

# El Lissitzky: Reading Lessons

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Not everything in print is to be read in a traditional way; there are new modes of reading which correspond to new modes of writing.

—Emile Benveniste

Then a voice which seemed to come from the sky rather than from the cock's throat cried, "Student, be seated. Pluck a quill from the cock's tail and with it write the book of books, containing all the *patres et matres lectionis*, the book that even the greatest genius must have studied before the age of five. In one word, the most perfect book of all, with the longest title: *Abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz* (although we may abbreviate: *Abc . . .*). Write this book, Fibel! Everyone will read it!"

With that, he awoke and sat up in bed—which is of course what any unseasoned author would have done.

—Jean-Paul, *The Life of Fibel*

Until the advent of modernism, writers paid little attention to typography. After the whimsical pictograms of medieval manuscripts and the mannered calligrams of Greek, Hebrew, Gallic, and Arabic poetry, typography became the restricted province of a few specialists. Economics dictated "justification," the most efficient use of the page: in this way, the book became a grisaille. Although typographers designed new faces, writers were interested only in the arrangement of type by the linear foot, punctuated by an occasional ornamental capital. Except for Rabelais and Laurence Sterne (and a few other exceptional cases), writers were either bored by typography or threatened by what they saw as an impediment to the presumed transparency of the signifier.

But then Lewis Carroll, Mallarmé, Apollinaire, Marinetti, and finally the *painters* emerged to prove that "the past and the future of the letter (where it comes from and what remains open to it) are independent of the phoneme."<sup>1</sup> A brief history thus begins with this swarm of seminal names: Bayer, Berlewi, Bill, van Doesburg, Feininger, Hausmann, Heartfield, Höch, Zdanevitch, Itten, Léger, Lewis, Moholy-Nagy, Peeters, Man Ray, Schwitters, Strzeminski, Werkman, Zwart, and especially *El Lissitzky* and *Alexander Rodchenko*, who exemplify the two tendencies of modern typography—the pure use of type and photomontage.

1. Roland Barthes, "L'esprit de la lettre," *La Quinzaine Littéraire*, June 1, 1970.

In Russia, the first attempts at a new typography were, paradoxically, handwritten—the lithographed books of the futurist painter-poets. Here, the grain of the calligrapher's letter acknowledges spacing and thus gives form to difference:<sup>2</sup> “You have seen letters laid out with a ruler, which, equally grey and colorless, appear constrained, frustrated. These are no longer letters, but seals of infamy! Any student of language will tell you that a word written by a particular hand, with a particular pen, barely resembles the same word written by another.”<sup>3</sup> It was, however, the “Typographic Revolution” proclaimed by Marinetti's *Words in Liberty* that, in Russia, prompted further typographic investigations. As Lissitzky was to write:

Prior to October our artists demonstrated little interest in typesetting. That task was left to the printers. But after October a number of our best artists from various fields, in their desire to express the new through the specifics of each medium, set about producing the new book in terms of the material of the book itself—that is, type. Their work took two directions: the first, which might be called “the architecture of the book,” proceeds from a plan of the whole and of each page based on the proportion and relations of the parts, the relation of composition to the page, the size and contrast of the letters, and above all the exclusive use of standard typographic elements and the specific characteristics of the typographic process, such as overprinting and the like.

The second direction, which might be called “figurative montage,” arranges compositional materials in a mosaic for the design of covers, isolated pages, and posters.

Both are directly linked to production.<sup>4</sup>

Lissitzky was the herald of the first “direction”—the total conception of the book, its construction (on the title page of *Dlia Golosa* he referred to himself as *konstructor knigi*).<sup>5</sup> At the same time, he never completely subscribed to claims of specificity which, in a restrictive formalist aesthetic, underpin the very idea of modernism. He seems instead to have been committed to mixing genres in order to destroy any division of the arts on essentialist grounds. He claimed that he created *Dlia Golosa* exclusively with standard typographic elements.<sup>6</sup> He used, however, not only letters (in the UNOVIS almanac he wrote: “Gutenberg's Bible was printed with letters only; but the Bible of our time cannot be

2. On these concepts, see the works of Jacques Derrida: *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins, 1976), *Writing and Difference* (Chicago, University of Chicago, 1978), *La dissémination* (Paris, Seuil, 1972), and *Positions* (Paris, Minuit, 1972).

