



SYMBOL INTERPRETATION IN VISUAL COMMUNICATION: ANALYZING A SUPREMATIST PAINTING “THE BLACK SQUARE” IN TERMS OF INTENTIONALITY

Algirdas Budrevicius

Faculty of Communication,

Vilnius University, Lithuania

E-mail algirdas.budrevicius@kf.vu.lt

ABSTRACT

Symbols are often used in visual communication; in particular they prevail in the abstract visual arts. Their interpretation is not always a simple task. Some cases of symbols cannot be interpreted using the traditional approaches. The purpose of this paper is to present an intentionality based idea of the symbol, and to describe the way of its interpretation. The symbol is proposed to be grounded on the term of the tangential intentionality. The latter implies that a thought of the perceiver of the sign is directed toward “not the signified object”. As a case of such a symbol, a painting *The Black Square* by K. Malevich is analyzed and an attempt of its interpretation proposed. Arguments supporting the proposed way of interpretation, including analysis of the statements of Malevich, are described. This painting marked the beginning of the non-representational art and made a great influence on the modern design. Now it costs more than one million dollars, however, discussions on its meaning and real value still continues.

Keywords: Semiotics, intentionality, interpretation, abstract art, *The Black Square*.

INTRODUCTION

Various types of signs are used in visual communication. Visual icons—resemblances of the signified objects—are the best means to communicate information about the concrete things. The highest and most abstract level of human communication, however, inevitably involves using of the symbols. Symbol is one of the basic types of sign. Sometimes it is even treated as its synonym. Aristotle used the word symbol in a similar way in his essay *On Interpretation* (Aristotle, 1941):

Spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words. Just as all men have not the same writing, so all men have not the same speech sounds, but the mental experiences, which these directly symbolize, are



the same for all, as also are those things of which our experiences are the images. (I, 1)

Peirce's conception of symbol is most common in contemporary semiotics. He defined it as "... a general sign which has become associated with its meanings by usage." (Peirce, 1998, para. 3). Peirce insisted that convention or habit is essential for the definition of symbol:

The word symbol has so many meanings that it would be an injury to the language to add a new one. I do not think that the signification I attach to it, that of a conventional sign, or one depending upon habit (acquired or inborn), is so much a new meaning as a return to the original meaning. (Ibid, para. 6)

Unfortunately, convention or habit cannot be applied for all cases of symbols. Many symbols encountered in the abstract arts cannot be treated in terms of convention or habit. I argue that convention should be taken into account only as a secondary term in defining the symbol. Primarily it should be grounded on the idea of intentionality. The latter is viewed in cognitive science as one of the basic ideas describing the activity of our mind.

The purpose of this paper is to present the idea of symbol treated in terms of intentionality and to describe the way of its interpretation. The meaning of the *Suprematist* painting *The Black Square* by K. Malevich will be analyzed as a case of such a symbol.

This paper presents a further development of the ideas described in a recently published book *Sign and form. Models of sign as homomorphism based on semiotic insights into Aristotle's and Aquinas' theory of Being and cognition* (Budrevicius, 2012) and a paper *The tangential sign-symbol in communication* (in press).

INTENTIONALITY AS BASIS FOR SYMBOL DEFINITION

Intentionality in cognitive science is defined as a "feature of beliefs, desires and other mental states, by virtue of which they are of or about something" (Caston, 2007/2003). Sometimes it is briefly termed *aboutness*. In case of sign, intentionality implements its feature to be about the signified object. In phenomenology, intentionality is viewed in terms of the directedness of consciousness of the subject toward its object (Brentano, 1874/1995). In this paper, intentionality is viewed as directedness of thought of the subject toward a perceived object (see Figure 1).

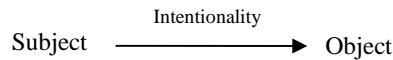


Figure 1. Intentionality as directedness of thought of the subject (perceiver of the sign) toward the object of his thought.

In this paper I argue that a thought generally can be split into its two basic components, each making a separate component of intentionality. One of them is aimed directly toward the object, and the other one is aimed toward *not the object*. The latter also might be termed as peripheral or lateral. It might be noted that the idea to split the direction of thought into two its components is not common for cognitive science and phenomenology.

