

El Lissitzky – Jewish as Universal: From Jewish Style to Pangeometry

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“Avant-garde oeuvre” implies certain dualities. On the one hand, it attempts to present a new vision of the totality of the world, a rational proposal for the “reconstruction of the world.” On the other hand, it might imply refined symbolist play, full of direct, and especially hidden, references and quotations. Furthermore, the avant-garde oeuvre is intended to speak universally; yet, it contains diverse national, nationalistic, and even chauvinistic traits (the latter flourished during and immediately after World War I), which internally contradict its universalism from within.

With regard to formative avant-garde dualities, El Lissitzky is a characteristic case. The “enigmatic artist” of the avant-garde epoch,¹ he was both Jewish and universal, rationally-constructive and symbolically-enigmatic. He attempted to be universal while playing with sophisticated and hidden Jewish metaphors. He constructed “the new worlds” while speaking in specific and complicated symbolical language. El Lissitzky’s discourse had been essentially distinct from the language of his peers, Kasimir Malevich and Marc Chagall. Within all their differences, Malevich and Chagall remained *symbolists in the avant-garde*: their discourse refers to something beyond the rational. Chagall mentioned this explicitly: “Ah, qui a compris Chagall!?”² and Malevich affirmed this *non-finito* character of his thought through all his works. On the contrary, Lissitzky was a *constructor*. He tried to find clear visual solutions to the most irrational problems – infinity, quantity, space, etc. His sophisticated

metaphorical textures are constructed and designed. To put it differently, the strongest rationalistic will towards synthesis moves Lissitzky beyond rationality, just as the Jewishness of his “Jewish-style” works contains formative impulses of universality. From yet another viewpoint, his abstract suprematist and post-suprematist creations and theories imply a hidden, genuine Jewishness.

Despite the artist’s own theories about his works, despite a perfect intellectual biography of Lissitzky written by his wife and the recollections of his contemporaries,³ Lissitzky’s ecstatic evolution and balance between artistic trends and national traditions create problems for researchers. The artist’s passage from Darmstadt, where he was trained in late Art Nouveau perspective to pre- and post-revolutionary Russia, where he discovered Jewish tradition and searched for Jewish style, followed by the “exodus” to the universalism of Malevich’s Suprematism and, later, a jump into a variety of German Weimar artistic trends, do not explain his heritage in terms of subtle evolutionary progression. Lissitzky is always between – between a Jewish search for style and cultural identity and the universal language of Suprematism, between Suprematism and Constructivism, between Malevich’s concept of abstract non-objectivity and De Stijl, between “Constructivism” and Dada, and last, between the world of Vitebsk, the west-Russian provincial center – and Darmstadt, Moscow, Kiev, Berlin, Hanover, and imaginary America. Understanding El Lissitzky presupposes a study of evident and hidden traces from his previous stages of

1 As he was treated by the editors of *Situating El Lissitzky: Vitebsk, Berlin, Moscow*, eds. Nancy Perloff and Brian Reed (Los Angeles, 2003).

2 Ziva Amishai-Maisels, “Chagall’s Jewish In-Jokes,” *JJA* 5 (1978): 76.

3 *El Lissitzky: Maler, Architekt, Typograf, Fotograf, Erinnerungen, Briefe,*

Schriften, ed. Sophie Lissitzky-Kuppers (Dresden, 1967). I will use both the original German text of this book and its English translation: *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*, ed. Sophie Lissitzky-Kuppers (London, 1968).

development to new ones. The problem of “situating El Lissitzky”⁴ remains an intriguing issue for the history of avant-garde art.

We will examine a short period in El Lissitzky’s artistic evolution – from Kultur-Lige activities of 1917–19 to his Berlin works and “Art and Pangeometry” (1925). A discussion of Lissitzky’s late 1910s–early 1920s must mention a certain duality in his early background. As Sophie Lissitzky-Kuppers reminds us, Lissitzky’s parents were absolutely opposite in character:

His father, who was employed as steward of a large estate, saw no real future in Tsarist Russia for himself and his small family. So he emigrated to America, where his brother had already gone before him. A year later, when his early efforts had met with success and a small business was beginning to prosper, he asked his young wife to come and join him, bringing the two-year-old Lazar. As an orthodox Jewess, she sought the Rabbi’s advice first, and he expressed the opinion that she should remain in her homeland, near her family, and should call her husband back. [...] Father and mother were absolutely opposite in character. The widely-traveled father knew two foreign languages, German and English, besides Russian and Yiddish, and in his spare time he translated Heine and Shakespeare. He was a freethinking man. There is no doubt that his great love of books was passed on to his eldest child. The orthodox mother was endowed with an extraordinarily keen mind and a great tenacity in everything she did. Her son, whom she found difficult to understand in later years, inherited her intelligence and also her small neat figure and large black eyes.⁵

Sophie Lissitzky-Kuppers’ testimony is essential – Lissitzky grew up in the dual context of the broad post-Haskalah thinking of his father and the Jewish orthodoxy of his mother, and this explosive mixture of Jewishness, post-Haskalah openness to the world, and “America” would be rediscovered in his later work. It should be noted that Lazar spent an essential part of his childhood in Vitebsk, which definitely was not a “small city,” as Sophie Lissitzky-Kuppers described it,⁶ but a *gubernian* (regional) center of West Russia, with an intriguing mixture of Jewish and universal cultural life.⁷ Fin-de-siècle Vitebsk featured a theater, a gymnasium, a branch of the Moscow archaeological institute, nine libraries, and more. Well-known ethnographical and historical studies were published by the outstanding Vitebsk historians Alexey Sapunov, Nikolay Nikiforovsky, and Alexander Sementovsky.

Jewish life in Vitebsk differed from the wider society and yet was an essential component of the city. An observation of Vitebsk in 1904 stated that, “at present the whole central part of Vitebsk is almost exclusively in Jewish hands.”⁸ Jewish life in Vitebsk was intense and varied: there were Litvaks, Hasidim, and early Jewish bourgeoisie, as well as public organizations of diverse and even contradictory character – a Jewish literary–musical society, a Society for the Enlightenment of Jews in the Russian Empire, a Society for Jewish Language (*Obshestvo Lubiteley Evreyskogo Yazyka*), as well as Bundist and Zionist-oriented groups.⁹ The artistic focus of fin-de-siècle Vitebsk was Yehuda (Yuri Moiseevich) Pen’s art school, which was attended in the early twentieth century by such future famous avant-garde or realist artists as Lazar Lissitzky, Marc Chagall, Ossip Zadkine, Solomon Yudovin, Zair Azgur, and others. To complete this picture we should mention an inspiring architectural landscape of

4 The title of the international conference, organized by the Getty Research Institute: *Situating El Lissitzky: Vitebsk, Berlin, Moscow*.

5 *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*, 15.

6 *Ibid.*, 15.

7 On the cultural atmosphere of Vitebsk in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as related to El Lissitzky’s artistic career, see Igor Doukhan, “Beyond the Holy City: Symbolic Intentions in the Avant-Garde Urban Utopia,” in *The Real and Ideal Jerusalem in Jewish, Christian and Islamic Art*, ed. Bianca Kühnel (Jerusalem, 1998), 556–75; *idem*,

“El Lissitzky, evreyskii stil’, avangard” (El Lissitzky, Jewish Style, Avant-garde), in *Proceedings of the 11th Annual International Interdisciplinary Conference on Jewish Studies*, eds. Rashid Kaplanov and Viktoria Motchalova (Moscow, 2004), 313–41.

8 *Pamiatnaya knizhka Vitebskoy gubernii na 1905 god* (Almanac of the Vitebsk Region for the Year 1905) (Vitebsk, 1904).

9 Ėmanuil G. Ioffe, *Po dostovernym istochnikam: Evrei v istorii gorodov Belarusi* (According to Authentic Sources: Jews in the History of Cities of Belarus) (Minsk, 2001), 76–79.



Fig. 1.

Figs. 1–3. El Lissitzky, illustration for *Had Gadya* (1st variant), 1917, watercolor on paper, State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow



Fig. 2.



Fig. 3.

Vitebsk, with its striking gothicized silhouettes of wooden Orthodox and Greek-Catholic churches, and central distinctive Baroque buildings that included cathedrals and the city hall, synagogues, Russian neoclassical architecture, certain modern architectural additions and more, all in the foreground of picturesque hilly (“Toledo-style,” to use Ilya Repin’s term) landscapes.¹⁰ So in his early, formative years Lissitzky found himself in a vibrant “multicultural” mixture of Jewish and non-Jewish traditions and modernity, post-Haskalah and Orthodoxy, bourgeois cultural comfort and pre-revolutionary inspiration.

Studying in the architectural department of the Darmstadt Technische Hochschule in 1909–14 also contributed to the “multiculturalism” of Lissitzky’s character. The Darmstadt Technische Hochschule preserved a refined

spirit of the Vienna Secession and the *Gesamtkunstwerk* idea of the Darmstadt artistic colony. Lissitzky, however, made many architectural journeys, drawing famous European architecture as well as the synagogue in Worms,¹¹ and was probably inspired by the Darmstadt Haggadah and medieval Jewish manuscripts.¹² On his arrival in Russia he became actively involved in Jewish renaissance artistic affairs, which shaped his artistic imagery till 1919.

