

REJECTING REASON AND EMBRACING MODERNIZED ART

How *Victory Over the Sun* Revolutionized the Russian Avant-Garde

The elemental makeup and design of the Russian futurist anti-opera play, Victory Over the Sun, set an artistic precedence during the years leading up to the Russian Revolution. The Russian Avant-Garde movement, which played a pivotal role in Victory Over the Sun's entrance into the artistic field, utilized numerous mediums in order to create such a piece. By the combined efforts of a librettist, artist, and musician, the genesis of Victory was born, thus shaping a parallel revolution to that in Russia.

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Matyushin, Kruchenykh, Filonov, Shkolnik, Malevich (1913)
Source: Pavel Filonov (Commons Wikimedia)

The Russian Avant-Garde can be showcased by its unique artistic makeup and the birthplace of suprematist ideologies. This style of artistry is what set it, as a whole, apart from all other forms of art because it became its own artistic revolution. Its paintings stripped away artistic form to create a sense of oneness in the viewer, of being complete and spiritual in a new way. It ended up pushing the norm and *status quo* to reveal new beginnings and rejections of things past in terms of culture, art, and music. Thanks to the combined efforts of Kruchenykh, Malevich, Matyushin, and even Mayakovsky, they created *Victory Over the Sun*, which is considered to be the most influential of early 20th-century Russian futurist operas. This opera helped artists think outside of the box in terms of how the fine arts were viewed and depicted, thus creating a unique form of abstract art. Its creation mirrored a time in Russia's history that was full of civil war, protests, and uprisings, so its message on destruction of what currently was with man was not well-received not only because of the content, but its unique style made it difficult to decipher from the common viewer. However, its debut revolved around a complicated artistic era full of people trying to make sense of what was proper and allowed, and what was to go against the establishment of the Tsar. It was *Victory Over the Sun's* abstract makeup and composition

which helped to inspire and influence an entirely new way of thinking in terms of fine arts in Russian artistic culture, and thus opening new doors to Russian artists during this artistic era. It became essential to reject the artistic *status quo* and favor a new era of modernity, embrace a different sense of spirituality and relationship to art, and start an artistic revolution not only in the hearts of artists, but in their minds.

THE ANTI-UTOPIA SCENE

The audience paid nine roubles to watch a curtain get ripped in two at nine o'clock at night on Tuesday, December 3rd, 1913 (or the 5th of December).¹ *Victory Over the Sun* debuted at Luna Park Theater in St. Petersburg. The ripped curtain revealed a portrait of the three men behind the construction of world's very first "Futurist Opera": Mikhail Matyushin (the composer), Aleksei Kruchenykh (the librettist and creator of its strange dialect), and finally Kazimir Malevich (the designer). However, this was not a normal "portrait." They were being represented as cutout shapes of all different designs, and the audience immediately knew they were in for something quite interesting.² This "opera" could be considered a type of classical text, featuring an idea of "destruction" as its main theme. Its performance succeeded Vladimir Mayakovsky's *A Tragedy*, which many critics viewed as sort of a prequel to *Victory* in terms of style and, in some instances, content.³ *Tragedy* featured only one person, Mayakovsky himself, and was performed once.⁴ It was no coincidence that these two plays were performed in the same place, one day after the other; however, while *Tragedy* was considered a monodrama, *Victory* was entirely futuristic. *Victory* was dynamic and aggressive, and *Tragedy* was solely based around Mayakovsky and his many portrayals of others.⁵

Victory can be defined as a relatively ingenious, absurd, and short play with only two brief acts. The play had an all-male cast with no names or developed personalities for the characters, but, most importantly, there was no recognizable plot throughout the play except to "capture the sun by strong men of the future."⁶ This play embraced the Future and modernization. However, *Victory* portrays the future as a very bleak society in Russia if it is to continue on its current path. It was considered to be the most "audacious and successful the-

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Vladimir Mayakovsky (1924)

Source: Mondadori Publishers

atrical event” in comparison to recent futurist operas, and also seen as a contemporary anti-utopia.⁷ *Victory* was hardly an opera: it featured more speaking than music, for which there was only a piano present. Many saw it as an “anti-opera” because it not only challenged art and how it was being portrayed, understood, and performed, and expanded upon music by creating an explosive style all from a piano, but also how the concept of how an opera was to be presented.

