

Abstraction and Estrangement across the Arts in the Russian Avant-garde

Norbert Francis (2020)*

The turn of the nineteenth century marked an inflection point in modern painting and sculpture accompanied by new experimentation and research in literature, a movement that has yet to recede in our time. Russian artists and writers found themselves at the very center of a historic moment. The February Revolution of 1917 propelled this development forward in Russia into the second half of the 1920s. Notably, modern and experimental currents in the plastic arts maintained close contact with the verbal arts, this interaction being the topic of the present chapter. The mutual influences came to be so important that broader over-arching aesthetic principles may have been revealed as students of the various art forms under each category stepped back to consider this possibility. The argument will be made that the different branches of modern art and literature laid bare principles and devices that in fact were not new to modernism. But it was the early twentieth century critics and theorists who were the first to launch an explicit research program focused on foundational underpinnings, one that would try to study art from a scientific point of view. This initiative was associated most notably with the early period of Futurism.

The non-objective world came to the attention of modern artists and brought recognition to the concepts of abstract representation in a way what was thoughtful and explicit. Representative works and theories rapidly swept across the cultures of all continents. Importantly, pre-modern artists knew about abstraction as a visit to any major museum of anthropology confirms.¹ Thus, in actual creative work it was not an innovation of modernism nor of its immediate precursors of the 19th century. As this claim has been well understood for many years, the study of abstraction incorporates observations and analysis starting with the artistic tradition of ancient times. The exact same circumstances apply to the concept of estrangement. The innovation of the modern era was to lay the groundwork for future research and empirically based theoretical work on these problems of aesthetic perception. The questions about perception lead to questions that are just as interesting for creative expression, both for professional artists and for spontaneous artistic creation in everyday life.

Two contrasting perspectives

Futurism was not the only grouping of modern art and literature of the pre-revolutionary and post-1917 period. But internal divisions, reflecting debates that can be traced to the emergence of modernism of the previous century, brought attention to bear on conceptions and understandings that remain unsettled today. At the same time, gravitating around the Futurists were currents that made contact with like-minded creators and scholars, internationally, to become part of a cultural and artistic movement that today

remains ascendant. This is no more evident than in the almost universal acceptance of, and preference for, the genres born at the turn of 19th century in the realm of the visual arts. To a greater degree, the unsettled controversies weigh upon the literary arts.

In previous discussions of Futurism regarding the internal controversies and debates, I neglected to elaborate more fully on its darker side (for lack of a better term), mentioning only in passing the dismissive stance of many of its leading figures toward traditional and so-called conventional styles.² This section is an attempt to correct the oversight on my part.

On the one hand there emerged a current of experimentation in search of new directions; one that sought to test the limits, vigorously exploring the boundaries and hybrid regions within and around each art form. Some of the cases of true provocation, even today, would be taken as a challenge to sensibilities and standards of acceptability (for example, some of the submissions to absurdist literature that ended up circulating in Samizdat). The call to shatter the traditional genres and cast them into the river was understood, by this current, as a figure; and importantly the domain to which the breaking up referred was art and literature, point of view that rapidly became the minority. In the visual arts this idea of *an autonomous avant-garde* was associated with the writings of Malevich, and in literature, among the early Futurists (many of them aligned at the same time with proposals of OPOYAZ): Jakobson, Shklovsky, Pasternak and Kruchonykh, to mention a few. For Malevich it may be more accurate, historically, to point out that his views evolved toward the resulting controversial position he came to hold by the mid-1920s. In addition, it's important to clarify, thinking about on how things turned out, that the posture of radically starting again with a clean slate, at "zero," was also seriously overstating things, on all sides. In the plastic arts, the movement that would fully implement non-objective representation would in fact benefit from the study of the prehistoric tradition, and then of their 19th Century precursors in Late Impressionism, the Fauves, and among other modern pioneers. On a related note, it was also necessary to recognize how exactly the colloquial distinction between "vulgar" and "fine" was not always helpful. Here, the term "primitive" refers to different notions: the one that is relevant to aesthetics (as well as to other fields) is in reference to *first principles* and to *primary*. In literature, important discoveries of the 20th century were still to be made in the study of pre-literate ("folk") verbal art and popular literature of past historical periods.³