In 1917 and 1919 Lissitzky produced two variants of the Passover poem *Had Gadya*.¹³ The 1917 watercolors feature an expressionist decorativeness of color and narrative (figs. 1–3). The auto-lithographs of 1919 are already marked by a stylistic shift (fig. 4). Preserving a certain narrative character, the treatment of forms becomes essentially more structural and every list reflects a topological invariant (or

10 On the imaginative impact of Vitebsk’s landscape on Marc Chagall’s artistic vision, see Doukhan, “Beyond the Holy City,” 572–74.

11 *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*, 16–19.

12 Alan Birnholz, “El Lissitzky and the Jewish Tradition,” *Studio International* (October 1973): 130–36.

13 For a detailed analysis of the two variants, see Haya Friedberg, “Lissitzky’s *Had Gadya*,” *JA* 12/13 (1987): 292–303; Ruth Apter-Gabriel, “El Lissitzky’s Jewish Works,” in *Tradition and Revolution: The Jewish Renaissance in Russian Avant-Garde Art (1912–1928)*, ed. Ruth Apter-Gabriel (Jerusalem, 1988), 101–24.

pattern) of the whole series in *Of Two Squares* (Vitebsk, 1920–Berlin, 1922) (figs. 6–13).¹⁴ As already noted by Haya Friedberg, *Had Gadya* – 1919 was marked also by a principal programmatic shift: if in the variant of 1917 the Angel of Death is depicted as cast down but still alive, that of 1919 shows him as definitely dead, and his victims (an old man and a kid) as resurrected. As at that time Lissitzky was quite sympathetic towards the October Revolution, which in a certain way coincided with the liberation of Jews from discrimination and pogroms, this shift might be considered as an artist’s symbolical positive statement of fulfillment of the Revolution’s objectives. However, the most radical visual innovation was a cover for *Had Gadya* – 1919¹⁵ designed in abstract suprematist forms with a specially elaborated “suprematist” script (fig. 5). El Lissitzky’s move towards abstraction followed with extreme speed in 1919. It was Lissitzky who initiated the invitation of the leader of abstract Suprematism, Kasimir Malevich, to Vitebsk,¹⁶ which sharply transformed the “flourishing” post-revolutionary artistic situation in the city, led by Marc Chagall. Prior to Malevich’s arrival in Vitebsk, Chagall deliberately developed his own version of a slightly



Fig. 4. El Lissitzky, illustration for *Had Gadya* (2d variant), 1919, gouache, India ink, and pencil on paper, Tel Aviv Museum of Art



Fig. 5. El Lissitzky, dustjacket for *Had Gadya* (2d variant), 1919, color lithograph, private collection

¹⁴ See Igor Dukhan, “El Lissitzky i montaz vremeny” (El Lissitzky and the Montage of Time), *PROdyzain* 4 (2002): 33–37.

¹⁵ Published in Hillel (Gregory) Kazovskii, *Khudozhniki kul'tur-ligi* (The

Artists of the Kultur-Lige) (Moscow and Jerusalem, 2003), 173.

¹⁶ Aleksandra S. Shatskikh, *Vitebsk: zhizn' iskusstva, 1917–1922* (Vitebsk: Artistic Life, 1917–1922) (Moscow, 2001), 49–50.



Fig. 6.

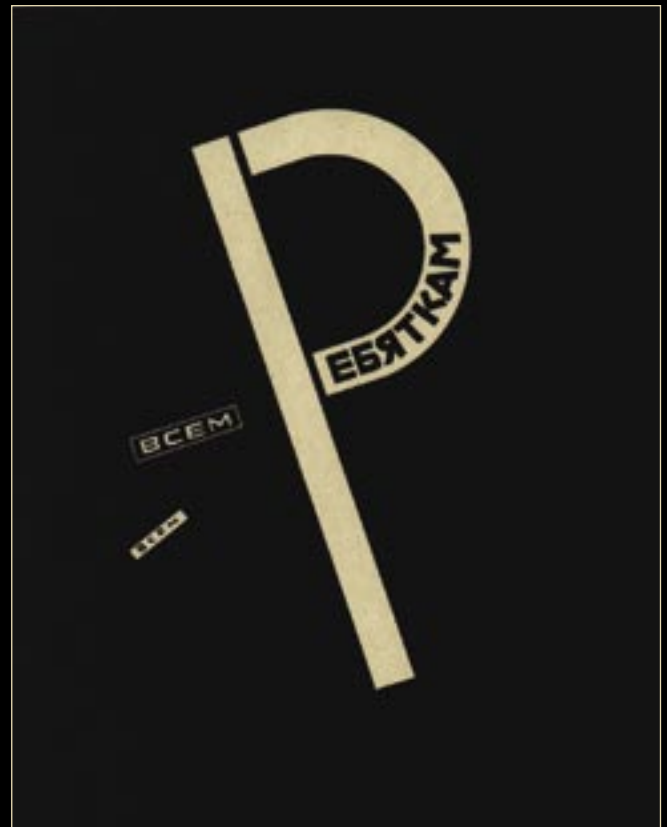


Fig. 7.

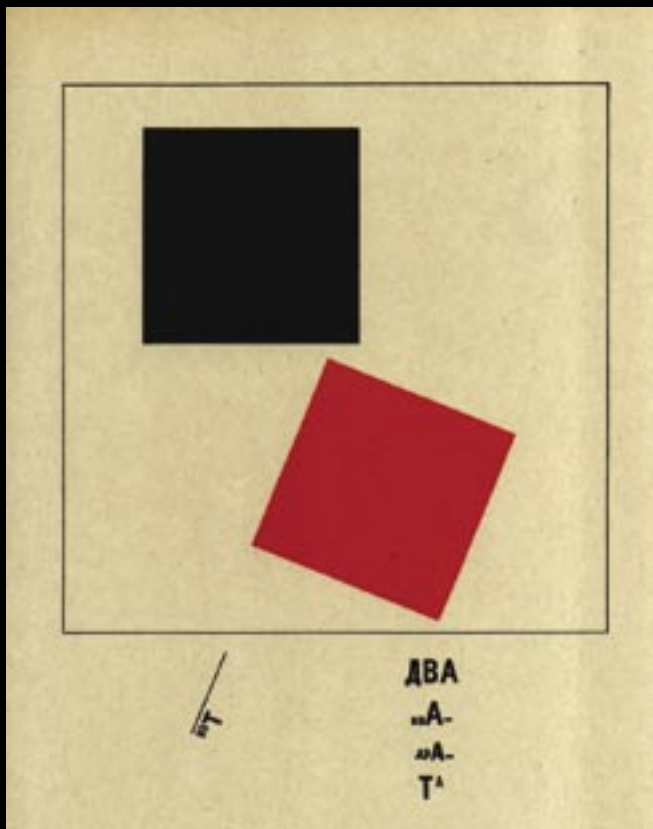


Fig. 8.

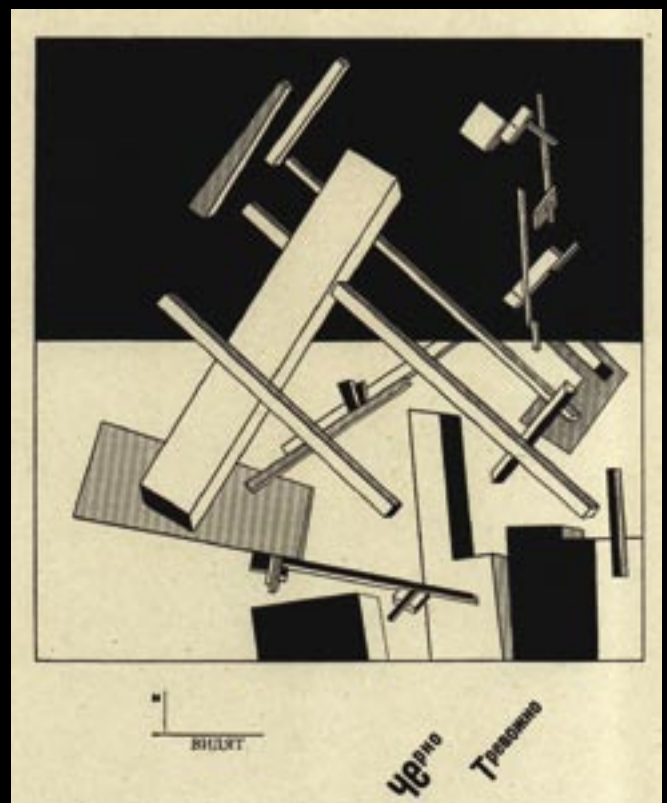


Fig. 9.

