Critical response to these two publications will likely be divided. On the one hand, there will be those skeptical of any attempt to relate Kazimir Malevich’s oeuvre to film. After all, Malevich was the father of Suprematism, a movement dedicated to immutable painterly laws and the ideal of media purity and, unlike most of his avant-garde contemporaries, he stubbornly held out against photography, photomontage, and film—he never made the transition, to borrow Benjamin Buchloh’s pithy phrase, “from faktura to factography.” On the other hand, many scholars will revel in the knowledge that these two publications could potentially jar Malevich studies out of its current impasse. The cinematic Malevich, in other words, promises to challenge and complicate received notions about Malevich the nihilistic “divine idiot” (as T. J. Clark recently described him), Malevich the unwavering formalist, or Malevich the iconoclast/iconophile. The raison d’être of both books, which appeared simultaneously yet ostensibly unaware of each other, are seven essays Malevich wrote on film between 1925 and 1929. And while these two studies do not represent the first attempts at treating Malevich and film, Bulgakowa’s and Tupitsyn’s are certainly the most ambitious to date.¹


Malevich’s decision to write about film in 1925 coincided with his initial encounter with Sergei Eisenstein in Nemchinovka, a small town outside Moscow. Malevich’s longtime acquaintance Kirill Shuiko, a revolutionary student of Vsevolod Meyerhold and protégé of Eisenstein, facilitated their introduction. The artist and filmmaker purportedly formed a strong bond, in spite of the fact that their views on art and politics were diametrically opposed. Years later, when the great director penned his memoirs, he was to recall Malevich’s physical strength and mental resolve, rather than his ideas on film and painting Bulgakowa also suggests Malevich’s writings on film were inspired by geographic relocation. After losing his important position as director of the Institute of Artistic Culture (GINKhUK) in Leningrad (the state closed the institute because its aesthetic philosophy was considered too abstract and unrelated to the goals of the Revolution), Malevich asked for permission to travel abroad. In the spring of 1927 he headed off to Germany along with crates of paintings, pedagogic materials, and numerous unpublished manuscripts. In early April of that year Malevich met with Walter Gropius at the Bauhaus in Dessau. Although Gropius was not forthcoming with a job offer, as Malevich had hoped, the trip was nonetheless a productive one. While there, Malevich met Moholy-Nagy, who, one year later, published a German translation of his *The Non-Objective World*. In Berlin Malevich sought out Hans Richter, a former member of the Blaue Reiter Group and a Dadaist, who by then was already known as Europe’s most important and pioneering abstract filmmaker. Malevich had the opportunity to view Richter’s short film *Rhythmus 25*, in which the filmmaker uses stop-action animation to bring to life cut-out nonobjective forms of varying sizes. Projected on the screen, these forms seem to push forward and recede in an ambiguous, diegetic space. In certain instances, this results in a pulsating, stroboscopic effect not unlike Tony Conrad’s landmark *The Flicker* (1966), completed some forty years later. Given his constant search for new “models of perception” and keen awareness of what Bulgakowa calls “the historicity of vision” (20), this psycho-physiological side effect of Richter’s film must have appealed to Malevich as well.

Seeing Richter as the only artist worthy and capable of translating his ideas about Suprematism to the screen, Malevich wrote a three-page scenario entitled “Art and the Problems of Architecture. The Emergence of a New Plastic System of Architecture. Script for an Artistic-Scientific Film. To Hans Richter.” Bulgakowa’s anthology includes the complete text along with black-and-white facsimiles of Malevich’s preparatory sketches for this project (the original drawings were in color—Malevich wisely foresaw the advent of color film). Although a soundtrack was eventually completed, the actual shooting of the Richter-Malevich film was postponed indefinitely when Soviet authorities, fearing Malevich’s defection, withdrew his visa and forced him to leave Germany. Wrongly assuming he would return to Germany some day, Malevich left his film scenario, paintings, and manuscripts behind.
The handwritten script survived World War II hidden away in the basement of Hugo Häring’s house in Biberach.