On the other hand, a second current committed to deep-going social change (Brik, Mayakovsky and other leading figures of *Lef*) had more in common with the Futurist manifestos of Filippo Martinetti, even as they soon split away from his faction for ideological reasons, the political rift with time leading to sharp differences.⁴

The current of maximalism, total cultural overthrow and reconstruction within this tendency of Futurism turned the shared impulse of iconoclasm (shared with Malevich and the like-minded experimental poets) toward a

missionary vision of a different kind. Its vanguardist commitment explicitly incorporated domains far beyond art and literature. Not only did traditional and conventional genres need to be replaced for aesthetic reasons (as a matter of historical necessity), but also because they stood in the way of the new art that would play a central role in transforming society along with human understanding, feeling, and motivation.⁵

The “autonomous” current of the avant-garde among writers and painters pushed back against this view: it rejected the obligation of artists to serve a program for rebuilding institutions or the duty to participate in practical application—for publicity, reeducation, political decoration, design of consumer products.⁶ In contrast, the “social commission” current, deliberately strove to orient artists toward this service and away from individualistic preoccupations, a task commensurate with the visionary and totalizing project of how they conceived of Futurism: a movement to recreate society for a new human nature. While the tone of their erstwhile Italian co-thinkers far outdid them in ferocity, it captured a kindred spirit of inspired voluntarism and protagonism:

Nous allons assister à la naissance du Centaure...

La poésie doit être un assaut violent contre les forces inconnues, pour les sommer de se coucher devant l’homme...le geste destructeur des anarchistes...

C’est en Italie que nous lançons ce manifeste de violence culbutante et incendiaire lequel nous fondons aujourd’hui le Futurisme...Musées, cimetières!...

[We will witness the birth of Centaurus...

Poetry must be a violent assault against the unknown forces, to summon them to lie down before man...[in] the destructive struggle of the anarchists...It is in Italy where we proclaim this manifesto of tumultuous and incendiary violence upon which today we have founded Futurism...Museums, cemeteries!]⁷

Reflecting on the debates of the post-revolutionary years perhaps, just prior to his arrest and interrogation, Malevich argued for the principles of what had become by then (mid-1920s) the minority view in the avant-garde:

Art no longer cares to serve the state and religion, it no longer wishes to illustrate the history of manners, it wants to have nothing further to do with the object, as such, and believes that it can exist, in and for itself, without “things.”⁸

In contrast to the “artists of the third category,” content with copying nature:

An artist who creates rather than imitates expresses himself; his works are not reflections of nature but, instead, new realities, which are no

less significant than realities of nature itself (“Persons of [this] category call themselves free people” - p. 21) ...The depicting of the events of daily life, in the manner of ...reflected images, falls to the lot of those who lack the capacity for new creation... Those who succumb to the regimenting power are advanced as loyal...while those who preserve their subjective consciousness and individual point of view are looked upon and treated as dangerous and unreliable.⁹

Kandinsky (1977[1914]) looked to music for the alternative model that Malevich alluded to: how can artists liberate their work from the commitment to “the reproduction of natural forms”?¹⁰ We will return to the idea of musical perception as homologous with poetic sensibility and what this shared root implies for poetics as a field of study. For now, we can suggest the following: one property of music in particular that lends itself to relevant comparison with verbal art, and by extension to other aesthetic domains, is abstraction, being the art form that naturally and most completely has resisted the copying of nature or the need (by the 1930s, the *official* obligation) to transmit messages, correct or otherwise.¹¹ Kandinsky remarked:

How miserably music fails when attempting to express material appearances is proved by the affected absurdity of programme music...[In] serious music such attempts are merely warning against any imitation of nature...The *Stimmung* of nature can be imparted by every art, not however, by imitation, but by the artistic divination of its inner spirit.¹²

But five years later, the credo of the New Culture was suggesting that individuals themselves could be remade because the new social order would remold them, idea based on the theory of the blank-slate. Human nature was the white unlined paper, absent of any constraint or predisposition not already imprinted upon it by socialization and instruction.