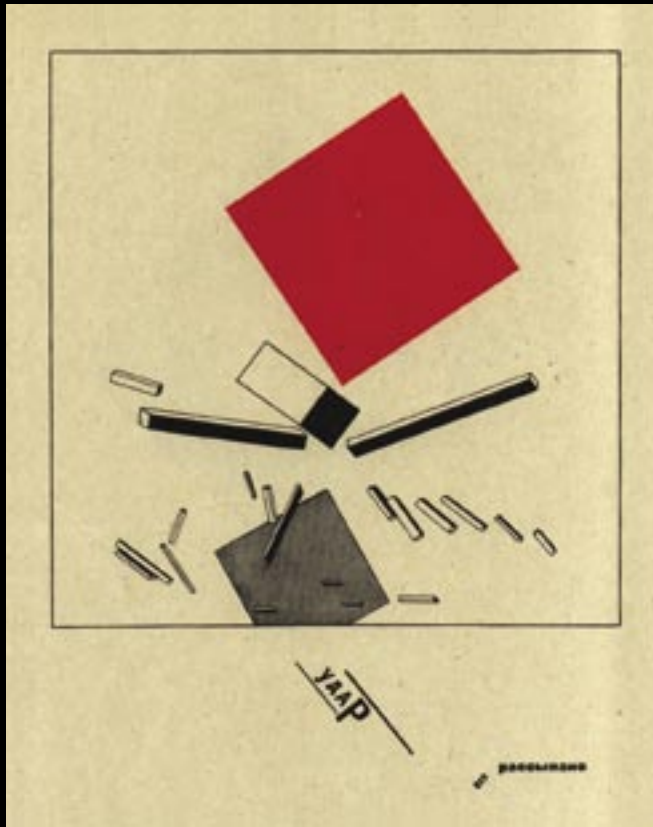


Fig. 10.



Fig. 12.



Fig. 11.

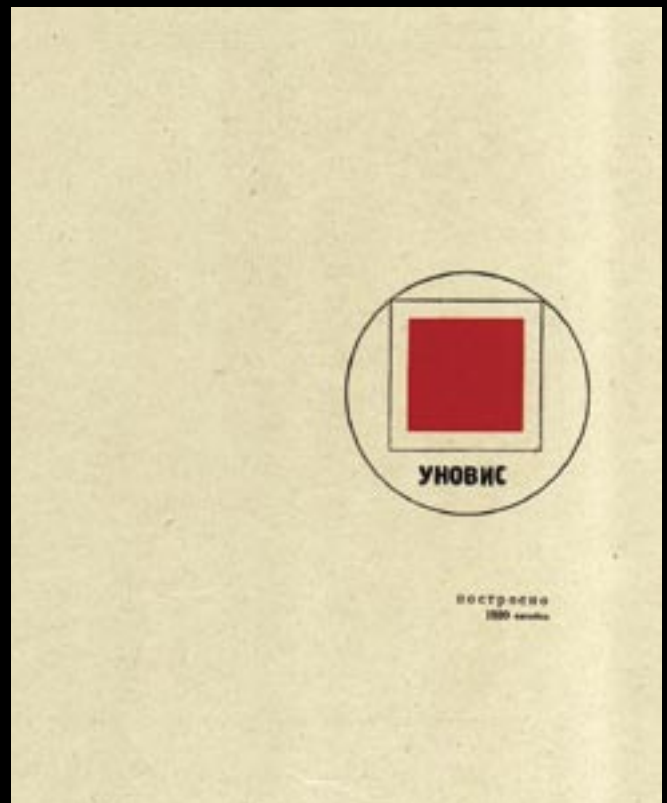


Fig. 13.

romanticized avant-garde “alogist” style, full of space–time paradoxes, but also narrative and figurative in its forms, and he tried to expand his imagery into the totality of Vitebsk spaces – walls and squares. The monumental murals of Chagall and his disciples on the walls of Vitebsk buildings, dedicated to the Revolution anniversaries, transformed the city center into an irrational interplay of flying revolutionary soldiers, horsemen, *shtetl* scenes, animals, etc., composed sub specie of vivid Jewish idioms. This revolutionary artistic romanticism was not positively received by the revolutionary masses, and in 1918 Chagall had to write a special explanation to the *Vitebskiy listok* (Vitebsk Newsletter), insisting that he and his disciples had no intention of ridiculing the Revolution in festival decorations.¹⁷

In the confrontation between the avant-garde versions of Chagall and Malevich, the methodological and metaphysical charm of Malevich won out over the impulsive Chagall’s individuality. Lissitzky deliberately sided with Malevich. This Vitebsk episode of 1919 seems very significant – Lissitzky chose the radical and advanced suprematist construct based on Malevich’s individual metaphysics and rejected Chagall’s romantic and “naïve” avant-garde style combined with revolutionary and Jewish narrativity. The partnership between Malevich and Lissitzky at Vitebsk UNOVIS [Utverditeli NOVogo ISkusstva – Affirmatives of New Art] was not simply a “master–disciple” relationship, or not “master–disciple” at all. As he later wrote in a letter to El Lissitzky in Berlin, in Vitebsk Malevich “took to the skies” and Lissitzky “took to the ground,”¹⁸ so it was cooperation in a certain way predetermined by Malevich’s theoretical principles which were architecturally and spatially developed by Lissitzky.

Simultaneously, Lissitzky tried to outline a messianic explanation for his turn towards Malevich’s Suprematism. In the paper “Suprematism zhyznestroytel’stva,” published in *UNOVIS Almanac*, he asserted: “The Old Testament was replaced by the New one, the New is replaced by the Communist, and for replacement of the Communist the Suprematist Testament goes on.”¹⁹ Later, in his programmatic article “Art and Pangeometry,” he also attributed to Malevich a radical mission of transfiguration of art and the world.²⁰ Such statements by Lissitzky relied on the apocalyptic metaphysics of Russian culture of the Silver Age and Jewish messianic trends.²¹ From this perspective, El Lissitzky probably believed that Malevich’s search for infinity was closer to Jewish metaphysical symbolism than the “naïve” romantic expressionism of Chagall.

If *Had Gadya* was a quintessence of El Lissitzky’s post-revolutionary Jewish Renaissance inspiration, his “visual book”²² *Of Two Squares*, “constructed” in Vitebsk in 1920 and published in Berlin by the émigré Skythen publishing house in 1922, could be considered as a typologically similar manifestation of UNOVIS–early Berlin developments. If in *Had Gadya* the narrativity of the Passover story predetermined the sequence of the illustrative cycle, *Of Two Squares* was precisely a “visual book” with an emphasis on visual impact and non-linear montage strategy. In fact, in a few years Lissitzky’s artistic strategy was to be profoundly transformed.

There is no doubt that *Of Two Squares* was an embodiment and development of Malevich’s idea of Suprematism. However, *Of Two Squares* features Lissitzky’s original artistic thinking (figs. 6–13). If we compare Lissitzky’s series of Prouns [PROekt Utverzhdenia Novogo –

17 *Vitebskiy listok* (Vitebsk Newsletter) (November 1918): 2 (collection of the Belarus National Library).

18 “Kasimir Malevich Letter to El Lissitzky,” *Experiment/Эксперимент* 5 (1999): 150.

19 El Lissitzky, “Suprematism zhiznestroytel’stva” (Suprematism of Life-Building), in: *UNOVIS Almanac* 1 (1920): 15 (collection of the State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, Manuscripts Department).

20 See my analysis of this statement in Dukhan, “El Lissitzky, evreyskii stil’, avangard” (n. 7 above), 327–31.

21 See Leonid Katzis, “‘Chiornyy kvadrat’ Kazimira Malevitcha i ‘Skaz pro dva kvadrata’ El-Lisicogo v iudeyskoy perspective” (Malevich’s

“Black Square” and El Lissitzky’s “Tale on Two Squares” in Jewish Perspective), in idem, *Russkaya eskhatologia i russkaya literatura* (Russian Eschatology and Russian Literature) (Moscow, 2000), 132–39; Dukhan, “El Lissitzky, evreyskii stil’, avangard,” 313–41.

22 The notion *vizual’naya kniga* (visual book) was used by El Lissitzky to stress an ultimate distinction between an avant-garde book based on visual imagery and a classical book of linear text and accompanying illustrations (El Lissitzky, “Kniga s tochki zrenia vizual’nogo vospriatia – vizual’naya kniga” (The Book from the Viewpoint of Visual Perception – a Visual Book), in *Iskusstvo knigi, 1958–1960* (Art of Bookprinting, 1958–1960) (Moscow, 1982), 163–68.

Project of Affirmation of the New] and posters of the early 1920s to Malevich's suprematist compositions of 1915–20, a certain difference can be noted. Malevich establishes a vision of a balanced world harmony. In his abstract compositions the suprematist colored plains freely “float” in the proscenium (or background) of the infinite Universe (see *Suprematism*, 1915, etc.). More dynamically shaped suprematist compositions evince different forms of chaotic movement and interaction of bodies, neutralized however by the dominating axis (*Supremus N 56*, 1916, etc.). The idea of gravity and tension of forces is only slightly marked in some of Malevich's compositions (*Supremus N 58*, 1916; *Vertical Suprematist Construction*, 1917). This mode of representation corresponds to the whole harmonic idea of Malevich's Suprematism, as movement from the dynamism and energies of earthly chaos to the weightlessness and calm of the lost universal harmony, the “fourth dimension,” explicated in *Bog ne skinut: iskusstvo, tserkov', fabrika* (God is not Dethroned: Art, Church, Factory)²³ and other theoretical treatises from 1915 to the early 1920s. Pursuing the same concept of Suprematism and non-objectivity, El Lissitzky gradually attempts to represent the dramatic tensions of forces and the conflicts of gravitational energies. The three-volume axonometric forms “struggle” with the plain suprematist surfaces, visualizing the conflict between forces of gravity and inertia (*Proun 1 E: The City*, 1921); some of his compositions are like the vector diagram of the directions of forces (poster *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge*, 1919; *Proun 30T*, 1920).