In contrast to The White Rectangle, Tupitsyn’s book, Malevich and Film, published on the occasion of the eponymous exhibition held at the Centro Cultural de Belém, Lisbon, May 17—August 18, 2002, and Fundación La Caixa, Madrid, November 20, 2002—January 19, 2003, is lavishly illustrated and full of juxtapositions of paintings and film stills—something Eisenstein once reprimanded Malevich for naively trying to do. Tupitsyn’s goal of introducing Malevich’s writings on film to an English-speaking audience comes second to her polemic attempts at making connections between what she deems “the filmic structures” inherent to Malevich’s Suprematist works (evinced above all in a series of recently discovered sketchbooks housed in the Khardzhiev collection), and neo-avant-garde art of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. The book, which is itself a fascinating exercise in modernist montage, moves quickly from Malevich’s early non-objective experiments to the work of a dizzying array of second-generation postwar artists, including Richard Serra, Sol LeWitt, Robert Rauschenberg, Yves Klein, Piero Manzoni, Art & Language, Mel Ramdsen, On Kawara, Komar and Melamid, Ilya Kabakov, and Allan McCollum. The logic behind Tupitsyn’s jump from the historical avant-garde to the neo-avant-garde, or from modernism to postmodernism, as she prefers to call it, is far from self-evident.

In Chapter 5, “During the Great Divide,” Tupitsyn constructs tenuous links between October, the revolution, and October, the art journal. Malevich’s cinematic sentiments, she contends, found their way into the collective imagination of postwar American avant-garde artists via Richter and the eminent film scholar and founding editor of October, Annette Michelson. After immigrating to New York during World War II, Richter lectured frequently on abstract film at the Guggenheim Museum and the Documentary Film Producer’s Association. In 1962, the publication of Malevich’s aforementioned 1927 film script rekindled Richter’s interest in the project, and after enlisting the help of documentary photographer Arnold Eagle, he dedicated himself to realizing Malevich’s scenario. Unfortunately, Richter died in 1976 before he could finish the film. Eagle worked on it for another six years but never completed it. Richter and Eagle’s preparatory sketches and related materials are now housed at the Getty Archives in Los Angeles. In 1971, Tupitsyn asserts, Michelson became aware of the project through Eagle and “conceded” that there was a cinematic side to Malevich’s overarching Suprematist vision. Thus, Tupitsyn concludes: “With the founding of October magazine in 1975 by Michelson and [Rosalind] Krauss, the arena for probing the abstract, and the minimal, along with the documenting the theoretical background against which Malevich’s paintings might be considered. Some of her most important observations occur in Chapter 3, when she discusses Malevich’s awareness of the mechanical reproducibility of his trademark Black Square, as well as his desire “to imitate the properties of one medium [painting] with the technical possibilities of another [film]” (17). Turning her attention to Malevich’s famous 0,10 exhibition, Tupitsyn comments on the unique manner in which Malevich chose to hang his works and, accordingly, the strange effect this mode of presentation had on the viewer’s body. She tacitly suggests that phenomenological approaches to film might enable us to better understand Malevich’s Suprematist paintings. One doesn’t necessarily have to buy into her oversimplistic comparison of Malevich’s vertically displayed paintings and “a filmstrip hanging loosely above an editing table” (15) to appreciate her claim that the artist consciously situated his paintings within a “cinematic code.”

In the end, however, it is Malevich’s writings, not paintings, that define his relationship to film. His seven essays on film are idiosyncratic and fascinating, if not always fully developed or free from internal contradiction. Both books include appendices devoted to explaining the difficulties in translating Malevich’s unique prose, which everyone seems to agree “is almost as remote from conventional norms of Russian writing as his painting is from the Russian realist tradition.”
at Moscow’s State Tretiakov Gallery, is in reality an oil on canvas that uses simple geometric forms and a Suprematist-inspired typography in place of film stills to deliver its message.

Malevich’s next two essays, "And Visages AreVictorious on the Screen" (1925) and "The Artist and the Cinema" (1926), are closely related and work together as a sort of antifilm manifesto. In them, Malevich never formulates a theory of film per se, but instead defines the new medium negatively as he further elaborates his idiosyncratic understanding of painting and its relation to technology-at-large. As is evinced in one of his didactic teaching tools, the Analytic Chart No. 16, 1925 (which, it is worth noting, possesses many undeniably filmic qualities), Malevich positions Futurism, Cubism, and Suprematism at the end of his teleological model of the history of painting. The developmental stages of modernist painting are visually associated with familiar technological icons, such as factory machines, airplanes, and a train. However, one searches the Analytic Chart in vain for an image of the motion-picture camera. This is because, according to Malevich, film forever belongs to the nineteenth century—the motion-picture camera is an inherently retrograde machine, enslaved to mimesis, and capable of reproducing only what exists in the world already. For this reason it is up to cinema to follow modernist painting’s lead, not vice-versa. As Malevich explains: “For many centuries [painting] served its ideological mistress, cleaned her, powdered and daubed her cheeks and lips, and penciled her eyebrows. Today it refuses to do so, in the name of its own culture. . . . it has freed itself from ideological content and has begun to build its form. . . . [Cinema too must realize] that art can exist without the image, without everyday life, and without the idea’s visage” (43).