Years later, the idea was popularized among a new generation of idealists in a widely celebrated cultural manifesto:

...[Juegan] un gran papel la juventud y el Partido. Particularmente importante es la primera, por ser arcilla malleable con que se puede construir al hombre nuevo sin ninguna de las taras anteriores. [Young people and the Party play a significant role. Particularly important is the former, for being malleable clay with which one can build the new man without any of the preceding defects.]¹³

Predictably, the very same lines of division were drawn among the Futurists and other avant-garde creators in the field of literature. The reader will take note that this observation, if shown to be correct, is consistent with the theme of this chapter (the “broader over-arching principles” that might apply in some way across forms and genres). The evolution of the Futurist-

oriented *Lef* (Left Front of the Arts), along with the debate with the competing writers organizations, is closely parallel to the developments among visual artists. While much of the fierce polemic of the time was surely driven by the competition for more mundane resources (i.e. recognition and patronage), there was no doubt that the leading voices in *Lef* were sincere in their conviction. They were convinced in their hearts that Futurist poetry and fiction narrative, led by the art vanguard of the revolution against traditional forms, would indeed remold an emerging new human thought, reason why among the most relentless activists, *Lef's* idea of casting *Anna Karenina* overboard was not metaphor. But to put the debates in context, the historical accounts actually present a picture of confusing factionalism among the many artist collectives difficult today to untangle and clearly evaluate.¹⁴ The messianic project, stunning in the scope of the envisioned psychological engineering, from the beginning in fact, was too much even for both Narkompros and the central Party leadership.

Looking back, there is one way, among others, to avoid falling into the same polarized confusion of the 1920s. To begin to approach the problem of how abstraction and estrangement are related, and to be able to objectively evaluate the representative works of experimental artists of the time, we can strictly set aside the ideological motivation and content of their work. For most artists and writers, allegiances were not based on exhaustive analysis and evidence-based understanding, much less conscious participation in one or another party or faction. Even in unambiguous cases of full knowledge and active complicity with regimes, for example, the work of the Pound and the Mayakovsky we study for its aesthetic merits if our purpose is to better understand their *work*. We recognize why in the case of literature making such a delineation is difficult, sometimes almost impossible. But it is the only way to keep the discussion focused. Considering the hypothetical discovery in the South American library archives of a Nobel laureate's "Oda a Mussolini," we would not veto the analytic assessment of the poem by his literary biographers. This traditional approach to analysis deserves mentioning because it has again become controversial in recent years.

Models for experimentation from the visual arts

Thus, among the Constructivist painters the interesting comparisons require us to mentally set aside embedded inscriptions and slogans in selecting for study the core artistic production for each individual creator within each genre. *Untitled, for Rosa Luxemburg* (1919), *Study for Globetrotter* (1920) and *Proun G7* (1922) of Lissitzky are masterpieces produced from the same onset of innovation as *Suprematist Composition* (1916) of Malevich, despite the theoretical disagreement between the artists within and between the Suprematist and Constructivist currents themselves.¹⁵ The same can be said of constructivist Lyubov Popova, a trail blazer of Cubo-Futurism before she

abandoned easel painting. *Birsk* (1916) for example displays the presence of actual space, a landscape, and object-like forms in three dimensions.

While Kandinsky came to not be identified with any of the organized movements in Russia, in self-exile from 1922, his work clearly belongs to the same broader movement. While stylistically his paintings are clearly distinguishable from the Suprematist and Constructivist compositions, to imply a fundamental aesthetic divergence would be an overstatement. Taylor presents an example of a recurring design feature of early Kandinsky in the (almost) fully abstract composition *Cossacks* (1911) in which natural spatial schemes or “scale effects” are preserved. Shapes and what may appear as figures (of larger dimension) at the lower edge are perceived as actually closer to a ground level and proximate to the observer in contrast to the sensation of distance at the upper edge. Within the center there might emerge a perceived motion.¹⁶ Taking the surface variations among the avant-garde painters into account, what is in fact undeniable is the coherence of the different strands forming a unified genre.