3. Victor Khlebnikov and Alexei Kruchenikh, “La lettre en tant que telle,” *Manifestes futuristes russes*, ed. L. Robel, Paris, Editeurs Français Réunis, 1971, p. 23.

4. El Lissitzky, “The Artist in Production,” *Catalogue of the Graphic Arts Section*, Polygraphic Exposition of the Union of Republics, Moscow, 1927.

5. Written by Mayakovsky and designed by Lissitzky, this book was published in Berlin in 1923. It was recently reissued in a facsimile edition by Verlag Gebr. König, Cologne/New York, 1973. The title may be translated as *For the Voice*.

6. Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky, Life, Letters, Texts*, trans. Helene Aldwinckle and Mary Whittall, Greenwich, New York Graphic Society, 1968, caption to illustrations 95–108. All further references to this volume will appear in the form of page numbers directly following the citations.

just presented in letters alone.”—p. 358), but also a whole range of underutilized accessories: thick, fine, and dotted lines; grids; diverse geometric forms. These were refined, transformed into figures. In addition, on many pages nontypographical elements were introduced; some of the illustrations approach photomontage.<sup>7</sup>

Lissitzky's typographic career, which began at approximately the same time as his career in painting, is well known. His first works were a series of small books for children, illustrated in the style of Chagall (with whom he had worked in Vitebsk). No matter what we may be told, these hardly contain anything new; in fact, according to his wife, “these little books were put away and later scarcely mentioned by Lissitzky.” (p. 20) During the revolution he made posters, including the famous *The Red Wedge Defeats the Whites*; it was, however, in Berlin that he produced most of his typographic works. There, in 1922, he printed his *Of Two Squares* (written in 1920). In 1925 he became an honorary member of the Gutenberg Society; in the 1927 *Gutenberg Jahrbuch* he wrote:

The invention of easel pictures produced great works of art, but their effectiveness has been lost. The cinema and the illustrated weekly magazine have triumphed. We rejoice at the new media which technology has placed at our disposal. We know that being in close contact with worldwide events and keeping pace with the progress of social development, that with the perpetual sharpening of our optic nerve, with the mastery of plastic material, with the construction of the plane and its space, with the force which keeps inventiveness at boiling-point, with all these new assets, we know that finally we shall give a new effectiveness to the book as a work of art. (p. 359)

In the same year he published “The Artist in Production” in Moscow:

October opened the route towards the masses. The experience of the artist's studio, of easel painting, had to be transposed to the factory, the machine. What is more, paintings had become luxury items because of the disproportion between the energy required to produce them and their limited sphere of influence. And as the printed page began to attract the artist, painting slowly died.

In April 1924 he wrote Küppers from his sickbed: “I no longer imagine for a moment that I will return to painting again, even if I recover.” (p. 48)

7. If Lissitzky was the herald of the first direction, Rodchenko was clearly the champion of the second, “figurative montage.” Malevich, however, could not abide photomontage: “New art is above all architectural, and its true meaning was not understood by the ‘left’ artists who turned to individual aesthetics and intuitive moods, and created from the debris of photo-montage eclecticism, thus placing a barrier in the path of the developing form of new art ‘as such.’” (*Essays on Art 1915–1933*, ed. Troels Andersen, New York, Wittenborn, 1971, vol. I., p. 230.) Lissitzky's view of photomontage was more temperate, yet he also perceived its limitations: “Most artists make montages, that is to say, with photographs and the inscriptions belonging to them they piece together whole pages, which are then photographically reproduced for printing. In this way there develops a technique of simple effectiveness, which appears to be very easy to operate and for that reason can easily develop into dull routine, but which in powerful hands turns out to be the most successful method of achieving visual poetry.” (Küppers, p. 359) However, he appears to have considered Rodchenko among the “powerful hands.” He also admired, outside of Russia, the work of John Heartfield.

And he was right.

In 1923 in Berlin his environmental *Proun Raum* had been a triumph. Subsequent exhibition designs—in Dresden in 1926, Hanover in 1928, not to mention the *Pressa* in Cologne, also in 1928, and the various Soviet pavilions in the great international exhibitions—revolutionized the classical conception of exhibition space. For Lissitzky, the organization of exhibition space and the construction of books and posters were the *Aufhebung* of easel painting, whose death—the cliché of the era—was proclaimed by many, from Mondrian to the Russian productivists.