Malevich’s Adorno-esque abhorrence of mimesis flags a little as time goes on. In his last two essays on film, "Cinema, Gramophone, Radio, and Artistic Culture" (1928), and “Pictorial Laws in Cinematic Problems” (1929), he finds certain redeeming elements in Dziga Vertov’s films, which he believes offer some hope for the future of the medium. In these two essays we learn that Malevich especially admired the abstract moments in Vertov’s otherwise mimetic film ElevenTime (1928). Vertov succeeds where others, including Eisenstein, fail by showing “pure force and dynamics” (81). (Malevich’s first three texts on film appeared in the Association of Revolutionary Cinematography newsletter, Kinozhurnal, which also publicized the famous Einstein-Vertov debates. So Malevich was acutely aware of the two directors’ respective aesthetic positions.) In a roundabout way, Malevich praises Vertov for what he does not show, that is, for not giving technology a specific form. Malevich’s position is similar to that of the philosopher Martin Heidegger, as explicated in The Question concerning Technology and Other Essays (New York: Harper and Row, 1977): each in his own way agrees that “the essence of technology is by no means anything technological” (4). Elsewhere Malevich answers his own rhetorical question, “Should we paint like the Futurists who worshiped their machines?”: “No! Because in pursuing the form of airplanes or automobiles, we shall always be anticipating new cast-off forms of technical life . . . .” In Malevich’s estimation, attempts to realistically depict the

by-products of modern technological progress are futile because the present tense inevitably and all too quickly becomes the future anterior.6

Bulgakowa’s and Tupitsyn’s books will doubtless inspire other scholars to write about Malevich and film. One can only hope that the next study on this topic will address one glaring inconsistency in the two studies currently under review—both scholars anachronistically relate Malevich’s writings on film to his early Suprematist paintings. As such, they fail to consider the possibility that Malevich’s antimimetic, antifilmic manifestos reflect the rise of state-sponsored Soviet Socialist Realist painting, or that an essay like “And Visages Are Victorious on the Screen” might foreshadow Malevich’s decision to paint faceless peasants a few years later. (Tupitsyn briefly deals with these paintings on pages 71–86, but only to bolster her earlier comments on Suprematism.)

In her 1999 essay “The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism,” film historian Miriam Hansen makes the provocative claim that “Russian cinema became Soviet cinema by going through a process of Americanization.”7 Following her lead, art historians should ask to what extent Russian avant-garde painting became Soviet Socialist Realist painting through a similar process of Hollywoodization. Paintings such as Sergei Gerasimov’s A Collective-Farm Festival (1937), Alexander Deineka’s The Wide Expanse (1944), and Alexander Laktionov’s A Letter from the Front (1947) beg for this kind of comparison. These large paintings amount to wide-screen spectacles, in which the canvas has been reinfused with an undeniably filmic space. In the tradition of classic Hollywood cinema, a story is told from the point of view of an omniscient narrator to the detached spectator standing in front of the canvas.

One question remains. When, in “Pictorial Laws in Cinematic Problems,” Malevich writes that “We must not forget that the content of our epoch is not exhaustible by showing how pigs are fed on a state farm, or how the ‘golden crops’ are harvested” (82), is he criticizing the mimetic limitations of cinema, or is he presciently anticipating the ultimate failure of Soviet Socialist Realist painting—or both?

2. All but the final essay, overlooked because of a typo that cited the author as W. Malevich, previously appeared in Malevich: Collected Writings, ed. Troels Andersen (Copenhagen: Bergen, 1968–78).
4. There seems to be some disagreement about whether the poster in question was painted by Malevich himself or one of his disciples. Tupitsyn and Shatskikh agree that it was done by Malevich, Bulgakowa demurs.

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