Then on another level, at the Vitebsk School, the rivalry between proto-surrealist Chagall and Malevich reflected a true division within modern art at that moment; and in this instance all evidence points to the controversy and its outcome as being fundamentally principled. As a backdrop to the feverish developments in Russia, to put everything into proper perspective, it’s important to recognize the immediate antecedents to abstraction in Fauvism and Cubism from Western Europe, reflected in the work of native Expressionists. The decades of the 19th Century moved quickly toward absolute non-objectivity and pure abstraction. Pioneering works such as James Whistler’s *Nocturne in Black and Gold-The Falling Rocket* (1875) announced fully fledged artistic currents already in ferment. Denounced by critics of the time for having no didactic purpose or extrinsic function, for not telling a story or imparting moral teaching, and for lacking clarity, artists pleaded guilty as charged. *Nocturne* is obscure and vague. Lines of separation are blurred with the illuminated spaces off-balance (or out of place). Figures appear as spare and gauze-like upon a dark and steamy background. The artist seemed to be more interested in the effects of method than in a depiction. Cézanne was a central part of the actual transition toward Cubism, experimenting with optical effects and new models of perspective and point of view. For objects, simplification sought out essential geometric features as in *Montagnes en Provence* (1890) as just one example.¹⁷ The stage was now set for the flood gate to be flung wide open.

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A study by Van den Oever on the defining properties of estrangement brings together key concepts for making the connection to abstraction. Its

reference point, from the field of film studies, to the historical period which saw the confluence of cinema, modern painting and Futurist literature allows for this integration. A review here of the arguments will help move us forward on the discussion of the theme of this chapter. During the prerevolutionary years, early cinema helped transform how all of visual art was experienced, coming at the same time as the publication of the core theoretical documents of OPOYAZ. Also coincidentally, and to great benefit, it was the primitive technology of filmmaking that spurred the revolutionary impact on perception of works of art. Only with subsequent advances would cinematography have the technical capacity to return to the experience, in this art form, of mimetism. The first movie-goers may have even sought out the experience of the new medium more so than to watch a story.¹⁸ The impact was both exciting and disquieting: the movement and the sound amazed, but animate figures were mute, moving across two-dimensions in spirit-like black, white and gray. Natural scenes and beings lost their color but acquired strange angles of perspective, unnatural movement, reversal across time, fluctuation in size that was surprisingly abnormal. The new kinds of decomposition¹⁹ must have been difficult to process, all of this linking the familiar and the bizarre. Such was the alien, and alienating, quality of a night at the movies.

The Futurists, according to Van den Oever, closely followed these developments with an eye on the innovative kinds of dislocation and on the margins of independence from the traditional attention to theme and interpretation that were now being made visible. In parallel, they paid attention to the breakthrough in new theories in poetics, from study circles in Moscow and St. Petersburg, toward better understanding perception and sensation, away from what literary language communicates toward what it evokes. *Film as technique* was what the creative writer now needed to study as a model because general principles of art were being revealed at the cinema, new ways of looking at the world, no less. If the idea of constrained ungrammaticality and incoherence could be compared to images taken as vague, disconcerting and disjointed, then making strange could be found everywhere. What does artistic estranged perception have in common with the similar experience from time to time in the prosaic world; and more importantly, what do they each have that is not in common? Unconscious human affective response may be one of the factors, question that modern day cognitive and evolutionary scientists have asked. This last observation by Van den Oever about current research on aesthetic sensation is the topic of the concluding section.

The perception of artistic pattern

The place to begin our follow up to the comparison between film and verbal art is to return to Kandinsky's insight regarding abstraction in music. He took note of a possibly more general, shared, principle spanning across the different art forms. In this case understanding musical creation and perception will suggest lines of research in poetics because of distinguishing features that music and poetry share: rhythmic organization in particular. In summary terms: song is

