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**Black Square, White Frame:
A Case Against Malevich**

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“I couldn’t sleep or eat; I wanted to understand what I had done.”
Kazimir Malevich

In the year 2015, a discovery shook the artworld. After an x-rays analysis, two other images and an inscription were found under “Black Square,” Kazimir Malevich’s iconic painting. The experts at the Moscow’s Tretyakov Gallery were able to see the initial Cubo-Futurist composition, painted over by a proto-Suprematist one, now both being hidden underneath the black square. The discoveries of earlier versions of a painting are nothing surprising or unusual in our times – it was the accompanying inscription on the white border that suddenly complicated everything we thought we knew about this work of art. The largest “crack” on the already cracked painting suddenly opened after the following words in Russian appeared: БИТВА НЕГРОВ В ТЕМНОЙ ПЕЩЕРЕ ГЛУБОКОЙ НОЧЬЮ, roughly translated as Negroes battling in a dark cave at deep night.¹ This “mysterious inscription” suddenly offered new “insights into the work’s cultural origins and meaning.”² According to one of the sources,

Though they’re still deciphering the handwriting, the researchers assume this phrase is a reference to what is widely believed to be the first modern monochromatic artwork, a 1897 work by French writer and humorist Alphonse Allais, called “Combat de Nègres dans une cave pendant la nuit” (“Negroes Fighting in a Cellar at Night.”) If their speculations are

¹ Interestingly, various news sources offered different versions of the translation into English and I will return to this.

² Ivan Nechepurenko, “Examination Reveals a Mysterious Message on Malevich’s ‘Black Square’ Painting”, The New York Times Blog ArtsBeat, November 18, 2015. <<https://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/11/18/examination-reveals-a-mysterious-message-on-malevichs-black-square-painting>> visited November 20, 2015.

correct, then “Black Square” is in some kind of dialogue with Allais, who was well-known in Russia at the time Malevich worked, and whose “Combat” piece was considered a joke by contemporary European audiences, even if it is clearly a racist one.³

In a statement given by one of the experts on Malevich, we further read that as a result of this new discovery, “some commentators in Russia hurried to accuse him of plagiarism, but in reality the situation is much more complicated. Malevich used Allais’s prank, but turned it into the realm of high art.”⁴ Indeed, the clear question that rose after the “appearance” of this sentence is how are we to even begin to interpret this “zero point of painting,” for many *the* avant-garde masterpiece? Is there anyone who would laugh today at this “joke” and are we too quick to dismiss Malevich as yet another racist? Not knowing much about the work of Alphonse Allais (1854-1905), a predecessor to “Black Square,” it might be useful to begin our investigation there.

³ Carey Dunne, “Art Historians Find Racist Joke Hidden Under Malevich’s ‘Black Square.’” Hyperallergic, November 13, 2015. <<https://hyperallergic.com/253361/art-historian-finds-racist-joke-hidden-under-malevichs-black-square>> visited November 20, 2015.

⁴ Konstantin Akinsha in Ivan Nechepurenko, *Ibid.*

I. Black is Not a Color

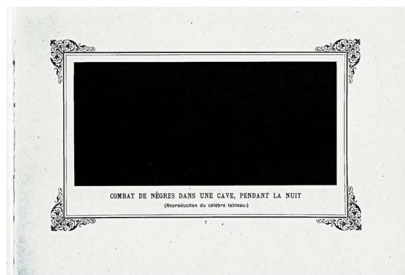
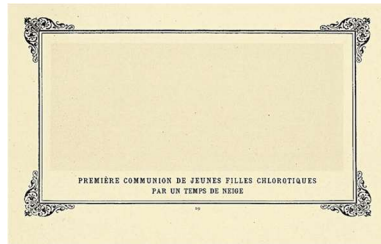
Making things even more complicated, it turns out that Alphonse Allais's work was also an appropriation, in this case of a painting by Paul Bilhaud (1854-1933), a French poet and dramatist, member of the avant-garde group the *Incoherents*. The *Incoherents* were founded in 1882 and "presented work deliberately irrational, absurdist and iconoclastic, 'found' art objects, the drawings of children, and drawings "made by people who don't know how to draw."⁵ At their first exhibition in the Parisian home of their founder, Jules Lévy, on October 1st 1882, an all-black painting by Bilhaud was exhibited, entitled "Combat de nègres dans un tunnel" ("Negroes Fighting in a Tunnel") and showing a black canvas with a golden frame.⁶ Alphonse Allais appropriated this work five years later under the title "Combat de nègres dans une cave pendant la nuit (Reproduction du célèbre tableau)" or, in English, "The Battle of the Negroes in a Cellar During the Night. (The reproduction of a famous painting)." It was published in his *Album printemps-avril* (*April fool-ish Album*), a "portfolio of monochrome pictures of various colors, with uniformly ornamental frames, each bearing a comical title."⁷ The images of framed white, yellow, red, blue, green, gray, and black canvases were accompanied by a title supposed to create a comical effect. For instance, the white one bore the title "Première communion de jeunes filles chlorotiques par un temps de neige" ("First communion of young chlorotic girls in a snowy weather"), while the red one was "Récolte de la tomate par les cardinaux apoplectiques au bord de la mer rouge" ("Effet d'aurora boréals) (Tomato harvest by apoplectic cardinals on the

⁵ "Incoherents," The Art and Popular Culture Encyclopedia, <<http://www.artandpopularculture.com/Incoherents>> visited March 15, 2017.

⁶ "Negroes Fighting in a Tunnel at Night," The Art and Popular Culture Encyclopedia, <http://www.artandpopularculture.com/Negroes_Fighting_in_a_Tunnel_at_Night> visited March 15, 2017.

⁷ *Ibid.*

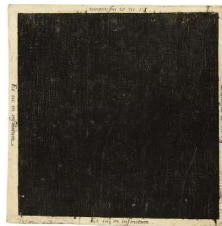
shore of the red sea (Aurora borealis effect).”⁸



⁸ The yellow: “Manipulation de l’ocre par des cocus ictériques” (“Manipulation of ochre by jaundiced cuckolds”), the blue: “Stupeur de jeunes recrues apercevant pour la première fois ton azur, O Méditerranée!” (“Stupor of young recruits seeing for the time your azure, O Mediterranean!”), the green: “Des souteneurs, encore dans la force de l’âge et la ventre dans l’herbe, boivent de l’absinthe” (“Pimps, still in the prime of life and belly, in the grass, drinking absinthe”), and the gray: “Ronde de Pochards dans le brouillard” (“Circle of pochard ducks in the fog”).

Hence a small correction of the words of the Malevich expert: Allais was not an artist, but a caricaturist. As one of the researchers of Allais's work noted, there was a certain paradox in those caricatures of non-figurative art, since we can "conclude that abstract art was mocked long before it even existed."⁹ From the 1840s, "following the development of the illustrated press and satirical newspapers, the monochrome joke became a commonplace."¹⁰ Nevertheless, the credit for the first monochromatic image goes to a seventeenth century

page within volume one of Robert Fludd's *Utriusque cosmi maioris scilicet et minoris metaphysica* (1617). The image – a black square – is presented in the context of a metaphysical iconography of the infinite. Each of the four sides of the square (slightly distorted so that it looks more like a rhombus) is marked with the same words: "Et sic in infinitum." For Fludd, this image was nothing less than a representation of the *prima materia*, the beginning of all creation.¹¹



⁹"Il faut constater que l'on s'est moqué de l'art abstrait bien avant que celui-ci n'existe" (translation mine). Raphaël Rosenberg, "De la blague monochrome à la caricature de l'art abstrait." In: *L'art de la caricature*, Presses Universitaires de Paris Nanterre. Paris, 2011, pp.27-49. Online version: <http://books.openedition.org/pupo/2208?lang=en>

¹⁰"Suite au développement de la presse illustrée et des journaux pour rire, la blague monochrome devient un lieu commun" (translation mine). *Ibid.*

¹¹Gabriel Ramin Schor, "Black Moods." *Tate Etc.* Issue 7, Summer 2006. <<http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/black-moods>> visited November 20, 2015.