The conflicts of abstract forms in *Of Two Squares* recalls of dramatic tensions in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel. The montage visual structure of *Of Two Squares* is based on a dramaturgy of topological transfigurations. Every new page puts forward a thrust of visual energy. The geometric bodies meet in the gravity fields, compressing

and clashing with each other. The gravitation and energies of the pictorial field transform their geometries. This clash between forces of gravity and inertia leads to the compression and disappearance of bodies. The narrative sequence of discourse dissolves in the dynamic struggle of forces, gravity, and inertia. Montage of visual events, the ecstatic temporality of “folding” (the term of Gilles Deleuze) creates the dynamic visuality of a time stream. The ecstasies of time emerge as a fundamental force for construction of *Of Two Squares* and form, as we will attempt to show later, an expressive trace of Jewish time-sensitivity.

Pursuing Malevich's basic ideas, El Lissitzky created his individual time-language of Suprematism. At the end of 1921 he moved to Berlin. The reasons for Lissitzky's long-term sojourn in Berlin, and elsewhere in Europe were varied. First, it was common for Russian artists and intellectuals to settle in Berlin in the early 1920s;²⁴ second, Berlin was an inspiring capital for the avant-garde trends in postwar art; and third, Lissitzky came with a special cultural mission from the Soviet cultural officials.²⁵ The messianic assertion of art and Suprematism, however, didn't escape from his theoretical horizon in the intense atmosphere of Berlin; on the contrary, as we will see below, it was developed as a metaphysical framework for Lissitzky's rationalistic constructs of that period.

If in 1916–19 El Lissitzky was, metaphorically speaking, predominantly “Jewish,” between 1919 and 1921 primordially “universal” (with hidden traces of Jewish time-sensitivity), in Berlin and Germany we could find Lissitzky “Jewish” and “universal,” or “Jewish” as “universal,” with emphasis upon “universal.” The difficulty of grasping simultaneously “the avant-garde” and “the Jewish” Lissitzky of the German–European period of 1921–25 is reflected in the character of the research publications on Lissitzky in those years, which comprise

23 Kasimir Malevich, *Bog ne skinut: iskusstvo, tserkov', fabrika* (God is not Dethroned: Art, Church, Factory) (Vitebsk, 1920).

24 Robert C. Williams, *Culture in Exile: Russian Emigrés in Germany, 1881-1941* (Ithaca and London, 1972); Karl Schlögel, *Berlin Ostbahnhof Europas: Russen und Deutsche in ihrem Jahrhundert* (Berlin, 1998).

25 And even with a secret mission, as Christina Lodder exposes, referring to the memoirs of Miriam Gabo of 1985: “In private, Gabo revealed

that he [artist Naum Gabo] had once visited Lissitzky's Berlin studio and had been horrified to see a seal of Cheka (Russian secret police) lying on the desk, identifying Lissitzky as an informer in the employ of this rather morally dubious government agency” (Christina Lodder, “El Lissitzky and the Export of Constructivism,” in *Situating El Lissitzky*, 33). However, there is no additional evidence to assert Lissitzky's collaboration with the Soviet secret services.

separate studies of him as an international avant-gardist²⁶ and as a “Jewish typographer and illustrator.”²⁷

In Germany and Europe Lissitzky was “accommodated” by the most advanced avant-garde circles (Kurt Schwitters and Merz, Hans Richter and G, Dada, Bauhaus and De Stijl circles, etc.); however, he preserved and developed his contacts with the Berlin Jewish and Russian émigré cultural milieu. As is well known, in the first half of the 1920s Berlin became a turbulent center of Jewish and Russian émigré cultural activities, especially in the publishing field.²⁸ Referring through the years to his pre-avant-garde ideals, Lissitzky published in *Milgroim*, the famous Berlin-based Jewish modernist arts-and-letters magazine, his reminiscences of the Mogilev synagogue, accompanied by his own copies of its excellent eighteenth-century wall paintings.²⁹ The memoirs of *Milgroim*’s art editor, Rachel Wischnitzer, presented a sympathetic, yet ambiguous, picture regarding El Lissitzky’s artistic “belonging” to definite circles. She precisely outlined Lissitzky’s correlation to Theo van Doesberg and Dutch De Stijl and mentioned his “Constructivism,” yet ignored Malevich’s influence. Considering Lissitzky’s Jewish works of 1917–19, she made a very matter-of-fact statement: “Lissitzky had been trained as an architect, but with little opportunities for work in his field in the years of World

War I he turned to the graphic arts and produced a number of illustrated Yiddish story books.”³⁰ Lissitzky himself was a personification of the *Milgroim* modernistic attitude towards Jewish art as part of the universal. (Wischnitzer later wrote: “I have always regarded Jewish art as part of the general creative process moulded inexorably by the times and the artist’s personality, rather than by national characteristics.”)³¹

From this perspective it appears intentional that in the third issue of *Milgroim*, exactly between Lissitzky’s reminiscences of the Mogilev synagogue and Henryk Berlewi’s observation of new Jewish art in the famous Soviet art exhibition of 1922 in the Sturm gallery,³² appears a reproduction of El Lissitzky’s *Proun 1 E: The Town* (1921), captioned by *Milgroim* as *Construction*.³³ Even if Berlewi paid more attention to the contributions of Marc Chagall and David Sterenberg to the exhibition, Lissitzky was depicted as an almost ideal Jewish modernist artist and his *Proun* (*Construction*) was emblematically placed by *Milgroim* at the top of Berlewi’s article. Berlewi delineated two trends in contemporary Jewish art – one preoccupied with romantic folklore, and the other with modern universal artistic tasks.³⁴ Briefly considering Lissitzky, he emphasized that the artist, thanks to his analytical abilities, quickly liberated himself from “Chagallism” (Berlewi’s

26 Among the recent publications are Selim Khan-Magomedov, “Novyy styl’, ob’emnyy suprematism i prouny” (New Style, Three-Dimensional Suprematism and Prouns), in *Lazar’ Markovich Lissitzky* [catalogue, State Tretyakov Gallery] (Moscow and Eindhoven, 1990); Victor Margolin, *The Struggle for Utopia: Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, 1917–1946* (Chicago, 1997), chap. 2; Matthew Drutt, “El Lissitzky in Germany, 1922–1925,” in *El Lissitzky: Beyond the Abstract Cabinet*, eds. Margarita Tupitsyn, Matthew Drutt, and Ulrich Pohlmann (New Haven and Hanover, 1999), 9–25; Christina Lodder, “El Lissitzky and the Export of Constructivism,” 27–47; Eva Forgacs, *Definitive Space: The Many Utopias of El Lissitzky’s Proun Room*, in *ibid.*, 47–77.

27 Apter-Gabriel, “El Lissitzky’s Jewish Works.” A rare and profound attempt to interrelate the “Jewish” and the “avant-garde” Lissitzky of his German–European period of 1921–25 was done in Alan Birnholz, “El Lissitzky,” PhD dissertation, Yale University, New Haven, 1973.

28 Hartmut Walravens, “Russische Kunstverlage in Berlin,” in *Europäische Moderne: Buch und Graphik aus Berliner Kunstverlagen, 1890–1933*: [catalogue] Kunstbibliothek Berlin, Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, ed. Lutz S. Malke (Berlin, 1989), 125–40; Glenn Levine, “Yiddish Publishing in Berlin and the Crisis in Eastern European Jewish

Culture 1919–1924,” *LBIY* 42 (1997): 85–108; *Russkiy Berlin* (Russian Berlin), ed. V. Sorokina (Moscow, 2003).

29 El Lissitzky, “Vegn der Mohliker shul: zikhroynes” (The Synagogue of Mohilev), *Milgroim* 3 (1923): 9–13 (Yiddish). For an English translation from the Yiddish by Seth L. Wolitz, see El Lissitzky “Memoirs Concerning the Mohilev Synagogue,” in *Tradition and Revolution*, 233–34 (n. 13 above).

30 Rachel Wischnitzer-Bernstein, “Berlin, the Early 1920s,” in *idem*, *From Dura to Rembrandt: Studies in the History of Art* (Milwaukee, 1990), 164.

31 Rachel Wischnitzer-Bernstein, “From My Archives,” in *ibid.*, 166.

32 Henryk Berlewi, “Yidishe kinstler in der hayntiger rusisher kunst: tsu der rusisher kunst-oysshtelung in Berlin 1922” (Jewish Artists in Russia), *Milgroim* 3 (1923): 14–16 (Yiddish).

33 This early attribution of Proun to Constructivism (even in terms) exposes Lissitzky’s ambiguous position between the Suprematism of Malevich and Constructivism (as well as between the Russian and the Western conceptions of Constructivism), see Lodder, “El Lissitzky and the Export of Constructivism.”

34 Berlewi, “Yidishe kinstler”: 14–15. I am grateful to Professor Susanne Martin-Finnis for her kind help in the translation of *Milgroim* excerpts.