poem performed melodically, verses that are set to a tonal pitch space – a scale – (or set to an atonal row of pitches in the case of non-tonal music). Thus, the relationship between abstraction and estrangement that might apply to the rhythmic organization of music will also apply to poetry in an important way (if the music-poetry hypothesis is correct). Futurist poetry of the early years, for example of Mayakovsky, often appeared on the surface to depart from musical patterns, toward styles of vernacular declamation and even conversational prosody—Struve compares it to similar design features (“prosaisms”) implemented by Pasternak.²⁰ But rather than this shift being taken as a negation of the music-poetry relationship, it can be understood as a departure from traditional melodic styles. The analogy then may be about a shift toward unfamiliar syntax and rhythmic organization (in Mayakovsky’s verse), parallel to the avant-garde musical genres of the time that were radically undermining tonality and regular meter. An example of the latter is the 12-tone technique in music. To this divergence from predictable verse patterns, the contrary-to-expectation response, varying from faint to palpable, among audiences may also have accounted for his wide popularity.

The way that abstraction and estrangement are related to aesthetic sensation or aesthetic appreciation, it will be argued, derives in large measure from affective response. As Jackendoff and Lerdahl point out, “affect” is a broader and more useful category for our purposes in this section than “emotion.” The following discussion is based on their (2006) paper that appeared in the journal *Cognition*. Flowing from the idea that music, by its very nature, is the most abstract among the art forms, the patterns of sensation and apperception received by listeners are also the least concrete, the least able to communicate or portray concepts, propositions, messages, arguments and images. A musical passage may come to be *associated* in memory with a concept or a likeness, but this is a different matter altogether. Despite the occasional attempt by theorists to assign “meaning” to musical passages, the comparison to the communicative function of language, in this regard, is fundamentally misguided. In addition, the range of affective responses to music is varied, and the responses themselves are often highly abstract, in addition to being generally below awareness. At the beginning of the 20th century a parallel idea was being considered: at first, the method of the avant-garde was to no longer focus primarily on *the semantic content* itself in the wording of poems, but rather on how *patterns*, of all kinds, induce affect/sensation. Readers will recall that it was the aspect of poetic language independent of concrete and worldly meaning that was one of the puzzles that the Futurist *zaum* experiment tried to explore.

Taking up the parallel with musical structure, the sound patterns of poetry should provoke similar types of affective response (a key factor that underlies aesthetic perception, according to the above proposal). Here, for the moment, we are considering the sound patterns of poetry, as such, apart from affective responses related to word meanings. The two, abstract sensation from musically linked patterns and understandings of word meaning, are obviously

interactive and are brought together and integrated in the actual composition of poems, and are then received by the listener integrally (holistically). What is important to note is that the tensions and resolutions of poetic sound patterns are, again, highly abstract; this might turn out to be one of the keys to understanding what aesthetic sensation consists of. While important research was conducted on narrative, we can see now why the Formalists concentrated their main efforts on the poetic function of language.²¹

Estrangement guides poetic sensibility on two levels: globally, the perception of the listener²² from the moment that he or she identifies the genre as non-prosaic, and as art (verbal), is linked to the overall experience of alternative discourse, one that will depart from the conventions of typical non-aesthetic language use. The poem, as a composition in its entirety, contravenes the patterns of prose and everyday face-to-face conversation. Then at the level of phrase, line and stanza, the very expectations of poetic pattern themselves are interrupted by irregularity (as the “accidental” in music) – points of irregularity introduced by the poet-performer. Jackendoff and Lerdahl offer an explanation for how the perception of made-strange can be maintained under conditions of familiarity (with repeated performance), thus preserving this aspect of the affective/aesthetic sensation. Our schema, or “mental grammar,” of conventional structures is still active on-line as we listen to a piece of music or a poem that has become familiar to us, allowing for the “accidental” syncopation or enjambment to result in a perception that we still *experience* as artful – “expected” from previous listening, but still “unexpected” by the unconscious schema.²³

