

El Lissitzky: Revolutionary Images from a Primitive Soul

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"In the name of our tomorrow let us burn Raphael."¹ The revolutionary message of this slogan reflects one of the reasons why the new Communist regime of 1917 embraced its leftist Russian artists. The words resound with a rejuvenation of life and culture similar to the Futurist manifestoes which fostered radical social upheaval, though their extremist stridency was to eventually prove useless to Lenin and his formation of a new society. For the artist El Lissitzky, the slogan represented logical evolutionary formulae for the Socialist utopia he envisioned.

Lissitzky felt that Socialist rebirth begins in the Old Testament, gives way to the New Testament and is realized in Communism.² Each doctrine equally tears down and rebuilds the previous one. His own artistic production follows a similar formula of building on the past while outmoding it and his methods were closely linked to the avant-garde, primitivist ideologies which included futurism. However, Lissitzky's contributions to art are motivated by more than aesthetic fulfillment or academic rebellion. He lived by an overwhelming social and artistic optimism that could only be compromised if it was deemed necessary for the betterment of the Communist state. Lissitzky's utopian attitude gave him the power to activate his Jewish heritage, build on Russian tradition, and create a new language for art, which in the end did not need to burn Raphael.

Lissitzky's positive nature and his belief in the collective ideal were formed in his youth. He was born in 1890 in northwestern Russia, and his early years were spent in Vitebsk, where his orthodox Jewish parents raised him with a love for books and Mother Russia. Despite the organized massacre of Jews under the Tsarist pogroms followed by endless restrictions for survivors, Lissitzky's parents also managed to instill in the young boy a firm belief in Judaism and the hope for a better world.³ This optimism for life, and his parents' commitment to religion and country provide insight into Lissitzky's quest for a new art and help to explain an intermittent career in the illustration of children's books. Indeed these books stand out as the vital link between Lissitzky's traditional values and his undying hope for the future.

Lissitzky's early work reveals his ability to utilize European avant-garde techniques individualistically. An early sketch, *The Church of the Trinity*, is a good example of this blend (Figure 1). At first glance *The Church of the Trinity* appears reminiscent of Van Gogh's aggressive use of line. Closer observation, however, reveals remarkable draftsmanship in the rendering of architectural elements. The sky and landscape are blank areas of space which strongly contrast with the detailed church and its fence. Lissitzky creates ambiguity while maintaining order by alternating areas of void and description. Combinations

of order and spatial ambiguity remain a crucial part of Lissitzky's later artistic development.⁴ It is in this and similar examples that the young artist's formula led Socialist recreation.

According to Lissitzky's wife, Sophie Küppers-Lissitzky, the years following the revolution were a time of liberation and purpose. She writes, "When the bullets were still whistling through the streets of Moscow, he hurried to see the Committee for Art... to obtain the orders necessary for undertaking effective propaganda work."⁵ Lissitzky's work between 1917-20 centered around graphic art, and in particular, his children's books. In 1918, Marc Chagall, then head of the Vitebsk Art School, appointed Lissitzky to the faculty as professor of Architecture and Graphics.⁶ Book illustrations from this period include works such as *The Kid* of 1917 and *The Fiddler* of 1919 (Figure 2). These unique books of Yiddish and Ukrainian fairytales, reveal a lyrical use of Chagall color and form. The compositional sources for Lissitzky's illustrations are found in the 17th century tradition of circulating songs, stories and dances through woodcut images known as lubok (Figure 3). A comparison of an original lubok woodcut with Lissitzky's illustration for *The Four Billygoats* of 1919, reveals that Lissitzky has utilized and built from his Russian heritage.

Around the turn of the century, the lubok became more political in subject matter. The simplicity and tradition of the lubok was revived by artists such as Mikhail Larinov, who formed a distinctive primitive style in the early Russian avant-garde before the Revolution.⁷ This synthesizing of the old and new was inherited by Lissitzky and was to play an important role in his move towards non-objective art. More importantly, Larinov's neo-primitive lubok form helped Lissitzky visualize his revolutionary formula for art and life.