The play was rooted in an iconoclastic, anarchic, and futurist ideals based on Russian folklore, especially in terms of the sun. The sun represented beauty, harvest, and tranquility to the Russian people and their culture. *Victory*, however, took the symbolic form of the “sun” and transformed it into showing a destruction of nineteenth-century Romantic idealism since the sun brings rebirth and a new day, and by destroying it, it ends. Not only did the Futurists go against the past, but they were also challenging symbolic ideas that were accustomed to these traditional folklores by giving them new meanings and understandings, rather than going with the usual interpretations. The creators of *Victory* used a cacophony of anti-representations of the “sun,” because the sun played a significant role in Slavonic mythology.⁸ They looked to *Snegurochka* or “Snow Maiden” (turned into a play by Aleksandr Ostrovsky and Tchaikovsky in 1873) as an influence. Where *Snow Maiden* ended on the longest day of the year with the sun shining out, *Victory* actually captured the

sun, leaving the world in darkness. It was important for the Avant-Gardists to show a destruction of Russian tradition and make way for the future.⁹

This play was used to target “old” traditions and belief systems. Not only was it about flipping traditions, but it was also about the “emancipation of man from his dependence on Nature, which the urban-minded Futurists believed had been superseded in the twentieth century by the machine.”¹⁰ Kruchenykh claimed that *Victory* was a misogynist play that was constructed “in order to pave the way for a male epoch.”¹¹ It rejected traditions in the fields of art, literature, and even music, in order to help invite a more futurist and modern idea into society. During the birth of the play, the three architects wanted to use this play as a way of attacking the traditional style of the Russian Theater so that they could establish their own form of Russian Futurist theater. This would allow them to portray other plays from Mayakovsky and Khlebnikov.¹²

According to Kruchenykh’s reflection on the play in his 1960 essay titled, *About the Opera, ‘Victory Over the Sun,’* he alludes to the insufficient funds for producing it, and how its creators used the Union of Youth (a pro-futurist group of young adults founded by Matyushin) to perform the roles of the play—the main roles going to the two best musicians of the group.¹³ The costumes that Malevich designed were made out of a solid wire frame and strong cardboard, which is what Malevich painted on. Although his costume designs contained shocking color schemes, he lacked the funds to acquire all the paints for it, and thus his costumes were barren. However, according to newspapers at the time, the sets created a “tunnel vision” effect for the audience’s viewing and mind penetrating pleasure.¹⁴

There were only two general rehearsals for *Victory* (including the dress rehearsal), and Kruchenykh mentioned how Matyushin was ecstatic over how effective the student actors were under such short notice and little funding by the Union of Youth. In contrast, he reflected on how in the original production, Malevich was quite displeased that he was not able to design or paint on a grand scale or paint in color, due to their lack of funds.¹⁵

THE ELEMENTS

Victory was, by all means, a very strange performance that was not received well by its audiences or critics due to its strange language, music, costumes, and set designs. However, the ideas behind engineering it had to originate somewhere. Therefore, where did *Victory*’s origins lie and how did it come to fruition? To explore this, it is important to take note at what it is most remembered for, and that is its strange dialect and most importantly, the artistic set designs by Malevich.

Rejecting all forms of reason and tradition in art, literature, and music was essential to creating *Victory*. Many artists and

librettists during this time period strove to be different, and underwent personal “revolutions” in portraying their work. This change was being achieved through “alogism,” a term coined by Russian director Nikolai Evreinov, where one aspired to be different, imagined surroundings were different, and people were all born with a desire deep in their souls to be different. It is similar to the idea of theatrical instinct, which Evreinov also coined.¹⁶ Many of the Russian Cubo-Futurist artists during this time, which many would eventually become Suprematist artists, even attributed their work to that of the “renewal of artistic languages and emphasised the specific features of their aesthetic achievements.”¹⁷

It was believed that the “alogical universe is as spontaneous as the nature of play” and that the process of acting in a play, “whether in theater, poetry, or their everyday routine, can be compared to a cognitive process, as a means to investigate the rationally unknowable.”¹⁸ Alogism was a form of abstraction, a foreshadowing to Dada and suprematist art that was highly unpredictable and indistinguishable at first glance, but deeply symbolical and rigid in its meanings. It was also viewed as a balancing act between the normal, and the absurd.¹⁹ It can also be seen as a riddle to the viewer, with no correct answer because there is no clear way of defining any answer. This new way of thinking of leveraging two opposites became an inspiration to Kruchenykh, Malevich, and Matyushin, whose work paved the way for the most famous Russian futurist opera.

The contrasting ideas of harmony and dissonance were present in alogism, futurism, cubism, and suprematism, and structured *Victory Over the Sun*. Cubism, an artistic movement in Europe in the early 20th century, encompassed pioneering artists such as Pablo Picasso, and it became the predecessor to futurism. It dealt with a unique portrayal of space, volume, and mass, which would surround the subject matter on the canvas, and it can also be viewed as the stepping-stone for abstraction. Its later counterpart, futurism, was slightly different. Futurism was practiced on all mediums of art. Specifically in Russia, this movement focused on literature and the visual arts, such as Malevich’s set designs and costumes and Kruchenykh’s script for *Victory Over the Sun*. This movement, a branch off of cubism, is what helped to inspire the idea of Suprematism, coined by Malevich in 1915 after being inspired by the futurist opera.²⁰

According to Russian poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, “Kruchenykh wrote his drama ‘by means of war’ (by analogy with ink) using war not as a subject, but as a medium and metaphor for futurist creativity.”²¹ It was geometrically engineered; it relied on the dynamics of the set where the theatrical effects were expected and specifically designated at times.