It was not until 1911-1912 that “‘abstract’ paintings were publicly exhibited as the works of art.”¹² We most certainly should not give the credit for the invention of the twentieth-century abstract art to the nineteenth century French caricaturists; nevertheless they should be mentioned within this framework, not as “the creators of a new artistic style, but rather the seismographs that register and reshape the ideas that were common in their time.”¹³ As it seems, what Malevich did was not only to appropriate a “disgraceful racist joke about the concept of layering black-on-black”¹⁴ but a caricature of abstract painting as well.

Returning to “Black Square,” what did we know about it before this discovery? “‘Black Square’ was conceived as the ultimate negation of the icon and, in doing so, it became a new form of icon.”¹⁵ It was exhibited “in the upper corner of a room, where a traditional Orthodox religious icon... would normally reside in Russian homes.”¹⁶ Apparently, “Black Square” is neither black nor a square: “None of its sides are parallel to the frame. Besides, it is made of mixed colors, none of which is black. If you look closer, you will see that the paint has cracked over time, creating an intricate network of line which some assert represents a running buffalo.”¹⁷ Also, it is not the only one: the first one, made for the

¹²“Ce n’est qu’à partir de 1911-1912 que des tableaux «abstraits» furent exposés publiquement comme œuvres d’art” (translation mine). Rosenberg, *Ibid.*

¹³“... les caricaturistes ne sont pas les créateurs d’un nouveau courant artistique mais plutôt des sismographes qui enregistrent et remanient des idées qui étaient communes en leur temps” (translation mine). *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Noah Charney, “Entombing Lenin’s Tomb: “Black Square” and the 100th Anniversary of Russian Revolution,” Salon, March 05 2017. <<https://www.salon.com/2017/03/05/entombing-lenins-tomb-black-square-and-the-100th-anniversary-of-the-russian-revolution/>> visited November 20, 2015.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Georgy Manaev and Dmitriy Romendik, “Hidden signs of Malevich’s ‘Black Square.’” *Russia Beyond*, January 9, 2014.

exhibition in 1915 started a series of black square paintings and today there are four known versions.¹⁸ For a long time,

It was believed that Kasimir Malevich's "Black Square" first appeared in 1913. The artist himself dated it to that year, and scholars trusted him implicitly.¹⁹ [...] By the end of the twentieth century, scholars had established the true date of the Suprematist monofigure's creation: 1915. [...] This shift in dates, which specialists have come to call "Malevich's mystification," in fact rested on a profound, albeit subjective truth. "Black Square's" biography had a prenatal period, which did indeed begin in 1913."^{20,21}

It is known that Malevich the conceptualist "convincingly backdated his works to construct a 'correct' artistic biography for himself. With regard to Suprematism, he changed not only dates but the very sequence of events."²² In her study of "Black Square," Aleksandra Shatskikh writes about the important phase of

<https://www.rbth.com/arts/2014/01/09/hidden_signs_of_malevichs_black_square_32989.html> visited November 20, 2015.

¹⁸ "The second painting was done in 1923 for the Venetian biennale, and differed from the original in size. Malevich painted his third "The Black Square" for the 1929 exhibition in the Tretyakov Gallery. (...) A fourth "Black Square" was rediscovered in 1993: a person whose name is unknown used it as collateral to get a bank loan in Samara." *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Aleksandra Shatskikh: *Black Square – Malevich and the Origin of Suprematism*. Yale University Press, New Haven&London, 2012, pp.1.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.2.

²¹ "During the 1913-1915 period, and triggered largely by his work on the play *Victory Over the Sun*, with its themes of time travel and magic, the black square, the symbolic coffin for the sun, entered his lexicon of images. The play's funeral for the sun and tinkering with the measurement of time opened many doors to the future. He began exploring theories of space and time." Gerry Souter, *Malevich – Journey to Infinity*. New York: Parkstone Press International, 2008, pp.110.

²² *Ibid.*, pp.33.

Malevich's work that preceded Suprematism: Fevralism. Its strategic goal was "the total destruction of the dominant rational worldview."²³ The aim was to convince the viewer that his or her reason was "powerless to comprehend the meaning of the quotation-metaphors' head-on collision. Transnational absurdism was the unconditional victor in this provocative struggle."²⁴ In terms of the formal style, Malevich created word-drawings or verse-images: "Clumsy and illiterate phrases – verbal truisms drawn from vulgar use – were put in square frames and thus transformed into a synthetic work of art."²⁵ The frame transformed a banal phrase into a work of art.²⁶ Fevralism had a primarily deconstructive function; however, "the verse-drawings also marked his move toward object-lessness; [...] Malevich was drawn to what lay beyond illusoriness, that is, beyond the world's visible aspect."²⁷ On a personal level, painting "Black Square" brought a "total eclipse" for Malevich:

"Things vanished like smoke" – and before Malevich arose the absolute, the world of nonobjectivity. [...] 'fiery lighting bolts' were constantly crossing the canvas in front of him; he considered "Black Square" an event of such tremendous significance in his art that he could not eat, drink or sleep for a full week.²⁸

Or, in Malevich's words:

I felt only night within me and it was then that I conceived the new art, which I called Suprematism. [...] The square of Suprematists... can be compared to

²³ Shatskikh, *Ibid*, pp.5.

²⁴ *Ibid*, pp.10.

²⁵ *Ibid*, pp.12.

²⁶ "Soon after, the Russian Formalists would call this mechanism "estrangement," although artists had discovered and perfected it before them." *Ibid*.

²⁷ *Ibid*, pp.14.

²⁸ *Ibid*, pp.45.

the symbols of primitive men. It was not their intent to produce ornaments but to express the feeling of rhythm.²⁹ [...] When in the year 1913, in my desperate attempt to free art from the ballast of objectivity, I took refuge in the square form and exhibited a picture which consisted of nothing more than a black square on a white field, the critics and, along with them, the public sighed, “Everything which we loved is lost. We are in a desert. [...] Before us nothing but a black square on a white background!”³⁰

In his vocabulary of describing this “desert,” Malevich uses words of emotions and feelings “Black Square” is meant to contain and transmit:

But this desert is filled with the spirit of non-objective sensation which pervades everything. [...] A blissful sense of liberating non-objectivity drew me forth into the ‘desert,’ where nothing is real except feeling... and so feeling became the substance of my life.³¹ [...] The emotions which are kindled in the human being are stronger than the human being himself... they must at all costs find an outlet – they must take an overt form – they must be communicated or put to work.³² The black square on the white field was the first form in which non-objective feeling came to be expressed. The square = feeling, the white field = the void beyond this feeling. The suprematist square and the forms proceeding out of it can be likened to the primitive marks (symbols) of aboriginal men which represented, in their combinations, *not ornament but a feeling of*

²⁹ Kasimir Malevich, *The Non-Objective World: The Manifesto of Suprematism*. Courier Corporation, 2003, pp.8.