The other major aspect of Lissitzky's artistic production at the Vitebsk school was his move towards abstraction and political awareness. Some historians have argued that after 1922 Lissitzky's art became almost anti-Jewish and had no correlation to his early works.⁸ Alan Birnholz, author of many studies on the art of Lissitzky, disagrees. He correctly states that "If the Revolution provided the social and political framework in which Jewish art could flourish, Jewish art in turn, provided a unique vehicle in which the ideals of the Revolution could be visually expressed."⁹ In view of this reciprocity, it is crucial to remember two things that were central to Lissitzky's formal and theoretical development: Malevich's replacement of Chagall as leader of the Vitebsk school, and the activities of an organization called Proletkult. The formal transition is obvious in a comparison of the *Billygoats* with Malevich's *Morning in the Country after the Rain*, 1911. Faceted forms in Lissitzky's townscape are the direct

result of Malevich's influence.

The Proletkult organization was established mainly to bring together workers and artists. The artists however, were absorbed in Futurist ideas which were alien to the working class. A worried Lenin officially condemned these theories in 1920, and instigated a new method of unity which included Social Realism and the eventual elimination of groups deemed too far left.¹⁰ These artistic and political events are helpful in understanding the contingency between Lissitzky's change of style and his ideological development.

In Lissitzky's book illustrations for *Chad Gadyo* in 1919, we can trace his stylistic development (Figure 4). Here Lissitzky still clung to the formula of the lubok. However, he pushed the simplicity of the primitive woodcut into a synthesis of Hebrew type and geometric form. Likewise, he replaced the flat color and heavy outline of *The Kid* with voluminous spheres and highly contrasting angles of light and dark. Again, the influence of Malevich is obvious; yet, Lissitzky's illustrations for *Chad Gadyo* connote more than this mere artistic rapport.

The story of *Chad Gadyo* is a part of the *Haggadah* which commemorates the deliverance of the Jews from Egypt. The final episode of the *Haggadah* story reads, "God slays the Angel of Death."¹¹ It is significant for Lissitzky's political beliefs that this aspect of his illustration can be understood as a documentation of current events. For in 1919, the civil wars between Socialist factions had ended and the Revolutionary cause had succeeded in squelching any attempt at counterrevolution by Tsarists.¹²

If Lissitzky used *Chad Gadyo* to unite the political present with the religious past, then his first major work, *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge*, 1919, did even more to capitalize on Jewish and traditional involvement in Communist party affairs (Figure 5). It was a powerful propaganda piece associating the Tsarist pogroms and the counterrevolutionaries with the "Whites" and the Bolsheviks and Jews with the "Red Wedge," and its simple message was not perceived as too intellectual or spiritual for the masses. Even Lenin endorsed its propagandistic power since it did not appear to be formulated in some artistic 'ism' which, he felt, had no place in Marxism.¹³

Lissitzky's *Beat the Whites* is especially significant when compared to most poster art of this period, of which most reflected the Cubo-Futurist style of the Proletkult and was not accepted by the public for whom it was created. In their propaganda images, these artists broke down the human form to the abstract essentials but were unable to trigger the proper psychological response in the masses.

In contrast, Lissitzky's symbolism was clear. For many viewers, especially Jews who had suffered under Tsarism, the arrangement of powerful geometrics recalled images of good over evil and God over the Angel of Death. According to Birnholz, the words, "Beat the Whites" were a shocking reminder of a common phrase from the pogroms "Beat the Jews."¹⁴ Lissitzky's clear intentions secured his position in the Russian avant-garde. As far as the Communist party was concerned, he had proved loyalty and dedication to the cause.

In 1920 Lissitzky made a radical turn towards non-objectivity. With Malevich he created the first Proun. The Proun, an acronym for "For the New Art," was a com-

positional breakthrough in Lissitzky's establishment of dynamic vibration through space. Extending Malevich's Suprematist forms and concepts, Lissitzky maintained that the Proun was not created by a single artist or movement, but rather it was a creative process which involved collective effort.¹⁵ This was an obvious reference to Lenin's dislike of 'isms' and furthered his intentions that the Proun be immediately understandable and accessible to the masses. Lissitzky attributed the success of *Beat the Whites* to the universal recognition of basic geometric shapes, and concluded that such primary shapes could be the basis for a new artistic language in the restructuring of society. Lissitzky explained the formation of Prouns in a unique blend of mysticism and scientific theory. At first, the artist passively observes the movement of shapes in any given space as they overlap, intersect and dissect each other, a potentially chaotic episode in need of organization. Next, the artist becomes active. He orders the forms and their splinters so as to create a universal system for art and life. The artist/constructor, according to Lissitzky, might be any arbitrary mediator whose function was to utilize the composition for societal need. When viewed on a picture surface, Prouns appear as illustrations of 2 and 3 dimensional objects, vibrating through their assigned space in dialectical tension.¹⁶