The language of *Victory Over the Sun* did not sit well with both the audience and its critics because its script completely rejected reason. Instead, it encompassed a new literary



Scene from *Victory over the Sun* (Moscow, 2014)

Source: *Shakko* (Commons Wikimedia)

technique, called *zaum*. The term was coined and created by Khlebnikov (as seen in the prologue for *Victory Over the Sun*) and further enhanced and minimalized in terms of the linguistic structure by Kruchenykh.²² Kruchenykh, being heavily influenced by this new style of literature, used it to compose the entire script for *Victory*. This new literary phonic helped push for the futurist movement in the Russian Avant-Garde revolution.

Zaum, which can also be referred to as “beyonese” as it coincided with the emergence of alogism in the visual arts, was considered to be a magical language. It combined the unconscious with intuition of speech, and then it would completely reject the predicted pattern of speech. It “colored many themes and motifs of [Kruchenykh’s] multi-layered transnational poetry.”²³ Instead of relying on what was said, it focused on how it sounded and looked on paper. Therefore, the combined ideas and efforts of physical phonics and visual aspects encompassed this new language. Kruchenykh was influenced by the Slavic languages, especially those used in folktales, legends, or myths.²⁴ The Slavic language in the script started to become very minimalistic, and it continued to become that way until it was reduced to its beginning phonic elements.

The entire dialogue for *Victory Over the Sun* was written in *zaum*, where compositionally nothing made sense, but linguistically it sounded beautiful. This was the effect that Kruchenykh aimed for when he was writing its script. Initially, it was the use of language, rather than the subject of art, that was the focus. However, set designs set *Victory* apart from other futurist works being rendered at the time.²⁵ The abstraction the play presented is how it is best remembered.

Artist Kazimir Malevich, having been heavily influenced by alogism, showcased it in his paintings, costumes, and set designs for *Victory Over the Sun*, and his influence was also present in artistic movements surrounding cubism and futurism. The painterly construction of the play was transformed into abstract shapes and anatomical structures, and

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the play itself was considered to be “an incidental experiment of the dramatic genre.”²⁶

THE GENESIS OF SUPREMATISM AND MUSIC

Victory was created during the summer of 1913 when both Malevich and Kruchenykh joined Matyushin at the “All Russian Congress of Futurists.” Collectively, Futurists believed in the idea of speed and technology, where the future would rely on faster means for production and a better standard of living. Artistically, they rooted themselves first by expressing their ideas through means such as literature and poetry, but it eventually branched out to art, sculpture, and the performing arts.²⁷ This futuristic collaboration of ideas and thoughts were not universally accepted, and thus it gave rise to a whole slew of new ideologies, art, and thinking. They sought to make something that would stand out and have some sort of remembrance, and thus the ideas and configurations behind *Victory* were created. Nonetheless, all of the Russian futurists were influenced, in some way beforehand, by the ideas of Cubism.

There are conflicting reports between historians in regards to when suprematism was actually born. Was it during *Victory*, or was it after? For example, the Northwestern University Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures notes how Malevich’s famous *Black Square* and suprematism were both during the play.²⁸ However, Kruchenykh noted in his reflection that, “there was no non-representational art or *Suprematism*, as [Malevich] called it, in the production of *Victory*, and nor could there have been, because constructed figures of people moved on the stage—they spoke... acted, and moved according to the needs of the articulation of their joints.”²⁹ Therefore, all suggestions that have pointed towards Malevich’s backdrop from *Victory* being the beginning of suprematism are false, simply because it was merely an inspiration for *Black Square* and an entirely new way of artistic thinking.

Suprematism, according to Malevich, was “[the] end and beginning where sensations are uncovered, where art emerges ‘as such.’”³⁰ It was an abstract art system that completely disregarded any sort of pictorial method that had been recognized in previous works of art, such as with cubism.³¹ The suprematist movement had three phases, where two of them dealt with colors and shapes, and the third had black and white with shapes. This new artistic revolution was based around geometric forms. Malevich believed that the square represented the absolute basic and most pure of all art forms. Not only did these geometric forms shape the “subject” of the painting, but the placement, color, and direction were all specific with each aspect meaning something else. Each part of the painting had its own story to tell, whether the shape was up high or down low on a canvas, the size of each shape meant something, and so on. These intentional artistic representations were part of a spiritual connection that the artist made with his or herself in regards to the message they wanted to portray.³²



