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Coloured Universe and the Russian Avant-Garde

Matiushin on Colour Vision in Stalin's Russia 1932

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ABSTRACT

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COLOUR was of fundamental importance in modernist art. One reason its significance has been studied so little with regard to Russian art is that Soviet archives were inaccessible until the early 1990s. This study is based on extensive research in Russian archives and unpublished material.

Contemporary ideas from German Bauhaus and De Stijl in Holland have received deserved attention. In the Soviet Union, avant-garde artists were silenced as enemies of the people – their priorities were other than the class struggle.

The aim of this dissertation is to present and analyse the hitherto unknown colour theory of Mikhail Matiushin (1866–1934) published in Leningrad and Moscow in 1932.

The work is divided into five parts. The first part, *Colour*, deals with the contexts of history, colour and art. During the 1920s a number of institutes for interdisciplinary scientific research in art, design and architecture were founded in the Soviet Union. One of them was the Institute of Artistic Culture in Leningrad – GINKhUK – where Malevich and Tatlin also worked. There the artist, musician and theoretician Mikhail Matiushin supervised the Department of Organic Culture with his Laboratory of Colour. To formulate a universal language was one goal, to redesign the world for the masses outside the 'dead' museums another, and to produce a new kind of human being, a third.

The second part, *Vision*, analyses Matiushin's training programme, a variant of synaesthetical union of the senses, which includes an extension of the visual angle to a complete 360°. The third part, *Culture*, compares Matiushin with the theosophist mystics Pëtr Uspenskii and C. H. Hinton, the painter Wassily Kandinsky and the philosopher Henri Bergson.

Part four, *Ideology*, sheds light on colour from those whose perspective was based on the State philosophy of dialectical materialism. By the early 1930s, the innovative institutes were closed down due to centralization of all expressions of culture under the banner of Socialist Realism.

The last part, *Synthesis*, provides a detailed discussion on what happened after the 1930s. It concludes with the colour theory text, both its Russian original and for the first time in English translation.

The belief is that Matiushin's colour theory was not given any consideration after its publication in 1932. The results of this study show, however, that his colour handbook has been and still is used in the colour design of St. Petersburg.

Key words: Russian avant-garde, Mikhail Matiushin, Elena Guro, Ender siblings, colour theory, colour vision, synaesthesia, dialectical materialism, Stalin, culture, painting, science of art, aesthetics, architecture, design.

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