In 1922, Lissitzky used the Proun concept for the production of a new children's book titled *Of Two Squares*, which recalled the symbolic impact of *Beat the Whites*. The book is a clever propaganda piece in which Lissitzky used the Proun structure to provide a historical telling of the Revolution: its dedication reads "To all, all my children" and begins with rules for playing out the story of the Two Squares. The text reads as follows: "Don't read, get paper, rods, blocks, set them out, paint them, build" (p.1); "Here are the Two Squares" (p.2); "They fly on to the earth from far away and" (p.3); "And see a black storm" (p.4); "Crash, and everything flies apart" (p.5); "And on the black was established the red clearly" (p.6); "This is the end—let's go on" (p.7)¹⁷ (Figure 6).

In the formation of a true Marxist society Lenin could not have asked for a better didactic example than *Of Two Squares*. It is simple and direct, recalls the past, unites opposing forces, is optimistic and, most of all, is universal. Unfortunately its vital, abstract quality became lost in Russia's move back to realism.

In 1923, Lissitzky was still convinced of the Prouns capability to solve the artistic problems of the new society. He began work on a set of illustrations for the opera *Victory over the Sun* called the *Puppet Portfolio*. The portfolio consists of fascinating and modern figures who exist in Proun space and are identifiable by their unique combination of geometric form, line and color. *The Old Man with His Head Two Paces Behind*, is a whimsical and kinetic creation—which represents the moment when movement stops—and most resembles the physical and mental attributes of age. *The New Man* presents the strength of youth in the formation of diagonal forces which extend the figure in all directions. The large red square, which is absent in the *Old Man*, stands out on the *New Man* and symbolizes the heart as the basis for proletarian strength (Figure 7).

Lissitzky has reduced some of the non-objectiveness of the Proun compositions in his creation of figurative forms, possibly in an effort to conform to the growing

demand for realism. What is important here is that in his effort to maintain revolutionary purpose, Lissitzky again held true to his formula for re-creation from the past. By comparing the *Old Man* and *New Man* with figures from his early folk-tale illustrations, it is obvious that Lissitzky has not lost the primitive aspects of his Russian heritage (Figure 8). The similarities are intended to show the authorities that he was indeed creating a new art based on proletarian sources. He transformed the same gestures for youth and age found in the early works to create a new language for artistic symbolism which is childlike in its simplicity and powerful in its propagandistic purpose.

In October of 1924, Lissitzky presented a lecture entitled "Prouns: Toward the Defeat of Art" and subtitled "May the overthrow of the Old World be imprinted on the palms of your hand."¹⁸ Despite its Futurist sounding title, it was Lissitzky's explanation of Proun concepts and their meaning for the new society. While the content of the lecture is a detailed account of Proun development and function, it is obvious Lissitzky was attempting to justify the inclusion of Proun theory in the confines of Social Realism. Lissitzky claimed in conclusion that Proun activity was the true path to reality.¹⁹

A self-portrait entitled *The Constructor*, 1924, visualizes some of the lecture points (Figure 9). *The Constructor* is a photomontage of Proun forms, typography and mathematics which represents the subtitle of the lecture. Lissitzky superimposed photographs of his hand and face, leaving his eye in the center of his palm. By integrating word and image, he wished to present himself as witness to the constant struggle to find utopia. Geometric shapes behind him intersect in the shape of a cross with the name El Lissitzky printed on them. Underneath the type are the letters "XYZ," connected by an arrow to the letters "el." As a blank piece of graph paper moves in and out of tangible and intangible objects, Lissitzky's position has become clear. He has placed himself as artist in the role of seer and martyr in the tradition of Gauguin's *Self-Portrait with Yellow Christ*.²⁰

Among the many compositional similarities, the hand which moves through Lissitzky's face is most significant. It mirrors the hand that covers the mouth of Gauguin's self-portrait on the tobacco jar to the right of the main figure. Although Gauguin's hand denotes his primi-

tive fetal self, Lissitzky has varied the theme.²¹ His stigmatized hand is similarly positioned to show impotence, while a cruciform design evokes other martyr imagery.²² He may have portrayed himself in the tradition of Gauguin's artist as outcast, but Lissitzky is still optimistic about his faith in re-creating the past. The juvenile ending of the alphabet XYZ, becomes a symbolic end of anything past and is linked by the arrow to societal re-creation through the guidance of the artist.