The two components of the thought might be presented in terms of two perpendicular vectors (see Figure 2). The vectors might be viewed as *normal* and *tangential*, following the tradition in sciences when similar situations are considered. The corresponding graphical presentation of intentionality of the thought might be called an intentionality diagram. It structurally presents the model of thought in terms of intentionality.

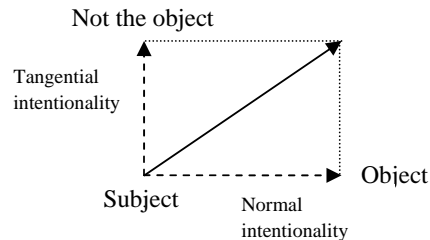


Figure 2. Decomposition of thought—presented in terms of vectors—into *normal* and *tangential* components of intentionality.

There are two marginal cases in this situation. In one case, the tangential component is absent, and there remains only the normal one. The thought then is purely direct, literal (see Figure 3). If the object is visual, the subject “thinks, what he sees”. It might be noted that traditional idea of intentionality as directedness of thought toward its object (see Figure 1) usually corresponds to this case. In other marginal case, there remains only the tangential component of thought—the one directed toward *Not the object* (see Figure 4). From the point of view of semiotics, it might be viewed as a sign-symbol of the signified object. In terms of the cognitive science, the tangential component might be viewed as a symbolic thought.

The phrase *Not the object* in the intentionality diagram generally might be treated in three different ways: a) narrowly, as negation of a concrete object—*not this object*, b) more



generally, as negation of some class of objects, c) most generally, as negation of the very idea of object—when object is dispersed or distributed over some space or area.

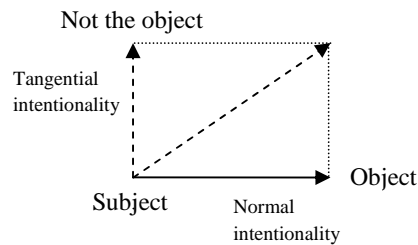


Figure 3. First marginal case of the thought: only the *normal* component of thought is present. The subject *thinks* directly, literally about the object.

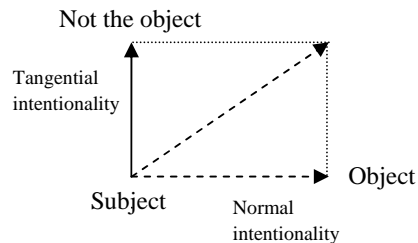


Figure 4. Second marginal case of the thought: only its tangential component is present; the subject *thinks* only *nominally* or *symbolically* about the object.

INTENTIONALITY BASED INTERPRETATION OF *THE BLACK SQUARE* BY K. MALEVICH

The painting *Black Square* marked the beginning of the non-representational art and made a great influence on the modern design. Now it costs more than one million dollars, however, discussions on its meaning and real value still continues. Here it will be considered as a visual symbol. Its interpretation will be analyzed in terms of intentionality.

Kasimir Malevich (1878-1935) was a Polish and Russian painter, the founder of *Suprematism*. He experimented with various styles. By 1913 he had so transformed his material that recognizable imagery had disappeared. Later he carried abstraction to its ultimate limit: he painted *The Black Square* (see Figure 5)—a black rectangle on a white ground. (Encyclopedia of World Biography, 2004).

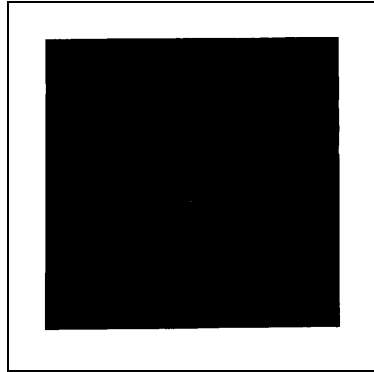


Figure 5. *The Black Square* by K. Malevich (1915).