Fig. 14. Issachar Ber Ryback, drawing based on the ceiling of the Mogilev Synagogue, 1916, watercolor and India ink on paper, 64.5x48 cm, Israel Museum, Jerusalem

term) and sentimentalism (the period of *Had Gadya*) and proceeded to pure construction (*reyner konstruksye*) in his Proun works.³⁵

Lissitzky's reminiscences concerning the Mogilev synagogue³⁶ date back to his joint expedition with Issachar Ber Ryback along the Dnieper River in 1915–16 sponsored by the Jewish Historical and Ethnographic Society in St Petersburg. The text was illustrated by the wonderful

watercolor copies of mural paintings done by Lissitzky and Ryback (fig. 14). The wooden synagogue of Mogilev – one of the magnificent synagogues of Eastern Europe – was built in the first half of the eighteenth century and from 1740 on it was decorated with murals by Chaim ben Isaac

³⁵ Ibid.: 16.

³⁶ Lissitzky, "Vegn der Mohliver shul": 9–13.

Halevi Segal of Slutsk.³⁷ The artist was fairly well known in his own times and later – even Marc Chagall paradoxically attempted to include Segal in his own family tree.

Lissitzky mentions that his first impressions of the Mogilev synagogue were really surprising and grandiose, comparable to his first visits to Roman basilicas, Gothic chapels, or Baroque churches. Such comparisons reflect a sense of the rediscovery of early Jewish art, so majestically described by the famous Russian-Jewish art critic Abram Efros:

We are responding to Jewish folk art – to which An-sky [the organizer of famous expeditions to Jewish sites in the Russian empire – I.D.] is finally drawing widespread public attention with the truly historic collecting efforts – much as the vanguard of the *rinascimento* did to their statues. We are just as ardently impassioned, and likewise strive to base our artistic activity on “beauty retrieved from the depth.” In exactly the same way we feel that what is created by the fledging art of Jewry will feed upon that beauty, however dissimilar it may be, just as the art of the Italian Renaissance, while unlike the beauty of the ancients, was wholly sustained by it.³⁸

Lissitzky’s comparison of the Mogilev synagogue to a basilica and a church brings to mind an interesting passage from the correspondence between the founder of Suprematism, Kasimir Malevich, and famous Russian-Jewish writer Mikhail Gershenson of the early Vitebsk period. In a letter of 19 December 1919 Malevich describes his visit to “the Catholic, Orthodox, and Judaist churches” in Vitebsk.³⁹

Considering that Lissitzky’s memoirs on the Mogilev synagogue were published just after his Vitebsk cooperation with Malevich, certain parallels seem curious and important for understanding Lissitzky’s vision. The Orthodox church leaves an impression of completeness

and finality upon Malevich, “it contains no place to go.” Catholic church – also “the leaving spirit,” however it “does not stand any more on the ground, and it is passing above it.” In the complex stream of Malevich’s discourse the brightest image is devoted to the Jewish synagogue. It is already completely dissolved in the movement, “it is completely non-present, only a place of reflection.” Jewish sacral space is filled with letters, in which the entire variety of life and plants is concentrated: “In a synagogue I flew upon the letters, having lost a body and blood.” In this metaphorical comparison of sacral spaces we cannot find any precise reference to Vitebsk sites. But the dialectics of vision itself is important: from the “full of blood” and “terrestrial” Orthodox church, to the Catholic cathedral as mediator between the terrestrial and the heavenly, and finally, to the synagogue as pure incorporeality and non-objectivity. The non-objective and non-figural character of the synagogue space coincided with the non-objectivity of the Suprematist vision. The avant-garde ideal had paradoxically discovered its reflection in the sacral Jewish space.

From this perspective let us read on in El Lissitzky’s *Milgroim* memoirs. As an architect, Lissitzky outlines his description with the spatial composition of the interior, and afterwards proceeds with the analysis of murals from the lower registers to the top. The description itself is full of poetical transfigurations: the stars in the sky are scattered in the form of flowers, the bird in the water catches a fish, on the ground the fox carries a bird between its teeth, figures fly and run. Lissitzky emphasizes the inexhaustibility of artistic forms and imagination. The sun intensifies this dynamism of changes – moving in a circle, with each new hour it creates new visual effects. Thus, following Lissitzky’s vision, synagogue space presents not a static composition but a continuous stream of transformations, even the film-montage.

We could hardly attribute the memory of the Mogilev synagogue to a purely art historical analysis. Condensed and bright images dynamically replace each other. Let us proceed to a typical discourse from the reminiscences: “On the three-cornered board that covers the passage from the wall to the ceiling, on the northwestern side, is the legendary wild ox. On the northeastern side is a

37 Maria and Kazimierz Piechotka, *Bramy Nieba* (Heaven’s Gates) (Warsaw, 1996), 273–74.

38 Abram Efros, “Lampa Alladina” (Aladdin’s Lamp), *Evreyskiy mir* (Jewish World) 1 (Moscow, 1918): 298.

39 Kasimir Malevich, *Sobranie sochineniy* (Collected Writings), vol. 3 (Moscow, 2000), 334–37.

wild goat; on the third plank, in the southeast, is the Leviathan; and on the fourth plank, to the southwest, is an elephant with a saddle on its back [...].”⁴⁰ Is it a consequent logical discourse on art history, or a montage of bright visual expressions (“Let the researches seek and clamber about in the sea of art history. I can only describe my own observations”)?⁴¹ Lissitzky’s vision is high-speeded – the memories in general follow Lissitzky’s idea of speed as artistic strategy: “The economy of time has given birth to the machine. The machine showed us the speed. We have found ourselves inside a stream.”⁴² Suprematism, according to Lissitzky, is a specific stage in the culture of speed and dynamism; it expresses the essence of speed and motion, not only describes them in the futurist manner.

What did Lissitzky hope to find in the Mogilev synagogue – the historical images of Jewish art or lively prototypes for new creativity? Lissitzky himself answered this question, explaining that ancient synagogue decoration unfurls before our eyes the dynamic pictorial world, germinating into new artistic creativity.

And if, at present, when the technical means to repeat a performance are so available and printing presses work so quickly, these artifacts will receive the broadest distribution, and will infect the “art teachers,” who will begin to powder and stylize this uniquely arranged face [...]. This unstable “vinaigrette” will then be stirred up as a new art culture, but we would be better off without this culture; it is unnecessary.

And later on comes the most essential statement: “What is called art is created when one is not aware that what one is doing is art. Only then does it remain as a monument of culture. Today art is created by those who battle against it. To us, the living dog is dearer than the dead lion. We know that when the dog dies, it becomes a lion.”⁴³

This last paragraph calls for special commentary. Ancient art should be comprehended immediately, “face to face,” not through distanced reflection and stylization. “Today art is created by those who battle against it” – a very Berlin Dadaist idea expressing the anti-art attitude of the moment – is accepted by Lissitzky for a while. But he

also attributes this immediacy of creativity to the historical artist. The objective of Lissitzky’s essay is to reveal “the living dog” of historical art, and this task correlates directly with modern creativity. And from this perspective Lissitzky’s *Milgroim* memoirs could be considered as the paradigm for the incorporation of historical creativity into the actual Jewish modernist artistic process.

Thus, from *Milgroim*’s point of view El Lissitzky was an almost ideal Jewish modernist artist who vividly accumulated the historical passé and turned towards modern artistic expression. This comprehension correlates to the Kultur-Lige’s basic manifestation of authentically modern Jewish art as the combination of cultural historical inspiration with free creativity. However, the question remains: In what way were the nostalgic poetics of Jewishness absorbed into Lissitzky’s Berlin avant-garde works, and was there a break, an “ontological” rupture between these two facets of Lissitzky’s evolution – “Jewish” and “universal”?

El Lissitzky’s illustration for Ilya Ehrenburg’s tale “Shifs-karta” (Boat Ticket), from his *Shest’ povestey o legkikh kotsakh* (Six Tales with Easy Endings, fig. 15), published in Berlin by the émigré Gelikon publishing house,⁴⁴ might be considered as an intermediate play between his Jewish expressionism of the late 1910s and the new abstract and montage language of the 1920s. In *Shest’ povestey o legkikh kotsakh*, like in his famous Berlin novel *Neobychainyie pokhozhdeniia Khulio Khurenito i ego uchenikov* (The Extraordinary Adventures of Julio Jurenito and His Disciples), Ehrenburg depicted the Russian Revolutionary era in picturesque and anecdotal tones, stressing its tragi-comic character.⁴⁵ “Shifs-karta”

40 Lissitzky, “Memoirs Concerning the Mohilev Synagogue,” 234.

41 Ibid.

42 El Lissitzky, “Preodolenie iskusstva” (The Overcoming of Art), *Experiment/Эксперимент* 5 (1999): 141.

43 Lissitzky, “Memoirs Concerning the Mohilev Synagogue,” 234.

44 Ilya Ehrenburg, “Shifs-karta” (Boat Ticket), in idem, *Shest’ povestey o legkikh kotsakh* (Six Tales with Easy Endings) (Berlin, 1922), 102–22.