By 1928, the pathos of *The Constructor* disappeared as Lissitzky again turned to illustrating children's books. He created a delightful book of geography and mathematics in the format of Communist propaganda (Figure 10). The illustrations are more realistic than *Of Two Squares* and focus has shifted from geometrics to typography. His love of children and interest in their education is obvious in the text; by creating art for children Lissitzky continued to renew his faith in the future of Communism.

Unfortunately for Lissitzky, the late twenties marked the adoption of Social Realism as the official Soviet style for art. Non-objectivity and abstraction, regardless of their power, had no place in the new system. Malevich was an artist out of favor by 1928 and spent his remaining years involved in theoretical work. Lissitzky's fortune was different but only to a degree. He continued to receive government commissions which centered around propaganda posters and exhibitions, but his work in Social Realism appears to us as a loss of the faith and optimism of his earlier work (Figure 13). For Lissitzky, Social Realism became the final phase of his re-creation triad in the new society. Where *Chad Gadyo* and *The Church of the Trinity* are the thesis of his Judeo-Christian background, Proun became the antithesis of his revolutionary soul and Social Realism the synthesis of his utopian goals.

Lissitzky's artistic achievements do not lend themselves to a single stylistic label. He was a visionary, driven by messianic purpose and utopian goals. Above all he was both Jewish and Communist and through his art and life he never ceased to unite the two.

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1 John Bowlt, "The Failed Utopia: Russian Art 1917-1932," *Art in America* July 1971: 45.

2 Alan C. Birnholz, "El Lissitzky and the Jewish Tradition," *Studio International* Oct. 1973: 132. Some reproductions of this quote include after the word "Communism," "The Testament of Suprematism or Communist Constructivism." I do not feel that this contradicts my argument that Lissitzky followed one formula for the re-creation of art and life. It actually reveals his dedication to any art form that could serve the needs of the Communist state and in the end it would appear that he conceded the title to Social Realism.

3 Sophie Küppers-Lissitzky, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts* (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, 1968) 15.

4 Alan C. Birnholz, "For the New Art: El Lissitzky's Prouns," *Artforum* Nov. 1969: 65-66.

5 Küppers-Lissitzky 20.

6 *El Lissitzky*, Exhibition catalog from Galerie Gmurzynska (Cologne 1976) 26.

7 Camilla Gray, *The Russian Experiment in Art: 1863-1922* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1979) 97.

8 Birnholz, *Studio International* 130.

9 Birnholz, *Studio International* 131.

10 Bowlt 45.

11 Birnholz, *Studio International* 131.

12 Birnholz, *Studio International* 131.

13 Bowlt 45-46. This viewpoint of Lenin's dislike for 'isms' comes from a quote which is in part, "...I just cannot consider the works of Expressionism, Futurism, Cubism and other 'isms' as the highest manifestation of artistic genius. I do not understand them. I do not experience any pleasure from them."

14 Birnholz, *Studio International* 131.

- 15 Birnholz, *Artforum* 66-67. Also interesting on the subject of Prouns is the catalog entry in Galerie Gmurzynska by Sophie Küppers-Lissitzky. She states emphatically that Lissitzky did not intend for Prouns to be studied by art historians, the reason being that Lissitzky felt once a Proun was composed it had completely fulfilled its total purpose.
- 16 Alan C. Birnholz, "El Lissitzky, The Avant-Garde, and the Russian Revolution," *Artforum* Sept. 1972: 73.
- 17 Sophie Küppers-Lissitzky, plates 80-91.
- 18 El Lissitzky 60-72.

19 El Lissitzky 67.

20 This connection between Gauguin and Lissitzky is backed up by several sources including, Sophie Küppers-Lissitzky, Gray 48-51, 68-69, 145. John Bowl, *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism* (New York: Thames & Hudson, Inc., 1988) 41-54.