The Black Square was presented in the *Last Futurist Exhibition 0,10 (Zero, ten)* in 1915 together with a *Manifesto of Suprematism* entitled *From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The new realism in painting*. K. Malevich claimed in his Manifesto:

All past and recent painting before Suprematism (as sculpture, verbal art, music) has been subjugated by the shapes of nature, waiting to be liberated, to speak its own language, independent of reason, common sense, logic, philosophy, psychology, laws of causality, and technological changes. (Malevich, 1915, p. 7; Mueller, 2007, p.2)

Suprematism (implying supremacy, domination; Lat. *supremus*, *highest*) was the first systematic school of abstract painting. The Suprematist paintings used only a few colors and a few basic geometric shapes, such as the square, the circle, the cross, and the triangle. Malevich described his approach as follows:

I have transformed myself in the zero of form and dragged myself out of the rubbish-filled pool of Academic art. I have destroyed the ring of the horizon and escaped from the circle of things, from the horizon-ring which confines the artist and the forms of nature. (Malevich, 1915, p. 1)

TREATMENT OF THE REALISTIC AND SYMBOLIC PAINTINGS IN TERMS OF INTENTIONALITY

The heritage of K. Malevich includes traditional (representational) and abstract (non-representational) paintings. The self-portrait of K. Malevich might be considered as an example of the representational painting (see Figure 6); *The Black Square* is the best known Malevich's symbolic (non-representational) painting.

Division of the visual art into representational and non-representational might be considered in terms of the previously described model of intentionality: the representational art might be

related to the normal component of the thought, and the non-representational one—to the tangential component of thought (see Figure 7).



Figure 6. An example of the traditional—representational—painting by K. Malevich. Self-portrait (1908).

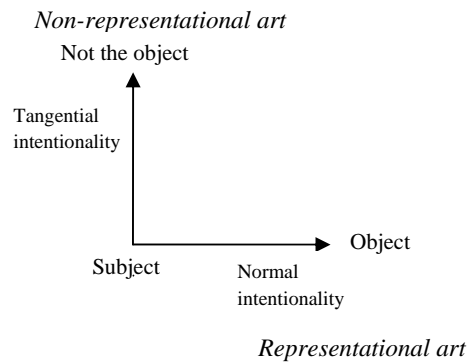


Figure 7. Division of the visual art into representational and non-representational according to the components of intentionality.

INTERPRETATION OF *THE BLACK SQUARE*

I suggest grounding interpretation of *The Black Square* on the following considerations. The painting might be decomposed into two its components: the black square and the white background. The first component should be viewed as its most important part, and the second component should be considered only as a means to strengthen the importance of the first one.

What is the meaning of the square? First of all, this question asks: what does the black square signify, that is, what is the object signified by it? The square might be viewed as one of the basic types of signs described by Peirce—the icon, index or symbol. As a visual sign, the square is an icon, the likeness of the corresponding geometrical shape. This interpretation, however, gives next to nothing for understanding the painting. Viewing the square as an index



also does not contribute to understanding the painting. There remains only a symbol, which is intuitively most relevant for the interpretation of the painting. According to Peirce, symbol is a conventional sign. This conception of symbol, however, is hardly applicable here, because no explicit or implicit convention could be related to the idea of the square presented in the painting. Thus, it might be concluded that analysis of the painting in terms of Peirce's classification of signs does not allow revealing its deep meaning.

The painting might be treated in terms of intentionality. Various its perceivers might think (and really does) differently about the meaning of the *Black Square*. This situation might be represented graphically as a set of vectors of intentionality, ranging from the one representing the *normal* direction—what literally means that the *Black Square* is simply a *geometrical shape*—to the tangential one—what implies that the *Black Square* signifies *not a black square, but something else* (see Figure 8). The painting does not have any deep meaning and value for a *normally* thinking subject, that is, for the one who treats it in terms of the normal component of intentionality. Many subjects treat the painting in this way. Malevich's idea was—in my opinion—to divert the thought of perceiver from its *natural* way, and to induce a *tangential* thought in his/her mind; the painting, hence, should be treated in terms of the *tangential* component of intentionality.