45 Import into the USSR of Ehrenburg’s *Shest’ povestey o legkikh kotsakh* was prohibited by Glavlit (Chief literary inspection). See Boris Frezinsky, “Pis’mo Il’yi Erenburga Elizavete Polonskoy” (Ilya Ehrenburg’s Letters to Elizaveta Polonskaya), *Voprosy literatury* (Issues of Literature) 1 (2000): n. 65.



Fig. 15. El Lissitzky, cover for Ilya Ehrenburg, *Shest' povestey o legkikh kontsakh* (Six Tales with Easy Endings), Berlin, 1922

brings us to the turbulent atmosphere of the pre- and post-revolutionary Jewish town of Berdichev, where its main hero – Hirsch Igenson – despite pogroms and the stormy events of the Revolution, preserves a naïve and romantic faith in the *shifs-karta* of Redemption. This *shifs-karta* was mentioned in his son's letter from America: "Wait a while. It should be well. *Shifs-karta* will be delivered to you soon."⁴⁶ This naïve faith in the *shifs-karta* of Redemption, the promise of the Messiah's coming (a vague explanation of the sense of revolutionary events by Rabbi Ele of Brody to his disciple Moishe) tragically correlates to the montage of stormy, senseless events of the revolutionary era in Berdichev. In his illustration⁴⁷ Lissitzky proceeds from the naïve-messianic impetus of Ehrenburg's tale and creates a montage-image, corresponding to Ehrenburg's montage-discourse.

Pursuing Ilya Ehrenburg's initiative, he plays with popular Jewish imagery, somewhat ironically introducing

the popular Jewish metaphors of *shtetl* and happiness (fig. 16). The photogram of the open hand⁴⁸ with two Hebrew letters – "pe" and "nun" (traditional Jewish tombstone initials for "here lies"). In the foreground is the schedule of the New York–Hamburg and Hamburg–New York sea routes, a ship sailing to America, an American flag, and a framing Magen David (Star of David), creating a collage-image full of meaning and even traces of political-social connotations. In this illustration he is close to his Hanover friend Kurt Schwitters' collage strategy of metaphoric allusion to political events. As Dorothea Dietrich explains, in his collages, "Schwitters neither makes clear references to the events in his titles, nor does he guide the reading of his images with unequivocally explanatory texts." His collages do not present a clear political or other message, but by means of recallings and signals, refer to the events.⁴⁹ Thus Lissitzky proceeded to intellectualize collage, combining the organic (photogram

46 Ehrenburg, *Shest' povestey*, 105.

47 Ibid., 102.

48 A similar hand impress appears in the parody of the October Manifesto issued by Tsar Nicholas II on 30 October 1905 (from *Pulemet* [Machine Gun], no 1 (1905). On its iconography, see John Bowl, "Manipulating

Metaphors: El Lissitzky and the Crafted Hand." in *Situating El Lissitzky*, 129–53.

49 Dorothea Dietrich, *The Collages of Kurt Schwitters: Tradition and Innovation* (Cambridge, 1993), 108, 112.

impression of the hand, texts) and the artificial, tracing a metaphorical correspondence to Ehrenburg’s textuality and actual events. In comparison with the montage strategy of the *Of Two Squares* period, we find here the next step in the montage game, more intellectual and indirect.

Unlike his colleagues Boris Aronson, Issachar Ber Ryback, and others, El Lissitzky did not promote manifestos of modern Jewish art, nor did he play with the metaphors of “Jewish soul” and “Jewish artist” like Marc Chagall. Even if essential remarks on Jewish art strategy might be discovered in his recollections of the eighteenth-century Mogilev synagogue,⁵⁰ in the 1920s he proceeded to shape his avant-garde artistic concepts, and to a certain extent his theoretical developments were of more consequence than his visual experiments. His brilliant survey of representation strategies in modern art, “Art and Pangeometry,”⁵¹ the culmination of his German–European experiences and reflections of 1921–25, not only outlined a development of artistic strategies comparable to mathematics and the natural sciences, but created a meta-narrative of time and art history. We find here a majestic conceptual synthesis of the possibilities of anti-figural abstract representation as an expression of infinity, and other profound issues of abstraction, made slightly problematic by Aronson and Ryback in their manifestation of abstraction as the ontological feature of modern Jewish art.

50 Igor Dukhan, “El Lissitzky, evreyskii stil’, avangard,” 313–41.

51 El Lissitzky, “Kunst und Pangeometrie,” in *Europa-Almanach* (Potsdam, 1925), 103–13. Reprinted in Larissa Shadova, *Such und Experiment: Russische und sowjetische Kunst 1910 bis 1930* (Dresden, 1978), 336–42 and *El Lissitzky: Maler, Architekt*, 353–58. The Russian text was translated from the original German archival manuscript: El Lissitzky, “Iskusstvo i pangeometriia” (Art and Pangeometry), in *Problemy obraznogo myshleniia i dizayn* (Problems of Imagery Thinking and Design), ed. Galina Demosfenova (Moscow, 1978), 62–76. I follow the English translation of “Art and Pangeometry” from *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*, 348–54, correcting it where necessary in accordance with the German original. All references to the work are to this edition.

52 Alexander Rappaport, “Lissitzky i ideya pangeometry” (Lissitzky and the Idea of Pangeometry), in *Rossia-Frantsia: Problemy kul’tury pervykh desiatiletiiy 20-go veka* (Russia-France: Problems of Culture of the First Decades of the 20th Century), ed. Iryna Danilova (Moscow, 1988), 32–57; Leah Dickerman, “El Lissitzky’s Camera Corpus,” in *Situating El Lissitzky*, 153–77.

It might appear strange and paradoxical to insert “Art and Pangeometry” into the methodological perspective of new Jewish art, for Lissitzky does not touch upon issues of Jewish artistic identity in this masterpiece of artistic theory. Meanwhile, to some extent “Art and Pangeometry” can be perceived as a framing concept of Jewish avant-garde ideas of representation. “Art and Pangeometry” was already read and interpreted as one of the programmatic texts regarding new non-Euclidean and anti-perspectivist artistic strategies.⁵² However, it could be taken in another context,



Fig. 16. El Lissitzky, illustration for Ilya Ehrenburg. “Shifs-karta” (Boat Ticket), in Ilya Ehrenburg. *Shest’ povestey o legkikh kotsakh* (Berlin, 1922). India ink and collage on paper, 43.5 x 24.1 cm. Boris and Lisa Aronson Collection

sub-species of another discourse – the Jewish modernist discourse on Jewish art as essentially anti-figurative and abstract. This discourse moved from the Kultur-Lige’s “Di vegn fun der yidisher maleray” (The Ways of Jewish Painting) by Issachar Ber Ryback and Naum Aronson,⁵³ with their strong and naïve affirmation of Jewish art as originally abstract creation and abstraction being the genuine Jewish form of expression, and was developed in *Milgroim*.⁵⁴ Let us consider “Art and Pangeometry” in this new context – the establishment of a modernistic conception of Jewish art as abstraction per se, and the turning from the naïve enthusiasm of early Kultur-Lige’s manifestation to the most profound theory of an abstract mode of representation.

Even at first glance, “Art and Pangeometry” reveals very interesting structural correlations with Ryback and Aronson’s “Di vegn fun der yidisher maleray” and “Di naye kunst un mir” (Modern Art and Our Jewish Generation) – Rachel Wischnitzer’s editorial for the first issue of *Milgroim*.⁵⁵ All three articles proceed from the typological analysis of classical tradition to the basic concepts of modern art as non-figurative. Ryback and Aronson analyzed modes of artistic representation from ancient Egyptian and Persian art to Marinetti and Futurism, emphasizing the development of pure pictorial qualities and correlation between artistic expression and national identities. They also strongly criticized all naturalistic trends, especially Russian *peredvizhniki*.⁵⁶ Nineteenth-century Jewish artists illustrating Jewish themes came under critical fire as well, both for their naturalism and their inability to express Jewishness in depth. Further, Ryback and Aronson described in detail new modernistic modes of expression – Cézanne, Cubists

and Futurists, emphasizing Picasso’s role as the synthesis and epitome of modern abstract form. They proceed to contemporary Jewish artists such as Nathan Altman, Robert Falk, and Marc Chagall, explaining how their Jewishness was expressed in the new purely pictorial or abstract forms (“architectonics of the picture,” facture, painting’s surface, color, etc.). Wischnitzer trod the same path: she also passed from the critique of classical forms and naturalism (emphasizing that the latter was not popular among Jewish artists) to the new modernist modes of pure pictorial representation. She considered Expressionism and Cubism to be the most suitable forms for the expression of Jewish sensibility, and she put Issachar Ber Ryback on the proscenium of new Jewish art as a paradigm of synthesis of modernist non-imitational aesthetic with deep Jewish sensibility.

The most staggering case is the conclusion of “Di vegn fun der yidisher maleray.” Ryback and Aronson stress that the new Jewish art is an abstract art per se, correlating to the basic cultural Jewish non-imitational sensitivity. Abstraction is the national form of expression. In this way the young Jewish artists, with their ecstatic freshness and passionate and naïve perception produce a new example for the whole of Western art.⁵⁷

Lissitzky’s “Art and Pangeometry” also proceeded structurally from the typology of classical space representations to abstraction and irrational space. At first he critically examined the basic modes of spatial representation in world art within the brilliant parallels of the developments of space–time vision in mathematics and science. In Heideggerian terms, he proceeded to a deliberate *destruction* of the ontology of European artistic space-and-time representation. He considered plain two-

53 Issachar Ber Ryback and Naum Aronson, “Di vegn fun der yidisher maleray” (The Ways of Jewish Painting), in *Oyfgang* (Kiev, 1919), 119–24.