The rhythmic organization of music, shared with poetry, consists of structures of grouping and metrical grid pattern (the temporal framework of beats). It is typically regular in music and poetry in a way that it is not in typical speech because in the case of the latter communicating meaningful messages takes priority. Unlike prose and conversation, in most traditional and vernacular poetry there is an approximate alignment between the metrical grid and the stress grid. In poems that disrupt this expectation by misaligning the patterns of stress and meter the effect that is created is similar to that of syncopation in music.²⁴ Other rhythmical devices for expressivity that make use of irregularity can manipulate tempo and timing, parallel structures and repetition, and how all these interact with intonational contour. Radical departure and misalignment result, for example, in affect that we call surprise, an impression that we might actually notice. On the other hand, the more subtle types of “accidental” induce affective responses that we can’t exactly put our finger on. Thus, we could say that estrangement favors abstraction in two ways: overall, at the level of the poem in its entirety (holistically), it undermines conventional language use and subverts clarity of meaning. At the phrase-level, the unexpected sensations and impressions that artistic devices produce are far from specific and concrete even when they are noticeable at all. What could the “meaning” of different kinds of impression be that we categorize as surprise? And “surprise” is only one among others.

This question of how aesthetic sensibility and affect are related is still a hard research problem. To their credit, the Formalists addressed it; but as Gleb Struve remarked,²⁵ there was still a “gap in the theory” regarding explanations centered on novelty and overcoming automatism.

To conclude on the related, and important, problem regarding the question of poetic language and “emotion,” we should recognize that it too was left unfinished by the work of OPOYAZ. The discussion was on the right track; Eichenbaum (citing Jakobson) called attention to a misleading identification: that a central distinguishing feature of poetic language could be reduced to the features of “emotional speech.” To the contrary, the two systems are functionally independent, even though a poet might make use of this mode of expression, in the same way that a narrator of prose might.²⁶ At the same time, Formalist theorizing (tentative and speculative as it was) studied the scientific literature of the time on the effects of the sound patterns of language on sensation and emotive response (such as we just reviewed). Onomatopoeic effects, for example, would have been a minor or secondary aspect of the relationship (this question apparently being one of the points of controversy).

Future investigations will be able to evaluate the claims about abstraction and estrangement with new methods and research models. This concluding section presents a working hypothesis. Thus, we need to be open to both falsifying evidence and the possibility that there are other, more important, factors that the avant-garde did not foresee, factors that may still be eluding us today. To reiterate the question that was asked during the first years of the 20th century: what are the properties of art that distinguish it, that set it apart as exceptional? It’s still a good idea to take each genre and art form in turn, on its own, and then consider common features and general principles of aesthetics that might be shared across modalities and art forms. Some features may be shared only between closely related art forms because they are more specialized, while one or two general principles might apply broadly, at some level, to all.

Notes

1. The emergence of Cubism followed in part from the study of non-European historical practices and current styles of the time that reflected ancient artistic traditions, according to de Zayas in *Arts and Decoration* (1916). The modern and the traditional currents, both, attend to “natural laws” that incorporate formal properties of design and composition that are consciously non-representational.

2. Francis, Norbert. (2017). *Bilingual and Multicultural Perspectives on Poetry, Music and Narrative: The Science of Art*: 42.

3. Among the Formalists associated with Futurism, analysis of the traditional literature, including from the distant historical past, also held the keys to understanding literary language. Shklovsky's analysis of (18th Century) *Tristram Shandy* is only one example of the research on the distinctive features, in this case, of art narrative. The comparison between Sterne's *roman étrange* and conventional narrative is analogous to that between Futurist and conventional poetry (p. 147). The genre to which belongs *Tristram Shandy* was a precursor to the unconventional and dystopic novels of Zamyatin, and subsequently the work of absurdist-Futurist provocateur Daniil Kharms, springing forth from trans-rational poetry. Kharms went on to violate every expectation of story for adults and children, crossing the limit into the chaos of his nightmare fantasies barely appropriate at any time of the day or night for the latter (Tumanov, Vladimir and Tumanov Larissa (1993). Struve, Gleb (1971) provides a comprehensive survey of the period.
4. Noteworthy is the study by Christina Brungardt (2015) of the curious career of graphic artist Vinicio Paladini, describing how a number of Futurist-inspired artists were able to work within the (shifting, but also parallel) parameters of *both* the Italian and Soviet governments of the 1920s and 30s. Paladini's commitments were curious, but apparently not unique.
5. Together with the exaltation of the machine, the social reconstruction tendency of Futurism was a front of action and confrontation (Hernández, Clara, "Marinetti y el Modelo del Artista Moderno," 2016).
6. Schröder, Klaus and Petrova, Evgenia, *Chagall to Malevich: The Russian Avantgardes* (2016).
7. Marinetti, Filippo, "Manifeste du Futurism," *Le Figaro* (February 20, 1909).
8. Malevich, Kazimir, *The Non-objective World* (1959[1927]), 74.
9. Malevich, 21.
10. Kandinsky, Wassily, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1977 [1914]), 20.
11. Livshits, Benedict, "The Liberation of the Word" (1988[1913]).
12. Kandinsky, 20.
13. Guevarra, Ernesto Che, *El Socialismo y el Hombre Nuevo* (1979), 14.