Figure from *Victory over the Sun* (c. 1910)
Source: K. Малевич (Commons Wikimedia)

Before a suprematist artist sought to create art through paint on a canvas, a spiritual connection that connected an idea surrounding the artist’s spirituality and his or her own self-thought had to be envisioned. In one of Malevich’s pamphlets from the 1920s, he mentioned how he had started to retreat into his domain of thought, and that he would continue to journey there in the infinite space of the human skull until it was no longer possible.³³ Instead of viewing art as having a subject matter that told a story to the viewer, it became a journey that the artist took into their mind. This brought out something pure, natural, and unique in each artistic creation.³⁴

Instead of having a blatant subject matter that had been recreated many times beforehand, suprematist art encompassed multiple aspects in terms of capturing emotions, philosophic issues, and concepts. Each creation was created for the viewer to come to their own conclusion, rather than it being obvious at first glance. This would not only allow the artist to travel on a journey while creating it, but it allowed the viewer to journey towards discovering what the painting meant to them.

Spiritually, Malevich believed that this two-dimensional form of art was a way for the human mind to ascend into a fourth dimension and reach a celestial path.³⁵ The idea behind this was an echo from the opera, because like an ouroboros, the final end result for the meaning behind a picture is endless. He believed that:

art is the ability to create a construction that derives not from the interrelation of form and color and not on the basis of aesthetic taste in a construction's compositional beauty, but on the basis of weight, speed, and direction of movement.³⁶

“Suprematism was an abstract art system that completely disregarded any sort of pictorial method that had been recognized in previous works of art, such as with cubism.”

This philosophical belief was especially present in *Victory Over the Sun*. *Victory* focused around the key concepts of weight, speed, and direction. It relied on weight, speed, and direction, rather than whatever color was being portrayed at a specific time. The effects in the play and the way the stage directions and set designs moved with one another created a literal visual of performing arts to the audience.

According to Malevich's artistic philosophy, if an artist continued to paint according to laws directed by someone else, then that art was neither truthful nor sincere. The artist had to break free from the confines of artistic laws. Only then would the artist begin to paint on a canvas, or sculpt with hands, with a sound mind and a pure spirit. An artist that continued to adhere to teachings in a school that only abides by a will of repetition towards repeated subject matter, which, in Malevich's mind, diminished the meaning behind the painting because its message was not unique or truthful.³⁷

This is possible when we free all art of philistine ideas and subject matter and teach our consciousness to see everything in nature not as real objects and forms, but as material, as masses from which forms must be made that have nothing in common with nature.³⁸

Continuing to allow the artist to see a repetitive subject does not create new art. Instead, its value became diminished. To Malevich, it was better to see the subject just as the artist saw a new blank canvas. It would become a new opportunity to explore something unique. The radical notion that the subconscious dominated the human consciousness helped to manipulate suprematist art under Malevich. This not only helped to construct a new thought process, but, in Malevich's eyes, a new individual.³⁹

The reason that cubist, futurist, and suprematist art was not understood by the people was that they were so used to the ideas and concepts of antiquity found in the likes of Renais-

sance art, with the creation of the perfect form of man, that they were not able to understand the beauty of modern art in a new stage. Bringing back things from the past, in Malevich's mind, meant that those in a younger generation would only be subjected to repeated forms, instead of breaking free and seeing past it with a more modern eye. Malevich said in an essay, “Art should not advance toward abbreviation or simplification, but toward complexity.”⁴⁰ This showed how he aimed for his audience to think of his paintings, rather than have the intelligence of the viewer be dwindled due to antiquity.

With suprematist and futurist art, however, the art depicted was simple, yet its meaning was hidden and riddled with complexities for the viewer to comprehend and figure out. The ideas of suprematist art further pushed the concept of futurist art out of the way, which allowed for this new philosophy of art to blossom.

Malevich's famous original *Black Square* painting, inspired by the backdrops he created in *Victory*, was nothing more than a black square on a white canvas. With this creation came about a trio of paintings to make a set, with the *Black Square*, *Black Circle*, and *Black Cross*, which all represented the basis of suprematist art.⁴¹ This trio of paintings by Malevich all linked to this notion of spirituality, where linking to something higher than what was presented at face-value held the most artistic value.⁴² The first *Black Square* (painted in 1915) was directly influenced by the set designs he did for *Victory*, since there were no colors for the original performance.⁴³ However, in this trio of paintings (circle, square, and cross), the square was only second to that of the circle. He is known for *Black Square*, since it was painted and then recreated multiple times, but the circle is what blossomed from *Victory*. The “sun” was a black circle, and thus, having it on the top right corner of the canvas instead of in the middle shows space and a disconnection to reality. If it were positioned right in the center, it would reflect unity. Having it off to the side represented discord and separation—both key aspects taken from the destruction in *Victory*.⁴⁴