54 Susanne Marten-Finnis and Igor Dukhan, “Dream and Experiment: Time and Style in 1920s Berlin Émigré Magazines: Zhar Ptitsa and Milgroim,” *East European Jewish Affairs* 35, no. 2 (2005): 225–45.

55 Rachel Vishnitzer, “Di naye kunst un mir” (Modern Art and Our Jewish Generation), *Milgroim* 1 (1922): 2–7 (Yiddish).

56 The Wanderers (*peredvizhniki*) – a movement in Russian art of the second half of the nineteenth century characterized by critical realism, whose

artists dominated Russian art for more than thirty years. The Wanderers were the first Russian artists to move out from under the umbrella of the Russian Imperial Academy of Arts so that they could paint what they saw in real life, as opposed to classical art that forced artists to paint ancient Greek and Roman themes. These painters became a part of the movement by the Russian intelligentsia that wanted to expose the injustices of the prevailing social order. They insisted on painting everyday life as it was and became marvellous *plein air* painters depicting for the first time Russian life and nature in all of its aspects.

57 Ryback and Aronson, “Di vegn,” 122–24.

dimensional rhythmical order of pictorial forms at the surface (planimetrical space, *planimetrischer Raum*) as the correlation to the natural system of numbers and system of the arithmetic progression, and the system of perspective three-dimensional representation in depth (perspective space, *perspektivischer Raum*) as the association to fractional numbers and geometrical progression. However, the invention of the system of irrational numbers and development of the imaginary geometrical topologies left behind the artistic concepts of space. Art had not been able to respond to irrational numbers and spaces, new imaginary geometries, and space-time relativity. Contemporary art, Lissitzky stressed, should do this in the endeavor to avoid cultural marginality.

Lissitzky discovers attempts to construct the new irrational space (*irrationaler Raum*) in the experiments of Impressionists, Cubists, and Italian Futurists.⁵⁸ The crucial moment in the formation of irrational imaginary space was the “invention” of the *Black Square* by Kasimir Malevich. This *Black Square* introduces the *Zero* = infinity of the artistic space dimension.⁵⁹ This desirable artistic irrational space had to become an ontological destruction of space finitude and tectonics. Lissitzky makes an effort to portray theoretically this new type of artistic space, which should be characterized by the visualization of the invisible and new space-time combinations. In order to approach “the non-material materiality,” he pushes two factors onto the proscenium of artistic creation: gravity and time. “Art and Pangeometry,” considering the relationships between art, time, gravity, and relativity, was based on Lissitzky’s essential understanding of the theory of relativity and non-Euclidean geometries.

Artistic interest in the theory of relativity and non-Euclidean geometries was not unusual in 1900–1930. In her comprehensive study of the impact of non-Euclidean geometry and relativity on modern art, Linda Henderson reasonably mentioned that Lissitzky’s approach to relativity was inspired by Theo van Doesburg and the intellectual climate of Berlin – Einstein’s city, where Lissitzky lived and worked.⁶⁰ However, from “Art and Pangeometry” it appears that Lissitzky understood these new theories more deeply and clearly than other Russian and European avant-garde artists who were involved in discussions of these

ideas. Lissitzky’s training as an architect was accompanied by the study of mathematics and scientific subjects that enabled him to understand the theory of relativity and new geometries better than artists and architects trained in art academies. New scientific ideas gave him inspiration. His approach to multidimensional spaces and critique of the classical systems of representation bore the features of conceptual originality and differed from both Russian and German-Dutch avant-garde modes.

If in the Russian avant-garde, especially in the art and theory of Kasimir Malevich, the “fourth dimension” was highly spiritualized and even mystified, Lissitzky developed a “scientific” approach which he gradually transformed into transcendental vision. This lively and dynamic equilibrium between the rational and the irrational was characteristic of Lissitzky’s vision, rooted in his permanent removal from rational to irrational and vice versa (“You know I am a rationalist, but there are moments when I get scared of ‘ratio.’ It has a grip on me just like electric power as long as it needs me, but then it just lets go of me,” he wrote in a letter to J.J.P. Oud in 1924).⁶¹ Lissitzky rarely mentioned the “fourth dimension” – one of the key phrases in Russian avant-garde theory, joining the rational and the mystical: over-sensation of space and time, correlating to non-Euclidean space and relativity ideas – dimensions which enlarge human space-time experiences. It is also noteworthy that in this aspect the Russian avant-garde approach towards the “fourth dimension” differed from the previous French Cubist attitudes it inherited. For the Russian avant-garde, the same idea of the “fourth dimension” lay primordially in the domain of spiritual over-sensitivity: “the development of the ability to visualize objects from all sides at once was only the first step toward the desired ‘higher consciousness.’ And this higher consciousness with its ‘fourth unit of psychic life’ (higher intuition) would have to be attained before man’s perception could increase to include a ‘fourth dimension’

58 Lissitzky, “Art and Pangeometry,” 354–55.

59 Ibid., 350.

60 Linda Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art* (Princeton 1983), 294–97.

61 Eva Forgacs, “Definitive Space: The Many Utopias of El Lissitzky’s Proun Room,” in *Situating El Lissitzky*, 70.

of space.”⁶² In his treatise, the most influential Russian philosopher of the “fourth dimension,” Peter Ouspensky, almost completely neglected such scientific aspects of it as non-Euclidean geometries by Nikolay Lobachevsky and Georg Riemann; on the contrary, he emphasized Eastern spiritual approaches towards the extension of human perception.⁶³ In a similar manner, in his comprehensive study of “perspective in reverse” Pavel Florensky, the Russian Orthodox theologian of the Silver Age, emphasized the dominance of spiritual vision over technical mathematical media (while essentially contributing to the study of new ideas of multidimensional geometric spaces).⁶⁴ For French Cubists who discovered the “fourth dimension” for artistic purposes, “it was a matter of following Poincaré’s dictum and creating ‘motor space’ by moving around the object to be portrayed. When these multiple views were synthesized in the manner of a geometrical drawing by Jouffret, an image of a higher dimensionality was to have been created.”⁶⁵ For Russian artists and thinkers it became a spiritual medium.

Lissitzky turned away from both the Russian avant-garde and the earlier French Cubist traditions. In his approach to the “fourth dimension” he was closer to German theosophical thinking (Paul Scheerbarth, Bruno Taut, and others)⁶⁶ as well as the Dutch De Stijl and Theo van Doesburg’s considerations on space-time architecture. Meanwhile, Lissitzky’s theory reveals much more consistency and profundity. Linda Henderson noted with reason that the ideas of transcendence and

the “fourth dimension” can be discovered in his concept of Proun in his comprehensive study of “perspective in reverse” as a step of transcendence from the material to a new world. We cannot completely agree with her that it was “the more pragmatic view of the ‘fourth dimension.’”⁶⁷ Lissitzky’s idea of Proun as the step of transcendence that joined the rational to the irrational was characteristic of his thinking. Already in the early 1920s Lissitzky made attempts to construct artistic work as a draft for the new imaginary totality. In *Thesis on the PROUN (From Painting to Architecture)* written in Vitebsk in 1920, and in his graphic Proun works of 1919–1920s we could see an attempt to model the artistic space not limited by the any illusionist perspectival organization, free from gravity and earthly tectonics (“infinite extent in depth and forward”).

Lissitzky’s criticism of the previous modes of representation focused on the problem of classical perspective. We cannot go into further details here and shall mention that in order to understand the hidden context of El Lissitzky’s criticism of perspective it should be stressed that classical perspective was not only the method of constructing space, or the code – it was a symbolic system for the representation of religious “vision” – “that of the ‘vision’ as understood in its most exalted sense, and which, though taking place within the soul of the depicted person, is made tangible to the viewer as a disruption of prosaic space.”⁶⁸ This understanding of classical perspective as a symbolic system was revealed in those years by Erwin Panofsky, who meanwhile made a detailed reference to Lissitzky’s “Art and Pangeometry,” published two years earlier, as the representative of another, anti-classical paradigm.⁶⁹

The desirable infinite imaginary space was more metaphysically portrayed than artistically constructed in El Lissitzky’s Prouns and photo experiments.⁷⁰ For its fulfillment Lissitzky called for the messianic figure of Malevich:

The establishing of the square, by Kasimir Malevich (Petersburg, 1913), was the first manifestation of expansion in the “set” of Art. Our arithmetical notation, which is called the positional system, has long used the 0, but it was not until the sixteenth century that the 0 was first regarded as a number,

62 Henderson, *Fourth Dimension*, 268.

63 Peter Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum: Kliuch k zagadkam mira* (Tertium Organum: The Key to the World’s Mysteries) (St Petersburg, 1911).

64 Pavel Florensky, “Obratnaya perspektiva” (The Reverse Perspective), in idem, *Ikonostas* (St Petersburg, 1993), 175–83.