14. Ermolaev, Herman, *Soviet Literary Theories 1917–1934* (1977): 9–26; Lawton, Anna, *Russian Futurism through its Manifestoes* (1988): 33–48. As a historical footnote to this section, it is interesting to take note that the very same confrontation between these two visions of art has been carried forward to the present day from its origin during the early years of modernism. See Yeh, Michelle. “Light a Lamp in a Rock: Experimental Poetry in Contemporary China” (1992) for a current example.

15. Regarding the divergence between Malevich and Lissitzky we can take note of a possible irony: while Lissitzky strongly sided with the utilitarian and propagandistic tendency within UNOVIS, an exemplar being his memorable *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* (1920), over time and taking the work of each artist as a whole, his non-objective works (readers may disagree) surpassed those of Malevich in both total production and qualitatively, in terms of development of the style, considering greater diversity of spatial elements and their relations of interaction, for example. On the other hand, this assessment might be unfair given that Malevich was the target of official persecution, imprisonment, banning and confiscation, beginning in the late 1920s. A related problem appears here: the need to distinguish between the work of fine art and the poster (the latter commissioned to support the “war effort” or other campaign of national mobilization). Artists in all societies participate in both genres, themselves often keeping the two separate in their own thinking.

16. Nevertheless, the question of what precisely the objective underpinning was of the criticism of Kandinsky’s compositions by leading Constructivists (i.e., petty rivalry aside) could maybe one day be clarified. Judging from Brandon Taylor’s portrayal (“Kandinsky and Contemporary Painting,” 2006), the critiques are difficult to follow, from today’s perspective: about considerations of “economy,” or that Constructivism calls for “the theoretical analysis of the basic elements of a work of art” not the “psychology of aesthetic perception,” citing Rodchenko in 1921. It’s not clear what the criticism of the Constructivists was really about.

17. Arnason, H.H. and Mansfield, Elizabeth, *History of Modern Art* (2010).

18. Van den Oever, Annie, “Ostrannenie, The Montage of Attractions and Early Cinema’s Properly Irreducible Alien Quality” (2010): 33–60.

19. In his classic study “Imagination and Creativity in Childhood” (2004[1930]), Lev Vygotsky saw in spontaneous creation the impulse to

dissociate natural entities and then to recombine them as one of the foundations of abstract thinking in general.

20. Struve, 182.

21. For the students of literary language at the time poetry was: “that domain of literature where the material itself was most unquestionably palpable” (Eagle, Herbert, “Afterword: Cubo-Futurism and Russian Formalism,” 1988: 284).

22. Historically (and evolutionarily), listening to poetry, recited, is primary; reading poetry published in a book or displayed on a screen, is secondary. The same primary-secondary relationship applies to human development, how poetic sensibility arises spontaneously across the lifespan.

23. Jackendoff, Ray, “Parallels and Nonparallels between Language and Music” (2009).

24. Jackendoff, Ray and Lerdahl, Fred, “The Capacity for Music” (2006): 42—43.

25. Struve, 207—208.

26. Eichenbaum, Boris, “La Teoría de del Método Formal,” (1970[1926]): 43—44.

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Appendix

Impressionism and Abstraction in Photography

Eva Polak:

<https://evapolak.com/Impressionist-Photography.html>

Lyle Rexer (2013): *The Edge of Vision: The Rise of Abstraction in Photography*. Aperture <https://aperture.org/books/the-edge-of-vision/>