But what role did typography play?

But let us digress about an object: a thin book, almost a pamphlet, carrying the UNOVIS insignia (to acknowledge from the beginning Malevich's silent but insistent presence: the emblem is a red square on a white ground, and it is encircled as well), conceived in Vitebsk in 1920 and printed in Berlin in 1922.

The reasons for this separation—two years and a relatively great geographic distance lie between conception and execution—are primarily *economic*. In 1920, at the height of the civil war, paper was as scarce as film . . . as everything. The paper shortage had been felt as early as 1912 (which sanctioned the printing of the futurists' manifestoes on toilet paper and forced Khlebnikov to write his poems on old bills, spilling from verso to recto, letters inscribed between numbers, much to the discomfiture of his followers and exegetes). The economic blockade hardly improved this situation. Thus it was not possible to print just anything; choices had to be made.

There were also *technical* reasons. Manual lithography (which Lissitzky himself used for Malevich's book *Suprematism—34 Drawings*, printed in Vitebsk<sup>8</sup>) was incapable of producing the desired precision and evenness of inking. New techniques would be necessary if the perfect, nonhierarchical unity of "figure" and "letter" (although it is uncertain whether the two may so easily be opposed) which Lissitzky envisioned were to be achieved. With traditional typography (in the narrowest sense) the figure would have suffered; whereas with lithography, given the poor quality of the available equipment, the letter would have been blurred, indistinct. These conditions, however, did not prevent Lissitzky from speculating on future technical possibilities, as well as on those currently at hand.

Finally, there may also have been resistance to the publication of this story—a question of cultural politics, although this is unlikely, at least prior to the NEP.<sup>9</sup> We must insist, therefore, upon the technical difficulties; even in industrial Berlin it was difficult to execute Lissitzky's other great typographic work, *Dlia Golosa*: "Editions of our books were usually produced by large printing-works, but the

8. Reissued in facsimile by J.-C. Marcadé, Paris, Chêne, 1974.

9. "During the twenties, a relatively liberal publishing policy was pursued by the state." (Peter Wollen, "Art in Revolution: Russian Art in the Twenties," *Studio International*, vol. 18, no. 932 [April 1971], 152). Total repression came later, with resolutions passed in the early thirties.

production manager at the Berlin office, Skaponi, found us a small firm, because, he said, 'As this is a risky thing, it is better to work with a small printer—they will pay more attention to you there.'" (p. 25)

*The New Book*

The story *Of Two Squares* is a textbook; it should instruct. Although meaning might be uprooted and the denotative illusion destroyed, the primary problem—on its own modest scale (of production, distribution)—was essentially similar to that of Eisenstein or Vertov: in a revolutionary period, it is impossible to eliminate the signified. In *Of Two Squares*, however, the political signified is extremely weak; text and illustrations are barely informed by it. There is simply the requisite amount of narrative. Only the colors, whose symbolism is highly conventional, offer a clue . . .

Children, however, have little need of extensive historical knowledge. A plastic scenario, a pictorial strategy is sufficient to indicate to them the forces which are face to face. Adults, on the other hand, know the entire story, which renders their readings both more epic and more perverse (epic in Brecht's or even Schiller's sense: "The goal of the epic poet is already present at every stage in his trajectory; this is why we do not press on toward some final destination, but dally like lovers with each step.").

The *epic*: Lissitzky spoke of it ("We, however, are satisfied if in our book the lyric and epic evolution of our times is given shape."—p. 359) as if responding to Marx:

. . . is Achilles possible side by side with powder and lead? Or is the *Iliad* at all compatible with the printing press and steam press? Does not singing, and reciting, and the Muses necessarily go out of existence with the appearance of the printer's bar, and do not, therefore, disappear the prerequisites of epic poetry?<sup>10</sup>

Not if the typographer is also the poet, Lissitzky seems to answer, not if a *new* history serves as the pretext for the book. (And is October not the actual, prodigious history which gives rise to a mythology—as Marx wrote, "there must be *one* mythology" which provides the material of the epic—a mythology which is, in miniature, the subject of this book?)

But is *Of Two Squares* really a picture book?