65 Henderson, *Fourth Dimension*, 268.

66 *Glass Architecture by Paul Scheerbarth and Alpine Architecture by Bruno Taut*, ed. Dennis Sharp (New York, 1972); Dukhan, “Beyond the Holy City,” 566–69.

67 Henderson, *Fourth Dimension*, 295.

68 Hubert Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective* (Cambridge, 1995), 26. See Erwin Panofsky, “Die Perspektive als ‘symbolische Form,’” in *Vorträge der Bibliothek Warburg, 1924–1925* (Leipzig and Berlin, 1927), 126.

69 Panofsky, “Die Perspektive,” n. 75.

70 On El Lissitzky’s photomontage works in relation to “Art and Pangeometry,” see Dickerman, “El Lissitzky’s Camera Corpus,” 153–77.

as a numerical reality, and no longer as nothing (Cardano, Taraglia). It is only now in the twentieth century the [Square] is being acknowledged as a plastic value, as 0 in the complex body of Art.⁷¹

This remark correlates with Malevich's earlier writings on non-objectivity as infinity. Lissitzky proceeds from Malevich's definition of Suprematism as the expression of intensive qualities of non-objectivity, based on the idea of zero (exhibition "0,10"), infinity of white ("I broke off the blue lampshade of color limits, I came into the white, follow me, aviators, flow to the abyss [...]"), and so forth.⁷² Meanwhile, the "0" itself was consistently an "apocalyptic number" in the context of Russian messianic intentions of the revolutionary era, so the construction of new art beyond "0" brought together artistic and messianic inspiration.

Messianic inspiration could already be discerned in the first statement of "Art and Pangeometry": "During the period of 1918–1921 a lot of old rubbish was destroyed. And in Russia we also dragged art off its sacred throne and 'spat on its altar' (Malevich, 1915) [...]. Now after five years (five centuries in accordance with the old time reckoning) in Germany for example, George Grosz reproaches himself only once: 'Our only fault was that we ever took the so-called art seriously.'" ⁷³ Such inspirations should be considered in the context of Lissitzky's understanding of time reckoning from the Old Testament era to the Communist and Suprematist eras⁷⁴ as a veiled assertion that he saw himself as living in the new era after the storms of the Apocalypse (Bolshevik Revolution of 1917). His remark about time – five years of the new era as being equivalent to five hundred years of the previous period – is especially significant. This "proportion of time" indicates that the time scale has been condensed, that even the era of the third – Communist – Testament (after the Bolshevik Revolution) is coming to its end. This compression of time approaching the forthcoming and new Suprematist Covenant was innovative for the apocalyptic vision of the Russian avant-garde.

The intensive and ambiguous anticipations of the forthcoming "turn of the time axis" (as poet Velemir Khlebnikov called it) and the resulting new era were characteristic of Russian (and German) avant-garde

thinking of the pre- and post-revolutionary era. In this perspective of the apocalyptic vision the Old Testament had been succeeded by the New and then the Third Covenants, and even the Fourth was "seen" as approaching. The Russian Silver Age author Vassily Rozanov declared this apocalyptic vision in the strongest terms: the era of the Old (first) Testament had ended with the appearance of Jesus (non-realized Apocalypse); the era of the New Testament has failed (Judaean-Christian Apocalypse), and after this the Era (Covenant) of the Holy Spirit would spread.⁷⁵ The year of the October Bolshevik Revolution 1917 – was perceived as the date of the Apocalypse and the Lord's Day of Judgment.⁷⁶ Those who survived these stormy apocalyptic times and continued their activity after the Revolution – Futurists and others – saw themselves as living in the new Era of the New (Third) Covenant. El Lissitzky, as already mentioned, had gone even further, interpreting the post-Revolutionary times. i.e., the Third Communist Covenant, gradually transforming into the next, the Fourth Covenant, i.e., the new Suprematist order. Earlier, Paul Scheerbart's utopia of "Glass Architecture" covering the Earth (the Glass Apocalypse)⁷⁷ provided shapes for the avant-garde apocalyptic imagination relying on the spatial language of weightlessness and transparency.⁷⁸ This Russian-German messianic context is essential for understanding El Lissitzky's perception of time, which was, from the other perspective, considerably close to the context of Jewish messianism.⁷⁹

71 Lissitzky, "Art and Pangeometry," 354.

72 Kasimir Malevich, *Suprematism: Katalog desiatoy gosudarstvennoy vystavki "Bespredmetnoye tvorchestvo i suprematism"* (1919) (Suprematism: A Catalogue of the 10th State Exhibition "Non-Objective Creativity and Suprematism [1919]), in Kasimir Malevich, *Sobranie sochineniy* (Collected Writings), vol. 1 (Moscow, 1995), 151.

73 Lissitzky, "Art and Pangeometry," 352.

74 See his statement made in "Suprematism zhiznestroitel'stva" (n. 19 above).

75 Leonid Katzis, *Russkaya eskhatologia i russkaya literatura* (Russian Eschatology and Russian Literature) (Moscow, 2000), 15 and elsewhere.

76 Ibid., 18–19.

77 Paul Scheerbart, *Glasarchitektur* (Berlin, 1914).

78 Doukhan, "Beyond the Holy City."

79 We follow Moshe Idel's methodology of interpretation of Jewish mysticism in twentieth-century culture, Moshe Idel, *Messianic Mystics* (New Haven, 1998).

In the historical context of Jewish messianic ideas, the hope for the forthcoming Redemption and the dominance of the future over the present might be considered a characteristic mode of Jewish artistic expression.⁸⁰ As early as the third century CE, the program of the Dura Europos frescoes⁸¹ was marked by the pronounced dominance of the forthcoming messianic future over other horizons of time – an ancient Jewish utopian time project. A strong tendency towards the fulfillment of God's promises, the central subject matter of Dura Europos, shaped a utopian temporality of Revelation and Redemption unprecedented in Hellenistic art. This concept of time can be seen in the programs of ancient synagogues mosaic pavements in the Land of Israel in the third to the sixth centuries, and later Jewish art.⁸² Meanwhile, in the programs of mosaic pavements we can already discern the combination of two “times” – inner messianic Jewish time and external non-Jewish, and the playing with the axis of time (to quote Sylvie A. Goldberg)⁸³ became a characteristic feature of Jewish messianic “temporality” in the art of the Middle Ages and later. In Lissitzky's case, it is essential just to mention that the apocalyptical thinking of the Russian revolutionary era was washed by the waves of the Jewish messianic mentality. The latter makes Lissitzky's montage of time in “Art and Pangeometry” understandable, and his specific visualization and

sensibility of the future's domination over “here and now.”

The consequence of El Lissitzky's *destruction* of the ontology of European artistic space and time in “Art and Pangeometry” – that contemporary art should transcend its historical and technical media in an endeavor to represent an infinity and time-space conversion – essentially clarified and strengthened Boris Aronson and Issachar Ber Ryback's declarative manifestation of new Jewish art as the experience of abstraction, an expression of Jewish cultural intentionality opposed to the pre-existing classical European visual mimetic codes. Proceeding in this manner, El Lissitzky shaped the synthetic vision of art as visualization of infinity and the imaginary, that became an intellectual emphasis in shaping the Jewish modernist search towards “authentic” modern Jewish art – abstract and non-figurative – even if Lissitzky did not refer to any Jewish aspect in “Art and Pangeometry.”

Lissitzky's artistic route was profoundly marked by its quest for a synthesis of diverse strategies of Russian, Jewish, and European avant-gardes. If Malevich, Chagall, or Tatlin consequently elaborated their artistic vision, creating their own style-paradigms, Lissitzky played a nomadic game within avant-garde diversity. El Lissitzky, an artist-mediator of the Jewish, German, and Russian avant-gardes, was a genuine avant-garde *non-finito*.

80 Elisabeth Revel-Neher, *Le signe de la rencontre: L'Arche d'Alliance dans l'art juif et chrétien du second au dixième siècles* (Paris, 1984); Kurt Weitzmann and Herbert L. Kessler, *The Frescoes of the Dura Synagogue and Christian Art* (Washington, 1990).

81 The messianic topics in the Dura Europos frescoes and in ancient and medieval Jewish art were outlined in Rachel Wischnitzer's writings in the 1930s and 1940s: *Symbole und Gestalten der Jüdischen Kunst* (Berlin, 1935); *The Messianic Theme in the Paintings of the Dura Synagogue* (Chicago, 1948). Incidentally, her attitudes towards messianic inspirations in Jewish illuminated manuscripts were already exposed

in her earlier contributions to *Milgroim*: “Der toyer-motiv in der bukh-kunst” (The Motive of the Porch in Book Ornamentation), *Milgroim* 4 (1923): 2–7; “Der leyb-batsvinger in der yidisher kunst” (David and Samson Slaying the Lion), *ibid.* 5 (1923): 1–4 (both in Yiddish).

82 Zeev Weiss and Ehud Netzer, *Promise and Redemption: A Synagogue Mosaic from Sepphoris* (Jerusalem, 1996); Zeev Weiss, *The Sepphoris Synagogue: Deciphering an Ancient Message in Its Archaeological and Socio-Historical Contexts* (Jerusalem, 2005).

83 Sylvie Anne Goldberg, *La Clepsydre: Essai sur la pluralité des temps dans le judaïsme* (Paris, 2000).