

Malevich and the Phenomenology of the Invisible

Cynthia Bergeron

The present research interprets Kazimir Malevich's *Untitled (Suprematist Painting)* (1918), in light of Michel Henry's phenomenology of the invisible. At a critical time in the history of the Russian revolution, Malevich produced works that were invested with specific theoretical and metaphysical ideas. The artist's choice to prioritize abstract form over classical representation is indicative of the modernist tendency to perceive the latter style as dated and retrograde. Furthermore, what the painter called the art of the non-objective, was meant to liberate painting from the constraints of representation, illusionism and mimesis, thus emerging as an expression of absolute sensations. This intellectual position is visually comparable to Michel Henry's understanding of self-immanence, feeling and radical interiority of life. Relating this precise artwork to the phenomenology of the invisible, I will elucidate how *Untitled (Suprematist Painting)* emulates Henry's principles by emphasizing internal manifestations and feelings, rather than visible/external phenomena.

Essentially a reductive gesture, *Untitled (Suprematist Painting)* features nothing but large rectangular brush strokes fading into the right portion of the raw canvas, while the composition remains geometrically bound on the left. These are positioned on a tilted diagonal axis that reaches from the top left to the bottom right of the picture plane. This very distinctive piece presents slight variations of white, as well as subtle textural details which evidence the artist's hand. It does not show immediately identifiable figurative elements, nor does it insist on depth, volume or perspective. Rather, it is entirely absorbed in the concepts of formal purity and gesture. Significantly, this piece is known to have been de-

rived from an earlier representational painting entitled *The Woodcutter* (1912).¹ (*Suprematist Painting*) with the original piece that yielded its inception, it is possible to discern that both works exhibit identical compositional structures. The noticeable hunched back of the protagonist is made to appear straight through the use of geometrical simplification, as the arm is transformed into two white strokes. Verging on transparency, the abstraction renders a ghostly and evanescent version of the initial figure that disappears into the background. In addition, the chromatic simplicity gives force to the tense spatial relationship of background and foreground, which compete and merge with one another. It is thus evident, that the figure which vanishes into the white space is what simultaneously composes it. This fusion not only emphasizes pictorial flatness, but evokes and symbolizes Malevich's preoccupation with human consciousness (the form) in the world or cosmos (background). Malevich stipulates that "there is a reality that is external...the consciousness we have of our own self in its continual flux introduces us to the interior of a reality [...]"² Therefore, *Untitled* (*Suprematist Painting*) is a work that marks the passage from objective/representational painting to non-objective art.

This transition not only attests to a shift in aesthetics, but illustrates the crux of a complex, artistic philosophy that Malevich calls *Suprematism* defined as such: "the forms [...] come to function as autonomous and abstract units, derive from cohesive and recognizable objects. [...] only their specific identities have been subtracted. For this reason, *Suprematism* was, as Malevich called it, "the new realism."³ This ambitious program has involved the rejection of all obligations related to the aspectual depiction of the world, in order to give precedence to the concept of emotion-as-form. Malevich famously states that "[...] true creations, [...] rather than representations, can best elicit true meaning and emotion."⁴ The work of Malevich is therefore reflective of his skepticism towards the ability to represent phenomena. Non-figurative painting is deemed absolutely necessary in order to discover of the truths hidden by common objectivity. In *Untitled* (*Suprematist Painting*), "objects have gone completely; only their sensations are left [...]. It is these sensations which may convey something essential about the universe."⁵ Therein, rests the likeness of this oeuvre to the phenomenology of the invisible, founded and developed by philosopher Michel Henry.

Phenomenology can be defined as "the study of all possible appearances in human experience, during which considerations of objective reality and of purely subjective response are temporarily left out of account."⁶ Initially formulated

by Edmund Husserl, this philosophical approach includes the “concept of *epoché* and reduction [...] as a method that permits us to gain a distance from the natural attitude.”⁷ By recuperating this notion, Henry renews the concept of phenomenology, introducing a distinction between visible and invisible phenomena. His observation is primarily that invisible or internal manifestations such as feelings are self-transcendent and differentiated from the external world. The Phenomenology of the Invisible therefore challenges traditional Husserlian phenomenology, as it presents these invisible manifestations as ones from which it is impossible to gain objective distance. Henry develops:

“it [...] is legitimate to speak of self-manifestation [...] that occurs then moment one is acquainted with an experience in its first personal mode of givenness, i.e. it is possible to speak of self-manifestation the moment I am no longer simply conscious of a foreign object, but my experience of the object as well, for in this case, my subjectivity is revealed to me.”⁸

The philosopher stipulates that internal life self-manifests, and constitutes the essence of appearances. This transcendental subjectivity is precisely what establishes the connection with external manifestation. It is a dyadic structure, in that it always constitutes “an appearance of something for someone.”⁹

From this, it is possible to characterize Malevich’s *Untitled (Suprematist Painting)* as a direct negotiation of sensual perception and feeling. Through the prism of the phenomenology of the invisible, this artwork may be interpreted as showing Malevich’s internal experience of *The Woodcutter*. In his treatment of the figure, the artist forgoes its extraneous visual details to render its mode of manifestation. The painting in question enacts the division between visible and invisible phenomena. Moreover, he readily voices his favourable position towards abstract art, stating that “...Malevich’s pure abstraction [...] comes from the world and gets its nature from the world while at the same time seeking to formulate its essence.”¹⁰ On the brink of discernibility, the figure itself hints to the invisible nature of the manifestation itself. The oeuvre becomes compatible with Henry’s affirmation that painting allows the passage from the internal to the external – to convey invisible sensations and experiences through an artistic medium. Henry writes: “to paint is to show, but the showing has the aim of letting us know what is not seen, what can never be seen.”¹¹ The thinker expounds on the dualistic structure of painting, thus articulating the very concept that bridges “the visible and the invisible.”¹²

It is possible to detect an evident similarity between Malevich's concept of the non-objective, and Henry's theory of the phenomenology of the invisible. Both positions place feeling at the core of their artistic and philosophical agendas, thereby challenging conventions by which the external or objective world is the sole subject of scrutiny. These philosophical similarities are detectable, further alluding to its visual rendering in the work *Untitled (Suprematist painting)*. Both Henry and Malevich have maintained that art is the point of access to higher metaphysical truths. As the philosopher considered abstract painting an expression of radical internal life; it yields the evident ability to fiercely pierce through "the invisible [...] the night of this abyssal subjectivity".¹³

Endnotes

1. Charlotte Douglas, *Kazimir Malevich* (New York: Harry Abrahams Inc, 1994):57.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., 47.
4. Kasimir Malevich, As quoted in Thomas Aiello, "Head-First Through the Hole in the Zero: Malevich's Suprematism, Khlebnikov's Futurism, and the Development of a Deconstructive Aesthetic 1908-1919." *E-maj 1* (2005):10.
5. Douglas, 76.
6. James Morris, *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: American Heritage Publishing, 1969): 985.
7. Dan Zahavi, "Michel Henry and the Phenomenology of the invisible." *Spring Netherlands: Continental Philosophy Review* 32 (1999): 223.
8. Ibid., 225.
9. Ibid., 223.
10. Michel Henry, *Seeing the Invisible*. (New York: Continuum, 2009):14.
11. Ibid.,10.
12. Ibid.,136.
13. Ibid.,10.