What was Malevich’s vision and how has his artwork influenced other artists up to today?

The Suprematist movement, which began in 1913, has influenced many artists and even architects, such as architect Zaha Hadid, whose vision was inspired by Russian artist Kazimir Malevich’s ‘Black Square’. Some have argued that the ‘Black Square’ isn’t a piece of art because it seems to have no obvious meaning, while some argue that this is the point - it can be whatever the audience sees into it. This essay will discuss how the ‘Black Square’ was a cornerstone of the Suprematist movement and how it has changed people’s views on art, as well as how the movement affected following movements such as the Abstractionist, Bauhaus and Modernist movements, who share a similar vision.

Suprematism was an artistic movement based on the forms of geometric shapes, especially squares and circles, pioneered by the Russian painter and theorist Kazimir Malevich, who also started the Geometric Abstraction movement. The movement focused on creating art with basic geometric forms, such as squares, circles and rectangles with a limited range of colours and in spacious areas - what Malevich described as “the supremacy of pure feeling or perception in the pictorial arts". While it primarily developed in the field of painting, it also extended to poetry and theatre. The ideals of the Suprematists were a revolutionary idea for its time, since Russia was in a particularly tense and revolutionary state due to its involvement in the First World War, and the art tended to be predominantly portraits of aristocrats or religious figures. The Suprematists attempted to do away with the old and usher in a new era in the history of art, and in the process, revitalised interest in traditional Russian folk art.

Suprematist art is abstract and based on “the supremacy of pure artistic feeling" rather than the visual depiction of objects. Malevich “sought refuge in the square form" and sought to “liberate art from the ballast of the representational world", and to this end, eradicated subject matter from his canvases. He believed that “the appropriate means of representation is always the one which gives fullest possible expression to feeling as such and which ignores the familiar appearance of objects.” In his work, he reduced his palette down to just a few colours, emphasising the simplicity of the shapes that appear to have been placed on the canvas randomly than ‘accurately representing' the subject matter. The seemingly random nature of the placement stops any connections with the surrounding world from being made, and as a result, encourages the viewer to approach the painting without any preconceived notions and creating a “mystical feeling or sensation” experience that does not rely on consciousness or memory.

Malevich pioneered the tradition of “reducing the forms of painting to their bare minimum, the bare essentials", an idea artists like Piet Mondrian and Mark Rothko, contemporaries of Malevich, also subscribed to. This movement challenged the public, who expected to be able to see recognisable things, or at least representational things, in these paintings, because it was so detached from anything they had seen before. By eradicating any attachment to the world, the followers of Suprematism believed they were “helping to shape a new society in which acquisitiveness would be replaced with spiritual freedom" and “aimed to achieve purity in a society that had little regard for ethical values or principles". While Malevich was not religious, but he viewed his stance on art as spiritual. In his 1916 manifesto ‘From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism", he explained that Suprematism developed in three stages - the first was black, the second was coloured and the third was white.

One work that most symbolises the Suprematist movement is Malevich’s ‘Black Square’. At this point in time, the world was still in the midst of World War I, which had followed the Russian Revolution of 1905. The revolution of 1905 would leave tensions that burst into the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the rise of the Bolsheviks. According to curator Fiontan Moran, “it seems difficult to think of the artistic revolution Malevich was bringing about as separate from the social revolution that was happening” at the time, and given the position it took at the exhibition where it was premiered - the place a Russian Orthodox icon of a saint would be hung in a Russian home - Malevich clearly meant for it to herald the beginning of a new era in art. The audiences of the time, used to realist and perhaps Cubist and Futurist works, would never have seen anything like the
‘Black Square’ before. According to Moran, “Malevich promoted it as a sign of a new era of art” and “saw it as beginning at zero” - in line with his belief that Suprematism developed in three stages, the first stage being black. However, Malevich lived during Stalin’s rule, under which abstraction was declared bourgeois and that art should be realist, socialist and representationalist - “about ordinary workers and people working in a very romantic way”, as well as “immediately understandable” and “not [encouraging] productive workers to think”. Malevich’s “Black Square” clearly did not fit with this ideal, since it encouraged people to think. By virtue of not having a defined, single apparent meaning, the painting - simply black paint on a canvas - inspires people to create their own meaning - whether one sees it as representing the ‘darkness’ of the time it was painted in or simply a crow landing on a tree at night. Malevich’s work has had a significant impact the field of architecture, although he himself was not interested in proposing new architectural designs. Instead, he submitted abstract sculptural models of intersecting geometric shapes he called “Architectonics”, leaving the design of the building and how it would embody Suprematist architecture to professional architects. The Suprematist influence was most immediately felt in the work of through a fellow Russian painter, El Lissitzky, as well as through Lissitzky’s Hungarian associate and collaborator, László Moholy-Nagy. More modern examples of architecture designed with Suprematist principles can be found in the works of artists like Theo van Doesburg, Le Corbusier, Gerrit Rietveld, Walter Gropius and Arthur Korn. The Suprematist movement also influenced several following movements, such as the Bauhaus Movement.

