudice from the past.” (Malevich 1995h, p. 189)

What we deal with here is a philosophical text which creates new meanings and accumulates a certain kind of metaphysical energy. Malevich wanted to use the language of the new art to express the apophatic infinity, and to render the unknowable Universe in the formulas of Suprematist minimalism. His own search for God shines through the semantic structure of the white square, which crushes the conventional ideas of polymorphism in art. The manifested phenomenon of apophatic emptiness and cosmic silence reflect the experience of sacred space and otherness as an invisible and objectless form: “The infinite white of Suprematism allows the ray of sight to proceed further without any limit” (Malevich 1995h, p. 187).

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Notes

- ¹ It must be added that elements of apophatic thought can be found in Plato’s Socratic dialogue “Parmenides”. The dialogue reproduces a talk between 65-year-old Parmenides, 40-year-old Zeno, Socrates who was 20 at the time, and Aristotle, then just a youth at the Great Panathenaea in 450 BCE. In the first hypothesis, the philosopher talks of the abstract and universal Unity which is “unlimited, if it has neither beginning nor end” (Plato 1997, p. 137d). In the dialogue between Parmenides and Aristotle we can easily discern the main tenet of negative theology: the via negativa as a means of postulating the Unity, “[P]: So neither name nor account belongs to it, nor is there any knowledge or perception or opinion of it. [A]: It appears not. [P]: So it is neither named nor spoken of, nor will it be an object of opinion or knowledge, nor does anything among things which are perceive it”. (Plato 1997, p. 142a) For more details, see (Dodds 1928; Rist 1962).
- ² Theologians and scholars of religion are still debating the origin of the corpus of texts published under the name of Dionysius the Areopagite (including the *Divine Names*, *Mystical Theology*, *Celestial Hierarchy*, *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* and *Ten Epistles*) and its dating. Some think they are 5th century forgeries, while others guess their putative real authors, such as Severus of Antioch, Dionysius the Great, Ammonius Saccas, Peter the Iberian, or John Philoponus. For more on this, see (Koch 1900; Stiglmayer 1928; Devreesse 1930; Puech 1930; Nutsbudze 1942; Honigmann 1952; Golitzin and Bucur 2013; Kharlamov 2016).
- ³ One of the first to address this issue was Galina Belaya in a small article titled “Avangard kak Bogoborchestvo” [Avant-garde as creating God] (Belaya 1992).
- ⁴ I. Klyun made an interesting point in his brochure “Tainye poroki akademikov” [Secret sins of academic artists]: “A huge challenge arose in its full might—to create form out of *Nothing*”. See (Kruchenykh et al. 1916, p. 29).

- ⁵ (Ampilova 2009; Bychkov 1998; Goryacheva 1993; Sarabyanov 1993, 1998; Tarasov 1992, 2011; Marcadet 2000; Sarabyanov and Shatskikh 1993; Strigalev 1989; Mudrak 2016; Schreier 1966; Bowlt 1991; Spira 2008).
- ⁶ It must be noted that, although Malevich has been the subject of numerous monographs and articles, his apophatic thought mostly stays under the radar in Russian scholarship. The reason for this goes beyond the difficulty of comprehending his vast philosophical and theoretical heritage: the very problem is quite provocative. For a long time, the art of the avant-garde has been studied in Russia solely in the context of theomachy and social utopianism. The issues of negative theology and Suprematism have been treated, albeit cursorily, in (Bychkov 1998; Mikhailova 2000; Shatskikh 2000; Levkova-Lamm 2004; Kurbanovsky 2007; Lozovaia 2011; Rostova 2021).
- ⁷ Mirosława Mudrak has noted a significant influence of Byzantine liturgy and Christian tradition of icon painting on Malevich's early Symbolist frescoes. She also described a synthesis of Oriental and European iconographical motives in his art. See Mudrak, Mirosława. 2016. *Kazimir Malevich i vizantijskaia liturgicheskaia traditsiia* [Kazimir Malevich and the Byzantine liturgical tradition]. *Iskusstvo*, № 2 (597). pp. 50–67.
- ⁸ See (Voronina and Rustamova 2015).
- ⁹ On the dating of Malevich's Black Square, see (Goryacheva 2020).
- ¹⁰ This might be a reference to Robert Fludd's "Utriusque cosmi maioris scilicet et minoris Metaphysica, physica atque technica Historia" (1617). Fludd, a mystic and astrologer, saw the black square as a symbol of the darkness of the Universe—a macrocosm where eternal Darkness reigns supreme.
- ¹¹ It must be noted that the articles and treatises by Malevich devoted directly to the *Black Circle* have not yet been discovered. Tatyana Goryacheva has suggested that in his Vitebsk years, Malevich wrote an article titled *Solntse i Chernyi Kvadrat* [The Sun and the Black Square], or, according to a different source, *Beloe Solntse i Chernyi Kvadrat* [The White Sun and the Black Square], but no manuscript of it is currently known. See (Goryacheva 2020, p. 27).
- ¹² See (Andreeva 2019; Bychkov 1998; Vakar 2015; Ichin 2011; Gill 2016; Lozovaia 2011; Levina 2015; Shatskikh 2000; Kurbanovsky 2007; Nakov 2010; Bowlt 1991; Spira 2008; Tarasov 2002, 2011; Milner 1996; Bering 1986; Krieger 1998).
- ¹³ The *Black Circle* (1915) is now part of the collections of the State Russian Museum in St. Petersburg. It went on display together with the *Black Cross* and *Black Square* at the 0.10 exhibition.
- ¹⁴ Mandorla (Italian for "almond"), or "vesica piscis" (Latin for "swim bladder")—a symbolic depiction of oval-shaped shining, or an almond-shaped halo around the body of the Savior, which appears on the icons of Transfiguration and Ascension.

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