³⁰ *Ibid*, pp.68.

³¹ *Ibid*.

³² *Ibid*, pp.74.

*rhythm.*³³

Malevich believed reason was a form of imprisonment for the artist, while the object in itself was meaningless: “The idea of the conscious mind is worthless. Feeling is the decisive factor... and thus art arrives at non-objective representation – at Suprematism.”³⁴

Nevertheless, the icon of his era, as Malevich declared in a letter from 1916 the significance of “Black Square,”³⁵ was forgotten for decades: “From the mid-1930s to the late 1980s, there was no artist in the Soviet Union by the name Kazimir Malevich. Up until the late 1950s and 1960s, the West knew only the few works that had come to the United States in the 1930s.”³⁶ Hence the importance given to it is solely in retrospect, making “Black Square” the icon of our era, hundred years after it was created, a fact prompting us even more to try to understand its hidden message, this inscription written in invisible ink. Perhaps that way we begin to understand the hidden structures on the void beyond our emotions.

³³ *Ibid*, pp.76.

³⁴ Souter, *Ibid*, pp.114.

³⁵ “Malevich verbally asserted the significance of Black Square as “the icon of our era” later, in May 1916, in a letter of reproof to Alexandre Benois.” Aleksandra Shatskikh, *Ibid*, pp.109.

³⁶ *Ibid*, pp.X.

II. The Truth in Frame

to say: abyss and satire of the abyss”

“it’s enough

Jacques Derrida

If we take a closer look at “Black Square,” it seems that its author wanted for the square to never be perceived without the frame, or the white field as he named it: the frame separating it forever from the surroundings, the context in which it has been made, the context in which it will be exhibited. However, one has to notice that Malevich’s white field resembles more a passe-partout than the frames we have seen on the initial images of Allais’s representations of Bilhaud’s paintings – the golden, heavy massive frames surrounding rectangular canvases.³⁷ In his gesture of appropriation, Malevich turned the rectangle into a square, replacing the frame with a passe-partout, a term that inevitably brings to mind the work of Jacques Derrida. In *The Truth in Painting* (1978), Derrida’s commentary on Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, we are reminded of the necessity to turn our attention to the discourse of the parergon, the supplementary element of a work of art (ergon). Writing about passe-partout, Derrida stresses the point that this cutout of a cardboard and open in its middle has a main function to let the work appear: “The passe-partout remains a structure with a moveable base; but although it lets something appear, it does not form a frame

³⁷ “Passe-partout: a paper or, more usually, cardboard sheet with a cutout, which is placed under the glass in a picture frame. A picture (a photo or print, drawing, etc.) is placed beneath it, with the cutout framing it. The passe-partout serves two purposes: first, to prevent the image from touching the glass, and second, to frame the image and enhance its visual appeal. The cutout in the passe-partout is usually beveled to avoid casting shadows on the picture.” Wikipedia, <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Passe-partout>> visited February 12, 2018.

in the strict sense, rather a frame within the frame.”³⁸ In the part about parergon,³⁹ a family to which *passee-partout* belongs to, we are introduced to its transitory nature:

Neither work (*ergon*) nor outside the work (*hors d’oeuvre*), neither inside nor outside, neither above nor below, it disconnects any opposition but does not remain indeterminate and it *gives rise* to the work. It is no longer merely around the work. That which it puts in place – the instances of the frame, the title, the signature, the legend, etc. – does not stop disturbing the *internal* order of discourse on painting, its works, its commerce, its evaluations, its surplus-values, its speculation, its law, and its hierarchies.⁴⁰

There are different types of framing, from physical to historical and philosophical ones. The painted gestures on a canvas are been perceived as a work of art only after its contextualization, imbedding, and framing by the “history of the philosophy of art: its models, its concepts, its problems have not fallen from the skies, they have been constituted according to determinate modes at determinate moments.”⁴¹ In the European “science of the beautiful, the mind presupposes itself, anticipates itself, precipitates itself. *Head first*. Everything with which it commences is already a result, a work, an effect of a projection of the mind, a *resultare*.”⁴² According to Derrida, all philosophical discourses on art and its interpretation, “from Plato to Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger,”⁴³ are organized by a “permanent requirement... to distinguish between the internal or proper sense and the circumstance of the object

³⁸ *Ibid*, pp.12.

³⁹ “... the frames (Einfassungen) of pictures or the drapery on statues, or the colonnades of palaces.” Jacques Derrida: *The Truth in Painting*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London, 1987, pp.53.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, pp.9.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, pp.18.

⁴² *Ibid*, pp.26.

⁴³ *Ibid*, pp.45.

being talked about.”⁴⁴ As Derrida notices, we also witness a process of the “naturalization of the frame”⁴⁵ while the work of the frame “meets the permanent requirement of making it seem that the difference between inside and outside is transcendental – not made, but natural.”⁴⁶ Nevertheless, “There is no natural frame. *There is* frame, but the frame *does not exist*.”⁴⁷

The importance of the parergon is immense: “The ergon is produced by the work of the frame. To be constituted as a work in itself (full of an essential originality and integrity) the ergon must be set off against a background, and this is what the frame works to achieve. [...] The ergon is an effect of the parergon.”⁴⁸ Hence, our initial problem of interpreting the *Battle of the Negroes*... might be related to the fact that all Western theories of “aesthetic judgment, whose proper object must always be the work (ergon) itself,”⁴⁹ exclude parergon, this “outside at work on the inside,”⁵⁰ from the act of interpretation: we suddenly encounter a task of interpreting an integrated exteriority, the framing on the inner side of the work. Nevertheless, exactly here lays the importance of our interpretative task: for Derrida, “there can be no theory of the art object as such, but only a theory of the whole field (what Derrida sometimes calls ‘the general text’) in which the art object is produced or constituted. And that field opens out from somewhere in the in-between, between the ergon and the parergon.”⁵¹

The economy of art production is circular: without the artist, there would be no work of art; without the work of art, there would be no artist: “The origin of the artist is the work of art, the origin of

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.80.

⁴⁶ Niall Lucy, *A Derrida Dictionary*. Hoboken, New Jersey: Blackwell Publishing, 2004, pp.53.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.53-54.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.54.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

the work of art is the artist, “neither is without the other.””⁵² In Malevich’s case, as we read, he seems to have been very aware of this economy and his first worry was to obtain the *copyright* for his “Black Square”: from now on, he shall be the only one with the right to make copies of the work, as we have learned, a work that was appropriated from somewhere else, from someone else. Thus, he wrote in a letter to a friend:

Dear Mikhail Vasilievich, I’m in hot water. I’m sitting, I’ve hung up my works and I’m working. All of a sudden the doors open and in walks Puni. This means the works have been seen. Now I need to put out a booklet on my work no matter what and christen it, thereby giving notice of my copyright.⁵³

According to Niall Lucy, following Derrida,

The artist’s compulsion to sign for the originality of his or her work (a compulsion ‘outside’ the work) ... is inseparable from the general text of historical, economic and political interests that are served by the concept of originality tied to the concept of the individual. [...] This is to say that the separation of the aesthetic from the non-aesthetic is related to the separation of the self from others.⁵⁴

Malevich’s identification with “Black Square” was very strong. In his later years, when he returned to figure painting, “he signed several of his works with a little black square. Even in his death, the black square predominated. It adorned his coffin, marked his grave, and mourners carried flags bearing its likeness. Evidently, his earlier iconic painting was a symbol central to Malevich’s

⁵² *Ibid*, pp.31-32.