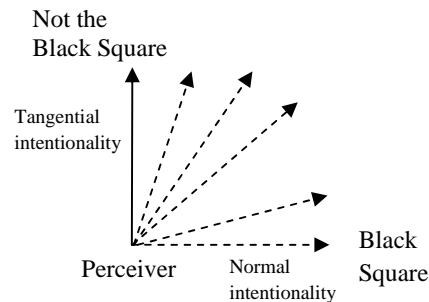


Figure 8. Intentionality diagram for interpretation of *The Black Square*. The direction of thought toward *not the black square* gives the deep meaning of the painting as a symbol.

Dashed lines represent a range of other possible interpretations.

The painting thus signifies *not the black square* (i.e., not the geometrical shape), but *something else*. This interpretation might seem trivial; however, it reveals the fundamental idea of the painting: each perceiver of the painting fills in *the something else* with his or her universe of everything what is *not the black square*. The latter might be a house, love, hate, sympathy, car, horse, etc.—virtually *everything what is not the black square*. Hence, the idea of the tangential, symbolic thought allows capturing the universality of the painting; the painting embraces all what is *not the black square*.



RELATION TO MALEVICH'S IDEAS

Malevich presented his Suprematist Manifesto together with his painting trying to influence—to change—the direction of thought of the perceivers. He introduced *The Black Square* as follows: “It is the face of the new art. The square is a living, royal infant. It is the first step of pure creation in art. Before it, there were naive deformities and copies of nature.” (Malevich, 1915, p. 8). The painter, hence, implicitly claimed that it is *not a square* (as a geometrical shape) what he has represented; he represented the most general and primary idea (form). Malevich explained his *Black Square* using a term of the “non-objectivity” (Rus. bezpredmetnost):

When, in the year 1913, in my desperate attempt to free art from the ballast of objectivity, I took refuge in the square form and exhibited a picture which consisted of nothing more than a black square on a white field... This was no empty square which I had exhibited but rather the feeling of non-objectivity.... (Black Square, 2007, p.1)

The term “non-objectivity” is clearly related with the term “Not the object” used in this paper for explanation of *The Black Square*. It should be noted, however, that Malevich treated the painting in terms of *feeling*; in this paper, the picture is treated in terms of *thought* what implies the rational approach to its interpretation.

Interpretation of *The Black Square* proposed in this paper is based on the idea that a cardinal change of the direction of perceiver's thought should take place to grasp the real meaning of the painting. Such an idea might be compared to the one expressed by Malevich in his essay *on the new systems of art*: he has noted that people usually expect the art to be understandable for them but they do not want to adapt their minds for the understanding (Malevich, 1919). This idea of Malevich might be articulated as follows: people usually treat a piece of art directly—in terms of the normal component of the thought. Instead, they should fully—perpendicularly—change the direction of their thoughts to understand the meaning of the *Black Square*. Instead of thinking about *the square*, they should start thinking about *not the square*—implying *everything else what is not the square*.

ALTERNATIVE: A BLACK SQUARE TREATED IN TERMS OF THE NORMAL COMPONENT OF INTENTIONALITY

The hidden meaning of *The Black Square* by K. Malevich, hence, is obtained by viewing it in terms of the tangential intentionality of the thought. Interestingly, there was an alternative for the Malevich's painting: Paul Bilhaud presented a similar picture in 1882. The idea of tangential intentionality allows revealing the essential difference between the two paintings.

In 1882, Jules Lévy in Paris established a *Salon of Incoherents* and opened an exhibition with the title *Les Arts Incohérents*. The pictures exhibited at the Salon were not pictures in the traditional sense. Among them was a painting by a poet Paul Bilhaud, who called it *Negroes fighting in a cellar at night* (see Figure 9). This was a black rectangle. There were no statements about any conceptual meanings behind the painting. It was just a comic picture. And the joke is not even in the picture; rather it is in its title: when black people fight in a basement at night, one can't see anything. (Squares of Malevich, 2012).

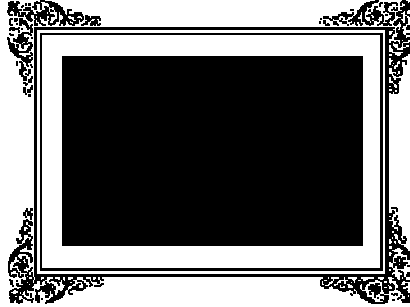


Figure 9. A painting *Negroes fighting in a cellar at night* by Paul Bilhaud (1882). The painting should be interpreted in terms of the *normal* component of intentionality. The meaning of this painting is in what we actually see—the black rectangle.