Malevich's work contained prominent military aspects that were present in his alogical/*zaum* paintings such as *Englishman in Moscow*, which, according to critics, represented war through fragmentation of the subject material.⁴⁵ The fragmentation, the distortions, and the idea of the actual sun being eternal showed how war could have an everlasting negative effect on victims. Malevich's works demonstrated how

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the culture of war affected his life and artwork, but they were probably not ironic representations of each other.⁴⁶

Nonetheless, the establishment of suprematism cannot be discussed without the mention of musical “advancements” from *Victory*, courtesy of Matyushin. He was considered a Renaissance man, involved in music, art, literature, and education. Kruchenykh reflected on Matyushin being a “first-class violinist, artist, sculptor... he was very close to literature.”⁴⁷ In regards to *Victory*, he wrote the score for it for piano since it was all they were able to acquire at the last minute, and male singers (since it was an all-male cast) so only the bass and baritone were present.⁴⁸ The music was looked at as the final touch for *Victory*'s futuristic aspects, and considered “anti-music.” It was greatly influenced by and often compared to Stravinsky's explosive and atonal *Rite of Spring* which came out six months earlier in 1913.

There are two versions of the score for *Victory*: the first published in the libretto for the play in 1913, and the second is considered the most complete. Matyushin's student, Maria Ender, wrote a handwritten transcription of the fifteen-page original manuscript.⁴⁹ Ender's version had many discrepancies, and many questioned whether or not musical creditability should be given to Matyushin for *Victory*. Also, only a few pages of the manuscript for *Victory* have been found, making Ender's version more widely used and accepted in reproductions of *Victory*.

Matyushin reflected upon the performance of *Victory* a month after its debut in an essay titled “Futurizm v. Peterburge.” He recalled how they found seven enthusiastic students, but only three had vocal experience and only two were experienced singers that took the main leads. The management for Luna Park only allowed them two days for rehearsals, which was not enough for this ensemble of students to tackle such a confusing and difficult piece of work. He wrote, “it was a complete scramble for everyone to learn their part. The grand piano, a substitute for the orchestra, was broken, repulsive-sounding, and was only available on the day of the performance.”⁵⁰

Kruchenykh, Malevich, Matyushin, and other avant-garde artists were affected by the civil society and public culture before the Russian Revolution really set in 1917, and in many ways, welcomed the revolution.⁵¹ The Romanovs celebrated their tercentenary, completely oblivious to the Revolution that would come in four years. During this time, however, the avant-garde artists were fully immersed in their own revolution.⁵² Russian artists were trying to break free from the continuum of art and create their artistic revolution at the time. The continuing rejection of Western art and aesthetics of antiquity were frequent at the time under the avant-garde artists, and it was particularly dominant in *Victory*. The ideas gathered settled around this radical notion of antagonistic artistic appeal of rejecting the well-known and breaking free



Vzorval by Aleksei Kruchenykh (1913)

Source: Aleksei Kruchenykh (Commons Wikimedia)

of traditions in order to find a set path towards modernism. However, nationalistic trends were woven in their work. Their concern over national traditions in Russia was a fundamental aspect of life during this time, and these trends were so important to the artists that they could not be denied in their play.⁵³ After the Russian Revolution of 1917, resurrecting *Victory* seemed to be the appropriate path to take.

THE RESURRECTIONS

The first reproduction of the play was done in 1920 by the members of the Posnovis, or Followers of New Art. This group was determined to bring new types of art to light, so they used *Victory Over the Sun* as their gateway and opportunity to do so. It was presented on February 6, 1920. Malevich supervised the construction of the sets and costumes. Along with this presentation, Nina Kogan presented the world's first “Suprematist Ballet” that was inspired by Malevich's *Black Square*.⁵⁴ However, as the Posnovis gained confidence, they changed their name to UNOVIS (*Utverditeli novogo iskusstva* - Champion of New Art, 1919-22), and Malevich was so pleased with this, that he named his first daughter Una, after it.⁵⁵

A few years later, *Victory* was resurrected again, however this time by Lazar (El) Lissitzky. He was mentored by Malevich, and became an artist, designer, photographer, typographer, and much more, and was viewed as an important proponent of the suprematist movement. His version of *Victory*, however, did not take off as he would have liked. He went on to conceive a “marionette version,” but this project never got past a few publications of ten color lithographs of figures and costumes in 1923.⁵⁶ Lissitzky’s analysis of *Victory* was that it celebrated man’s technological advances and capabilities. He wrote, “the sun, as the expression of old world energy, is torn down from the heavens by modern man, who by virtue of his technological superiority creates his own energy source.”⁵⁷ Between the 1920 revival and the 1923 attempt, it was not until 1980 that *Victory* resurfaced again.