⁵³ Aleksandra Shatskikh, *Ibid*, pp.55.

⁵⁴ Niall Lucy, *Ibid*, pp.54.

identity.”⁵⁵

In the general economy, the process of framing becomes irreplaceable. For the work of art to exist, it must be framed: “Any market and first of all the picture market ... presupposes a process of framing;”⁵⁶ it has to be signed as our economy does not like bastard children; it has to be titled, it must be christened. Derrida invites us to pose a question of what happens when one entitles a work of art? In the case of “Black Square” it is obvious that it tells us what to see. The “Black Square” turns a not-really-a-square into a square (due to the fact that our sensory apparatus is not sophisticated enough to notice the mistakes), it turns a shady dark field into black (as there are many non-black objects and subjects that we place under the same category by simply labeling them black). Indeed, from that moment on, we are unable to see anything else but a black square, whose blackness, whose squareness has been created in the interiority of our minds. We are unable to *unsee* it, we are framed. At least, not until the “invisible” inscription spoils our pleasure and reframes the question of what are we really looking at.

The western aesthetic tradition favored “a disinterested pleasure”⁵⁷ in experiencing the works of art, and the parergon is to be perceived in the function of this. In formal sense, the parergon stands out, it detaches itself both from the ergon and from the surrounding, standing out “like a figure on a ground.”⁵⁸ Hence, the parergon is divided in two: “At the limit between work and absence of work, it divides in two. And this division gives rise to a sort of pathology of the parergon, the forms of which must be named and classified.”⁵⁹ According to this tradition, the sign of bad taste would be letting one be seduced by “the bad, external to the pure object

⁵⁵ Kazimir Malevich net, “Black Square.”
<<http://www.kazimirmalevich.net/black-square>> visited February 14, 2018.

⁵⁶ Derrida, *Ibid*, pp.71.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, pp.46.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, pp.61.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, pp.64.

of taste,”⁶⁰ hence “the deterioration of the parergon, the perversion, the adornment, is the attraction of sensory matter.”⁶¹ In order to avoid being seductive and remain situated next to the ergon, as ergon cannot do without it, parergon “ought to remain colorless, deprived of all empirical sensory materiality.”⁶² As our tradition disciplines us, the separation of outside from the inside is crucial in the matters of the aesthetic judgment which should be focused on the beauty of the intrinsic domain, “not on finery and surrounds. Hence one must know – this is a fundamental presupposition, presupposing what is fundamental – how to determine the intrinsic – what is framed – and know what one is excluding as frame *and* outside-the-frame.”⁶³ As a consequence, Kantian partitioning always creates properties on which it becomes possible to economize and profit from.

The same procedure is to be found in the matters of constructing individual identity, but also this “‘permanent requirement’ to separate the inside from the outside ‘organizes all philosophical discourses on art, the meaning of art and meaning as such.’”⁶⁴ In the process of thinking, Derrida’s deconstruction of the self-constitution of the ergon, of the work of art, is

inseparable from its involvement in a larger or greater enterprise: the deconstruction of identity. And that enterprise is not about cancelling or erasing identity; [...] it’s about the ungroundedness of identity – the necessity, which might be called an ethico-political necessity, of not allowing identity to be fixed or grounded in, or tied to, a notion of presence.⁶⁵

In Kantian tradition, the parergon is always considered to be

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp.63.

⁶⁴ Lucy, *Ibid.*, pp.55.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

on the outside, an outsider, and not important “to the total representation of the object,”⁶⁶ “as a kind of comely adjunct to the already fully constituted beauty of the object itself.”⁶⁷ Nevertheless, the inevitable question here is why would then something that perfect need an addition, an extra? In Lucy’s words, “How could something complete in itself, full of plenitude and presence, abundant with ‘total representation,’ be augmented? How is it possible to add something to what is already total?”⁶⁸ Hence, the need for a parergon points to a fundamental lack in the work itself, “original purity of the work of art contains a lack. It is this lack (an originary lack) that the supplement supplements.”⁶⁹ In Derrida’s words,

It is lacking *in* something and it is lacking *from itself*. Because reason is “conscious of its impotence to satisfy its moral needs,” it has recourse to the parergon, to grace, to mystery, to miracles. It needs the supplementary work. This additive, to be sure, is threatening. Its use is critical. It involves a risk and exacts a price the theory of which is elaborated.⁷⁰

Although we were to believe that it was the parergon the one with the lack, this *passe-partout* with a hollow middle, we now arrive to the question where the lack really is: to whom it belongs to – to the parergon or to the ergon? What Malevich’s “Black Square” does is to force us to perceive the work of art, the black square, always with its white frame. Nevertheless, it would have been easy to apply the theory of the parergon, it would have been easy to write about the white field, the white *passe-partout* if it weren’t for that inscription, if it weren’t for the *Negroes Fighting...* In this case, it is with the surplus we have a problem with, a surplus of the parergon that made visible the lack of the very ergon we were

⁶⁶ Derrida, *Ibid*, pp.57.

⁶⁷ Lucy, *Ibid*, pp.136.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, pp.137.

⁷⁰ Derrida, *Ibid*, pp.56.

trying to comprehend.

When it comes to painting, nothing can be erased – every gesture must be painted over, must be replaced by a new one, a gesture that will hide the process to a human eye, but not to a more sophisticated visual apparatus. In order for it do disappear, the initial inscription had to be painted over; nevertheless, as we see, at some point in history, it will betray its maker, offering a final punch, a final insult, an *Überfall* – which, according to Derrida, is the structure of the parergon: “The violent superimposition which falls aggressively upon the thing, the ‘insult’ as the French translator says for the *Überfall*, strangely but not without pertinence, which enslaves it and, literally, conjugates it, under matter/form.”⁷¹ This joke for some, an insult for the others, parasitizing on the edges of the ergon, will put a shadow on its maker; nevertheless, it simultaneously points to the opening that might be a chance for his escape. “Satire, farce on the edge of excess.”⁷² “That edge points back to without even, beside oneself: the extremity that may lead one out of one’s senses. It also points forward. A new frame of reference is now opened.”⁷³

⁷¹ *Ibid*, pp.67.

⁷² *Ibid*, pp.17.

⁷³ Shuli Barzilai, “Lemmata/Lemmala: Frames for Derrida's Parerga.” *Diacritics*, vol. 20(1), 1990, pp.6.

III. You Can Always Try to Translate⁷⁴

Equipped with a new x-ray vision, the time has come for us to focus on the “joke.” While researching a multitude of online sources, I encountered not only a general carelessness regarding the title given to Allais’s reproduction of the original black rectangular, but also of the translation of Malevich’s newly discovered inscription. At least regarding the 1882 painting by Paul Bilhaud (for which there is no recorded image) there seems to exist a consensus about the title: “Combat de nègres dans un tunnel”: “Negroes Fighting in a Tunnel.”⁷⁵ This same title is wrongly assigned to Alphonse Allais’s 1887 illustration and it is often written on the same page for which the title in the illustration clearly reads “Combat de nègres dans une cave pendant la nuit (Reproduction du célèbre tableau)”: “The Battle of the Negroes in a Cellar During Night. (The reproduction of a famous painting).”⁷⁶ In some cases, the English translation of Allais’s work is “Negroes Fight in a Cave, at Night”⁷⁷ or “Negroes Fighting in a Cellar at Night,”⁷⁸ where French *la cave*, meaning cellar, is translated as English *cave*.