The Bauhaus Movement, founded in Weimar Germany in 1919 by Walter Gropius, was a movement that was inspired by Suprematist principles. One of the key ideas of the Bauhaus movement was the concept of blending art and machinery, and using machinery to create art. Similar to the Suprematist movement, the Bauhaus movement was borne out of a time of great conflict. Weimar Germany, like Soviet Russia, did look favourably on abstract art, so it was forced abroad, where many found the movement’s acceptance of machinery in bringing together fine art and the applied arts innovative. With regards to architecture, the Bauhaus movement shuns ornamentation in favour of simplicity and functionality, makes use of asymmetry and regularity over symmetry and favours space over mass with regards to architecture. This can be seen in buildings done in the Bauhaus style. These buildings usually have simple, geometric shapes - usually cubic - favour right angles, rounded corners and balconies, and have smooth facades and an open floor plans. The movement emphasises “the social function of architecture and design, favouring concern for the public good rather than private luxury”. The influence of the Suprematist movement can be seen in the Bauhaus movement through the Bauhaus Movement’s use of geometric abstraction in architecture can be seen in how a building is created by paring it down to the most simple, basic geometric shapes in the creation of something bigger. Malevich believed that architecture should be functional and ‘useful’ above all, and this is a belief that has been passed down to the Bauhaus Movement.

Malevich’s ideas have also found root in modern architecture, such as in the work of Iraqi architect Zaha Hadid, who was inspired by his work. She aims to question “every premise” of what it means to be modern, and this harks back to Malevich’s ‘Black Square’, where black paint on a canvas can contain or mean anything a person wants it to. She also “allows us to see space differently” by bringing together fragmented shapes, an example of which can be seen in her work ‘Malevich Tectonic’, to create a whole, with even the name of the piece showing this belief. The word ‘tectonic’ evokes tectonic plates - shapes or parts coming together to form a whole, but also different uses and meanings coming together to form a single piece - in Hadid’s case, buildings-that is multifunctional, meaningful and yet artistic and simple, which conforms to Malevich’s ideals on art and architecture. It has been said that because Hadid grew up during great upheaval, as did Malevich and the originators of the Bauhaus Movement, where work could be thought of as “misguided or wrong”, she has begun to think that “anything is possible”. This freedom from the fundamentals and boundaries can lead to innovative new creations, even with the most basic shapes - the “basic simplicity” and reduction of art or architecture to a ‘purer’ version of itself, as Hadid says, that Malevich sought, while questioning, like the Suprematists, the fundamentals of art and architecture - asking questions such as “What is art?” “What is architecture?” “What can a building look like?”, “What does art look like?” Hadid, who uses Malevich’s work to apply to
architecture, asks “How can a building work and/or relate to its environment?”, and uses the almost haphazard nature of Malevich’s paintings to create a sense of ‘movement, of dynamism’, almost as if the shapes were “part of a universe”, with “galaxies” coming together. Geometric abstraction, Hadid says, gave her a creative outlet with which to “solve a problem” by “[organising one’s] thinking” instead of simply staring at a board and waiting for an idea. Hadid has been fascinated in recent years with how a structure can appear to be “floating about”, and this quality can also be found in Malevich’s work, which, if placed in a particular way, can appear to defy the laws of logic and give the impression of the structure “rising into infinity”. This sense of ‘weightlessness’ can also be found in Malevich’s work - possibly a result of his fascination with flight and freedom from the bounds of logic.

The Russian painter and theorist Kazimir Malevich aimed to distill art down to its bare minimum - what he regarded as the purest form, and thus allowing the person viewing the work to bring their own interpretation to it. For him, this meant using simple, geometric shapes and minimal range in colour. This minimalist approach to art and architecture has inspired many artists that followed him, most notably the Bauhaus Movement. His influence can also been felt in the field of architecture, as evidenced in the work of Zaha Hadid.

**Sources**


The Russian Revolutionary Zaha Hadid on Kazimir Malevich. BBC. (2014). 23rd March. 14:30 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c1RMXq_5HYc