Victory was performed multiple times throughout the 1980s and ‘90s. To differentiate from the original production, these performances had the colored costumes that Malevich intended for the characters to wear. *Victory* appeared in 1980 when it was re-created by Robert Benedetti for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Three years later, it was performed at the Berlin Festival, in Amsterdam, the Brooklyn Academy of Music in New York, and lastly, in Washington, D.C. Afterward, *Victory* popped up in Tokyo, Toulouse, and Munich. There was even a 1989 production in Leningrad, a new staging at the Kunstlerhaus in Vienna in 1993, and then one in Moscow in 1997. The last time it was staged and performed was in 1999 at the British Premiere, which was directed by Julia Hollander.⁵⁸

Hollander’s production of *Victory* was beneficial to the history of the play, in having a well-translated libretto made by historians and linguists.⁵⁹ In her production, she wrote a note in the program, discussing the similarities between the production in 1913 and the one in 1999. She wrote that in 1913, Europe was on the brink of the first World War, and then discussed a conflict that was occurring in the Balkans and how that would lead into another war for the Russians.⁶⁰ Her idea of the play was different than that of Lissitzky, because while he viewed it as a metaphor for man’s technological advances, she viewed it as a dark prophecy for the Russians.⁶¹ Hollander’s production also featured Jeremy Arden, who “composed” the music for the play.⁶² Musically, this play featured violins and a piano.⁶³ In regards to the costumes, they were colorful and were slightly different from Malevich’s original designs. These actually allowed the wearers to move, which was important for Hollander’s rendition of *Victory*, which was the most interactive rendition between the cast and the audience.

In an interview with Hollander and Arden in 2008, they discussed how their production of *Victory* came to light. It was through the inspiration of a collection of Malevich paintings that the idea to bring the play to life again became aroused. Essentially, art historians knew of this play only through Malevich’s works, but “theatre practitioners were generally un-

aware of it.”⁶⁴ As with the original production, Hollander was not granted much money for his production, and struggled just like the original artists did—but, she and her crew had a six month time frame to pull this production off. The students they were going to use in their production were conservative, and not fond of improvisation, which was highly important to the foundation and text of *Victory*. Instead, the students were used for music only, and Hollander hired professional actors to portray the characters. At the end of the day, however, they all had to collaborate and discard the idea of improvisation, because no one was up for the challenge.⁶⁵



Black Square (1915)

Source: Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

Hollander made sure that her representation of *Victory* had her own mark on it. With this being her first dive into the absurdity of the avant-garde, she tried to imagine what it was like “to be them, telling a story.”⁶⁶ She felt inclined to use Malevich’s costumes and the *Black Square*, but she did not want hers to be as provocative as the original production. To differentiate even more, her production did not feature an all-male cast; of the singers brought in, two of them were female. Hollander’s *Victory* also consisted of a bizarre laser light show that was orchestrated to move with the sound of the music vibrating off of the instrumentalists. Arden mentioned how the music was difficult to compose because Matyushin’s work was only available in fragments. He had to look back at other futurist works in order to compose something for the violinists.⁶⁷

The public opinion and reviews for *Victory* solely depended on the time in which it was being performed. Its original production in 1913 garnered harsh criticism from newspapers and journalists. To start off the futurist movement, Maya-

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kovsky's *Tragedy* received the first review, which was incredibly critical. His play was called a mockery that should not have even been called a play, and, at one point when Mayakovsky said he was going to hang himself, the audience egged him on.⁶⁸ The other reviews in Bartlett were similar, but about *Victory*. The majority of the reviews also mentioned how it was a mockery to opera as well. They would remark how the play was boring, yet wild and senseless. Some would comment on how the audience did not fill up all the seats and became bored. Many also stated that it was just impossible to discuss what had taken place at Luna Park. Even at the end, when the writer/director was supposed to come out, he never showed.⁶⁹ The reviews for the 1913 performance made *Victory* seem exactly like what Hollander was trying to do in her revival of it. Maybe the futurists behind *Victory* made the play in order for there to be audience interaction. Maybe they knew that what they wrote would not be accepted, and so they hoped for the audience to shout or get involved with what they were doing. After all, that would also go against the entire idea of an "opera" where the audience sits and listens in enjoyment. With *Victory* being the "anti-opera" that it was, the audience involvement might have been exactly what the futurists were hoping for.