When it comes to Malevich’s inscription in Russian, Битва негров в темной пещере глубокой ночью, various news sources

⁷⁴ Derrida, *Ibid*, pp.5.

⁷⁵ English page of Paul Bilhaud’s Wikipedia entry: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Bilhaud> visited November 20, 2017.

⁷⁶ For instance: <http://www.artribune.com/attualita/2015/01/artecucina-il-gustoso-passo-verso-il-nero-assoluto/attachment/allais-alfonse-1854-1905-0070-alfonse-allais-album-pri/>; <https://www.wikiart.org/en/alfonse-allais/negroes-fighting-in-a-tunnel-by-night>;

⁷⁷ Russia Beyond Website <https://www.rbth.com/2015/11/13/new-secrets-of-malevichs-black-square-revealed_539999> visited November 20, 2017.

⁷⁸ “Russia discovers two secret paintings under avant-garde masterpiece.” The Guardian, November 13, 2015. <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/13/russia-malevich-black-square-hidden-paintings>> visited November 20, 2015.

offered the following possibilities for translation:

Battle of the Negroes.⁷⁹
Negroes Battling in a Cave.⁸⁰
Battle of Negroes in a Dark Cave.⁸¹
Negroes Fighting in a Cave.⁸²
Negroes Battling at Night.⁸³

As it seems, none of the sources was able to offer a translation of the full sentence, pointing to the still low level of knowledge and skills regarding translation in our century, despite all our technological development.

Having seen all those options, let us now try to comprehend what kind of a scene the “joke” describes. First of all, we can claim with certainty they all agree that some form of a physical encounter is taking place: a fight or a battle. Second, there is a plural entity

⁷⁹ Sophia Kishkovsky, “There is More to Malevich’s Black Square than a hidden racist joke, Moscow curators reveal.” *The Art Newspaper*, November 18, 2015. <<http://authenticationinart.org/pdf/artmarket/There-is-more-to-Malevich%E2%80%99s-Black-Square-than-a-hidden-racist-joke-Moscow-curators-reveal-The-Art-Newspaper.pdf>>, visited November 20, 2015.

⁸⁰ *The Guardian*, *Ibid*.

⁸¹ Carrey Dune, “Art Historians Find Racist Joke Hidden Under Malevich’s ‘Black Square.’” *Hyperallergic*, November 13, 2015. <<https://hyperallergic.com/253361/art-historian-finds-racist-joke-hidden-under-malevichs-black-square/>> visited November 20, 2015.

⁸² Henri Neuendorf, “X-Ray Analysis Gives Shocking New Insights Into Kazimir Malevich’s ‘Black Square’”, *Artnet News*, November 13, 2015. <<https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/kizimir-malevich-black-square-363368>> visited November 20, 2015

⁸³ Ivan Nechepurenko, “Examination Reveals a Mysterious Message on Malevich’s ‘Black Square’ Painting”, *The New York Times Blog Arts Beat*, November 18, 2015. <<https://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/11/18/examination-reveals-a-mysterious-message-on-malevichs-black-square-painting>> visited November 20, 2015.

named “negroes,” an entity invisible to us. Their invisibility might be due to a third certainty – the fact that the scene takes place in an enclosed or dark space: a tunnel, a cellar, or a cave. Most likely, it is happening at night, as some of the sources find necessary to point out. So far, we are missing a joke. The black abyss is laughing at us.

After Derrida’s lesson, perhaps we are to find the key to understanding it in its *passe-partout* – to open the doors of interpretation, we are going to need a master key, as the first meaning of French *passe-partout* actually is.⁸⁴ For the joke to work, one has to understand not only the meaning of all the words on a meta-level, but their context, subtleties and multiplicities of meaning as well. Nevertheless, this joke was made 140 years ago, hence the objective fear we might not be able to understand it. Of course, an even bigger problem arises if the joke still works today: if one still laughs at it, does it mean that the context that produced and understands it has not been changed during this century and a half?

Upon consulting the dictionary, we have the impression that the sentence “the fight of negroes in a tunnel” has a special status in French language, being used as an expression in its own right with two possible meanings: 1) to designate something very obscure, notably a place, and 2) to designate a rough combat, with uncertain outcome.⁸⁵ Both of those meanings sound serious, therefore they do not seem to be of much help to our joke, making our frustration grow. Hence, where have we been? We have already

⁸⁴ “Definition of *passe-partout*: 1. Master key [opened the door with a *passe-partout*]. Merriam Webster Dictionary, <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/passe-partout>> visited February 14, 2018.

⁸⁵ “Combat de nègres dans un tunnel = 1. Quelque chose de très obscure, notamment un lieu; 2. Combat brouillon, à l’issue incertaine.” [translation mine] French Wiktionary, <https://fr.wiktionary.org/wiki/combat_de_n%C3%A8gres_dans_un_tunnel> visited February 14, 2018.

established the following: there is an obscure entity, “negroes,” fighting in a tunnel, or in a cellar, or in a cave. Against who or whom are they fighting? Are they fighting among themselves? We cannot tell. Whether in a cellar, in a cave, or in the dark, everyone turns invisible; with no rays of light, everything blends into the surrounding darkness. In the dark, we are all black.

One could speculate about the differences between the settings in which this fight is taking place, as well as about the consequences upon interpretation the transition from the tunnel to the cellar to the cave might have regarding the entity in question. If this entity is in a tunnel, how did they get stuck in one? Or have they been derailed from reaching the end of the tunnel by the fight that suddenly broke out? What have they been fighting about? Perhaps which way to head to as this darkness they have been stuck in makes both the entrance and the exit look alike? In any case, if they were stuck in a tunnel, it only means they were our contemporaries, or at least that they were stuck in the modern times when the tunnels became fashionable. Once they move into a cellar, we must ask ourselves how did they find themselves there? Why are they in the cellar? Who are they hiding from? Did someone lock them in? And again, what are they fighting for? In the darkness of a cellar, perhaps a clumsy gesture by another fellow has been misunderstood for a slap, a gesture that might have started the fight. In the darkness of a cellar, any gesture can be perceived as an attack.

As for the Malevich’s “negroes,” this entity has been moved to the cave. Does this mean that we are back in the pre-history, when different entities inhabited the safety of the openings on the surface of the earth? Or they could be revolutionary insurgents, hiding in the cave from someone they are fighting against? Perhaps the battle is not taking place in the cave itself, perhaps the outside battle has found temporary refuge there? In any case, for the American news source that translated the long Malevich’s sentence simply as “Negroes Battling at Night,” the entity does not need a tunnel, a cellar or a cave: the fight can take place outdoors, in the

night. The entity is free to ramble around, leaving the safety of a disclosed place; safety not only for them, but for the ones on the outside as well. If one is not careful enough, one might get caught up in the battle with this invisible entity on a dark night.

After this thorough investigation, we are not an inch closer to understanding the “joke.” Nevertheless, as we have seen, the common denominator for all those different variations of the “joke” is the entity named “negroes,” inevitably leading us to the conclusion that negroes must be the joke: hence, in order to finally burst into laugh, we must primarily try to understand the nature of this entity.

Battle of the _____.
_____ Battling in a Cave.
Battle of _____ in a Dark Cave.
_____ Fighting in a Cave.
_____ Battling at Night.