The intentionality diagram to explain the meaning of the painting by Bilhaud in terms of intentionality is presented in the Figure 10.

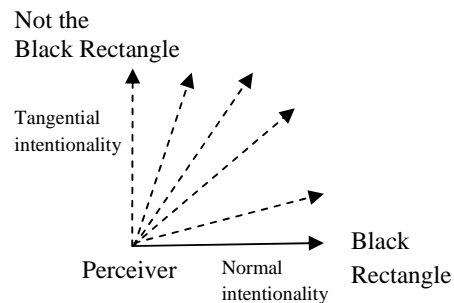


Figure 10. Intentionality diagram for interpretation of the *Black Rectangle* by Paul Bilhaud. The direction of thought toward the object—the Black Rectangle—implies interpretation of the painting as an immediate representation of the rectangle. Dashed lines indicate other possible interpretations.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Some cases of visual symbols cannot be accounted for in terms of traditional Peirce's classification of signs. Symbols of the geometrical Suprematism, and *The Black Square* by K. Malevich, in particular, make a special interest. An attempt to ground interpretation of such symbols on the idea of intentionality is made in this paper. It might be summarized as follows.



A model of the perceiver's thought based on the idea of intentionality is proposed. The intentionality—traditionally viewed as directedness of the consciousness of a subject (perceiver) toward its object—is proposed to be decomposed into its two components; the one aimed directly toward the signified object, and another one aimed toward *not the immediate signified object*. The two components are treated in terms of the *normal* and *tangential* directions of intentionality. Graphically they are presented in terms of the intentionality diagram. In case when the latter has only one—tangential—component, it represents a symbolic thought of the perceiver.

Proposed model of the symbol is applied for interpretation of *The Black Square*. The following conclusion then is obtained: the painting should be perceived *tangentially*—as *not the black square*. The square is a kind of the basic form; its denial—*not the black square*—then similarly implies the highest degree of generality. The painting, therefore, signifies *everything what is not the black square*. In the widest sense—even all the objects of reality represented by all painters before him. Malevich presented his Manifesto of Suprematism together with his painting to suggest the adequate interpretation of *The Black Square*.

Some Malevich's statements might be used to support the proposed way of interpretation. Malevich treated the painting in terms of the *non-objectivity* what is similar to the *not the object* used in this paper. Also, he claimed that we should adapt our minds to understand the art. A similar idea is proposed in this paper: a perceiver should divert his/her thought from its *normal* way (the square as a shape)—to the *tangential* one (not the square).

As an argument to support proposed explanation of *The Black Square*, the meaning of a similar painting by Paul Bilhaud—also representing a Black Rectangle—is considered. The painting should be explained in a *normal* way—in terms of the normal component of intentionality; the Black Rectangle in this case means no more than a corresponding geometrical shape.

Proposed opinion concerning the meaning of *The Black Square* is not new; a similar opinion, in particular, has expressed Shatskikh (2012). The novelty of this paper is not in revealing the meaning of the painting; the novelty is in the proposed way—to ground its interpretation on the idea of intentionality, the basic idea in cognitive science and philosophy of the mind.

Described interpretation of *The Black Square* should be viewed only as a first step toward explanation of its meaning. A more elaborated account might be proposed by means of analyzing Malevich's statements in more details. He interpreted *The Black Square* in terms of the *feeling of non-objectivity* (Rus. *bezpredmetnost*) what implied more than a logical negation of the object. The *feeling of non-objectivity* might be more adequately treated in terms of the



absence of the object. The non-representational art similarly implies absence of representations. Art should not represent reality, insisted Malevich. In his Manifesto of Suprematism he even questioned the very ideas of the subject and object (Malevich, 1915); a similar statement might be treated in terms of phenomenology. A more detailed interpretation of *The Black Square*, therefore, might be based on the approach of phenomenology. Proposed in this paper account of symbol in terms of tangential intentionality, nevertheless, gives the basic and logically grounded understanding of *The Black Square*.

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