The other performances from 1920, and then the revivals in the '80s and '90s, all garnered some attention, but none were like the original. Reviews for the 1920 performance are scarce, but a mention of *Victory* was in an article in 1939. It talked about how the reviewers tore apart Mayakovsky's *Tragedy* much more than they did *Victory*, which meant that the tragedy was better to Kruchenykh.⁷⁰ Kruchenykh also mentioned how *Victory* was understood a little better in 1920 than it was in 1913, but that might have been attributed to the war and the revolution, and maybe the Russian people were able to connect with the absurdity of it all.⁷¹ This suggestion that it was viewed better seven years later also contributed to how it was viewed in the '80s and '90s.


In 1981 at the Hirshhorn Museum, *Victory* was performed in English instead of Russian. It had seven other performances the week before which had gathered many people. The reviews said how *Victory* had a very cult-like feeling to it since it was always talked about, but hardly ever seen. This performance was not an exact reconstruction of the 1913 *Victory*, but its revival almost half a century later was remarkable. The review by Anna Kisselgoff was quite positive, in saying, "'*Victory Over the Sun*' can still startle us with the power and

freshness of its original concepts. Even as a historical reconstruction, it remains outside the theatrical mainstream."⁷² Now, almost fifty years later, *Victory* had started become more appreciated, and accepted, than ever before.

Hollander's revival in 1999 garnered some mixed reviews, mostly of her [direction/performance/etc.]. Andrew Clements from *The Guardian* wrote that it wasted everyone's time, energy, and money.⁷³ In another review, Isobel Hunter commented that the program should have had notes about what was original or not, along with mentions on Kruchenykh and his work, rather than solely devote much of the play to Malevich's works.⁷⁴ Hollander, however, remarked in her interview that the audience loved the performance:

They loved it and the fact that you could surprise them, right behind them. 'Oh a brilliant circus artist is doing her thing.' No, they responded really well to that. Some people entered and exited. The instrumentalists, for example, arrived and put down their music stands and did their thing.⁷⁵

She felt that they could have taken *Victory* even further, but Ardens believed that their performance felt right. It was archaic and abstract enough for them to really feel like they had captured the original production's intent.⁷⁶

Since its first inception, *Victory Over the Sun* was meant to be the kick-starter for the Russian futurist movement, but it became something even more meaningful, not only to the futurists, but in terms of where it stood in history as a whole. Though not accepted at first, its purpose for being an "anti-opera" as well as a machine to help launch futuristic ideas and later the philosophical and artistic suprematist movement, helped to invoke, influence, and inspire an entirely new revolutionized view surrounding art. *Victory* provided an entirely different outlook on symbolic life in the Russian culture, as well a way for the Futurists to push aside traditions and spark their own artistic revolution. Nowadays, it is a play that is very rarely produced and witnessed, and yet it is only known for its artistic advancements, instead of its linguistics and atonalities. Those who get the chance to be a part of its reproductions found themselves facing challenges similar to those that the original creators faced, but also that it has become a much more accepted and respected type of work. The creators certainly left an interesting yet lasting mark in their time for history. In the end, "all is well that begins well, and has no end—the world will perish but there is no end to us!"⁷⁷ 