21 *The Art of Paul Gauguin*, Exhibition Catalog from National Gallery of Art (Washington D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1988) 178.

22 Birnholz, *Studio International* 134.



Figure 1. El Lissitzky, *The Church of the Trinity*, 1910. Courtesy of Sophie Küppers-Lissitzky, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*, trans. H. Aldwinckle and M. Whittal. (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, 1968).



Figure 2. El Lissitzky, *The Kid*, 1917. Courtesy of Sophie Küppers-Lissitzky, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*, trans. H. Aldwinckle and M. Whittal (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, 1968).



Figure 3. Artist unknown, 19th century Lubok, illustrating a tale by Krilov. Courtesy of Camilla Gray, *The Russian Experiment in Art, 1863-1922*, (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1986) fig. 60.



Figure 4. El Lissitzky, *Chad Gadyo*, 1919. Courtesy of Camilla Gray, *The Russian Experiment in Art, 1863-1922*, (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1986) fig. 167.

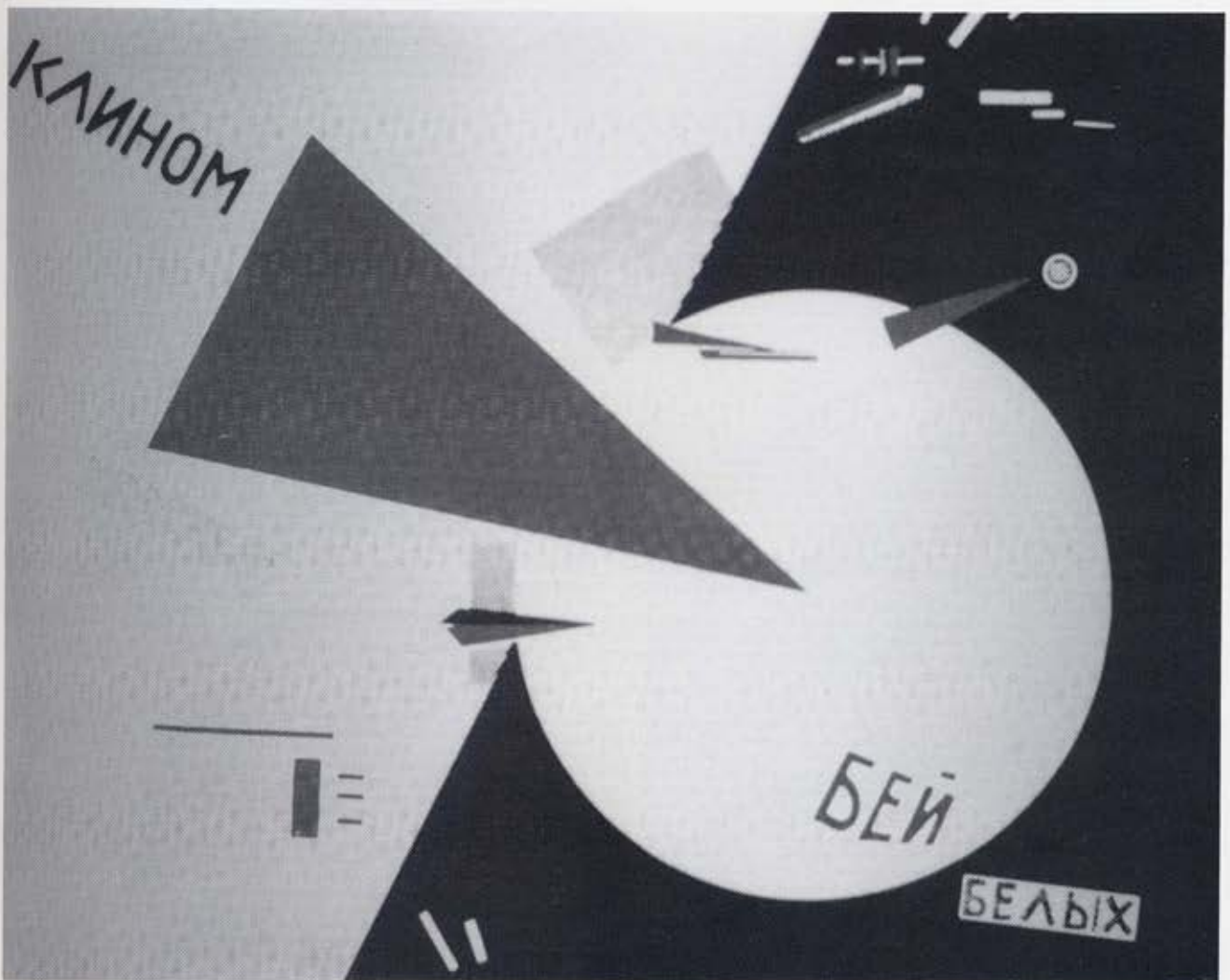


Figure 5. El Lissitzky, *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge*, 1919. Courtesy of Sophie Küppers-Lissitzky, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*, trans. H. Aldwinckle and M. Whittal (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, 1968).