Instead of investigating the fundamental question, which has been posed by men such as Freud, Wittgenstein, and Eisenstein (Does visual thought exist? Is a picture capable of stating a proposition? Can a preconceptual logic which existed

10. Karl Marx, Introduction to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1857 ed.), trans. N. I. Stone, Chicago, Charles H. Kerr & Co., 1904, p. 311.

prior to articulate speech reemerge in an image?), I will simply recount what Z, a character in an imaginary dialogue by Mondrian, described: a film screened during World War I in which clashing armies were presented as small colored squares. "The plastic expression given by the violent displacement of elements was due in part to the idea of 'struggle,' which was known in advance."<sup>11</sup>

This is obviously not Lissitzky's point. The written text of *Of Two Squares* carries little information. This "narrative" has no denouement; it concludes with the phrase *to be continued*, so that it is up to the reader to complete the book, the revolution. Despite appearances, this is not simply a pictorial translation of a narrative. Still, the example from Mondrian demonstrates the timeliness of the question (A narrative composed of abstract images?).

The book must function as a work; it must be effective. It must, by forcing the reader to work, elicit another kind of reading, serve as a model for the transformation not only of production but also of consumption, reactivate reading. Taking a stand against those who "consider the difficult work of art as a weekend pastime,"<sup>12</sup> it must transform the reader.

Art as an "instrument of social change"—such was the program, but without any instrumentalist intention (the sad consequences of which are familiar from the case of social realism). The book must change the reader in a completely *material* way. By transforming itself formally, it also transforms the conditions of its apprehension. (Especially since form is the preferred hiding place of ideology, largely because in the West we have the bad habit of ignoring form. "Form is *always ideological*," Eisenstein wrote in response to charges of "formalism" leveled against him.<sup>13</sup> This is well known, but bears repeating.)

Does the political nature of this book not then lie in its attempt to transform the power of the book over the reader's body (as opposed to what would later be called the easy reading of the NEP), rather than in the fact that it offers children a little mythology of October? Indeed, "by reading, our children are already acquiring a new plastic language; they are growing up with a different relationship to the world and to space, to shape and to colour; they will surely also create another book." (p. 359)

All of this is undoubtedly political.

### *The Broken Line*

In 1927 Lissitzky complained: "Yes, in this present day and age we still have no new shape for the book as a body; it continues to be a cover with a jacket, and a spine, and pages 1, 2, 3. . . . We still have the same thing in the theatre also." (p. 359)

11. Piet Mondrian, "Natural Reality and Abstract Reality," in Michel Seuphor, *Piet Mondrian*, New York, Abrams, n.d., p. 321.

12. "Qui le Lef prend à la gorge," *Manifestes futuristes russes*, p. 73.

13. S. M. Eisenstein, "In the Interest of Form," *Kino*, November 12, 1932.

Nevertheless, this little book (12 sheets, printed on crude, slightly yellowed paper, 22 by 28 centimeters), made five years before this expression of regret:

1. has no real cover (Were the first and last pages made of cardboard or of heavier paper? How was the book bound?)

2. has no jacket or sleeve (Something else gives Lissitzky's works their volume, such as the "alphabetical" index of *Dlia Golosa*.)

3. is unpaginated. (So that the order or reading does not appear to be prescribed, at least not explicitly. This apparent absence of constraint must be analyzed.)

However:

Our first encounter with a book rarely consists in laying it flat on a table, opening it to the first page, and commencing to read with the first word. Especially when it is a picture book. We often leaf through it, thumbing the pages while the eye darts quickly in and out in a series of glances which rhyme with the rhythm of our leafing through the spatialized "body" of the book.<sup>14</sup>

*Of Two Squares* is perhaps the last work which allows us to read from the first word to the last without lifting our heads. (But what if, as Roland Barthes once suggested, it is only when one lifts one's head that one truly reads?) It thus reveals in its entirety (in several ways, on several levels) the contradiction between continuity and discontinuity which constitutes the book.

Although its format may pose some difficulties, the book invites us to thumb its pages—like the doodles sketched during a boring lecture in students' notebooks, which, when rapidly leafed through, are transformed into an *animated cartoon*. In this way the book is presented as a metaphor for the filmic ("the continuous page-sequence—the bioscopic book"—p. 355). But it also denounces the optical illusion of cinematic continuity. We know today, from "experimental" cinema, that a film is constituted of a number of small units placed end to end: pictograms and black intervals. In (commercial) cinematic narrative, however, the illusion of presentness (in which each image appears to efface its predecessor and is itself destined to be forgotten in turn, neutralized by the succeeding image) conceals the real material discontinuity of film.