After consulting more knowledgeable sources, I learned that *negro* comes from Latin *niger* meaning color black. Actually, it was one of the two words used to designate two varieties of the black: matte black (*ater*) and glossy black (*niger*):

Ater: about the second century B.C., took on a negative connotation. It became the bad black, ugly, dirty, sad, even “atrocious”. [...] On the other hand, *niger*, its etymology unknown, was less commonly used than *ater* for a long time and at first possessed only the single meaning of “glossy black.” Subsequently it was used to characterize all blacks taken as a whole, notably the beautiful blacks in nature. At the beginning of the imperial period it had already become more common than *ater* and spawned a whole family of frequently used words: *perniger* (very black), *subniger* (blackish, purple), *nigritia* (blackness), *denigrare* (to blacken, to denigrate), and

so on.⁸⁶

This is now getting even more confusing: why would beautiful, glossy black colors from the nature fight in a tunnel? Or in a cellar? Never mind the cave? More importantly, why would that be funny? Perhaps the history of the black color can help us here – as it turns out, the color black is an unusual entity with an instable past; even more, in human history, it has been on and off expelled from the rank of colors.⁸⁷

Throughout history, color black covered all possible shades of meaning – from very positive to extremely negative ones: from fertile earth to hell, from mourning clothes to *the little black dress*. What is certain is the fact that “ancient cultures had a more developed and nuanced awareness of the color black than contemporary societies do. In all domains, there was not one black, but many blacks.”⁸⁸ In early times, the black had a productive meaning, with grottos and caves becoming “the favorite birthplaces for gods and heroes, then places of refuge or metamorphosis; one went there to hide, to be restored, to perform some rite of passage.”⁸⁹ Significantly, “in the West, beginning in the eleventh century, black became the diabolical color par excellence, although it is impossible to clearly identify the reasons why.”⁹⁰ In the history of humankind, “all obscure matrices are also places of suffering and misfortune, inhabited by monsters, confining prisoners, harboring all sorts of dangers, increasingly disturbing the darker they are.”⁹¹

According to the historian of colors, “issues of color are,

⁸⁶ Michel Pastoureau, *Black: The History of a Color*. Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008, pp.28.

⁸⁷ Leonardo da Vinci was among the first ones to famously state that “black is not a color.” See more in: *Ibid*, pp.117.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, pp.27.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, pp.22.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, pp.52.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, pp.22.

first of all, social issues.”⁹² Although biology considers the higher levels of melanin, the dark biological pigment in human skin,⁹³ to be a positive evolutionary trait,⁹⁴ Europeans living during central Middle Ages considered dark skin color almost always negative, “belonging to individuals located outside the social, moral, or religious order. [...] The dark appearance of their skin was a visible sign of their evil, pagan, or transgressive natures;”⁹⁵ “dark skin and hair were signs of ugliness.”⁹⁶ With time, the list grew even longer:

Criminals of all kinds, adulterous spouses, rebellious sons, disloyal brothers, usurping uncles, even individuals practicing immoral trades or occupations relegating them to the margins of society: executioners (especially the executioners of Christ and the saints), prostitutes, usurers, witches, counterfeiters, and even lepers, beggars, or cripples. They all lack light skin, the characteristic of well-born, honest men, and good

⁹² *Ibid*, pp.12.

⁹³ “Human skin, in human anatomy, the covering, or integument, of the body’s surface that both provides protection and receives sensory stimuli from the external environment.” Encyclopedia Britannica. <<https://www.britannica.com/science/human-skin>> visited February 14, 2018.

⁹⁴ “Melanic pigmentation is advantageous in many ways: (1) It is a barrier against the effects of the ultraviolet rays of sunlight. On exposure to sunlight, for example, the human epidermis undergoes gradual tanning as a result of an increase in melanin pigment. (2) It is a mechanism for the absorption of heat from sunlight, a function that is especially important for cold-blooded animals. (3) It affords concealment to certain animals that become active in twilight. (4) It limits the incidence of beams of light entering the eye and absorbs scattered light within the eyeball, allowing greater visual acuity. (5) It provides resistance to abrasion because of the molecular structure of the pigment.” Encyclopedia Britannica. <<https://www.britannica.com/science/melanin>> visited February 14, 2018.

⁹⁵ Pastoureau, *Ibid*, pp.79.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, pp.80.

Christians.⁹⁷

With the rise of Protestantism and its chromophobia, the black became the color for everything in sight: “Puritanism affected all aspects of political, religious, social, and practical life; everything became black, gray, and brown.”⁹⁸ In the following centuries, the arrival of science completely changed the status of the black color: at the turn of the seventeenth century, Isaac Newton discovered the spectrum – rays of light whose chromatic sequence was always the same – a discovery that seriously affected the destiny of the black: “Newton proved that light did not weaken to give rise to colors, but was itself, innately, formed from the union of different colored lights. This was a very important discovery. Henceforth light and the colors it contained were identifiable, reproducible, controllable, and measurable.”⁹⁹ There was no place for the black in this new system: “White, in effect, was indirectly part of the spectrum since all the colors were contained within it. But black was not. Henceforth it was situated outside of any chromatic system, outside the world of color.”¹⁰⁰

As the historian of colors writes, “the rejection of black had gone too far.”¹⁰¹ Luckily for it, the new exoticism of the eighteenth century will pave a path for its return to the artistic and literary scene:

Greater attention was given to Africans, both for despicable mercenary reasons – the cruel triangle of commerce between Europe, Africa, and America – and for ethnological and philosophical reasons: why did different skin colors exist in different latitudes, dark skin colors in particular? To this question, hardly even asked in the Middle Ages, the responses varied, but

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, pp.81.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, pp.134.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, pp.147.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, pp.162.

most of them implicated the climate and the sun's rays. The vocabulary reflected these new preoccupations; dark-skinned Africans who until then had been called Moors, like the inhabitants of the Maghreb, or Ethiopians, a vague term, became Negroes, or Blacks, not yet colored people. That expression would have to wait for the century's end and the aftermath of the first abolition of slavery by the French Convention in 1794. This lexical shift from 'black' to 'color' seems to prepare the way for the future return of black to the chromatic order, even before white.¹⁰²

During this period of renewed interest for Africa,

the slave trade, practiced for ten generations, reached its height. The Europeans carried textiles, arms, and alcohol to Africa; they left for America with many slaves; those who survived the appalling conditions of the crossing were exchanged for cotton, sugar, and coffee, brought back to Europe. It was estimated that between seven and nine million men and women were thus deported from Africa to the Americas in the eighteenth century.¹⁰³

At the same time, this surplus became very productive for the culture of Western Europe: "Art and literature made the black man fashionable."¹⁰⁴ Nevertheless, in those works of written art, "the black man remained unobtrusive, and colonial paternalism went hand in hand with the myth of the noble savage. Rare were the authors who denounced the exploitation of blacks by whites."¹⁰⁵

With the arrival of the modern era and modern economy, or

¹⁰² *Ibid*, pp.81.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, pp.162.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*.

in the age of coal and factories, the pollution made “black penetrate everywhere.”¹⁰⁶ The first ones to “revolt against this omnipresent and omnipotent black”¹⁰⁷ were the painters; new world in bright colors has been created on the paintings by impressionists and postimpressionists. Leonardo’s famous words were happily evoked; black was expelled once again and “painting was first of all about color; if black was not a color there was no place for it in a painting.”¹⁰⁸ The tide began to shift a few decades later, and the “return of the black expanded after World War I, when abstraction provided fertile ground for it.”¹⁰⁹ Russian Suprematism had a significant role in this, giving back black its significance. Hence “by the 1920s to 1930s, black became or returned to being a fully ‘modern’ color.”¹¹⁰¹¹¹ Returning to our discussion on “Black Square,” depicting black square on the white field, it might be important to mention that pairing of black and white has not been a permanent trait in European history, more likely it can be seen as an abomination: “In the West... black and white did not always represent a pair of contrasting colors. In the cultural world white possessed a second opposite, red, which was sometimes more powerful than black in this role.”¹¹²

The preference of black over color in the visual arts has its own history. In Christian tradition, drawing was openly favored:

Drawing was the extension of an idea; it addressed the

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, pp.176.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid*.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, pp.177.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*, pp.184.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*.