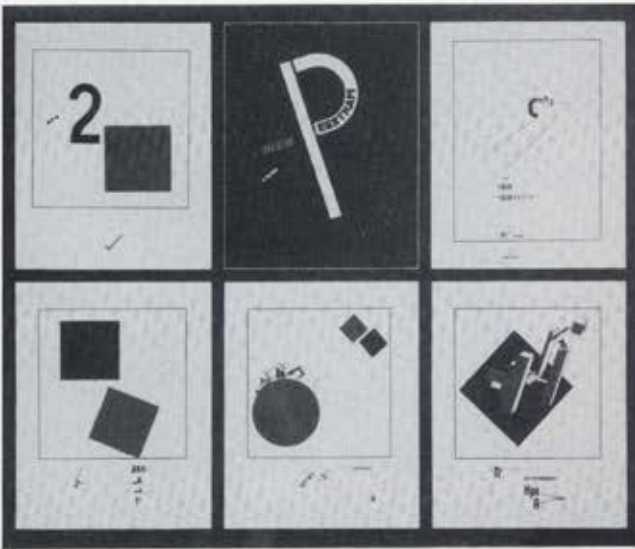


Figure 6. El Lissitzky, *Tale of Two Squares, a Supremist fairytale in six pictures*, 1922. Courtesy of Larissa A. Zhadora, *Malevich: Suprematism and Revolution in Russian Art 1910-1930*, trans. A. Lieven (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982) fig. 187.

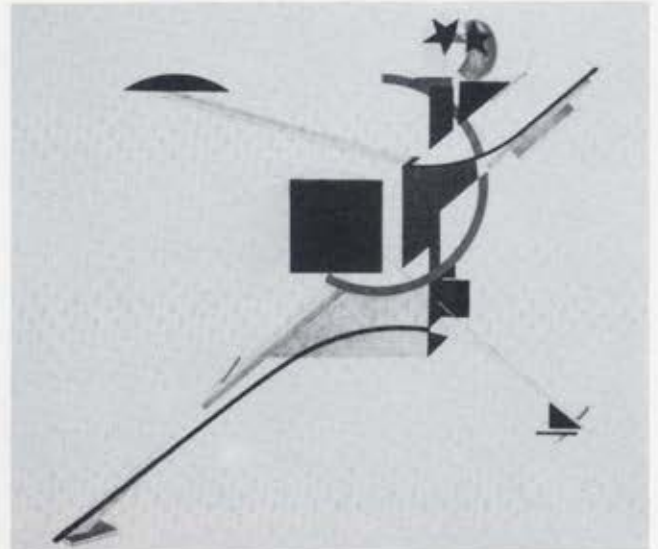


Figure 7. El Lissitzky, *The New Man*, from the *Puppet Portfolio*, 1923. Courtesy of Sophie Küppers-Lissitzky, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*, trans. H. Aldwinckle and M. Whittal (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, 1968).



Figure 8. El Lissitzky, "Boy Playing" illustration from a Ukrainian fairytale, 1919. Courtesy of Sophie Küppers-Lissitzky, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*, trans. H. Aldwinckle and M. Whittal (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, 1968).



Figure 9. El Lissitzky, *The Constructor*, 1924. Courtesy of Sophie Küppers-Lissitzky, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*, trans. H. Aldwinckle and M. Whittal (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, 1968).



Figure 10. El Lissitzky, "Mathematics," illustration for a children's book, 1928. Courtesy of Sophie Küppers-Lissitzky, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*, trans. H. Aldwinckle and M. Whittal (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, 1968).