The fact that every "plate" in Lissitzky's book reacts (in the chemical sense) with every other one overdetermines the cinematic metaphor: the "montage of attractions." This book is thus the trace, the residue of an animated film from which the best moments have been excerpted. As his friend Eggeling wrote, "Lissitzky hoped to resolve the problem of the representation of movement in the visual arts with the assistance of a camera. But *Of Two Squares* never became a

14. Martine Deborne, "Volumes-feuillets-planches," *Communications*, 19 (1972).

film.” (p. 380) It remains a collection of stills without origin, the floating detritus of an absent text.<sup>15</sup>

*Of Two Squares* might also be mistaken for a *false* comic strip, each page representing a separate frame:<sup>16</sup> “The linearity of the book, justified by communication alone, is destroyed, or rather exploded and dispersed . . . as if the volume itself required the detachment and dispersal of its pages and the assimilation of either the real or the fictive space of the image (paging and spacing).”<sup>17</sup> Thus the book, the concept of the book passes from the singular (the scroll, the codex in its wooden box, *The Legend of Prague*, for example) to the plural: “The traditional book was torn into separate pages, enlarged a hundred-fold, coloured for greater intensity, and brought into the street as a poster.” (p. 358) These posters—as opposed to the gigantic billboards of modern (American) advertising, which are meant to be read from moving vehicles—are “for people who would stand quite close and read it over and make sense out of it” (*ibid.*)—like the *dazibaos* of the Chinese cultural revolution.

Yet since “as long as the book is of necessity a hand-held object, that is to say not yet supplanted by sound recordings or talking pictures, we must wait from day to day for new fundamental inventions” (p. 357) which will destroy the traditional form of the book. Meanwhile, another maneuver—a Trojan horse—suggests itself: the poster might become part of the book.

Perhaps this is the case with *Of Two Squares*.

(Elsewhere, Lissitzky expressed interest in the comic strip. In 1925 he wrote on the subject of a periodical—undoubtedly *Asnova*, on architecture: “I am now introducing in our newspaper a kind of cartoon serial, captioned by a few explanatory sentences, thus conveying an idea through this visual method.”—p. 68.)

But another rubric—rhythm—summons another metaphor which is offered

15. I will rehearse in this context neither the theory of the “filmic,” which is based in the pictogram, nor the polemic which found Eisenstein and Malevich in opposed camps. Both, however, are relevant. For the former, see Roland Barthes, “The Third Meaning,” *Image/Music/Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, New York, Hill and Wang, 1977, pp. 52–68. For the Eisenstein/Malevich polemic see Malevich, *Essays on Art*, vol. I, pp. 226–38, and Eisenstein, *Film Form*, trans. and ed. Jay Leyda, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1949, pp. 72–83. See also Annette Michelson, “Reading Eisenstein Reading *Capital*, Part 2,” *October*, 3 (Spring 1977), 82–9.

16. “There are other ‘arts’ which combine still (or at least drawing) and story, diegesis—namely the photo-novel and the comic-strip. I am convinced that these ‘arts’, born in the lower depths of high culture, possess theoretical qualifications and present a new signifier. . . . There may thus be a future—or a very ancient past—truth in these derisory, vulgar, foolish, dialogical forms of consumer subculture. And there is an autonomous ‘art’ (a ‘text’), that of the *pictogram* (‘anecdotalized’ images . . .); this art taking across historically and culturally heteroclitic productions: ethnographic pictograms, stained glass windows, Carpaccio’s *Legend of Saint Ursula*, *images d’Épinal*, photo-novels, comic-strips. The innovation represented by the still (in comparison with these other pictograms) would be that the filmic (which it constitutes) is *doubled* by another text, the film.” (Roland Barthes, “The Third Meaning,” p. 66).

17. Martine Deborne, “Décrire,” *Ca*, I, 1 (1973).



as a pretext for and constitutes one of the codes of reference of the book, of the story *Of Two Squares* as an emblem of the book of the future: music. The book is a score, perhaps less than *Dlia Golosa*, which as its title indicates was made for the voice, "to be read aloud." According to Lissitzky, the illustrations "stand in the same relation to the accompanying poems as a piano to the violin."<sup>18</sup> (There are two types of layout in *Dlia Golosa*. Double pages indexed by notches, as in an address book or subway map, are complex graphic games in two colors. These are separated by other pages which, while more numerous, simply present poems scanned according to a red/black opposition.) Writing is silent, but when scanned rhythmically, it becomes orchestral.