¹¹¹ “On the other hand, white and especially green were regarded differently and were never granted that status. For certain abstract artists (let us think of Mondrian or Miró, for example), green was no longer a basic color, a color in its own right. This was a new idea, contradicting all the social and cultural uses for the color green for centuries, even millennia.” *Ibid*.

¹¹² *Ibid*, pp.42.

intellect. As for color, it addressed only the senses; it did not aim at informing but only at seducing. In doing so it sometimes obstructed the gaze and kept the viewer from discerning contours or identifying figures. Its seductiveness was reprehensible because it was a diversion from the true and the good.¹¹³

Color was considered dangerous: it was “uncontrollable; it rejected language – to name colors and their shades was a dubious exercise – and escaped all generalization, if not all analysis. It was a rebel, to be avoided whenever possible.”¹¹⁴ In Kant’s case, as Derrida reminds us, he believed that the purity of colors brings highest experience of beauty:

According to Kant, there are two ways of acceding to formal purity: by a nonsensory, nonsensual reflection, and by the regular play of impressions, “if one assumes with Euler” that colors are vibrations of the ether (*pulsus*) at regular intervals, and if (formal analogy between sounds and colors) sounds consist in a regular rhythm in the vibrations of the disturbed ether. [...] That is why simple color is pure color and can therefore belong inside the beautiful, giving rise to universally communicable appreciations. Mixed colors cannot do this.¹¹⁵

Or as Wittgenstein writes, black was accused of “dirtying” everything. Nevertheless, he was unable to answer the question of what does that really mean: “Is that an emotional effect that black has on us? Is it an *effect* of the addition of black color that is meant here?”¹¹⁶

¹¹³ *Ibid*, pp.155.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*.

¹¹⁵ Derrida, *Ibid*, pp.77.

¹¹⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Colour*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977, pp.29, point 105.

As we have seen, on one side, we deal with a dynamic history of the black color, a color through time reduced from multitude of blacks to a single one; on the other, we deal with a history of a utilitarian application of the black color as a negative concept, projected onto the surface of many different objects and subjects. A strange “optical device” invented by Europeans on their travels across seas blended all human beings with a higher level of melanin into one category by “coloring” them black. Now the image we were trying to understand begins to make sense: when seen through this optical device, the entity trapped in the cellar most certainly will look black. This optical device, which I unfortunately do not possess, and which seems to be necessary in order for us to laugh at the battle of the negroes in the tunnel, exceeds the domain of the aesthetics and becomes of crucial importance in influencing the behavior of the ones possessing it. As Wittgenstein’s stated, “*practices* give words their meaning.”¹¹⁷

If the psychologist informs us “There are people who see,” we could ask him “And what do you call ‘People who see’?” The answer to that would be of the sort “Human beings who react so-and-so, and behave so-and-so under such-and-such circumstances.” “Seeing” would be a technical term of the psychologist, which he explains to us. Seeing is then something which he has observed in human beings.¹¹⁸

At this point, I will stop pretending I do not see, I will stop pretending I do not understand the “joke.” But I still cannot laugh, I am still far from that powerful laughter I expect a good joke to provoke. A clear line has appeared between the abyss and the satire, separating an insult from a joke, a subtlety the French caricaturists seem not to possess. One has a choice over becoming a cardinal or not and then risking being compared to a red tomato, but one has no choice over being perceived and named black, hence forever

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, pp.59, point 317.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid*, pp.62, point 338.

being stuck in a dark cave. I apologize for not being able to offer a more valid translation of Malevich's inscription as, in Wittgenstein's words, "I can't teach anyone a game that I can't learn myself. A color-blind person cannot teach a normal person the normal use of color words. [...] He can't give him a *demonstration* of the game, of the use."¹¹⁹ Wittgenstein also rightfully noticed that "the rule-governed nature of our languages permeates our life,"¹²⁰ while the concepts do not only reflect our life, "they stand in the middle of it."¹²¹ The implications of the projections of the black color had been criminal for a long time. Nevertheless, the ones on which this framing has been forced upon for such a long time, as an insult, as an *Überfall*, are most certainly not the ones to be blamed or laughed at for being stuck in a tunnel, cellar, or a cave.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, pp.54, point 284.

¹²⁰ *Ibid*, pp.57, point 302.

¹²¹ *Ibid*.

IV – The Suprematist Whites (Unframing Malevich)

Those words bring us back to the beginning, to the question if Malevich's gesture should be interpreted as a racist one. Let us now use the same power of imagination and try to project the images of the primordial scene of creation that might have taken place in his studio. We see the artist painting a white surface over the second version of the painting he did not find satisfying. The square canvas is white once again. The artist takes his brush and draws the outline of a square. He decides to paint it black, so he uses all the colors he has at that moment, mixing them until the surface becomes as black as possible. He likes the result and wants to quicken the process. Excited, he throws away his brush and uses his fingers instead, leaving fingerprints all over the paint. His decision not to paint the whole canvas black resulted in the image of the black square we can still see today; in the contrary, the painting would have had to be named "Black Canvas" instead. The white field left on the outside will become his insurance policy for the black square to always be perceived as such. Then, at some moment, this two-dimensional shape of a square reminded him of a famous French "joke" he once heard or read; he writes down the joke in Russian, *Negroes battling in a dark cave at deep night*. With those words, the image becomes flat, the meaning absurd, and some French might begin to laugh. Nevertheless, the artist decides to go a step further, a step deeper. For some reason, unbeknown to us, the artist now decides to paint over the words: the words disappear, the white field now becomes clean again, and this two-dimensional shape suddenly turns multi-dimensional: the flat surface disappears and the abyss opens, dragging one's imagination in, pulling one's perception into this dark vortex, vortex one cannot resist or fight against. The joke is erased and from the *satire of the abyss*, we are pushed into *the abyss*.

To our surprise, the x-rays revealed more than what we were supposed to see, what we were supposed to know. The parergon is now permanently *under erasure*. The painting is not abstract or 'pure' anymore, as it has been presented to us for our detached

pleasure. The cracked black surface turns alive, the shapes start to emerge, the black is not black anymore. Equally important, the white is not white anymore. On a single canvas, the artist has managed to fit in not only two older paintings, but a concept, a racist joke, and a caricature of abstract art. With one gesture of erasure, a painter of abstract art on whose account the caricature was also made, turned a personal insult into an icon of the new era. The rectangular became a square, the golden frame became white, the parergon now permanently disturbs the ergon. The “joke” will stay inscribed forever, but we are offered a way out of the tunnel. With this one gesture, Malevich rudely, without asking for permission, “stole” the work from the French satirists and decided to call it the right name. From now on, when looking into this dark abyss, we are not to see *negroes battling in a dark cave at night*, but what we are truly seeing: a black square. Or, what should be the correct translation for the first monochromatic painting, a black rectangular.