Endnotes

- [1] Rosamund Bartlett, *Victory over the sun: the world's first futurist opera* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2012), 1; Nina Gurianova, *The aesthetics of anarchy: art and ideology in the early Russian avant-garde* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 117.
- [2] Bartlett, 1.
- [3] Northwestern University Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, "Early Twentieth-Century Russian Drama - Victory Over the Sun," *Northwestern University*, <http://max.mmlc.northwestern.edu/~mdenner/Drama/plays/victory/1victory.html>.
- [4] Bartlett, 1.
- [5] Michaela Bohmig, "The Russian Cubo-Futurist Opera Victory over the Sun - Aleksei Kruchenykh's Alogical Creation" in Bartlett, 110-111.
- [6] Bartlett, 1.
- [7] Ibid., 3.
- [8] Ibid., 6.
- [9] Ibid., 7-8.
- [10] Bartlett, 8-9.
- [11] Aleksei Kruchenykh, from 'Dom Intermedii', Rech' (14 October 1910), in M.V. Peshchinskii, E.A. Kukhta and N.A. Tarshis, *Meierkhol'd v russkoi teatral' noi kritike 1892-1918* (Moscow: Artist Rezhisser. Teatr, 1997), 198, as used in Bartlett, 8.
- [12] Bohmig in Bartlett, 109.
- [13] Bartlett, 18.
- [14] Gurianova, 122-5.
- [15] Aleksei Kruchenykh, *About the Opera 'Victory Over the Sun'*, as translated in Bartlett, 96-97.
- [16] Gurianova, 112.
- [17] Bohmig in Bartlett, 109.
- [18] Gurianova, 177.
- [19] Ibid., 117.
- [20] Matthew Drutt, *Kazimir Malevich: Suprematism* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2003), 17.
- [21] Ibid., 124.
- [22] Bohmig in Bartlett, 111-112.
- [23] Gurianova, 135.
- [24] Ibid., 135-6.
- [25] Isobel Hunter, "Zaum and Sun: The 'first Futurist opera' revisited," *Zaum and Sun: The 'first Futurist opera' revisited*, http://www.ce-review.org/99/3/ondisplay3_hunter.html.
- [26] Gurianova, 119.
- [27] Bartlett, 3.
- [28] Northwestern University Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, "Malevich's Suprematist Backdrop," *Northwestern University*, <http://max.mmlc.northwestern.edu/~mdenner/Drama/plays/victory/2victory.html>
- [29] Kruchenykh in Bartlett, 98.
- [30] Drutt, 17.
- [31] Ibid.
- [32] Ibid., 17.
- [33] Ibid., 33.
- [34] Ibid.
- [35] Steven C. Marks, "Russian Avant-Garde," *Russia's Great War and Revolution*, <http://russiasgreatwar.org/media/culture/avant-garde.shtml>
- [36] Kazimir Malevich, "From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism" in *Russian Art of the Avant Garde*, John E. Bowlt (New York: Viking Press, 1976), 122-123.
- [37] Malevich, 119-120.
- [38] Ibid., 123.
- [39] Boris Groys, *The total art of Stalinism: avant-garde, aesthetic dictatorship, and beyond* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), 19.
- [40] Malevich, 121.
- [41] Andrea Crane, "Malevich and the American Legacy" exhibition at Gagosian Gallery Madison Avenue, pt. 1, as filmed by Gagosian Gallery, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aqmH-vwn6Tw&list=PLzrcuYhjOSHxIkac0sa5pbHy551dEsUcH>.
- [42] Drutt, 17.
- [43] Bartlett, 3.
- [44] Crane, "Malevich and the American Legacy"
- [45] Cohen, 125-6.
- [46] Ibid., 128.
- [47] Kruchenykh in Bartlett, 99.
- [48] Bartlett, 4.
- [49] Gaebel in Bartlett, 200.
- [50] Matyushin from "Futurizm v. Peterburge. Spekatkli 2, 3, 4, i 5-go dekabria 1913" in *Terekhina and Zimenkov Russkii Futurism*, 236-39, as quoted by Catja Gaebel in *The Music* in Bartlett, 199.
- [51] Aaron J. Cohen, *Imagining the unimaginable World War, modern art, & the politics of public culture in Russia, 1914-1917* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 16-17; Bartlett, 3.
- [52] Ibid., 2-3.
- [53] Cohen, 118-9.
- [54] *The Great Utopia: the Russian and Soviet avant-garde, 1915-1932: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, State Tre'tiakov Gallery, State Russian Museum, Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt* (New York, N.Y.: Guggenheim Museum, 1992).
- [55] Bartlett, 10.
- [56] Ibid., 10.
- [57] El Lissitzky as quoted by Hollander, http://www.ce-review.org/99/3/ondisplay3_hunter.html.
- [58] Bartlett, 10.
- [59] Ibid., 10.
- [60] Hunter, "Zaum and Sun: The 'first Futurist opera' revisited."
- [61] Ibid.
- [62] Julia Hollander in an interview with Sarah Dadswell, which took place at the Department of Drama, University of Exeter, 21 April, 2008, and was recorded by Peter Hulton, Director of the Arts Documentation Europe. Interview published in Bartlett, 263.
- [63] Hunter, "Zaum and Sun: The 'first Futurist opera' revisited."
- [64] Hollander, Arden, and Dadswell, in Bartlett, 263.
- [65] Ibid., 268-269.

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[66] *Ibid.*, 271.

[67] *Ibid.*, 274-77.

[68] “‘The Futurists’ Show: Who is Mad? The Futurists or the Audience?” as translated from, ‘*Spektakl’ futuristov. Kto sumashedshie? Futuristy ili publika!*’ in *Peterburgskaia Gazeta*, 332 (3 December 1913), 5, as translated in Bartlett, 87.

[69] Contemporary Reviews as translated in Bartlett, 88-89, 95.

[70] Kruchenykh in Bartlett, 98.

[71] *Ibid.*, 102.

[72] Anna Kisselgoff, “Theater: ‘Victory Over the Sun.’” *The New*

York Times, <http://www.nytimes.com/1981/01/27/arts/theater-victory-over-the-sun.html>

[73] Andrew Clements, “Victory over the sun.” *The Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/1999/jun/22/artsfeatures2>

[74] Hunter, “Zaum and Sun: The ‘first Futurist opera’ revisited.”

[75] Hollander, Ardens, and Dadswell, in Bartlett, 280.

[76] *Ibid.*, 277-284.

[77] Kruchenykh, Malevich, and Matyushin, *Victory Over the Sun*, as translated in Bartlett, 45.