Rhythm, we know, predates the invention of writing and of painting:

We have found rhythmic inscriptions from the Mousterian period, thirty thousand years before the birth of Christ, and therefore well before the first writing. These inscriptions were probably not semantic; they were, in fact, preinscriptions. All of them are in some way or other what we generally call abstractions. Abstraction therefore existed even before the appearance of figuration or writing. Consequently, in this unique area of corporeal practice, painting and writing would have originated in the same nonfigurative and nonsemantic gesture, one that was simply rhythmic.<sup>19</sup>

And, in his remarkable analysis of "The Concept of 'Rhythm' in its Linguistic Expression," Emile Benveniste demonstrates that rhythm designates the contradiction between the continuous and the discontinuous, and that this contradiction is operative even at the level of the letter.<sup>20</sup>

Thus the letter becomes, at the minimal level, the cipher of the book: caught up in the flow, it may nevertheless, like the page, be detached.

### *Theory*

As early as 1919, Lissitzky wrote to Malevich:

I think it is necessary that we should pour the thoughts, which are to be drunk from the book with the eyes, over everything which is perceived by the eyes. The letters and the punctuation marks, which impose order on the thoughts, must be included in our calculations; the way the lines are set out can lead to particular concentrations of thought, they must be concentrated for the benefit of the eye, too. (p. 380)

18. El Lissitzky, "Typographische Tatsachen," *Gutenberg-Festschrift*, Mainz, 1925.

19. Roland Barthes, "La sociologie de l'art et sa vocation interdisciplinaire," *Coloquio/artes* (Lisbon), 18-19 (April-June 1974).

20. In *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek, Coral Gables, University of Miami, 1971, ch. xxvii.



*El Lissitzky. The Red Wedge Defeats the Whites (Poster). 1919. (Above).*

*Cover for Of Two Squares. 1922. (Opposite).*

ПРО

2



Филиппинский

But let us return to the letter, since everything begins with it. As Mallarmé wrote, “The book, the total expansion of the letter. . . .”

Lissitzky did not envision the creation of a new alphabetical typeface. So many were available that it seemed unnecessary to add another to the list; he borrowed from several, varying their formats. What he envisioned was a new *layout* of the page. But if Lissitzky sought a new formal arrangement of type, it was in order to expose the idea of a great alphabetical combinatory. Letters are *articulated*:

Inordertocommunicateyourthoughtsinwritingyouhaveonlytoform certaincombinationsfromthesesymbolsandstringthemtogetherinan unbrokenchain.

but—NO.

YOU see here that the pattern of thought cannot be represented mechanically by making combinations of the twenty-six letters of the alphabet. Language is more than just an acoustic wave motion, and the mere means of thought transference. In the same way typography is more than just an optical wave motion for the same purpose. From the passive, non-articulated lettering pattern one goes over to the active, articulated pattern. (p. 355)

Like Albers, Lissitzky understood that the most economical graphic signs, hence the least articulated, were also the least legible. The letter is the articulation of *phonè* and *graphiein*; an absence (*spacing*) marks their separation. To underscore this fact is to break with the traditional *grisaille* of the book.

On this basis, Lissitzky elaborated a veritable typographic argument which may be connected with certain recent preoccupations about language:

—the letter is an *element* which is itself composed of elements (—, |, /, and the curve—far fewer than the Chinese ideogram). The immense text of the world is born from these few nonhierarchical marks, as equal as the text is infinite. (“YOU have observed that in an organic pattern all the facets exhibit the same structural unity.”—p. 356)

—continuity does not exist; it always bears the imprint of difference, since “the linear norm was never able to impose itself absolutely for the very reasons that intrinsically circumscribed graphic phoneticism. We now know them; these limits came into being at the same time as the possibility of what they limited, they opened what they finished and we have already named them: discreteness, difference, spacing.”<sup>21</sup>

From the very beginning of the book, however, something has attempted to conceal the fact that “phonetic writing *does not exist*.”<sup>22</sup> Something has resisted spacing and sought, in a great mimetic deception, to imitate the *flumen orationis*.

21. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 86.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

Thus the cursive, syncopated letter was retained out of a desire to minimize the discontinuity produced by the machine. ("By the time that Gutenberg invented printing, the manuscript had attained such a degree of perfection that it served as a model for books executed in this totally different process."<sup>23</sup>) This resistance to technical change (but technology, Lissitzky reminds us, is hardly innocent or independent) appears to indicate that the passage from the *volumen* to the page represents a profound epistemological mutation, one which has yet to be fulfilled: "the end of linear writing is indeed the end of the book."<sup>24</sup>

—phonetic writing, like pure alphabetic writing, does not exist (the myth: one grapheme for each phoneme). The graphic sign is neither transparent nor without residue, but has its own density. Perceived by the eye ("the words on the printed sheet are learnt by sight, not by hearing"—p. 355), which is often quicker than the ear, writing is silent. It bears the imprint of difference, repetition; the wheel is its emblem. Thus typography summons a new type of writer, one who is attentive to the book's materiality, its corporeality. The new writer already writes with a machine: Lissitzky, who himself typed certain diacritical marks in red, wrote: "The new book demands the new writer. Inkstand and goose-quill are dead." (*ibid.*)

—Lissitzky nevertheless envisioned a *motivated* graphics, for which he cited as precedents Marinetti and Sonia Delaunay-Terk (for her design of Cendrars's poem, where changes in color underscore thematic shifts). He might have added Mallarmé and, among his contemporaries, Strzeminski or Moholy-Nagy, among others. "The designing of the book space through the material of the type, according to the laws of typographical mechanics, must correspond to the strains and stresses of the content." (p. 355) Thus a new, abstract Cratylism emerges: the graphic sign must "follow," as well as vacillate with the *rhythm* of content. Modern thought requires modern typography. Above all—and herein lies the innovation—the graphic sign itself must *influence* reading, especially reading *out loud*—not simply imitate the voice and gestures of the speaker, but also regulate the intensity, inscribe the silences, and thus program (theatricalize) the diction of writing. (When discussing the book, Lissitzky mentions the theater, which, he claimed, had yet to explode traditional scenography. This conjunction of theater and the book is also characteristic of Mallarmé.)

—since the book must become pictogrammatical, the relationship of image and text must be subverted. First, the subordination of image to text must be reversed (which is why Lissitzky praised American magazines which "first started to shift the emphasis and make the word the illustration of the picture, instead of the other way around"—p. 357). In the end their opposition must be abolished (which explains the attraction of new photomechanical techniques in which "the production style for word and illustration is subject to one and the same process.")

23. El Lissitzky, "The Artist in Production."

24. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 86.

[*ibid.*] The letter is simply one figure among others.) *Of Two Squares* represents the first phase of this deconstruction, *Dlia Golosa*, the second.

But we must now return, after so many detours, to our object.

### *The Title*

We are struck immediately by the naked violence of the “cover,” the “first” page, which is actually a page like all the others. (But to comprehend fully its effect, it is important to bear in mind the ornamental grisailles that were common then, or even the conventional paradigms of contemporary French publishing.)

What accounts for the paper? Did economic reasons alone dictate the choice of this unpleasant, grainy texture and sallow color? Or did convention play a role? Did Lissitzky shrink from producing a deluxe edition? (He spoke enthusiastically about the books of the painter-poets, which “were not numbered, de luxe copies, they were cheap, unbound, paperbacked books . . .”—p. 358. Nevertheless, at the end of his book we are informed that fifty signed and numbered copies were produced—a paradox?)

The paper is surprising: *The white will never be white.*

Practically nothing distinguishes this page from the others. It is “articulated”—beyond the dedication, a second title page, and the “directions for use”—to the “first” page of the story (7, if the cover is 1). All odd-numbered pages are printed, except for 21 (opposite the colophon) and 23 (opposite an entirely black page), which are “white.” All the even pages are blank, except for 6 (which I call “directions for use”), 20 (the colophon), 22 (black), and 24 (the last page, the back “cover” inscribed with two lines, one grey, the other black).

All of the pages devoted to the narrative (there are six: 7, 9, 11, 13, 15, 17, although this choice is arbitrary—is the cover not also part of the story?) bear large squares of identical size which frame the images; the “text” (which is also an image) is always outside this frame. On the “cover,” however, this framing square, which delimits a field of pure vision, is distinctly larger than those which follow, and it contains a text. This text is quite special; it is a rebus, although it may at first not appear as such—a red square, an invocation of the father (Malevich, 1915).