As part of the closing words in our case against Malevich, I am obliged to reveal the conceptual consequences of my method, of my particular framing: due to it, we might have been wrong about this painting all along. As many experts on his work will testify, and as he himself wrote, Malevich considered “Black Square” to be an icon without the frame: “‘I have done one icon of my time, bare (as a pocket), without a frame...,’ this painter wrote to Alexander Benuea in May 1916.”¹²² Hence, did we cross the line by claiming the opposite, by seeing the frame where there was not supposed to be one?

One way to interpret Malevich’s defense is that his renunciation of a frame was political: “The claim of a new transcendental icon as a construct of the human mind meant a complete break with all previous cultural tradition and a declaration

¹²² Oleg Tarasov, *Framing Russian Art: From Early Icons to Malevich*. London: Reaktion Books, 2011, pp.344.

of a radically new view of the world.”¹²³ For him and the circle of painters close to him, the Russian icon was “art of the highest order. Together with other examples of ‘primitive’ art it offered the opportunity of escape from the academic imitative image to ‘pure art.’”¹²⁴ More importantly, there was a belief that it could lead mankind not only to mysticism, but to the ideals of communality. In later years, Malevich divided Suprematism into three stages, based on his three squares – black, red and white: “In the community they have received another significance: the black one as the sign of economy, the red one as the signal for revolution, and the white one as pure action.”¹²⁵ He gave color an important role, “as signals showing the way”¹²⁶ in “an epoch for a new system of architecture”¹²⁷ and “utilitarian perfection.”¹²⁸ The task given to “Black Square” was to lead towards new communal economy in a new society where individual property will not have a place. As we can notice, those words stand in contradiction to Malevich’s gesture of protecting the copyright for his painting as soon as it was finished; based on this, we might speculate that his thinking went through profound transformation in the years that followed. As it seems, his personal journey of understanding Suprematism which he created brought a deep transformation of his own belief system, of his own system of economy.

In “The Question of Imitative Art” written in 1920, Malevich fights strongly against the “old” art and prevailing academism, requesting a new conception of art as a prerequisite for creating a new, faire society shared by everyone:

Just as up to now many people have been unable to
conceive clearly the form of the commune, so many

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ Kazimir Malevich, “Suprematism. 34 drawings.” In: *Essays on Art 1915-1933*. London: Rapp and Whiting, 1968, pp.127.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, pp.128.

¹²⁸ *Ibid*, pp.127.

have failed to see form in new art; but those that have seen it have also seen a new world for their life. [...] It is necessary to consciously place creativity as the aim of life, as the perfection of oneself, and therefore current views on art must be changed: art is not a picture of pleasures, decoration, mood, experience or the conveyance of beautiful nature. This type of art no longer exists; nor do jesters, dancers and other miscellaneous theatrical grimacers (these monkeyish grimaces have also come to an end). There has appeared a silent, dynamic creation of new art's edifice in the red image of the world.¹²⁹

Malevich's "abstract art" is everything but abstract: its role is utilitarian, "closely linked with the communism of humanity's economic wellbeing."¹³⁰ The non-objective world is to be purified of all the old forms, "imitative art must be destroyed like the imperialist army."¹³¹ Art schools are to abandon the studio model and become "a creative university of construction,"¹³² while the role of the artists, after rejecting the slavery to old forms, will be to lead the society through a process of permanent creativity, a society that will constantly renew itself searching for the new models based on the principles of communism: "The economic life of the new world has produced the commune. The creative constructions of the new art have produced the Suprematism of the square."¹³³ The self-sufficiency of a Suprematist form, hence would not need a frame, "the long-standing symbolic boundary separating a picture from surrounding space. This work was itself 'reality,' cosmic emptiness, frameless, and as such was intended to float in the infinite cosmos and give new form to the real world."¹³⁴ As an

¹²⁹ Kazimir Malevich, "The Question of Imitative Art." In: *Essays on Art 1915-1933*. London: Rapp and Whiting, 1968, pp.171.

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, pp.173.

¹³¹ *Ibid*, pp.178.

¹³² *Ibid*, pp.181.

¹³³ *Ibid*, pp.180.

¹³⁴ Tarasov, *Ibid*, pp.349.

accumulation of artist's creative energy, "Black Square" was intended to open a new world and make a long-standing impact on social reality. As Oleg Tarasov rightfully notices, it is not framing we are dealing with here, but the framing effect: "The 'framing' effect of the white surround formed a black square, and the square formed the framing, which transformed the whole construction into a 'point,' a *fons et origo*, which the artist saw as 'the first step of pure creativity in art.'"¹³⁵

Perhaps as a sign of Malevich's own disappointment in the social reality that ensued after the revolutionary years, but also as his belief that in some future times the art he proposed might find the way to realize a communist society, a photograph of an exhibition of his work in the Tretyakov Gallery in 1933 shows "Black Square" with a new, gilt frame. His paradoxical decision to frame it in the end perhaps was made in order to create for the painting a "honorary 'museum status' in world art history."¹³⁶ In this same gallery, it is presented today in a glazed frame, reminiscent of the ways in which old icons were guarded and kept. As some have noticed, the "development of various forms of frame for the visual image is a most important phenomenon in European culture. [...] On that level the frame suggests and permits the study of a picture not in isolation, but in its close interaction with the whole culture of an age."¹³⁷ Indeed, if the inscription remained, if the "joke" stayed, there would be no foundation on which to claim that this icon was frameless hence inviting us to see a new world. At the limit of our perception, this frame would still be directing our gaze, assist our spatial orientation.

Due to the fact that humans are not nocturnal animals, the historian of colors claims, "humans have always been afraid of the dark."¹³⁸ We are also reminded of one of the most persistent stories about caves that stayed with the humankind in the past few

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.351.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.12.

¹³⁸ Pastoureau, *Ibid.*, pp.24.

thousand years – that by Plato. According to this, human souls are locked up and chained by the gods in a cave, as a place of pain and punishment: “On one wall they perceive a display of shadows symbolizing the deceptive world of appearances; they must break their chains and leave the cave to contemplate the true world, the world of Ideas, but they cannot do so.”¹³⁹ Cave is here “a prison, a place of punishment and torture, a sepulcher or veritable hell.”¹⁴⁰ It is thanks to Malevich that we have been taken to this journey of rethinking the positions and implications of visible and invisible framings, of the voids supporting our vision of the world. The abolition of old forms is a prerequisite for the new economy to emerge: as we have seen, there is an abyss of differences separating Malevich’s Suprematist Whites from the white supremacy. The relationship between colors is not only of the contrast, but also of kinship.¹⁴¹ Perhaps the final words in our case against Malevich could come from Derrida, who left us an enigmatic puzzle to solve, rethinking over and again what economizing on the abyss actually means:

*economize on the abyss: not only save oneself from falling into the bottomless depths by weaving and folding back the cloth to infinity, textual art of the reprise, multiplication of patches within patches, but also establish the laws of reappropriation, formalize the rules which constrain the logic of the abyss and which shuttle between the economic and the aneconomic.*¹⁴²

¹³⁹ *Ibid*, pp.22.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid*.

¹⁴¹ “Among the colours: Kinship and Contrast. (And that is logic.)” Wittgenstein, *Ibid*, pp.23, point 46.

¹⁴² Derrida, *Ibid*, pp.37.

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