This square is weighty.

It is printed with the same red ink that is used elsewhere in the book, but here color is intensified because of size (as Matisse remarked, “The quantity of color was its quality.”<sup>25</sup>). Similarly, the square’s frontality distinguishes it from all subsequent red figures, which are oblique, and links it with the other elements of the rebus. According to Lissitzky:

25. Henri Matisse, “Statements to Tériade,” *Matisse on Art*, ed. Jack D. Flam, London, Phaidon, 1973, p. 59.

Combinations occur in the horizontal and perpendicular directions. These two lines produce the right (unambiguous) angle. It can be placed in alignment with the edges of the surface, then it has a static effect (rest). It can be placed diagonally, then it has a dynamic effect (agitation). These are the axioms of typography. (pp. 355–56)

The rebus is a title.

This title is not, however, aloof, separated from the text like a blurb, an incitement to purchase this book. As a pictogram it is already implicated in the matrix of the book. What we have here, despite its deceptively simple appearance, is in fact a syntagm in three different expressive orders—which immediately raises the problem of articulation. Each semantic unit must be read within a different frame of reference (  $\Pi PO 2 \square$  ), thus challenging the possibility of any transcription or translation—although Western logocentrism, erasing the differences, considers this translation to be “natural”: *Of Two Squares*.

The order in which the rebus is to be read seems obvious (we know, however, from Klee and Eisenstein, that when the text is an image, the order in which the reader approaches it always transforms the image’s meaning):

—there is an arithmetic progression in the size of the semantic units which comprise the syntagm:  $\Pi PO 2 \square$  should be read in the order 1, 2, 3.

—in the West, we read from left to right and from top to bottom (undoubtedly a Christian custom). The  $\Pi PO$  is at the left and inclines upwards; the 2 is to its right, beginning slightly above and ending slightly below it; and the red square is even further to the right, its upper edge slightly higher than the lower part of the 2.

But this order might just as well be reversed. It is the red square which strikes us first (*The Red Wedge Defeats the Whites*). This order is also challenged by an inscription found outside the frame: the printed signature of Lissitzky, the book’s “architect.” This signature is interrupted by a fold (the first name, or its diminutive—Lazar, El—occupies a descending slope which forms an angle with the surname, in upper and lower case letters of the same typeface, which occupies an ascending slope. This signature—a right angle, hence “nonambiguous”—placed obliquely—hence “dynamic,” according to Lissitzky’s axiomatic system—is to be related to the bolder but shorter inscription,  $\Pi PO$ , printed in a different typeface—the only other diagonal on the page.

These two oblique axes are not parallel, but intersect at a point (a vanishing point? anamorphosis?) which is off the page, about 30 centimeters from the upper right-hand corner of the frame. Since Lissitzky had abandoned single-point perspective, we must ask whether this “initial” page represents the persistence of the visual pyramid, which Lissitzky claimed had been superseded by axonometrics. Has another received cultural system been substituted for the customary vertical/horizontal format of the book? There is no doubt that here reading

remains on the surface; forms have no thickness, and the oblique inscriptions do not diminish in depth. Nevertheless, the danger persists.

Yet the signature, which appears not as a paraph but as a distorted inscription outside the frame, is itself twisted into a figure as a result of the parallel (which is not a *physical* parallel) which may be drawn between it and the “first” and only word of the title. Thus the (economic, commercial) bond which unites title and signature is exposed and undermined, and the calm linearity of conventionally coded readings is destroyed (first the author’s name, in smaller type; then the title, in bolder type. This order is maintained in every work published today, although it may be reversed, for commercial purposes, by inscribing the author’s name on a colored band or wrapper.)

There is one final disruption of sense hidden in the rebus, one which redoubles the ruse of the signature which takes the place of a caption without fulfilling its function. Nowhere is it indicated that one of the two squares will not be red (not even on the title page, page 5, where this rebus is exhaustively decoded—although something is always lost in translation.)

The unprepared eye does not even perceive this elision: the ideological overdetermination of red through a symbolism of color, which is neither psychological as in Kandinsky nor totally arbitrary, is accepted as “evidence,” when it is in fact a rape, a dishonest forcing, of meaning . . .